

FROM CRAY RINGS TO CLOSURE

ASPECTS OF THE TASMANIAN FISHING INDUSTRY TO CIRCA 1970

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other higher degree or graduate diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in text of the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "P. L. Long". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "P" and a long, sweeping underline.

ABSTRACT

The history of the Tasmanian fishing industry is traced in general terms from settlement to 1925, and in greater detail to circa 1970. The development of the industry is reviewed emphasising changes in structure, the roles of management boards and the effects of government policy. A number of public enquiries and their recommendations are analysed to gain an insight into the industry at various times. The roles of regional centres and their increasing participation are investigated as are the development of the west coast fisheries.

Events such as the great depression, the second world war, and the emergence and decline of export markets are examined in the light of their effects on the industry in general, and fishermen in particular. The organisation of fishermen into professional associations and commercial co-operatives, their expansion, and in some cases demise, is also explored. The attitudes of fishermen to resource management, conservation, and the effects of pollution are reviewed, as are their responses to fisheries and marine regulations

Particular attention is paid to the concept of fishing effort and this is examined in the light of changing fishing technology, increasing capitalisation and the availability and dependence on bank finance. The question of access to the various fisheries by new participants, and its increasing difficulty over the years is explored, together with moves to exclude part-time fishermen, to instigate limited entry fisheries and to place restrictions on amateurs.

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INTRODUCTION

*"I would suggest to anybody wishing to become a fisherman - firstly go to a psychiatrist and if he says you are a hopeless case, then you may consider becoming a fisherman because no man in his right mind should consider same."*¹

These words were written by a man who had spent most of his working life fishing in Tasmanian waters and had a very strong attachment to the sea. They emphasise that it is not a purely logical decision to go fishing, for the economic returns can often be better ashore, and the life is at times uncomfortable and dangerous in the extreme. Yet in many families fishing has been a tradition followed by the succeeding generations, despite the hardships and isolation, and it appears there may be those who have "salt water in their blood".

Fishing is an anachronistic economic activity in that fishermen are truly the last of the hunter gatherers, undertaking a method of food production that on land has been replaced by agriculture and animal husbandry for many hundreds of years. In no other industry do the participants rely on capturing wild living organisms that in most cases they can not even see until they are secured aboard the boat.

Because they can not normally see the fish they seek, fishermen must rely on the knowledge gained from their own experience and that of their peers and, as some old timers maintain, that sixth sense about the location of the potential catch. It is this quality that leads to the claim that good fishermen are born not taught. Finding the fish is but one part of a complicated occupation that is more of a lifestyle than a job. Fishermen the world over must know and respect the weather conditions that they are likely to encounter, to anticipate its changes, and to take advantage of its benign periods to reap the rewards. They must be shipwrights and mechanics, net menders and rope splicers, welders and painters, and be capable of carrying out running repairs at sea on a rolling, pitching platform that is often either an exposed and windswept deck or a confined and claustrophobic engine room.

Fishing is by necessity a lonely experience as family and friends are left behind, often for weeks, and in the time that is not spent fishing the fisherman is confined to normally cramped living quarters. Social contact is limited to the company of one or two crew members and the crews of other boats that may occasionally lay alongside for the night. Relationships can be strong and enduring or short and violent depending on the personalities of the parties.

¹Handy Jager, The Needy and the Greedy, unpublished paper edited by A. J Harrison, Dept. of Sea Fisheries, 1989, Page 3.

Tasmanian fishing is essentially different from the European experience in that local fishermen have not until recently been concerned with the exploitation of the more distant waters. The various fisheries have tended to be coastal, the vessels relatively small and the fishing businesses family based. The fishing industry has, however, changed over the years, influenced by government policy, war, emerging and declining markets, technology and the attitudes and level of organisation of the fishermen themselves.

This work traces the development of the industry since European settlement, in general terms, and in more detail from 1925 until the early 1970s. It examines the changes that have taken place, their political causes and ramifications, and the effects upon fishermen and their families in terms of lifestyle, economic well being, and business pressures. The question of continuing family tradition, increasing capitalisation and consequent difficulty of access for young fishermen is also considered.

