"Bucking the Inevitable:" Industrial Capitalism and North Atlantic Fishermen in the Last Days of Sail

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Cet article examine la réaction des marins pêcheurs des États-Unis et du Canada concernant l'introduction de la pêche au chalut à perche. Les pêcheurs américains et canadiens avaient à peu près la même opinion concernant la nouvelle technologie, et ce qui est sans doute encore plus important, leurs attitudes et leurs actions reflétaient les réactions des ouvriers qualifiés des industries de transformation en produits de base concernant des défis similaires à peu près à la même époque. Les ouvriers qualifiés, indépendamment du contexte, considéraient la menace de la société et de la technologie pour ce qu'elle était, soit une attaque évidente à leur sécurité d'emploi et à leur perception de soi fondée sur les habiletés, et ils réagirent en conséquence.

In early 1926, The *Atlantic Fisherman,* a trade journal for the North Atlantic fisheries, ran an editorial commenting on the growing controversy over steam trawlers in Nova Scotia. Noting that "our sympathies are naturally with the fishermen and the vessel owners of the fleets affected by the trawler activities,"it went on to observe "somehow we cannot but feel that our good friends, in protesting against the trawler, are bucking the inevitable."[1] Certainly, if the experience of American fishermen some fifteen or twenty years earlier was any indication, there was little doubt about it.

Back in June 1905, a group of Boston investors had organized the Bay State Fishing Company to build a steel-hulled beam trawler like those used by the English in the North Sea. By dragging the ocean bottom with a bag-like net, beam or otter trawlers could catch

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[1] *Atlantic Fisherman,* March 1926.

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far more fish in a shorter time than could dory fishermen working from sail-powered schooners. In fact, in 1912, the six steamers of the Bay State fleet averaged forty-nine trips and two million tons of fish each.'

The dorymen were so concerned about this threat to their livelihood that they petitioned Congress to authorize the Commissioner of Fisheries "to investigate the method of fishing known as beam or otter trawling and to report to Congress whether or not this method of fishing is destructive to the fish species or is otherwise harmful or undesirable."3 The fishermen argued that the new method depleted fish stocks, marked the beginning of industrial fishing, and would ultimately lead to monopoly.

After a prolonged investigation, the U.S. Commission of Fisheries acknowledged that the new technology would displace "the less efficient line fishery" and reduce "the number of individual vessel owners" and lead to "concentration of ownership ... in the hands of a comparatively small number of firms and corporations." However, it held that "the consideration of [such] broad subjects of social welfare" were not "germane ... to the investigation with which we are charged."4

Like the *Atlantic Fisherman* editorial, the Commission Report held the results to be inevitable. Still, concern for the impact of the new technology on the fish supply led the Government to restrict beam trawling to those areas where it was already practiced. It made little difference to the sailing fishermen, who, by the mid-1920s, were all but obsolete in the American fleet.

Even though the Commission of Fisheries' apathy and the *Atlantic Fisherman's* resignation were understandable in light of the realities of industrialization, the underlying truth that defined both positions meant little to men confronted with the prospects of losing a way of life that had defined their families and communities for generations. American and Canadian fishermen feared the loss of autonomy that the beam trawler implied.

For them, the success of the industry rested on the cooperation of labor and capital. As one report from Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, put it:

> The fisheries of Nova Scotia ... have skilled seamen who cooperate with each other and with firms of long standing who are scattered over the rural parts of Nova Scotia. The beam trawler implies corporation con trol. Its appearance in number means that the skilled fishermen who are able might secure jobs as coal heavers for a monthly salary or leave the country and seek an opportunity in other lands.'

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2 For an excellent discussion of the introduction of beam trawling to New England, see: Andrew W. German, *Down on T Wharf The Boston Fisheries As Seen Through the Photographs of Henry D. Fisher* (Mystic, 1982), Chapter 7; Andrew W. German, "Otter Trawling Comes to America: The Bay State Fishing Company, 1905-1938," *The American Neptune* XLIV (Spring 1984): 114-131.

United States Bureau of Fisheries, *Report of the United States Commissioner of Fisheries for the Fiscal Year 1914,* Appendix VI, by A. B. Alexander, H. F. Moore, and W. C. Kendall (Washington, D.C., 1915), 5.

[4] *Ibid.,* 49.

[5] *Atlantic Fisherman,* March 1930.

The words nearly echoed the sentiments of Gloucester's Captain Frank Nunan in 1912. Delineating the problems posed by the Bay State Fishing Comp any, Nunan wrote in the *Fishing Gazette:*

> It is labor and independence against something not right. By way of an illustration, take the day before Christmas, or the day before a big storm.
> The Old Way - "Well boys, go home. We won't go out tonight."
> The New Way - "Well, wife, the fish company says I must go out tonight. You know I am hired and I must go, for if I don't there is someone to take my place on the wharf. Goodbye. Think of me tomorrow.'

In both cases, the threat of technology was exacerbated by the fact that interests outside the community were behind the introduction of the trawlers. Gloucester was the leading American fishing port until the end of the 19th century, when Boston became the hub of New England's fishing market.' Likewise, Lunenburg dominated Nova Scotia's salt bank fishing until Halifax interests successfully used trawlers to provide a regular supply of fresh fish for Canadian and international markets, thus significantly cutting Lunenburg's market share.'

