

# **Anthropological Fieldwork among the Commercial Fishermen of Port Dover, Ontario, 1977-1978: Chronicling the Cultural Traditions of an Occupational Community in a Lake Erie Commercial Fishing Port**

**John J. Van West**

*Les anthropologues ont longtemps compté sur les études sur le terrain à l'appui de leur recherche. Pour les étudiants de la discipline, le travail de terrain reste un rite de passage particulièrement important (mais pas une obligation) par lequel ils doivent passer avec succès afin de devenir praticien reconnu et accrédité de la discipline. Ce document sert à deux fins. Tout d'abord, il relate les défis rencontrés par l'auteur au cours de la période de son travail de terrain anthropologique (comme étudiant visant son doctorat) parmi les pêcheurs commerciaux à Port Dover, dans l'Ontario. En second lieu, il sert à mettre en évidence la nécessité, longtemps constatée, pour les anthropologues et autres spécialistes des sciences sociales à s'engager dans la recherche ethnographique sur le terrain des pêcheurs commerciaux des Grands Lacs. Ces pêcheurs vont partager leurs expériences dans l'environnement de ce travail qui les définit. Mais leurs histoires ne seront pas entendus tant que l'on ne parle pas d'eux.*

## **Introduction**

It was on 5 May 1977 when, as a 28 year old University of Toronto doctoral student in anthropology, I commenced dissertation field research among Port Dover's commercial fishermen.<sup>1</sup> This was my fieldwork *rite of passage*, the recommended (although not a mandatory) transitional stage of training that student practitioners of anthropology are expected to complete in order to be accepted and recognized as accredited anthropologists. I had chosen to conduct my dissertation field research at

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term fisherman/men throughout this paper, rather than the gender neutral "fishers." "Fisher," as a term of reference and address, was never used by Port Dover's commercial fishermen in their vernacular. There was no need for them to do so in any case, as women were neither employed as crew on or in command of any fishing vessel in Port Dover during my tenure in the field.

“home”<sup>2</sup> (in Ontario), unlike many of my peers in the Department of Anthropology who conducted theirs in more “exotic” places and spaces, among non-western peoples, consistent with the practice that had been established by the discipline’s founding American and British practitioners (among others) early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> My classmates travelled to the far reaches of the planet (New Guinea, Australia, Africa, and the more remote regions of Canada, among other places). I would drive a mere two hours to Port Dover to commence my fieldwork among its commercial fishermen. Port Dover was not, arguably, a very exotic field location by comparison, but that did not matter. My interest in maritime anthropology had been kindled by the scholarly writings of anthropologists at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. None of them (or any other anthropologist for that matter) had conducted field research among Great Lakes commercial fishermen. So this was going to be my effort, as the first anthropologist to engage in fieldwork among them, in Port Dover.<sup>4</sup> These considerations weighed heavily in my decision to spend sixteen months in this eastern Lake Erie coastal tier community where commercial fishermen had established a significant presence in history and in culture.

### **Port Dover’s Commercial Fisheries: the Fieldwork Setting, 1960-1977**

Lake Erie’s commercial fishing industry has had a rich, complex and colourful past.<sup>5</sup> Along the Canadian north shore, the communities of Port Maitland, Port Dover, Port Burwell, Port Stanley, Erieau, Wheatley and Kingsville (among lesser known coastal tier villages) have supported thriving commercial fisheries through the years.<sup>6</sup> Port

<sup>2</sup> Orvar Löfgren, “Anthropologizing America,” *American Ethnologist* XVI (1989), 366-374.

<sup>3</sup> Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> As far as I am aware, only Dr. Sally Cooper Cole (an anthropologist and faculty member at Concordia University) and I have to date conducted anthropological fieldwork among Euro-Canadian Great Lakes commercial fishermen. Dr. Cooper Cole worked among Portuguese-Canadian fishing families in Wheatley, Ontario after I had completed my fieldwork in Port Dover in 1978.

<sup>5</sup> Two excellent monographs have been written on the history of the Great Lakes commercial fishing industry, one by Margaret Beattie Bogue, *Fishing the Great Lakes: An Environmental History, 1783-1933* (Madison, 2000) and the other by Alan B. McCullough, *The Commercial Fishery of the Canadian Great Lakes*, Environment Canada, Canadian Parks Service (Ottawa, 1989). For Lake Erie specifically, see Frank Prothero, *The Good Years: A History of the Commercial Fishing Industry on Lake Erie* (Belleville, 1973) and David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak, *Fortune and Fury: A History of Commercial Fishing in Erie* (Erie, PA., 2011). For more local coverage of Port Dover’s commercial fisheries in history, see W.S. Addison, “The Development and Problems of the Fishing Industry of Port Dover” (unpublished B.A. Thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1962), and *Port Dover: A Pictorial Journey Through 200 Years of Port Dover History*, ed. David Judd (Port Dover, Ontario, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Lake Erie’s commercial fishermen held 211 commercial fishing licenses in 2004, and operated their fisheries from 11 Lake Erie coastal tier communities, including Port Dover. Ministry of Natural Resources, “Lake Erie Fisheries Management, Walleye and Yellow Perch Fishing – Background” (31 March 2005), [http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/Csb/news/2005/mar31fs\\_05.html](http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/Csb/news/2005/mar31fs_05.html) (accessed 12 December 2007).

Dover, located at the eastern end of Lake Erie, for example, had established commercial fisheries as early as the 1860s.<sup>7</sup> It became a major fishing port in the 1920s, surpassing Port Stanley as the largest fishing port along Lake Erie's north shore. Until 1960 its commercial fishermen (and fishermen operating their fisheries from the other Lake Erie ports) harvested, among other less valued species, the lake herring (*Coregonus artedii*), lake whitefish (*Coregonus clupeaformis*) and the blue pickerel (*Stizostedion vitreum glaucum*) as their principal target species. Approximately ninety percent of this production was shipped by rail to New York City's fresh water fish trade on Peck Slip that comprised many small to larger scale Jewish owned and operated fish trading houses within the Fulton Street fish market. To a lesser extent freshwater fish were also shipped to Chicago, where the trade was controlled by Booth Fisheries, and also to Detroit.<sup>8</sup> Historian Frank Prothero has characterized this earlier, pre-1960, period in the history of Lake Erie's commercial fishing industry as "the good years."<sup>9</sup>

The good years, however, were not to prevail. The lake herring, lake whitefish, and blue pickerel began to collapse, sequentially over time, commencing with the demise of the herring in the late 1940s and culminating with the biological extinction of the blue pickerel in or about 1960.<sup>10</sup> Port Dover's commercial fishermen were more adversely affected by the cumulative loss of these three higher valued species than were fishermen resident in the other Lake Erie ports, in large measure because these fish were more heavily concentrated in the colder waters comprising Lake Erie's deep Eastern Basin.<sup>11</sup> It was here, within the broad boundaries of this basin, where Port Dover's commercial fishermen fished throughout much of the year. They regarded the predominantly western half of Eastern Basin as their principal fishing grounds.