The effects of technological progress on the fishing process and increasing efficiency are explored, as is the concept of effort. Effort is the number of mechanisms i.e. nets or cray pots employed in fishing, multiplied by the amount of time fished. So in the case of crayfishing effort, this is measured in "pot days". The development of co-operatives and fishermen's professional associations are also examined as are the responses to increased government control and regulation, the threat of pollution, the introduction of limited entry fisheries and long term resource conservation.

The special qualities of the fishing community together with the changing conditions within the industry make for a volatile mixture. This has resulted in several controversies and public enquiries over the years and these are also examined below.



Mending nets at Coles Bay
circa 1930

Photograph courtesy of
F. Smithies Collection,
Archives Office of Tasmania

CHAPTER ONE THE EARLY YEARS

The island of Tasmania has more coastline, compared to total land area, than any other state in Australia and since the earliest times of human occupation this coastline and the immediate offshore waters have been exploited, for their abundance of fish, as a source of food.

Aboriginal middens, which are situated on all sections of the coastline except for the most rocky and inhospitable areas, have provided archeologists with evidence of the harvesting of shellfish over many thousands of years. The reason why Tasmanian Aborigines stopped eating scale fish approximately 3,500 years ago remains a mystery, but the myth of "cooking mutton fish (abalone) bringing on storms"² and the taunting of George Augustus Robinson's Aboriginal followers as "Fish Eaters", by their west coast counterparts,³ would lead to the view that there was some form of culturally inspired taboo in place.

Stone wall fish traps found at Cooks Beach on the Freycinet Peninsula, at Rocky Cape, and Low Head on the north coast, were first thought to be of Aboriginal origin but later research points to 19th century European construction. Tidal stone fish traps are non-selective and catch a wide variety of fish, whilst the remains in Aboriginal middens are mainly those of parrot fish which indicates tidal traps were not used by them. This view is reinforced by a letter from Mr. Braddon in 1878 which described two stone fish traps in operation at Leath on the north coast.⁴ Nevertheless, oysters and abalone were continually exploited by Aborigines as a food source and probably provided a substantial portion of the diet for coastal tribes.

The early European settlers also were very much reliant on marine resources in the vicinity of the new settlements at Hobart Town and Port Dalrymple, and in a letter, to Lord Hobart, Governor Collins tells of how he utilized 328 lbs. of fish for rations and thereby saved 164 lbs. of salt beef.⁵ The Reverend Robert Knopwood also made several references in his diaries to catching fish in the Derwent River including an entry for 13 April, 1805 when he notes "took my

²R. Jones, "Hunting Forebears" in Ed. M. Roe, The Flow of Culture : Tasmanian Studies Canberra, 1988. Page 38.

³ibid.

⁴J. Stockton, "Stone Wall Fish Traps in Tasmania" - E. A. Calhoun and A. Piper, "Stone Fish Traps at Cooks Corner", both in Australian Archeology No. 14 1982

⁵K. T. H. Farrar, "Historic Perspectives of Food in Tasmania", in Food Technology in Australia Vol. 24, No. 3, March, 1972. Pages 116-131. (reprint from above Page 2)

boat and went a fishing with very great success" and on 31st December, 1807 when his man caught "some very fine rock cod".⁶ This was at a time when the settlement was very short of food and in January, 1806 Knopwood had compiled a list of the fish available at various seasons and these included flathead, rock cod, mackerel, taylor and perch which gives us some idea of the importance of fish to the residents of the young settlement.⁷ Even when the food situation improved for the Colony, fish was part of the diet, and Knopwood informs us that on 16 June, 1814 "...we went to see the net drawn"; they caught a great quantity and "the gentlemen supped with me off fish."⁸

Fish continued to play a part in the food supply of the Colony and in 1816 John Gunn was advertising fresh fish for sale in Hobart. By 1840 there was a processing plant for whitebait in Launceston and in 1863 a Chinese-operated fish curing works operated at Southport.⁹ Fishing boats were racing in the annual Hobart Regatta in 1840, and in 1850 an advertisement appeared in the Hobart press calling for a staunchly built schooner to be used to investigate a great fishing bank said to be situated off the south coast of Tasmania and to have been discovered by Captain Ross on his voyage to Antarctica.¹⁰

As the fishing industry developed during the nineteenth century so did the level of interest by members of the general public and those carrying out the government of the Colony. There were concerns about the efficiency of the industry and for the conservation of the resource and these led to the establishment of a Royal Commission which took evidence from 83 witnesses in 1882, and reported in 1883.