Though separated by a couple of decades, the responses of American and Canadian fishermen to the introduction of new technology were almost identical. Perhaps more significantly, they mirrored the reactions of skilled workers in the smokestack industries to similar challenges at about the same time. Largely ignored by traditional labor history, with its emphasis on laborers in industrial settings, struggles for control on the shop floor, and the dynamics of ethnic and race relations, the story of the fishermen suggest that while job settings may differ greatly from industry to industry, skilled labor attitudes may not.

At the heart of the American fishermen's objections to otter trawling was the loss of freedom and egalitarianism that the new technology seemed to represent. Fishing, for most of these men, wasn't a conscious decision, but part of a family tradition handed down from father to son and reinforced by the nature of the towns and villages where they'd grown up.

Migrating from Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, many of the fishermen out of Gloucester represented upwards of a hundred years of family experience in the fisheries. For such men, formal education was irrelevant because there was only one occupation realistically open to them.' As one man from Aquaforte, Newfoundland, recalled, "As soon

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[6] *Fishing Gazette,* 3 February 1912, as quoted in German, *Down on T Wharf,* 110; German, "Otter Trawling Comes to America," 121.

' German, *Down on T Wharf,* Chapter 1.

8 For more on the changes in the Lunenburg fisheries during this time, see B. A. Balcom, *History of the Lunenburg Fishing Industry* (Lunenburg, 1977), Chapter 6.

These points were repeated countless times in interviews. See: Lawrence Allen, Interview with John Kochiss, Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, 11 November 1969, Frank Mitchell, Interview with Fred Calabretta, Reading, Mass., 24 July 1992, Mystic Seaport Museum Oral History Collection (hereafter, MSMOHC); Hubert Cluett, Interview with David Masters, Gloucester, Mass., 15 March 1978, Gloucester Arts and Humanities Program (hereafter,

as you could work at something you quit [school]. There wasn't too much to be educated for.'[10]

While their choice of fishing seemed inevitable, there was nonetheless an attractiveness to it that made these men more than mere pawns of fate. In a story similar to that repeated by countless immigrants to Gloucester, another Newfoundlander noted that from an early age, he had "water in his blood." Instead of going to school, he "somehow or other ended up hanging around at the wharves all the time."[11]

For the fellow from Aquaforte, the appeal of fishing was clear. "You were free. You didn't have a boss over your shoulder all day long. ... You were in the dory, you and your mate. You were your own boss after you left the mother ship. The quicker you got the trawl, the quicker you got on board and got coffee. So you had goals to work for."[12]

And, of course, there was pride in knowing that you could set your own goals without having to be told what to do. Not every man could be a fisherman, and those who couldn't were weeded out early, and fast. In a system that promoted cooperation and mutual responsibility, there was likewise accountability.[13] Old timers showed youngsters aboard a vessel how to do things *once.* After that they were on their own, which meant, one man remembered, "You learned a lot by yourself."[14]

Another observed that aboard a schooner "you didn't grow up" so much as you were "rushed up."'[15] Such a rough apprenticeship bred self-reliance and self-confidence among those who passed muster, but also encouraged a sense of cooperation. Eager youngsters wanted to please their shipmates and impress them as being worthy of trust as fo'c'sle equals. The experienced hands, meanwhile, were not above correcting the new fellows when they made mistakes, if they showed themselves to be reliable and hard working.

In the end, "It was up to your pride," noted a fisherman. "It was up to yourself. If you didn't do it, you knew you were going to get it. So you wanted to be as good as the other guy."[16] Such an ethic had a leveling effect aboard the fishing schooner. According to a Boston man who went fishing at age nine, "It didn't make any difference where you came from, as long as you knew your business ... and they could find out in no time whether you

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GAHP); Al Edmunds, Interview with R. Wayne Anderson, East Boston, Mass., 20 June 1982, Walter Furlong, Interview with R. Wayne Anderson, Charlestown, Mass., 10 June 1982, Robert O'Brien, Interview with R. Wayne Anderson, Watertown, Mass., 2 March 1982; Uno Peterson, Interview with R. Wayne Anderson, Chelsea, Mass., 9 &16 June 1982, Northeastern University Oral History Project (hereafter NUOHP). Lunenburg fishermen described similar situations, a point worth noting since many Gloucestermen started life in Lunenburg. See Peter Barss, *Images of Lunenburg County* (Toronto, 1978), 19-24.

[10] Robert O'Brien interview, 2 March 1982, NUOHP.

[11] Hubert Cluett interview, 5 March 1978, GAHP.

[12] Robert O'Brien interview, 2 March 1982, NUOHP.

[13] Uno Peterson interview, 9 & 16 June 1982, NUOHP.

[14] These points were made by several men. See: Robert Merchant, Interview with Virginia Jones, Stonington, Conn., 1 April 1978, MSMOHC; Robert O'Brien interview, 2 March 1982, Uno Peterson interview, 9 & 16 June 1982, NUOHP.

[15] Barss, *Images of Lunenburg County,* 20.