As the lake herring, lake whitefish and blue pickerel began to decline (or biologically vacate the Eastern Basin) in their place emerged the invasive rainbow smelt (*Osmerus mordax*). Commercial fishermen in Port Dover, and fishermen generally along

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<sup>7</sup> Addison, "The Development and Problems of the Fishing Industry of Port Dover."

<sup>8</sup> R.H. Fiedler and J.H. Matthews, *Wholesale Trade in Fresh and Frozen Fishery Products and Related Marketing considerations in New York City*, Appendix VI to the Report of the U.S. Commissioner of Fisheries for 1925, Bureau of Fisheries (Washington, 1926), L.T. Hopkinson, "Trade in Fresh and Frozen Fishery Products and Related Marketing Considerations in Chicago, Ill." [U.S.] Department of Commerce, Bureau of Fisheries, Economic Circular No. 54 (1921) and J.R. McBride, "Fishing Made Detroit Famous Before Ford Arrived," *The Fishing Gazette* XXXV (1918), 975.

<sup>9</sup> Prothero, *The Good Years*.

<sup>10</sup> See James Y. Nichol and Alex Dellow, "What's Happened to all the Fish? Lake Erie's Fishermen Wonder," *The Star Weekly*, 19 December 1959, 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> An excellent review and description of the geomorphological boundaries of Lake Erie's western, central and eastern basins is provided by P.G. Sly, "Lake Erie and its Basins," *Journal of the Fisheries Research Board of Canada* XXXIII (1976), 355-370. The western boundary of the Eastern Basin is defined by the Norfolk moraine, which runs (underwater) from the neck of Long Point, Ontario at Port Rowan (see Figure 1) to Erie, Pennsylvania; the eastern boundary of this basin occurs where the north and south shores of Lake Erie converge at the lake's discharge into the Niagara River.

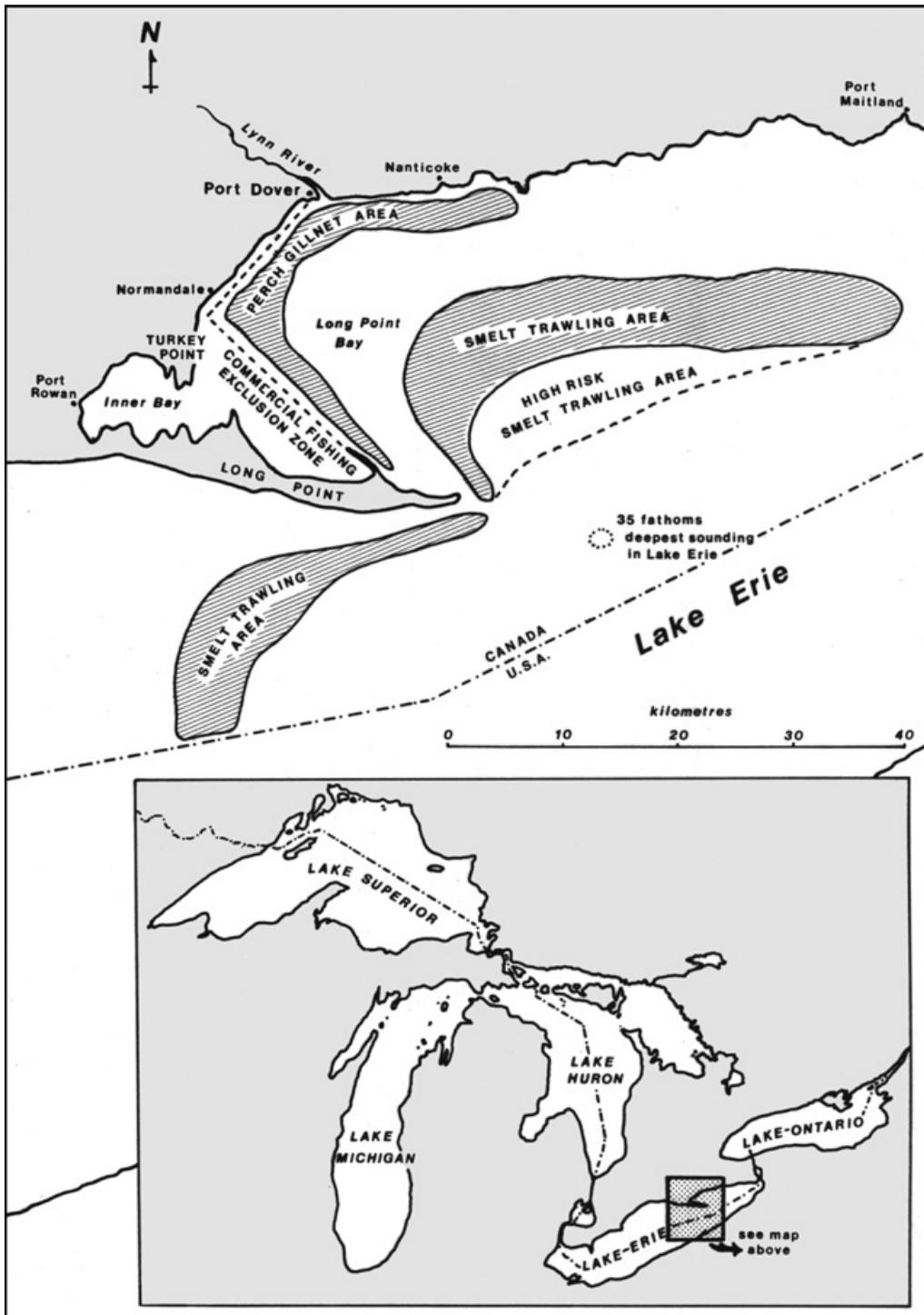


Figure 1: Map showing the fishing grounds of Port Dover's commercial fishermen, 1977-1978. Source: Map prepared by Dr. Victor Lytwyn for John J. Van West.

the lake, had always considered the rainbow smelt to be a nuisance because they were not very commercially valuable<sup>12</sup> and, because of their propensity to become entangled (or “bridle” the mesh), as an undesirable by-catch in gillnets that were being fished to harvest the more commercially viable species. It was quite an effort for fishermen to remove smelt from their nets, often accomplished by boiling them in water, a process that rendered the smelt for easier removal. By contrast, they were much more accepting of the non-invasive yellow perch (*Perca flavescens*) following the collapse of the lucrative lake herring, lake whitefish and blue pickerel stocks even though yellow perch, like the smelt, had not been considered a very lucrative harvestable resource throughout “the good years.” It all came to pass in 1960, when rainbow smelt and yellow perch emerged as fishermen’s principal and preferred commercial target species.

Among other considerations, rainbow smelt and yellow perch are very different fish in terms their habitat preferences. The rainbow smelt is a small, silvery pelagic and foraging fish that schools at various water elevations in open offshore water depending on the season. They seek and prefer cold, deep and well-oxygenated water. After spawning in shallow water or in streams in the spring of the year, smelt migrate to water 24 metres or more in depth where they remain between May and October. In late fall or early winter, smelt move back to shallower water inshore normally no deeper than 12 metres.<sup>13</sup> Originally found along the east coast in tributaries between Labrador and New Jersey, “rainbow smelt eggs planted in Crystal Lake, Michigan, in 1912 are believed to be the source of rainbow smelt found in all of the Great Lakes, except Lake Ontario.”<sup>14</sup> Yellow perch, by contrast, avoid deep, cold and well-oxygenated open water. They prefer a habitat comprising relatively shallow and vegetation-dense near shore waters no greater than nine metres in depth.