The population of the Colony at this time was 120,000 and there were 86 boats operating in the fishing industry. These boats, together with fishing equipment, were valued at £7,700. There were 175 men employed in actual fishing whilst the public was supplied by 80 sellers and hawkers and it was estimated that a total of 1,050 persons were dependent on the industry for their livelihood.¹¹

The Commission was told that most boats were open whalers fitted with wet wells and although they had fished successfully to depths of 80 fathoms with hand lines and grabball nets, trawl nets had not proved a viable proposition.¹²

⁶M. Nichols, ed., The Diaries of the Rev. Robert Knopwood Hobart, 1977. Pages 81 and 181.

⁷ibid. Page 164.

⁸ibid Page 181

⁹K. T. H. Farar, op.cit. Page 8.

¹⁰H. O'May, Hobart River Craft Hobart, 1959. Page 38.

¹¹Royal Commission into "The Fisheries of Tasmania" 1883. Page XII.

¹²ibid. Page XIII.

Mr. George Peacock gave evidence that he had been unsuccessful in canning fish as some did not keep and he also expressed the opinion that at 8d. per lb. trumpeter was too expensive to can.¹³

On the issue of conservation the Commission noted the great reduction of the number of king fish (a large barracouta type fish), which had been one of the Colony's major export species, but put the decline down to natural causes.¹⁴ Concern was also expressed about the amount of undersized fish being dumped on the beaches from seine nets and the number of undersized crayfish being offered for sale.

The method of catching crayfish in Tasmania at this time was limited to the cray ring, which was a stiff circular hoop, initially made from fibre but later from wire, with a net suspended below it. Bait was fixed to the inside of the net and the ring was lowered to the sea floor on the end of a rope to which a cork float was fixed. A number of these rings were worked by each fishing boat and they needed continuous attention as once the bait had been eaten there was nothing to keep the crayfish inside the ring. Conversely, boats from other colonies, mainly Victoria, were fishing in Bass Strait and northern waters using the cray pot, which was a circular trap with a hole at the top into which the crayfish were lured by affixing bait to the inside. These pots could be left down for longer periods and, therefore, more pots could be worked by each boat so the method was considerably more efficient.

Whilst there were some extravagant claims that it was possible to catch an equal number of crayfish per day with rings, Mr. Handy Jager states that his father would catch an average of 20 score per day using 12 rings and that his best day ever was 36 score.¹⁵ Conversely there are many reports of catches in excess of 50 score per day using cray pots. The Royal Commission expressed concern about the effects that Victorian boats, using pots, were having on the Tasmanian industry¹⁶

The argument against the use of cray pots in Tasmania was that the crayfish could not escape, and that as pots were often lost, particularly in rough weather, this method was detrimental to conservation of the resource. This issue was to cause continued controversy in the industry for the next forty years. The Royal Commission recommended the establishment of a Board of Commissioners to manage the Colony's fisheries, both sea and freshwater, and the appointment of

¹³ibid. Page 43.

¹⁴ibid. Page XV.

¹⁵H. Jager, The Needy and the Greedy Unpublished paper edited by A. J. Harrison, 1989.

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¹⁶Royal Commission, 1883, op. cit., Page XII

an Inspector of Fisheries. English biologist, Mr. William Saville-Kent, was selected and went on to play a significant role in the development of the Australian fishing industry.¹⁷ The Fisheries Act of 1889 set a minimum size of 12 inches overall for crayfish and banned the taking of soft-shelled fish and females bearing eggs.