[16] Robert O'Brien interview, 2 March 1982, NUOHP.

knew your business or not."[17]

Shipboard routine dovetailed with values learned over generations in the Old Country to make assimilation to Gloucester society easier than it was for immigrants to industrial cities. Gloucester's own social dynamics, meanwhile, encouraged the perpetuation of these values and a sense of cross-class cooperation and understanding.

In many ways, community relations in Gloucester reflected patterns identified by some historians of late 19th and early 20th Century American industrialization. In a series of studies on workers in several industries during the Gilded Age, Herbert Gutman was the first to challenge the widely held notion that entrepreneurs were nearly omnipotent in instituting a new industrial order.[18] By insisting that workers were isolated, that industrialists had a relatively free hand in implementing new disciplines, and that little cross-class sympathy existed, historians, according to Gutman, ignored the fact that during its early phases, industrialism and its values were more readily accepted in large cities than in small towns dominated by one or two large industries, usually owned by employers from outside the community.

In the latter, local conditions strengthened worker power and limited employer options, especially during strikes and lockouts. Unlike their counterparts in the growing metropolises, small businessmen in these towns harbored a great deal of pro-labor and anti-industrial feeling. Making up a large proportion of the town's total population, industrial laborers shopped in the small stores owned by the community's middle class and lived close by them. Not ideologically predisposed to industrialist perceptions of workers as factors of production, the middle class tended to view workers simply as fellow citizens.

The position of workers within the town's social structure reinforced their power within the community. Living in compact social communities within fair proximity of one another, these laborers developed what Gutman termed "a `primitive' sense of social

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17 Al Edmunds interview, 20 June 1982, NUOHP.

18 Herbert Gutman explored this theme in several case studies. See: Gutman, "Two Lockouts in Pennsylvania, 1873-1874," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 83 (July 1959): 307-326; Gutman, "An Ironworkers' Strike in the Ohio Valley, 1873-1874," *The Ohio Historical Quarterly* 68 (October 1959): 353-370; Gutman, "Trouble on the Railroads in 1873-1874: Prelude to the 1877 Crisis?" *Labor History* 2 (Spring 1961): 215-235; Gutman, "The Worker's Search for Power: Labor in the Gilded Age," in H. Wayne Morgan, (ed.), *The Gilded Age: A Reappraisal* (Syracuse, 1963), 38-68; Gutman, "Class, Status, and Community Power in Nineteenth Century American Cities--Patterson, New Jersey: A Case Study," in Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working Class and Social History* (New York, 1977) 234-260. Other historians have found similar patterns. See, for example: Irwin M. Marcus, "Labor Discontent in Tioga County, Pennsylvania, 1865-1905: The Gutman Thesis, a Test Case," Labor *History* 14 (Summer 1973): 412-422; John T. Cumbler, "Labor, Capital, and Community: The Struggle for Power," *Labor History* 15 (Summer 1974): 395-415; Cumbler, "The City and Community: The Impact of Urban Forces on Working Class Behavior," *Journal of Urban History* 3 (August 1977): 427-442; Nick Salvatore, "Railroad Workers and the Great Strike of 1877: The View From a Small Midwest City," *Labor History* 21 (Fall 1980): 522-545; Michael W. Santos, "Community and Communism: The 1928 New Bedford Textile Strike," *Labor History* 26 (Spring 1985): 230-249; Santos, "Between Hegemony and Autonomy: The Skilled Iron Workers' Search for Identity, 1900-1930," *Labor History* 35 (Summer 1994): 399-423.

solidarity" despite a relative absence of unionism.[19] Because they were such an integral part of their towns, moreover, workers could not easily be overlooked when they protested. This was clearly the case in Gloucester, where Captain F. G. Robinson told his Lunenburg counterparts that the city could raise a million dollars to fight steam trawling.[20] Whether that figure was realistic or not, Robinson had ample evidence of Gloucester's largesse when it came to her fishermen.

The Gloucester Fishermen's Institute, which provided room and board, games, a reading room, navigation classes, and Christian uplift and advocacy, was ample proof of the community's commitment to the fishermen's well being. Indeed, the consistent and generous support, both financial and moral, shown by the city's monied interests and summer residents had made the Institute possible. The involvement of skippers, vessel owners, builders, businessmen, and yachtsmen in events as diverse as fishermen's races, ethnic festivals, schooner launchings, and trial trips blurred class lines. The possibility of "worthy" individuals rising to vessel ownership or business prominence, meanwhile, made for a fluid social structure that further contributed to Gloucester's anti-industrial sentiment.21

As in Gutman's communities, the fact that the Bay State Fishing Company was an out-of-town conglomerate made it suspect in Gloucester from the outset. When the Company became part of the National Fisheries Company scheme in 1906, Gloucester's worst fears were simply confirmed. The National Fisheries Company had tried to combine the Boston fish dealers, fix prices, and further encourage beam trawling.