Given their respective habitat preferences and life cycles, rainbow smelt and yellow perch occupy mutually exclusive ecological niches within Lakes Erie’s Eastern Basin. As Figure 1 depicts, smelt, as the invasive newcomer, occupy the much larger and predominantly deeper and more open waters to the east and south west of Long Point; that is where Port Dover’s commercial fishermen trawl for them. The non-invasive yellow perch, as the *in situ* long term resident species, by contrast, remain cloistered for the most part in the more protected and much shallower and warmer inshore waters within Long Point Bay, including the Inner Bay Long Point, and along the coast from Port Dover to Nanticoke. Port Dover’s small boat fishermen gillnet for yellow perch in these waters, excepting Inner Bay, Long Point, where commercial fishermen are not

<sup>12</sup> While smelt were considered a nuisance and a “course” fish by most fishermen along the lake, some did harvest them on a commercial basis with shore-based poundnets and haul seines west of Port Stanley as early as the 1940s. These fisheries were operated on a very small scale however.

<sup>13</sup> See Wayne R. MacCallum and Henry Regier, “Distribution of Smelt, *Osmerus mordax*, and the Smelt Fishery in Lake Erie in the Early 1960’s,” *Journal of the Fisheries Research Board of Canada*, XXVII (1970), 1843 and W.B. Scott and E.J. Crossman, *Freshwater Fishes of Canada*, Bulletin No. 184 (Ottawa, 1973), 313.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, *Atlas of the Spawning and Nursery Areas of Great Lakes Fishes*, IX – Lake Erie (September 1982), 49.

permitted to fish.<sup>15</sup>

While yellow perch are not very heavily concentrated anywhere within the boundaries of Lake Erie's Eastern Basin, they are, because of their habitat preferences, quite plentiful in the shallower, warmer and more turbid waters comprising Lake Erie's Central and Western Basins, west of Long Point's neck at Port Rowan (see Figure 1) in the littoral waters of (from east to west) Elgin, Kent and Essex counties. In fact, "the western basin is the major spawning and nursery ground for Lake Erie's yellow perch."<sup>16</sup> However, the the abundance of yellow perch and other commercially valuable fish stocks in Lake Erie's shallow western waters<sup>17</sup> was of no real consequence for most fishermen resident in Port Dover and in the other eastern Lake Erie coastal tier communities. Under the terms of their fishing licenses, they were, and remain today, barred from fishing in waters just west of Port Stanley, that is, just west of the Kent-Elgin County boundary line.<sup>18</sup> Certainly, there were no licensing encumbrances that would preclude them from fishing closer to their home ports for the lightly concentrated perch within the broad boundaries of Lake Erie's Eastern Basin or, in the alternative, to fish for them in the more distant waters west of Long Point's neck at Port Rowan (but east of the Kent-Elgin County boundary line, as permitted by license) where perch are more abundant. Fishing for perch in these more distant waters, however, would incur considerably higher operating expenses.<sup>19</sup> Neither option proved particularly workable for Port Dover's commercial fishermen from a cost-benefit perspective and many of them faced the prospect of bankruptcy in 1960 following the sequential collapse of the more prized lake herring, lake whitefish and blue pickerel stocks.<sup>20</sup> The lower valued but quite abundant (and much detested) smelt, however, were readily available in the deep Eastern Basin and could be harvested save for the fact that cost-effective fishing gear for smelt had not been developed. That problem was addressed when fishermen in Port Dover, with the support of its mayor and members of his Council, exercised considerable pressure on the provincial government to respond affirmatively to the crisis.<sup>21</sup>

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15 M.M. Petzold and J.R. Paine, *Population Characteristics of Yellow Perch in Long Point Bay Lake Erie in the Fall of 1976*, Ministry of Natural Resources, Lake Erie Fisheries Assessment Unit Report, 1978-3 (1978).

16 U.S. Department of the Interior, *Atlas of the Spawning and Nursery Areas of Great Lakes Fishes*, IX – Lake Erie (September 1982), 158.

17 Yellow pickerel (*Stizostedion vitreum vitreum*) was another species that Lake Erie commercial fishermen began to target with greater intensity after 1960.

18 In 1978, only two Port Dover fishermen held licenses that permitted them to access the fish stocks west of Port Stanley (west of the Kent-Elgin County boundary line), in waters comprising a portion of Lake Erie's Central Basin and all of its Western Basin. See William F. Sinclair, *The Federal Small Craft Harbours Program on Lake Erie: The Socio-Economic Need for the Program and Its Potential for Success* (Department of Fisheries and the Environment, Small Craft Harbours Branch, Fisheries and Marine Service, Ontario Region, 1978), 37.

19 I would like to thank Port Burwell commercial fisherman Larry Martin (now retired) for clarifying these complexities from a fishing effort perspective.

20 *The Globe and Mail*, 13 October 1959.

21 *Port Dover Maple Leaf*, 18 December 1959.



Figure 2: The James B., a typical Port Dover smelt trawler, shown here returning to port. Shown is one of two otter doors at the vessel's stern on its port side (the other otter door is located on the starboard side). Photo by John J. Van West.

In the winter of 1959-1960, gear specialists and scientists from the federal and provincial governments,<sup>22</sup> in consultation with commercial fishermen, began testing the small-meshed gillnet, the Danish purse seine, and a variety of different bottom and mid-water trawls to establish the effectiveness and efficiencies of each net for harvesting the pelagic smelt in any depth of water and throughout the year.<sup>23</sup> A hybrid high reaching bottom trawl was eventually considered the best fit for harvesting the pelagic smelt. In the absence of alternatives, and swayed by the test results that trawling would give them a “new lease of life ... [and a] new optimism and hope where only a few short weeks ago

<sup>22</sup> Support funding for this research was provided by Canada's Department of Fisheries (now Fisheries and Oceans Canada). See Arthur S. Goodwin, “Salt Water Trawls Tried in Lake Erie,” *Canadian Fisherman* XLVII (March 1960), 29-31; “Trawling on the Great Lakes: Gill Netting Replaced by Trawls as W.F. Kolbe & Company Ltd. of Port Dover, Ontario Plan New Extensive Smelt Fisheries with Fleet of Approximately Fifty Boats,” *Fishing Gazette* LXXVII (May 1960), 24, 75; “Smelt Catching Gear for the Great Lakes,” *Trade News* XIII (June 1960), 14-16; Mark Ronayne, “New Life for Lake Erie,” *Trade News* XII (July 1960), 3-7.