The question of the legalisation of cray pots arose several times during the early part of this century. Firstly, in 1903, cray pots were legalised in Bass Strait north of latitude 40 degrees 31 minutes south, and in 1905 this area was extended to 40 degrees 38 minutes south, for those holding a special license.¹⁸ In 1911 a sub-committee of the Commissioners for Fisheries recommended against total legalisation and in 1913 a Select Committee of the Tasmanian Parliament was set up to enquire into complaints by fishermen about the restrictions of the fisheries regulations. This committee recommended that cray pots of a certain size should be legal for use in Tasmanian waters, for a trial period, north of a latitude 42 degrees 21 minutes south, which is a line running through Schouten Island on the state's east coast.¹⁹ The demarcation line eventually reverted to 40 degrees 38 minutes, which runs just south of Hunter Island in the west and Clark Island in the east of Bass Strait.²⁰

Fishermen were allowed to deliver their catch to markets in the south of the state and carry their cray pots with them. This was to prove a nightmare for those entrusted with policing the regulations, as skippers of boats caught with pots aboard could claim they were intending to fish in northern waters. Subsequent evidence will show that cray pots were illegally used in the south of the state for the next 12 years.

A more thorough investigation of the fishing industry was undertaken in 1916 by a Royal Commission, carried out by Professor Theodore Thomas Flynn Bsc. from the University of Tasmania, who took evidence from 99 witnesses. Professor Flynn found that the industry had languished and that fishermen were only working the home and middle fishing grounds mainly because their boats were too small to venture further afield.²¹ Trawling had been tried without major results, although it had proved successful in New Zealand and in New South Wales, where 3 trawlers valued at £8000 each were in operation. He

¹⁷A. J. Harrison, The Commonwealth Government in the Administration of Australian Fisheries Brisbane, Royal Australian Institute of Public Administration, 1990.

Page 1.

¹⁸R. H. Winstanley, "Rock Lobster Fishing in Tasmania 1904 - 1972" Tasmanian Fisheries Research Vol. 7, No. 1, Page 1.

¹⁹Parliamentary papers, 1913, No. 48. Page 2.

²⁰R. H. Winstanley, Op. Cit. Page 5.

²¹Report of Royal Commission 1916, Parliamentary Papers, 1916, No. 10. Page 6-7.

recommended that the government charter a "school fishing boat" with the intention of setting up a trawler-based industry.²¹

Through his reports on the various ports, Flynn gives us a glimpse of the total industry and we see that outside Hobart and Launceston it comprised of a series of very small scale operations, with Dunalley being the only port with any degree of organisation. Here 7 out of the 15 crews fishing had organised a co-operative, cooking and processing their own catch.²² This co-operative had, in fact, only started that year with initially 2 boats owned by the Spaulding brothers and the cost of entry was £20 per share. It was to become the Tasmanian Fishermen's Association, a very successful organisation, that not only processed the local catch but also shipped crayfish to the Sydney market and achieved a gross return almost double that being received by Hobart fishermen.²³

In the Tamar the local fishing grounds were fast being exhausted with the 30 to 40 fishermen earning an average of only £2 per week. This reduction of resource was blamed upon amateurs with "private nets".²⁵ Fishing at both Strahan and St. Helens was limited to seine netting, in the respective harbours, for scale fish, mainly flounder. These were sold to the local markets with the occasional large catch sent by rail or bus to the major centres. During fine weather boats would venture "outside" in search of crayfish but fishermen with their small boats were very wary of the notorious bars of Macquarie Harbour and Georges Bay.²⁶ It was reported that the fishing grounds in Georges Bay were being affected by a "slum" from nearby tin mining operations.²⁷

At this time the main ports on the north west coast were Burnie and Devonport where Flynn reported there were plenty of fish but a shortage of facilities and little protection from the weather.²⁸ No mention was made in the report of the ports of Stanley and Triabunna, both of which were to become major fishing centres during the next fifty years.

²²ibid. Page 18.

²³Ibid. Page 8.

²⁴H. Rattenbury, Rattenbury Father and Son Tasmanian Pioneer Fishermen 1884 - 1982 Unpublished paper edited by A. J. Harrison, 1988. Page 3.

²⁵Royal Commission 1916, Op. Cit. Page 8.

²⁶Dick Clark, Strahan, 27/5/93, and Jeff. Felmingham, St.Helens, 18/5/93, Personal interviews, both of whom had fathers fishing at the time of this enquiry.