For Gloucester's Captain Frank Nunan, a point person in the fight against the trawlers, the scenario was clear. The Bay State Fishing Company had monopolistic designs on the fisheries. "[T]he backing of the beam trawlers," he stated emphatically, "will fight before they give up their plan ... to control the fish business; to have their own wharf; to have their own store for fitting out steamers; to have ice houses, railways and lastly, to sell their

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[19] Gutman, "Two Lockouts in Pennsylvania, 1873-1874;" "An Ironworkers' Strike in the Ohio Valley, 1873-1874;" "Trouble on the Railroads in 1873-1874: Prelude to the 1877 Crisis?" "The Worker's Search for Power: Labor in the Gilded Age;" "Class, Status, and Community Power in Nineteenth Century American Cities - Patterson, New Jersey: A Case Study."

[20] Cited in German, "Otter Trawling Comes to America," 120.

[21] For more on the Gloucester Fishermen's Institute, see: Gloucester Fishermen's Institute, *Annual Reports,* 1893-1897; *Gloucester Times,* 1889-1892. For more on the easy blending of classes in business, social, and community settings, see, James B. Connolly, *The Port of Gloucester* (New York, 1940), Chapter XXVI; Jeremiah Digges, *In Great Waters: The Story of the Portuguese Fishermen* (New York, 1941), 173-187; Joseph E. Garland, *Down to the Sea: The Fishing Schooners of Gloucester* (Boston, 1983), Chapters 3, 7, 9; George Wesley Pierce, *Goin' Fishin': The Story of the Deep-Sea Fishermen of New England* (Salem, 1934; reprint ed., as *Going Fishing: The Story of the Deep Sea Fishermen of New England,* Camden, Maine, 1989), 119-122; Dana Story, *Frame-Up! The Story of Essex, Its Shipyards, and Its People* (Barre, Mass., 1964); Dana Story, *Growing Up in a Shipyard: Reminiscences of a Shipbuilding Life In Essex, Massachusetts* (Mystic, 1991), Chapter 1; William S. Webber, Jr., *Waterfront: Around the Wharves of Gloucester in the Last Days of Sail* (Manchester, Mass., 1973); Manuel F. Domingoes, Jr., Interview with Linda Brayton and David Masters, Gloucester, Mass., ND., GAHP; Julian Hatch, Interview with Michael W. Santos, Naples, Florida, 25 October 1993; June Mellow, Interview with Michael W. Santos, Gloucester, Mass., 18 November 1993; Dana Story, Interview with Michael W. Santos, Essex, Mass., 16 November 1993.

own fish."[22]

Like entrepreneurs in steel and other industries, the Bay State executives, at least in Nunan's mind, were attempting to integrate the industry horizontally to maximize control and profitability. Clearly, the leadership at U.S. Steel had learned long ago the value of having everything from raw materials, to transportation, to processing facilities, under a clearly delineated corporate hierarchy. But it had come at a cost to the workers employed in its various subsidiaries. Unions had been busted, worker autonomy lost, and skill had been diluted to the point where most everyone in the mill was a semi-skilled machine tender, easily trained and easily replaced.[23] Such a reality seemed all the more viable given the assumption of most schoonermen about the competency of the crews aboard the steam trawlers. According to the *Portland Express,* "They can come from Mattawankeag as well as from Orr's Island, and it matters little whether their knowledge of rigging is confined to tying a knot around a cow's neck so it will not slip and choke her to death."[24]

That steam trawlers required both skilled fishermen and skilled engine room workers was irrelevant to the argument of the dorymen. The trawlermen were industrial laborers, pure and simple, and as such, technology made them easily replaceable. Whether they worked on a fishing boat or a textile mill or a steel plant didn't much matter. The dynamics of wage slavery, for the all-sail fisherman anyway, was the same.

Unlike the schooner fleet, steam trawling paid a wage rather than sharing the profits of a trip. It seemed obvious to the fishermen that such a system would inevitably destroy the egalitarianism that permeated community life in cities like Gloucester, and would replace it

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[22] *Fishing Gazette,* 3 February 1912, cited in German, "Otter Trawling Comes to America," 121.

[23] For more on the steel industry, see: David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960); Francis Couvares, *The Remaking of Pittsburgh Class and Culture in an Industrializing City, 1877-1919* (Albany, 1984); John A. Garraty, "The United States Steel Corporation Versus Labor: The Early Years," *Labor History* 1 (Winter 1960): 3-38; Katherine Stone, "The Origins of Job Structures in the Steel Industry," *The Review of Radical Political Economics* 6 (Summer 1974): 61-95. For a good overview of the changing realities confronting workers throughout industrial America at the time, see: Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974); Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.,1977); Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., "The Emergence of Managerial Capitalism," *Business History Review* 58 (Winter 1984): 473-503; Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1979); David Montgomery, "Worker Control of Machine Production in the 19th Century," Labor *History* 17 (Fall 1976): 485-509; David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge, 1979); David Nelson, *Managers and Workers: Origins of the New Factory System in the United States, 1880-1920* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1975); Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago, 1974). There are also some excellent industry-specific studies. See, for example: Cecelia F. Bucki, "Dilution and Craft Tradition: Bridgeport, Connecticut, Munitions Workers, 1915-1919," *Social Science History* 4 (Winter 1980): 105-124; David Nelson, "Taylorism and the Workers at Bethlehem Steel, 1898-1901," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 101 (October 1977): 487-505; Robert Ozanne, "Union-Management Relations: McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, 1862-1886,"Labor *History* 4 (Spring 1963): 132-160; Robert Ozanne, *A Century of Labor-Management Relations at McCormick and International Harvester* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1967).