<sup>23</sup> Poundnets and haul seines were not included among the gear being tested. Although poundnet and haul seine fisheries had been established along Lake Erie's coast west of Port Stanley to harvest smelt commercially when they spawned inshore, these nets were only effective as harvesting gear in shallow inshore waters.

everyone was threatened with chaos and bankruptcy,”<sup>24</sup> most fishermen in Port Dover proceeded to modify their gillnet vessels for smelt trawling. They equipped them with otter doors (to spread the trawl when dragged behind the vessel), and deck winches and A-frames to facilitate the lifting of the trawl’s cod-end over the port side of the vessel and onto the deck.<sup>25</sup> While smelt were about to become a mainstay commercial species for most commercial fishermen in Port Dover in 1960, a small number of small-boat fishermen, their vessels too small to drag a bottom trawl behind them, continued to employ gillnets exclusively in the commercial capture of yellow perch from Long Point Bay, and from Port Dover’s inshore waters along the coast towards Nanticoke.



*Figure 3: The Derwynne E is one of Port Dover’s six small gillnet vessels that fish for perch in Long Point Bay and along the coast towards Nanticoke. Photo by John J. Van West.*

In 1977, Port Dover had a population of about 3,000 people who were employed, variously, in small retail businesses, shipbuilding and repair, tourism and, of course, the commercial fishing industry. When I commenced my fieldwork in the spring of 1977, approximately 100 commercial fishermen considered Port Dover to be their home and operating port, including the independent fishermen (or vessel owner-operators) and their

<sup>24</sup> *Port Dover Maple Leaf*, 8 January 1960.

<sup>25</sup> F. Lloyd Phillips and his son owned and operated a machine and welding shop on Port Dover’s waterfront. They modified the first three of Port Dover gillnet fleet for smelt trawling, in November 1959. See *Port Dover Maple Leaf*, 29 August 1984.

deckhands, and the captains and crews employed by the corporate fisheries.<sup>26</sup> Port Dover's fleet of fishing vessels consisted of twenty-two steel hulled offshore smelt trawlers that measured between fifteen to twenty-four metres in length. The majority of them were independently owned and operated. In addition, the fleet included six smaller gillnet vessels that measured approximately seven to twelve metres in length. These vessels were all independently owned and operated.

In the broadest sense, Port Dover's occupational community of fishermen was internally stratified on the basis of whether a fisherman owned and also operated a fishing vessel, or simply operated a vessel (as a captain) for others, or whether he worked as a deckhand. Their occupational community was also stratified on the basis of the target species fishermen were harvesting (smelt or yellow perch) and the capturing gear they employed to harvest them (trawls or gillnets). However, from the perspective of those living in Port Dover who had no direct association or familiarity with its commercial fishing industry, none of these distinctions or complexities were evidently considered sufficiently significant to draw attention to them. Residents living in Port Dover who were not directly involved in the community's fishing industry would simply refer to local commercial fishermen, in the collective sense, as a "group unto themselves." This uninformed characterization of Port Dover's commercial fishermen was shaped, in my view, by their converging domains of work and non-work activities — as fishermen physically removed from the community while harvesting fish (one domain); as fishermen working in and around the harbour (but nowhere else) repairing their nets, gear and socializing with one another in their net shanties using fisheries-specific vernacular (another domain); as fishermen involved in wider community activities (for example, in the planning for and participation of the Great Lakes Fishermen's Exhibition, which was held in Port Dover for a number of years) but removed from the physical surroundings of their working world (another domain); and as fishermen at home managing household and fishing related administrative (bookkeeping) responsibilities and other household interactions among them and their families as expressions of an occupational community within the broader community of Port Dover. During my tenure in the field, it became very clear to me that Port Dover's commercial fishermen comprised a very distinct, identifiable, bounded and internally complex occupational community within Port Dover's broader social domain.<sup>27</sup>

My field research and PhD dissertation would focus primarily on the largest group of fishermen within Port Dover's occupational fishing community — the independent smelt trawlermen — who owned their own fishing vessels (or fish tugs as they are more commonly referred to in the industry) and operated them with a crew of one deckhand or two when required.

<sup>26</sup> Sinclair, *The Federal Small Craft Harbours Program on Lake Erie*.

<sup>27</sup> See Janet Gilmore, "Fishing for a Living on the Great Lakes," in *Festival of American Folklife Program Book* (Washington, D.C., 1987), 63-64; Timothy Lloyd and Patrick B. Mullen, *Lake Erie Fishermen: Work, Tradition and Identity* (Chicago, 1990); G. Salaman, "Two Occupational Communities: Examples of a Remarkable Convergence of Work and Non-work," *Sociological Review* XIX (1971), 389-407.

## Entering the Field and my First Big Blunder: Port Dover, 1977

I arrived in Port Dover on the evening of 5 May 1977, following a two-hour road trip from Brampton to Port Dover with the car packed full of household paraphernalia and other stuff that my fiancée believed I needed to keep body and soul together (she had joined me on the trip in order to drive the car back to Brampton). I parked the car on Main Street directly in front of the small, cozy, and fully furnished second floor walk-up one-bedroom apartment I had rented the previous month and proceeded to unload my belongings. The harbour was a ten minute walk away, and the Commercial Hotel was located across the street. The Norfolk Hotel was situated further east along Main Street and closer to the harbour. Many of the younger deckhands would often gather at the Commercial Hotel after work for a pint or two and socialize. It was their preferred watering hole. Many of the “independents” and the captains who operated the “company” boats, by contrast, preferred to spend time in the “quieter” and, from their



*Figure 4: The Norfolk Hotel, more affectionately referred to by locals in Port Dover as the “Tilt’n Hilton” Hotel. Photo by John J. Van West.*

perspective, more upscale Norfolk Hotel. Initially established as a roadside inn, the Norfolk Hotel, also affectionately known as the Tilt’n’Hilton, was a historic landmark in town. It is situated on a hill overlooking the harbour and the hill creates the illusion of the building leaning into the hill; hence the name “Tilt’n,” with Hilton derived from the owner’s first name. I would spend time in both hotels with the “independents,” captains and deckhands, as a “participant-observer” engaged in conversations with them.

“Participant observation” is a demanding and time-consuming qualitative field data gathering technique first used by social anthropologists in their fieldwork. It is now more widely used by other social scientists. As a field method, “participant observation” garners rich insights into and understandings of local life that other data gathering methods such as surveys and questionnaires cannot provide.

Having lived in downtown Toronto for many years, it took me several days to become accustomed to my new home. Port Dover has one main street called, fittingly, Main Street. I walked around town a great deal during my first six weeks in the field,



*Figure 5: Main Street, Port Dover, facing east. In the background is Lake Erie. The harbour can be seen in the distance. Photo by John J. Van West.*

making small talk with the locals (including some fishermen) and spending considerable time observing the rhythms of everyday life in town and in and around the harbour. People responded to me with a mix of polite reserve and curiosity about who I was and what I was doing in town. But as time passed, with seemingly no substantive movement forward in my field research, I came to fear that my friendly dialogue with the locals would not move beyond its casual façade. Although I had established initial contact with the fishermen on a very informal basis during this early period in the field, which included a number of trips out to the fishing grounds with them, my lack of progress was causing me considerable anxiety. Apprenticing student anthropologists, it seems, often experience such angst in the early stages of their fieldwork.<sup>28</sup> Vulnerable, frustrated and

<sup>28</sup> See Victor A. Liguori, “‘Come Ahead, If You Dare’,” in *Fieldwork: The Human Experience*,



*Figure 6: A partial view of Port Dover's west harbour; where the Lynne River discharges into Lake Erie. Photo by John J. Van West.*

totally at a loss on what to do next (and in the absence of clear community responses to my inquiries, or even to my presence) I never knew when or how my conduct as a newcomer in town might inadvertently subvert the fieldwork process.