²⁷Royal Commission 1916, op. cit. Page 8.

²⁸ibid.

Flynn investigated the transport and marketing systems, in both the north and south of the state, and found them inadequate. He found conflict of interest in the fish markets at both Hobart and Launceston with the individuals employed to supervise the markets acting as agents for fishermen and buyers. He did, however, find that there was no evidence of collusion between the fish buyers although they added about 100% mark-up to their buying price. He recommended that fish prices be advertised in the newspapers as happened in other states.²⁹ Dealers were also reported as assisting some fishermen with the purchase of boats and this gave them influence when buying the catch but fishermen were very individualistic and prized their independence.³⁰

The Commissioner was critical of fishermen selling their catch alive from the wet wells of their boats at the Hobart wharf because he found that the advantages of this system, in providing fresh fish, were outweighed by the time lost by fishermen waiting for the fish to sell. This lost time tended to restrict supply.³¹ No one seems to have asked the fishermen what they thought of this and it may be that they were perfectly happy to remain at the dock repairing their gear and catching up on the local news for a few days whilst the fish sold.

We can see from this and the previous enquiries there was a feeling amongst the Tasmanian establishment that fishing should be developed more along industrial lines and be moved away from its lifestyle and family base. Fishermen showed little interest in this direction and were content to carry on in the old ways except where changes in fishing technology could make their tough working conditions easier.

Most boats were still small, open-ended whalers or ex-lifeboats, sometimes decked in forward to provide a small protected sleeping compartment, and the sails, when not in use, would be draped across the boom like a tent to provide extra shelter. Engines were just coming into use and these were either converted car motors or low horsepower, single cylinder, petrol models. There were a few larger boats involved in fishing and these were mainly either converted trading ketches or "wood hookers". Many of those engaged in the manning of trading ketches, or the barges bringing firewood to Hobart, would fish on a part-time basis and some progressed to be full-time fishermen, hence the conversion of their vessels into fishing boats.

²⁹ibid. Page 11.

³⁰ibid. Page 16

³¹ibid. Page 10.

Most of the actual fishing, whether it was setting nets, rings or pots was done from a dinghy, carried on deck by these larger boats when not being used. Sail was the main form of propulsion and engines were only generally used for manoeuvring or in dangerous situations. Cooking in the small boats was carried out on deck in a fire pot which was a small drum with a few inches of soil in the bottom in which a small wood fire was lit, whilst some of the larger boats were fitted with wood stoves. Fishermen's clothing consisted of coarse dungaree trousers and felt bluey jackets, which became very heavy when wet and virtually impossible to dry at sea.³²

Whilst crayfishing was an important export market for the state, many of the local fishermen were employed in catching scale fish, and in some cases this was more lucrative with fish like trumpeter bringing a higher price per dozen than crayfish and taking up less space in the wet wells. Barracouta ('couta) were very plentiful and George Bridge had been fishing for them since 1904. He often sold them to a factory at North West Bay for manure but when they moved to Nubeena in 1912 he and his family established a very successful 'couta smoking operation.³³

Shark was also caught for manure, and Harold Rattenbury tells of his father catching shark by hanging a bleeding sting ray over the side of the boat and gaffing the sharks when they attacked the ray.³⁴ Scallops had been dredged from the Derwent River since early in the century though some beds had to be closed in 1908 through over-exploitation. These beds were reopened in 1911 and a 5/- license fee was imposed. This fee brought in £20 during 1916 but scallops were driven from the river by excessive silting and no licenses were issued in 1919. By the early 1920's a few fishermen were dredging for scallops in the northern section of the Dentrecaesteaux Channel.³⁵ In the early years of the century all scallop boats used sail and only dredged downwind. By the 1920's they had engines but the dredges were still hauled by hand.³⁶

Other fisheries were important but it was crayfishing that provided most of the state's exports and over which there was the most controversy. Professor Flynn had recommended that cray pots be legalised throughout the state but no action was taken and this led to many fishermen breaking the law and a good number being prosecuted. In 1916, 30 year-old Tom Challenger joined the police force

³²H. Rattenbury, Op. Cit. Page 3.