[24] *Fishing Gazette,* 18 May 1912, cited in German, *Down on T Wharf,* 110; German, "Otter Trawling Comes to America," 121.

with the class tensions that defined the experience of industrial towns.

A strike by the trawlermen for higher wages and shorter hours in July 1912, simply confirmed this impression as fact. Never mind that the strike lasted only a week and the trawlermen won a wage increase of ten dollars a month. [25] Nor was it particularly significant that the beam trawlers were generally safer than dory trawling and had been pushed since the late 1880s by reformers concerned about the appalling loss of life among schoonermen.

Even while grudgingly acknowledging the relatively greater safety of the trawlers - "At least you were on deck and could go warm yourself ... and you didn't have to go away in the night in a fog" - old timers insisted that life aboard the schooners was generally healthier. [26] "Kids could swim in Gloucester Harbor and you could see the bottom," before the diesel-powered draggers became popular, reminisced one man. He went on to say that on the schooners, "there were no machines to handle the work on board. There was a sort of respect and affirmation of what it took to be a fisherman in the old days."[27]

Like skilled workers in the smokestack industries, what the dorymen feared most about the encroachment of technology and industrial values was the loss of this respect and affirmation, and with it, their sense of control over their own lives and destinies. According to Charles Sabel, job security without the accompanying acknowledgement of craft identity meant little to the skilled laborer. [28] Technical prowess - not place in an officially defined job hierarchy - was what counted for the skilled operative. In Sabel's words, the craftsman is "a man proud of his fellowship with his companions whose skill he respects, a man hesitant to forego that fellowship for a place in a world whose values he mistrusts in so far as he understands them."[29] For this reason, when the skilled workers' status was threatened by technology, they tended to cling, at least for awhile, to their old sources of identity, even if it meant staying aloof from fellow workers. By distinguishing themselves from the morons from Mattawankeag whose idea of rigging was tying a knot around a cow's neck, the schoonermen were setting up a sense of their exclusivity from, and superiority to, the trawler crews. That such distinctions were largely artificial was beside the point.

By 1916, many of the fishermen's fears had been realized. Following the Fisheries Commission's decision to allow beam trawling to continue, executives of the Bay State Fishing Company restructured their firm as a diversified fishing and processing company.

2s German, *Down on T Wharf,* 109.

26 Robert O'Brien interview, 2 March 1982, NUGHP.

[27] Manuel Domingoes interview, N.D., GAHP.

[28] Charles F. Sabel, *Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry* (Cambridge, 1982), 89-92; Benson Soifer, "A Theory of Trade Union Development: The Role of the `Autonomous' Workman," *Labor History* 1 (Spring 1960): 141-163. In a study of machinists in Bridgeport, Connecticut, between 1915 and 1919, Cecelia Bucki found a similar tendency. Many craftsmen, concerned with exclusivity and fearing that organization of the less skilled was a concession to employer attacks on skill, found it difficult to accept industrial unionism. As a result, where organization reinforced craft power, the skilled men acted alone. See Bucki, "Dilution and Craft Tradition." The control issue is also addressed in: Montgomery, "Worker Control of Machine Production;" Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America;* Santos, "Between Hegemony and Autonomy;" Michael W. Santos, "Brother Against Brother: The Amalgamated and Sons of Vulcan at the A. M. Byers Company, 1907-1913," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 111 (April 1987): 195-212.

[29] Sabel, *Work and Politics,* 89-92.

They chartered the Bay State Fishing Company of Maine with rights to breed, pack, can, and sell all species of fish. The firm merged the fishing operations of the original Bay State Fishing Company with the processing and marketing activities of Boston's most successful wholesale outfits. The goal was clear - corner the market and, insofar as possible, foster a monopoly on the New England fish trade.

In the same year, the Boston Fish Pier Company was formed, acquiring twenty-eight dealerships. By 1917, thirty-seven independent firms had been amalgamated into two. The impact for the Bay State Fishing Company was impressive. In that year, it was responsible for landing 36 million pounds of fish, approximately one-third of Boston's annual total.[30]

While such success was responsible for encouraging the spread of the steam trawler, it also contributed to what might be termed the proletarianization of the fishermen during the first twenty years of the twentieth century. That the trawlermen were wage slaves was evidenced clearly enough for the schoonermen by a rise in labor strife on the wharves. First there had been the 1912 strike, then the 1915 walkout for union recognition, followed filially by the 1918 strike for an increase in crew size, with captains, mates, and engine room gangs each pushing for a wage hike.[31]

The following year, it became painfully obvious that the line fishermen were likewise becoming victims of monopoly capitalism. With the wartime economic boom over, market demand decreased, causing fish prices to fall to 2½ cents a pound in 1919. While the trawlers' tendency towards big harvests no doubt contributed to the problem, their crews, who were paid a monthly wage and a bonus, were not greatly affected. On the other hand, the dorymen, who worked on shares, were.