I soon came to realize that my early inquiries were being frustrated by circumstances that had very little to do with me personally or with my research. I had arrived in Port Dover when local Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources conservation officers were aggressively enforcing an eight-inch (approximately 20 centimetre) slot size length on commercially harvested yellow perch (fish were measured in a slot measuring device). It had been determined by the Ministry of Natural Resources that yellow perch less than 20 centimetres long were too immature to be harvested. This enforcement measure, of course, directly and adversely impacted Port Dover's small-boat gillnet fishermen (those fishing the shallow waters of Long Point Bay and along the Port Dover coast east towards Nanticoke) who argued to the contrary (along with the smelt trawlermen who supported them) that the yellow perch they were harvesting from these local waters were in fact fully mature but smaller in length because they had spawned in, and in their biology were conditioned by, and had migrated from the micro-environment of the Inner Bay, Long Point (see Figure 1). The Inner Bay, Long Point perch, they argued, were therefore in full compliance with the regulations and commercially harvestable.<sup>29</sup> Conservation officers disagreed, stood their ground and continued to enforce the eight-inch slot size limit by monitoring the commercial harvesting operations of Port Dover's small boat fishermen from government patrol vessels and from positions on-shore. Occasionally, conservation officers would also pull a section of gillnet from the water to determine whether its meshes met with the government's minimum mesh

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ed. Robert Lawless, Vinson H. Sutlive, Jr. and Mario D. Zamora (New York, 1983), 111.

<sup>29</sup> In 1978, Ministry of Natural Resources scientists confirmed that Port Dover's commercial fishermen may have been right all along regarding the mature length of Inner Long Point Bay yellow perch. See Petzold and Paine, *Population Characteristics of Yellow Perch in Long Point Bay Lake Erie in the Fall of 1976*.

size regulations. Smaller meshed nets, (or “snuggies” as they were called) were confiscated and those who owned them were charged. These were certainly not the best of times for Port Dover’s small boat fishermen to fish for a living, nor for an apprenticing anthropologist to commence field research among them.

My lucky break (or so I thought) came at the end of May 1977, about a month into my fieldwork. I had learned that Port Dover’s Board of Trade was in the process of organizing a fish dinner in St. Cecelia’s Hall publicly to acknowledge and thank the commercial fishermen for their significant contribution to Port Dover’s local economy. The event, I thought, would be the perfect opportunity for me to make contact with the fishermen outside of their working environment. I purchased my dinner ticket and looked forward to attending the gala. On the night of the event, I entered a packed and noisy room where everyone was standing around and busy talking. Other than recognizing some of the fishermen with whom I had made contact over the previous weeks, I knew no one except the father of a contact I had made in Toronto whose family had lived in Port Dover for many years. My contact’s father was a very respected and involved member of the community and the author of several books on Port Dover’s local history. Perhaps sensing my reserve, he and his wife approached me and began to introduce me to the many people they knew in the room, including a gentleman whom I will call Abraham Jones (a pseudonym). As Abraham Jones and I shook hands and exchanged greetings, I was informed by the father of my Toronto contact that Abraham worked in “the Ministry” and was closely involved with the commercial fishermen and their community. This led me to conclude that Abraham must have been a clergyman who supported local fishermen without equivocation in their on-going fracas with conservation officers on the yellow perch length issue. His support was consistent, I reasoned, with the small group of Canadian east coast Catholic clergymen who had supported and worked alongside with the small-boat and trawler fishermen in their struggles to organize co-operatives along Canada’s Atlantic coast.<sup>30</sup> Yet, there was something about Abraham that troubled me and I did not know why. I let my concerns slide when the master of ceremonies for the evening announced that dinner would be served shortly and asked everyone to be seated.

Abraham seated himself next to me at the table. The dinner’s main course included deep fried locally caught yellow perch. As Abraham passed me the heaping platter of fish, he leaned over and in my ear whispered, “I’ll have to get my tape measure from the truck to see whether these are legal fish.” He was, of course, having a bit of fun with me, but the remark was sobering because I immediately realized that Abraham Jones was not a clergyman “in the ministry,” as I had naïvely assumed, but a conservation officer “in the Ministry” of Natural Resources, who had no doubt been out in Long Point Bay that day checking for and pulling “snuggies” out of the water! How could I have been caught so off-guard? How could I have been so naïve?

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<sup>30</sup> These clergymen worked under the umbrella of the “Antigonish Movement,” which was administered through the Extension Department at St. Francis Xavier University. This Catholic-Clergy directed social movement was led by Fathers Jimmy Tomkins and Dr. Moses Coady.

By then, everyone at the banquet, including the fishermen, had observed me socializing with Abraham Jones. I was convinced that my credibility as an apprenticing anthropologist had been severely compromised. All I could do now was to make every effort to keep Abraham at a safe distance. But he seemed to have taken a liking to me. The more I tried to distance myself from him, the greater his efforts were to stay close at hand. I had made a friend (one that I could have done without) in full view for all (including the fishermen) to see for the remainder of the evening. There would be no conversations with the fishermen that evening, as I had hoped. And there certainly would be no building of trust with them, or so I had thought at the time. I left the banquet early and walked home, dispirited, upset, and convinced that my fieldwork in Port Dover had come to an abrupt end.

It took a while for me to recover from this seemingly major early stumble. Much later, I was told by a number of the fishermen that the Abraham Jones incident had merely confirmed the rumour, which had been in circulation amongst them since my arrival in town, that I was a conservation officer in plainclothes and a spy. It made perfect sense for fishermen to have drawn this conclusion, being a newcomer in town and therefore a stranger, even though I had told a number of them why I was living in Port Dover and what my work involved. I was certainly not the first anthropologist to have been perceived as a spy in the fieldwork context. The villagers of Hal-Farrug in Malta also concluded that Jeremy Boissevain, the Dutch anthropologist conducting fieldwork among them, was a spy.<sup>31</sup> To the extent that Boissevain and I were believed to be spies, our respective circumstances were similar. In my case, from the perspective of the fishermen, I appeared in town from somewhere else, and for no apparent logical reason began to observe them in and around the waterfront. I was curious and asked many questions. I wore plainclothes and drove a dilapidated baby blue 1958 Chevrolet, which I had recently purchased from my brother to get around town and to drive to and from other nearby fishing ports. It was the perfect undercover vehicle. If my inquisitive behaviour and the car weren't enough to create suspicion, the fact that I appeared not to be working but was paradoxically living quite comfortably and quietly (almost reclusively) in a walk-up second story apartment above the dry-cleaners in town assuredly would have confirmed what they were thinking about me. "Who is this guy?" "What's he doing in town?" "He must be a fish cop." On 10 June 1977, I made the following entry in my field notebook:

I am just now beginning to realize the full impact of my activities in Port Dover. Fishermen seemingly view me as a Ministry of Natural Resources spy — a perfectly logical conclusion to make under the circumstances. I am new in town, ask many questions and am frequently seen by the fishermen observing their harbour and dockside activities and vessel movements, much like conservation officers would do. ... [One commercial fisherman told me] that I am "lucky that I have not been thrown overboard on my trips out [to the fishing grounds]. We don't fool around anymore. When they [conservation

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<sup>31</sup> Jeremy F. Boissevain, "Fieldwork in Malta," in *Being an Anthropologist: Fieldwork in Eleven Cultures*, ed. George D. Spindler (New York, 1970), 58-84.

officers] start taking away something that you have been working for all your life, then you don't stand there and let that happen."<sup>32</sup>

I had worked hard to establish a relationship of trust with the fishermen and had made some headway with them just two weeks prior to the Abraham Jones incident. Early in May 1977, for example, I had met with one of the directors of the Eastern Lake Erie Trawlers Association and through him had made arrangements to accompany some of its members on their trawlers to the smelt fishing grounds. Fishermen knew by now that I lived in town (because I told them) and that my field research methods involving the practice of "participant observation" were very different from the survey practices employed by other investigators. For the next 15 months, I participated in and observed the rhythms of everyday life among Port Dover's commercial fishermen through which I gained a more intuitive (and certainly a better) understanding of their working world, to the extent that one can ever gain such an understanding of other life ways, even within our own society. My long term residency in Port Dover and my involvement with them as a "participant observer" facilitated such an understanding.

### **Other Missteps and Movement Forward: Port Dover, 1977-1978**

By the end of the summer of 1977, my fieldwork activities had become more regularized and certainly less stressful. Commercial fishermen have a wonderful sense of humour and we all had a good laugh as we got to know one another better about my encounter at the Board of Trade dinner with Abraham Jones. There was no escape for me and I frequently became the target of their good-natured wit. I was spending more time with them in town at the Commercial and Norfolk ("Tilt'n Hilton") hotels, and around the waterfront and out on the lake on their fish tugs. I also interviewed fishermen and their families at home; they would invite me to come for dinner and talk. Their spouses were very much involved in our open-ended conversations about Port Dover's community based fisheries. They would, I was told, often monitor inter-vessel communication among the fishermen (or communicate directly with their own spouses) on the lake using their home-based ship-to-shore marine radios.<sup>33</sup> At the time, I had not been aware of fishermen communicating with their spouses at home over their ship based radios, even though I had been on a number of trawlers out to the fishing grounds by this time. The marine radio was in its applied context a very significant integrative device that reinforced the fabric and the boundaries of their occupational community.<sup>34</sup>

Port Dover's smelt trawlermen also relied on their marine radios to maintain contact and communicate with other fishermen while fishing, which included communicating distorted information about fishing particulars in order to leverage personal advantage in their pursuit and capture of smelt. The frequency of such

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<sup>32</sup> John J. Van West, Field Notes, 10 June 1977.

<sup>33</sup> The introduction of the "two-way" radio for use on Lake Erie fishing vessels appears to have occurred during the mid-1950s. See Richard Doyle, "Lake Erie Swings to Radio," *Canadian Fisherman* LXI (October 1954), 28-29.

<sup>34</sup> G. Salaman, "Two Occupational Communities: Examples of a Remarkable Convergence of Work and Non-work," *Sociological Review* XIX (1971), 389-407.



Figure 7: Fisherman Frank Bravener having a conversation on his ship to shore radio. Photo by John J. Van West.

deceptive radio broadcasts would increase during the height of the summer season, when the smelt are inclined to disperse and scatter throughout the Eastern Basin, thereby becoming more difficult to locate and catch, or when the demand for them exceeded supply.<sup>35</sup> In such cases, upon finding a large school of smelt, a fisherman would lower his trawl into the water and commence through his marine radio to direct other fishermen away from the area by conveying misinformation about where he was fishing, or how much he was catching, among other strategies that have been chronicled in the literature by maritime anthropologists. I was in the wheelhouse of a trawler fishing on the lake one day when, on its ship-to-shore radio, I overheard a fisherman on another trawler broadcast to other fishermen who were fishing that day that he had been unable to locate any fish with his fish finder. The captain of the trawler I was on smiled and said, “He’s lying. I know he’s got fish.” I asked how he knew. He replied, “I can tell he’s lying by the pitch of his voice.” Many of the mobile highly

capitalized offshore capture fisheries throughout the world (involving, for example, trawling) operate on this principle of the zero sum game.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to my frequent evening interviews with fishermen and their families, I was also spending a great deal of time with fishermen in their net shanties and around their docked fishing boats. It was here — in and around the harbour, net shanties and docks — where many (but not all) of them tended to gather immediately after they had

<sup>35</sup> I have discussed the social organization of production among Port Dover’s smelt fishermen at length in John J. Van West, “Ecological and Economic Dependence in a Great Lakes Community-Based Fishery: Fishermen in the Smelt Fisheries of Port Dover, Ontario,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* XXIV (1989), 95-115.

<sup>36</sup> Raoul Andersen, “Hunt and Deceive: Information Management in Newfoundland Deep Sea Trawler Fishing,” in *North Atlantic Fishermen: Anthropological Essays on Modern Fishing*, ed. R. Andersen and Cato Wadel, Newfoundland Social and Economic Papers No. 5, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland (Toronto, 1972), 120-140; see also Raoul Andersen, “Those Fishermen Lies: Custom and Competition in North Atlantic Fishermen Communication,” *Ethos* XXXVIII (1973), 154-164.