As a result, the fisherman's union demanded a fixed minimum price for fish, which the wholesalers flatly refused. Seeing no other alternative, the schoonermen struck in July, and by the middle of August, a Board of Arbitration settled the dispute in favor of the fishermen.[32] Though they'd won, the 1919 strike was a tacit acceptance of the "New Way" that Captain Nunan had warned against back in 1912. One doryman noted years later "The union was set up to cope with the beam trawlers." It wasn't needed aboard the schooners, because there, you were "on your own."[33] Collective action, then, even if successful, was an admission that the fishermen's independence and autonomy was no longer assured.

This point was apparent to anyone who understood the routine aboard a steam trawler. Every morning the skipper was required to check in with headquarters by radio. The quantity of fish he had aboard, how many sets he'd made, his location, weather conditions, other vessels fishing in the vicinity, and anything else that might help the company know exactly what was going on with all its vessels was reported. The data was then tabulated and evaluated and skippers ordered to stay out or head in, depending on gluts or scarcities in the

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[30] German, "Otter Trawling Comes to America," 123-125.
[31] German, *Down on T Wharf* 109.
[32] German, "Otter Trawling Comes to America," 125.
[33] Robert O'Brien interview, 2 March 1982, NUOHP.

No skill, no expertise, no need to be able to "think like a cod fish" to be a trawler captain. If the schooner captain was a self-starter, independent, and knew his business intimately because he'd worked his way up from the fo'c'sle, a trawler skipper seemed just to need to know how to take orders. His status aboard ship came not so much from a hard-earned reputation as from an officially prescribed job hierarchy in which he was the relative equivalent of a shop floor foreman or middle level manager. By the mid-1920s, Captain Nunan's scenario of what would happen if beam trawlers won out - when "the Fishing Company says I must go out ... I must go, for if I don't there is someone to take my place" - had become truth for a good many American fishermen.

Aware of developments in the United States, Canadian fishermen were quick to resist similar challenges in their country. As early as 1912, Lunenburgers showed more than a passing interest in the fight against beam trawlers.[35] Nova Scotia had already outlawed trawling within the three-mile limit, and many in the province were pushing the Canadian Government to prohibit offshore otter trawling as well. No doubt a lot of Lunenburgers took heart in Captain F. G. Robinson's assertion to them that the Gloucester fishermen would wage an all-out fight to stop the beam trawler in American waters.

Watching the American struggle, Lunenburgers probably realized that the way the U. S. dealt with the issue would ultimately and eventually impact them. How could it not, with beam trawlers already operating in Canadian waters and on the Banks? Surely, the U. S. Bureau of Fisheries' decision to allow beam trawling in areas where it was already being practiced could only be taken as a bad omen for men who advocated a total ban on the new vessels. By the mid-1920s, the Lunenburgers' worst fears were being realized. Unless something was done, and done fast, dorymen would be as obsolete in Canada as they were becoming in the United States.36

In 1928, under pressure from the fishermen, the Government appointed a Commission to study the condition of the fisheries in the Maritime Provinces, and to suggest solutions for the benefit of both the fishermen and the industry. After hearing repeated claims that there was overwhelming evidence to show that beam trawling was in the best interest of neither the fishermen nor the future development of Nova Scotia's fisheries, a majority of the Commission recommended its prohibition from Canadian waters. With the chairman of the committee filing a minority report favoring the new technology, the Canadian Government struck a compromise. Trawlers would be allowed to work during the winter months, but restricted during the rest of the year.

Far more limiting than the American solution, the Government plan rankled trawler interests. In Halifax, an association of trawler-owning corporations was organized to push for the opening of Nova Scotian ports to beam trawlers, and thereby extend their access to

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Frank H. Wood, "Trawling and Dragging in New England Waters, Part I," Atlantic *Fisherman,* January 1926, 23.

[35] German, "Otter Trawling Comes to America," 120.

[36] Detailed coverage of the struggle over otter trawling in Canada appeared in the *Atlantic Fisherman,* July 1929 to May 1938.

the fishing banks offshore. While conciliatory to the fishermen, the association appealed to patriotism and a sense of fair play. A proposal was developed that called for restricting the free landing of trawler caught fish to Canadian-built vessels, thus preventing excessive trawler development by doubling or tripling the cost of bringing cheap, second-hand, foreign-built boats under Canadian registry. The Halifax group contended that its approach would stimulate the building of Canadian boats and provide profitable employment "for the sons of fishermen in the Province."37

Such arguments did little to convince Lunenburg's fishermen. On August 13, 1929, P. J. A. Cardin, the Minister of Marine and Fisheries, Colonel J. L. Ralston, the Minster of Defense, and W. A. Found, the Deputy Minister of Fisheries, traveled to Lunenburg to investigate conditions. From Riverport to West Dublin, wherever they went in Lunenburg County, the Ministers heard the same story - the beam trawler posed a serious threat to the Nova Scotian fisheries and must be stopped. As a result of the inquiry, an amendment was made to the Fisheries Act in 1929 that required any otter trawler fishing from a Canadian port to have a license from the Minister of Marine and Fisheries. Additionally, it authorized the Governor-in-Council to fix regulations under which licenses would be granted.

On October 30, 1929, by order-in-council, the issuance of licenses to boats built after November 1, 1929 was limited to vessels built in Canada. For existing fishing vessels that were not Canadian built, temporary licenses good through April 1, 1932 would be issued. License fees were set at one cent per pound of fish landed for non-Canadian boats, and 2/3 cents for Canadian craft. This latter proviso was quick to draw fire from several Halifax firms operating trawlers. Contending that the license was actually a tax, they argued that it could not legally be imposed by order-in-council. As such, they refused to pay until the matter was properly adjudicated.

Interestingly, while the Government's decisions exasperated the trawler interests, they did little to mollify the fishermen's agitation against beam trawling. In the first months of 1930, the Lunenburg Board of Trade passed a resolution calling for nothing short of the elimination of the steam trawler. Pointing to the destruction done to gear and property by these vessels, Lunenburgers noted that trawlers had shown indifferent results and had failed to pay dividends even remotely close to that yielded by the fishing schooners.

Opinion on the wharves was unanimous. Proportionately, the schooner could catch as many fish of a better quality without destroying the grounds or smaller fish. With the advent of auxiliary power, they could profitably engage in winter fishing, while the introduction of cold storage facilities allowed Nova Scotian fishermen to amply supply the Canadian market.

Yet the issue ran deeper than simple economics. Lunenburgers could not ignore the potential threat to long-established community patterns if the trawler became entrenched. As the local correspondent for the *Atlantic Fisherman* put it, the fleet not only employed 2,000 men directly, it was responsible for "building a community of self-respecting, progressive

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37 *Atlantic Fisherman,* July 1929.

and happy citizens."'

Not that these people had much monetarily. Life in Lunenburg and the surrounding county was hard.[39] Every spring the vessels set sail for the Banks after the men had taken their crops in. Gone upwards of three months, fishermen left it to their women folk to tend gardens, feed animals, and raise the children till they got back. If they got back. Each season brought news of schooners lost in gales or of dorymen gone missing. The money earned fishing helped supplement the family's income, or perhaps more accurately, farming supplemented the money earned aboard the schooners. In either case, there was never a lot of cash on hand. One lived from hand-to-mouth, at little more than a subsistence level.

Still for all that, these people were happy, they were proud, they were independent. One old timer, remarking on all the new-fangled opportunities available some forty years later, told an interviewer, "In them days people was poorer ... but they was happier."[40] Another man observed that while life was simple, "it was just happy. You was a millionaire."[41]

Nostalgia may play tricks on the imagination, but there was no denying the realities of life in the tiny villages scattered throughout Lunenburg County. Forced by isolation to be nearly self-sufficient, families were close-knit and neighbors cooperated. They had to for survival, but there was more to it than that. Kinship patterns went back generations. Everyone knew one another, and one's identity came from being so-and-so's son or daughter, or so-and-so's grandchild. The community became part of an extended family network of folks you were related to by tradition and necessity, if not by blood. Such ties bred mutual respect if not always mutual affection, and certainly fostered a sense of interdependence. You knew you could count on your neighbors, as they knew they could count on you.

Nor was it all about survival. When a family needed wood for the winter, the men organized a sawing party and out to the woods they would go while the women stayed at home quilting. At night, dances at the store or fish shed were common.

Whatever the source of their values, Lunenburgers were sure of one thing--those values would not survive the introduction of beam trawlers. If loyalty, trust, and cooperation were hallmarks of a man's character, it was easy to see how corporate rules would undermine and destroy long-standing personal relationships. Indeed, Lunenburgers prided themselves on a tradition of mutual respect and understanding between labor and capital, a tradition they feared would be swept away if the companies behind the beam trawler got their way. For them, an outright ban on the new technology was the only viable answer.

As the Depression deepened, the urgency of this solution increased. In the early spring of 1931, the Lunenburg Board of Trade sponsored a conference attended by representatives of fishermen and fishing interests from throughout Nova Scotia. A resolution

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[38] *Ibid.,* March 1930.

[39] The profiles of life in Lunenburg at this time are drawn from Barss, *Images of Lunenburg County,* 9-11, 19-24, 76-83.

[40] *Ibid.,* 10.

[41] *Ibid.,* 82.

calling for "the abolition of the steam or otter trawlers on the grounds that the trawler is ruining the fishing business in Nova Scotia"[42] was passed by acclamation. An executive committee was appointed to "carry out the objectives of the resolution" and sent to Ottawa with explicit instructions to lobby the Government, the Nova Scotia members of Parliament, and the Maritime and Fisheries Commission.

To the Lunenburgers, the rightness of their argument was obvious. The lawmakers they sought to persuade, however, weren't so sure. The trawler interests made an equally compelling case. So the matter dragged on, making compromise increasingly unacceptable to both sides.

By the end of 1931, the fishermen's frustration had grown. At the annual convention of the United Maritime Fishermen held at Halifax, there was sharp criticism of the Government for its beam trawler policy. Formed a little over a year earlier in June of 1930, the United Maritime Fishermen represented some 200 local fishermen's unions organized by the Rev. M.M. Coady in Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and the Magdalen Islands.