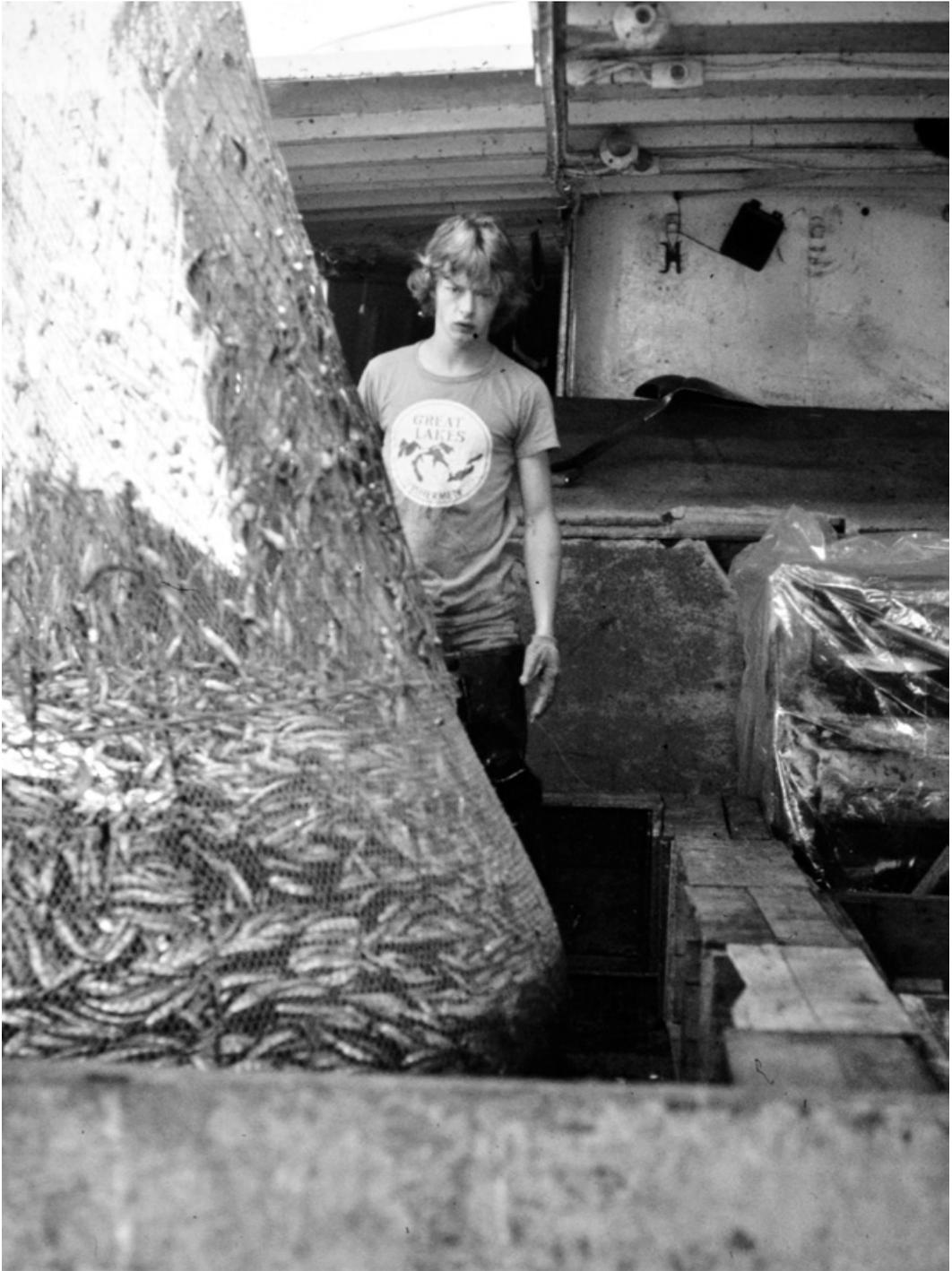
unloaded their fish, and it was here where they would talk about their day out on the lake, gossip and drink coffee, repair nets and mechanical gear, tell jokes, exchange information about the weather, fish, and much, much more. There was much laughter and good cheer at these informal group gatherings. The size of the group would change constantly as fishermen joined in, stayed for a while, and then would leave to go home or do some more work. There was never a quiet or a dull moment in and around the harbour with fishermen engaged in all sorts of work related activity. And all of this social activity and buzz among them reaffirmed for each fisherman his important and meaningful presence in their occupational community. I was well into my fourth month of fieldwork and had become a more familiar face in town, at the bank, or in the grocery store, bakery, post office and laundromat, and so it went. As I went about my business, people were starting to extend a friendly wave, share a smile or simple nod their heads in response to my greetings as we passed each other on the sidewalk in town. My world, uncertain and fractured as I felt it had been in May 1977 at St. Cecelia's Hall, was starting to come together.



Figure 8: Fisherman Roy Lindsay repairing equipment after returning to port. Photo by John J. Van West.

Trust, I believe, underpins *everything* in the fieldwork encounter (and broadly speaking in everyday life). Fishermen began to tell me more about their way of life because I had earned their trust. They shared information about their home life, family histories, and how long they had been fishing. I told them about my life, what I had done, where I had traveled to and from as a young boy, and why I was interested in writing about them. I listened and they listened. I came to be known as “that guy writing the book,” which, according to at least one fisherman, was a questionable undertaking at best because “the book” would never sell.<sup>37</sup> His response was direct and for me poignant: “Why would anyone want to read a book about a bunch of working fishermen who don’t know much about anything?” It was a self-deprecating remark that I found very

<sup>37</sup> I always corrected fishermen on “the book” they believed I was writing. I was writing a thesis, I told them, which was, I said, somewhat like a book. I promised them that I would leave a copy of it in Port Dover’s public library, which was done in 1983 following my thesis defense.



*Figure 9: Deckhand Wayne Buck about to unload a cod end full of smelt. Photo by John J. Van West.*

unsettling because he had somehow internalized and accepted this stereotypic image of fishermen (of himself) as valid.<sup>38</sup>

My fieldwork often involved being with the fishermen out on the lake fishing as a “participant observer.” I would frequently assist deckhands with their assigned duties: operating the winch, managing the gear, landing the catch, shoveling smelt into containers and icing them, washing the deck, among other responsibilities.

I was often given generous quantities of smelt (but also perch and the occasional whitefish or yellow pickerel, which had been caught in the trawls as incidental catches) in return for my labour at the end of the day. I accepted these gifts graciously but with some embarrassment, because it was so painfully obvious to me and to those on board that I really was more a hindrance than a help. This became readily apparent one summer day in 1977 when one fisherman asked me if I would crew for him with pay. The deckhand had called in sick and because I had been out on the boats so often, I guess he thought that I would be of some help. I did not want to let him down, but I was not confident about taking on the work, alone on deck, without someone experienced by my side for my own safety as well as the captain’s. Commercial fishing is an extremely dangerous occupation and it is in fact, according to some maritime anthropologists, “far more dangerous in terms of loss of life than the most dangerous land occupation in our society — coal mining.”<sup>39</sup> The morning went without incident but by early afternoon, we encountered a serious problem. In our final lift, we noticed that the net had snagged a large waterlogged tree stump. We were unable to open the cod-end to land the fish without first removing the stump. The captain and I struggled for several hours to extract the log from the net. The water was far from calm and the cod-end, flush with fish, was swinging almost uncontrollably from the vessel’s towering A-frame against its port side, like a pendulum on a clock. I knew we were in trouble and I knew I was not being all that helpful because I was constantly seeking instructions and guidance on what to do next. The captain, normally a kind and patient man, became frustrated with me and I felt badly that I was letting him down. We were able to remove the stump after considerable effort and land our fish. Back ashore, when the news circulated quickly about what had happened on deck (because the captain had talked), other fishermen were quick to come to my defense, expressing their upset with the captain and his lack of understanding and patience. This made me feel a bit better; in fact, their collective support demonstrated for the first time a concern for and empathy with *my* struggles to record *their* way of life. I had come a long way since Abraham Jones had talked to me about fish size and rulers over dinner.

During the winter of 1977-1978, with the lake frozen over and with fishing stopped for the season, I, along with a number of younger fishermen, enrolled in a net mending course taught by the late Jack Powell. Jack was a local commercial fisherman

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<sup>38</sup> For an excellent analysis of fisherman stereotypes, see Janet Gilmore, “Fisherman Stereotypes: Sources and Symbols,” *Canadian Folklore* XII (1990), 17-38.