The convention unanimously voted to adopt a resolution condemning the "indifference" of the Government to "the repeated demands of the United Maritime Fishermen for complete and immediate abolition of the trawler." Many at the convention were incredulous that the Department of Fisheries could take such a "very decided stand ... in favor of the trawler interests." Pointing to the "obvious" depletion of the fish supply and the destruction of spawning grounds, the fishermen found it impossible to understand how any middle course was serving either them or the long-term well-being of the Canadian fisheries.

The struggle against the trawler had taken on a moral imperative for the fishermen. For them, they were in a life or death struggle for their very way of life. As such, the stakes were too high to settle for anything short of total victory. If the evidence from the United States was any indication, efforts at Government compromise only served the corporate interests promoting trawling. The fishermen concluded that to have any chance at all, they had to force Ottawa to unequivocally accept their point of view.

Of course, such a likelihood was impossible. The *Atlantic Fisherman* had been right in 1926, when it pointed out the futility of "bucking the inevitable."[43] Still, as late as the spring of 1938, Lunenburgers were critical of the Government for its apparent bias in favor of the trawler companies. Still contending that they could adequately supply the fresh fish market, they refused to acknowledge the economic realities that had forced them to strike only months before.

As their American counterparts had back in 1919, Lunenburg dorymen found themselves victims of corporate interests beyond their control. With the Depression dragging on and markets glutted with fish, in no small part the result of the trawlers' efficiency, prices had bottomed out. Making a living from the sea, hard enough even in the best of times in

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[42] *Atlantic Fisherman,* April 1931.
[43] *Atlantic Fisherman,* March 1926.

Lunenburg, had become nearly impossible by 1937. Discontent in the fo'c'sles grew. Crews became restless, and more than a few refused to ship to the Banks. Talk around town and in the county turned to unionization.

The skippers, for the most part, sided with the men. In December of 1937, Captain Angus Walters, skipper of the famed fishermen's racer ***Bluenose,*** was elected President of the Lunenburg Station of the Fishermen's Federation of Nova Scotia. Never one to bite his tongue, Walters promptly supported the fo'c'sle men's demand for a 1/4 cent per pound increase on haddock.[44] The dealers, led primarily by the Maritime Fish Corporation and General Seafoods of Halifax, refused to concede a price increase or recognize the fishermen's union. Walters and his organization of Master Mariners had had enough. They refused to sail until the fishermen's demands were met.

Securing the support of the Halifax Fish Handlers and Fish Cutters Union, the Lunenburgers were able to tie up the dragging fleet and shut down the main plants of the Maritime Fish Corporation and General Seafoods. After three weeks of negotiations, a temporary settlement was reached on January 19, 1938.[45]

Like the 1919 American strike, the fishermen's victory came at a high cost. The Lunenburg tie-up was the first labor strife in that community since the fisheries had begun. With it, the worst fears of the Lunenburgers were realized. Their way of life would never be the same again. Labor-management cooperation, personal integrity, and a sense of mutual responsibility and respect had been replaced by impersonal business dealings, threats, and class strife. It was a bitter pill to swallow for people whose values were grounded in generations of a close-knit community. No wonder they continued to protest the inevitable long after technology had made them obsolete.

Unlike Boston and Halifax, Gloucester and Lunenburg were small, fairly intimate communities, Lunenburg even more so than Gloucester. As such, they were conservative, proud of their seafaring tradition and of the values and relationships that it had created. Like the small rural communities of the late 19th century studied by Herbert Gutman, they tended to be suspicious of industrial technology, corporate attitudes, and urban values in general.

The fact that most Lunenburg fishermen were farmers for at least part of the year no doubt reinforced these prejudices. Historically, fanners have looked at cities as corrupt and evil places, the sources of abuse and sometimes their exploitation. That trawlers were being foisted on them by corporate interests headquartered in Halifax could only help confirm such instinctive suspicions. As for Gloucester, Boston's growing economic challenge at the end of the 19th century disposed its citizens to dislike Beantown even before the first steam trawler was launched.

The beam trawler forced fishermen on both sides of the border to confront industrialization on terms similar to laborers in other cities and industries. They responded in ways reminiscent of those workers, despite the uniqueness of their work environment. Indeed, the dynamics of a worker-controlled shop floor seemed little different from the

G. J. Gillespie, ***Bluenose Skipper*** (Fredericton, New Brunswick, 1955), 116-118.

45 Details on the strike are drawn from: ***Atlantic Fisherman,*** January to February 1938; Gillespie, ***Bluenose Skipper,*** 116-118.

pitching deck of a schooner under a full press of sail when the latter was stripped of the romantic imagery imposed on it by writers like Rudyard Kipling, whose *Captains Courageous* defined our understanding of these men for generations.

Whether on a fishing boat or shop floor, skilled workers saw the threat of the corporation and technology for what it was - a clear assault on their job security and skill-based sense of self That workplace dynamics were reinforced by long-standing community patterns only complicated the situation, because it represented yet another front on which the skilled workers' way of life was under attack. While the inevitability of change wrought by industrial capitalism may be obvious in retrospect, skilled worker resistant to it, in this case by fishermen, was the only logical course open to people confronting its effects first-hand.

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