<sup>39</sup> John J. Poggie Jr., Richard B. Pollnac and Carl Gersuny, “Risk as a Basis for Taboos among fishermen in Southern New England,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* XV (1976), 258.



*Figure 10: Fisherman Jack Powell repairing a torn trawl on the waterfront. Photo by John J. Van West.*

and a man with a big generous heart who had years of net building and mending experience. The classes were as much a social event as they were a learning opportunity. Jack was an extraordinary teacher and led the way. By the end of the course I had mastered the art (it was as much an art as it was a skill) of splicing rope and wire cable and repairing and stitching the lead and cork lines on gillnets. It was, however, far more challenging for me to repair an otter trawl. This net is shaped like a funnel, consisting of diminishing meshes in the net from its wide opening at one end to the narrowing cod-end at the other.

The evenings always passed quickly and I enjoyed them immensely. On one occasion, just before coffee break, I was splicing wire cable attached to an otter trawl. I enjoyed working the cable, difficult though it was, and began to whistle quietly. Almost immediately, one of the fishermen working nearby looked at me and said, “Hey John, do you know that whistling brings up the wind?” Nothing else was added. I

interpreted the remark as a nuanced request for me to stop whistling, which of course I did immediately, and nothing further was said.

I reflected on this whistling incident for some time, because earlier in the month I had asked another much younger fisherman if, in Port Dover, fishermen were at all superstitious. I was told they were not. I explored the issue further with some fishermen during coffee break at our next net mending class. There were indeed a few, particularly those who had been fishing for many years, who admitted that they avoided whistling for fear that it would bring up the wind. Another taboo that was to be avoided, I was told, was to change the name of a fishing vessel for fear that it would bring bad luck. The occurrence of superstitious beliefs among commercial fishermen, of course, is a well-established fact.<sup>40</sup> I was quickly learning the occupational (maritime) culture and with this knowledge came acceptance and respect, which led one fisherman to tell another whom I was about to interview that, “you can tell John everything. He is on our side.” It was March 1978, several

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 257-262; R. van Ginkel, “Fishermen, Taboos and Ominous Animals: A Comparative Perspective,” *Anthrozoös* IV (1990), 73-81.

months before I was scheduled to return to Toronto. I was deeply moved by this generous and gracious public acknowledgement of approval and trust. It was the critical turning point in my fieldwork — for me and also for them. I was, in the short time that remained of my fieldwork, given increasingly more access to information by fishermen about their working world (such as, for example, data on the costs and earnings of their fisheries), which I had been unable to access earlier in my fieldwork.

In August 1978, I returned to Toronto and on 29 June 1983, I successfully defended my Ph.D. thesis. My fieldwork in Port Dover among its commercial fishermen and their families has left lasting memories of goodwill, kindness, unstinting generosity, and much humour. I continue to travel to Port Dover intermittently to visit with a number of them to reminisce about old times — my old times as an apprenticing anthropologist and theirs when Port Dover was recognized as the largest freshwater fishing port in the world. It's as though history has not intervened for a retired maritime anthropologist who continues to return to the field for the sheer pleasure of spending time with the men and women (now also retired) for whom the commercial capture of fish sustained a unique and distinguished way of life.

### **Closing Remarks**

As an anthropologist whose interest in maritime peoples and their communities was influenced by the writings of Dr. Raoul Andersen (now professor emeritus of Anthropology at the Memorial University of Newfoundland<sup>41</sup>), I continue in retirement to prepare research on and write about the economic, historical and cultural traditions of Ontario's Great Lakes (and lesser lakes) commercial fishermen.<sup>42</sup> It has also been my resolve through my writings,<sup>43</sup> including this paper, to satisfy the broader purpose of advocacy. There is a very real and long overdue need for social anthropologists and other social scientists to engage in ethnographic field research among Great Lakes (and lesser lakes) commercial fishermen. We know so very little about their way of life, differentiated as it was in the past and as it is now by region and community along the lakes littoral. It is a way of life that has been fracturing for quite some

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<sup>41</sup> Dr. Andersen served as my Ph.D. external examiner.

<sup>42</sup> I am currently preparing a book length manuscript that will chronicle the life of the late independent commercial fisherman Cecil Martin. Mr. Martin, who passed away in 1966, played a pivotal leadership role in the formation and operation of 14 fishermen's marketing, supply and processing co-operatives along the north shore of Lake Erie, and on Georgian Bay and Lake Huron, between 1949 and the mid-1960s.

<sup>43</sup> See John J. Van West, "The Need for a Social Science Perspective in Fisheries Management: A Socio-Historic Case Study of the Independent Fishermen in Port Dover, Ontario," *Environments* XVIII (1986), 43-54; ———, "Ecological and Economic Dependence in a Great Lakes Community-Based Fishery"; Jean Manore and John J. Van West, "The Water and the Life: Family Work and Trade in the Commercial Poundnet Fisheries of Grand Bend, Ontario, 1890-1955," in *Fishing Places, Fishing People: Traditions and Issues in Canadian Small-Scale Fisheries*, ed. Dianne Newell and Rosemary E. Ommer (Toronto, 1999), 55-79; John J. Van West, "Ojibwa Fisheries, Commercial Fisheries Development and Fisheries Administration, 1873-1915: An Examination of Conflicting Interest and the Collapse of the Sturgeon Fisheries of the Lake of the Woods," *Native Studies Review* VI (1990), 31-65.

time and in some cases has vanished altogether as adverse pressures on and other competing interests in the fishery resources undermine the efforts of Great Lakes commercial fishermen to make a living.<sup>44</sup> Fishermen can and will share their experiences about the working world that defines them. But their stories will not be heard, read or even understood unless and until they are chronicled in the record.<sup>45</sup>

### **Acknowledgements**

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44 The commercial fisheries of the Great Lakes are being threatened (and have been for many years) by the proliferation of non-native exotic invasive species (e.g., sea lamprey, zebra and quagga mussels, spiny waterfleas, Eurasian ruffe and the round goby, among other non-desirable invaders, including the rainbow smelt, which became desirable), point- and non-point source and atmospheric pollution, species extinction and other considerations. These other considerations would include the government's misadministration of Ontario's fisheries and the reallocation in policy and law of an increasingly greater share of the fisheries resources for use by sports fishermen and more recently by Aboriginal commercial fishermen.

45 James Feldman and Lynne Heasley are of the view that the Great Lakes region has not attracted systematic scholarly attention. See James Feldman and Lynne Heasley, "Reflections - Recentering North American Environmental History: Pedagogy and Scholarship in the Great Lakes Region," *Environmental History*, XII (2007), 951-958. While I would agree with their assessment, there is real hope that not all is lost. For example, the Northeast Minnesota Historical Center's 1977 initiative called the *North Shore Commercial Fishing Oral History Project*, interviewed 11 Lake Superior commercial fishermen whose stories are on deposit in audio format at the University of Minnesota, Duluth (lamentably, only one interview has been transcribed). See <http://www.d.umn.edu/lib/nemhc/guides/s2207.htm> and also <http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/search/searchterm/north%20shore%20commercial%20fishing%20oral%20history%20project> (accessed 15 September 2013.)