³³L. J. Bridge, The Bridge family Unpublished paper, 1989. Page 1-2.

³⁴H. Rattenbury, Op. Cit. Page 8.

³⁵R. A. Perrin, Bsc. Hon., The Dentrecaesteaux Channel Scallop Fishery. Master of Environmental Studies Thesis, University of Tasmania, 1986. Pages 25-29

³⁶G. Kerr, Craft and craftsmen in Australian Fishing Portland, Vic., 1985. Page 11.

and shortly after was made a water bailiff. This was the start of a long career that was to be almost a legend in Tasmanian fishing, for the stories of Challenger's exploits in tracking down fishermen breaking the regulations are still told around the state's wharfs and waterside pubs.

One of the main problems was that boats were allowed to carry cray pots in southern Tasmanian waters but not allowed to use them. Challenger, therefore, had to catch them in the act and on several occasions he swam out to fishing boats that he suspected of breaking the law.³⁷ One night in a Hobart hotel he heard a fisherman boasting that Tom Challenger would never catch him fishing with pots. During the night Challenger boarded the man's boat and concealed himself below deck where the pots were stowed. There he remained until next morning and when all the pots had been set he emerged and arrested the skipper.³⁸

In 1920 tragedy drew attention to the inconsistency of Tasmania's cray pot regulations. Skipper Bernard Burgess, aged about 31 years, in command of the Victorian fishing boat "Myrtle Burgess", 25 tn., had spent the night of 3-4 November anchored off Georges Rocks in north eastern Tasmania. This position was well south of the cray pot demarkation line and the previous evening Burgess and his deck hand, Henry John Knight, had set 20 illegal pots. At 5.30 am the two men had left the "Myrtle Burgess" anchored and in the charge of cook, Leslie Marsh, and gone to pull and reset the cray pots in a motor dinghy.

Knight claimed they saw two figures on the beach, one of whom beckoned them towards the shore. Burgess took the dinghy in close but remained just off the rocks. Trooper Reginald Smith of St. Helens, who was accompanied by his wife, identified himself and accused Burgess of illegal fishing. At this point Burgess offered the trooper some crayfish which were refused and he was again ordered to bring the boat ashore. Instead he headed out to sea and told Knight to lie down on the floor of the dinghy. The trooper called twice for Burgess to stop and that he was under arrest, then seven shots were fired. When the shooting ceased Burgess was dead, shot through the head. Knight had been hit by a flying splinter of wood from the dinghy's gunnel but was not badly injured. Trooper Smith claimed he fired two warning shots and a further five at the dinghy's petrol tank.

An inquest was held on 5 November, 1920 at which there was basic agreement in the evidence of Knight and Smith. The Coroner found that the shooting could not be justified and committed Smith for trial for manslaughter. It was

³⁷Victor Douglas, Personal interview, Rosny Park, 31/5/93.

³⁸Bern Cuthbertson, Personal interview, Sandy Bay, 9/6/93

recommended that Knight not be charged with illegal fishing in view of his traumatic experience.³⁹ Tom Challenger was despatched to St. Helens to confiscate the "Myrtle Burgess", which had run aground when the police attempted to move her. After a confrontation with two of Burgess's relatives the boat was finally moved to Hobart. Trooper Smith received a seven year jail sentence for manslaughter.⁴⁰

The Tasmanian Parliament reviewed cray pot legislation in 1921 but again decided against its repeal. It is interesting to speculate on the views of some members of the Tasmanian establishment towards these regulations, as Harold Rattenbury reports that in 1922 he and his father used illegal cray pots off Tasman Island whilst they had Judge N. K. Ewing aboard for a holiday trip, and the next year the same thing happened with Sir Herbert Nicholes aboard at Port Davey.⁴¹ These breaches of the law in the presence of two prominent citizens also gives us an insight into the attitudes of professional fishermen. Rattenbury would have been aware that the law was out of date and virtually unenforceable and was confident enough of his own abilities and independence to risk breaking it. He also was in a position of power in charge of his own vessel, at home in his own wild and often dangerous environment, where those normally taking a senior role now relied upon his judgement for their very survival.

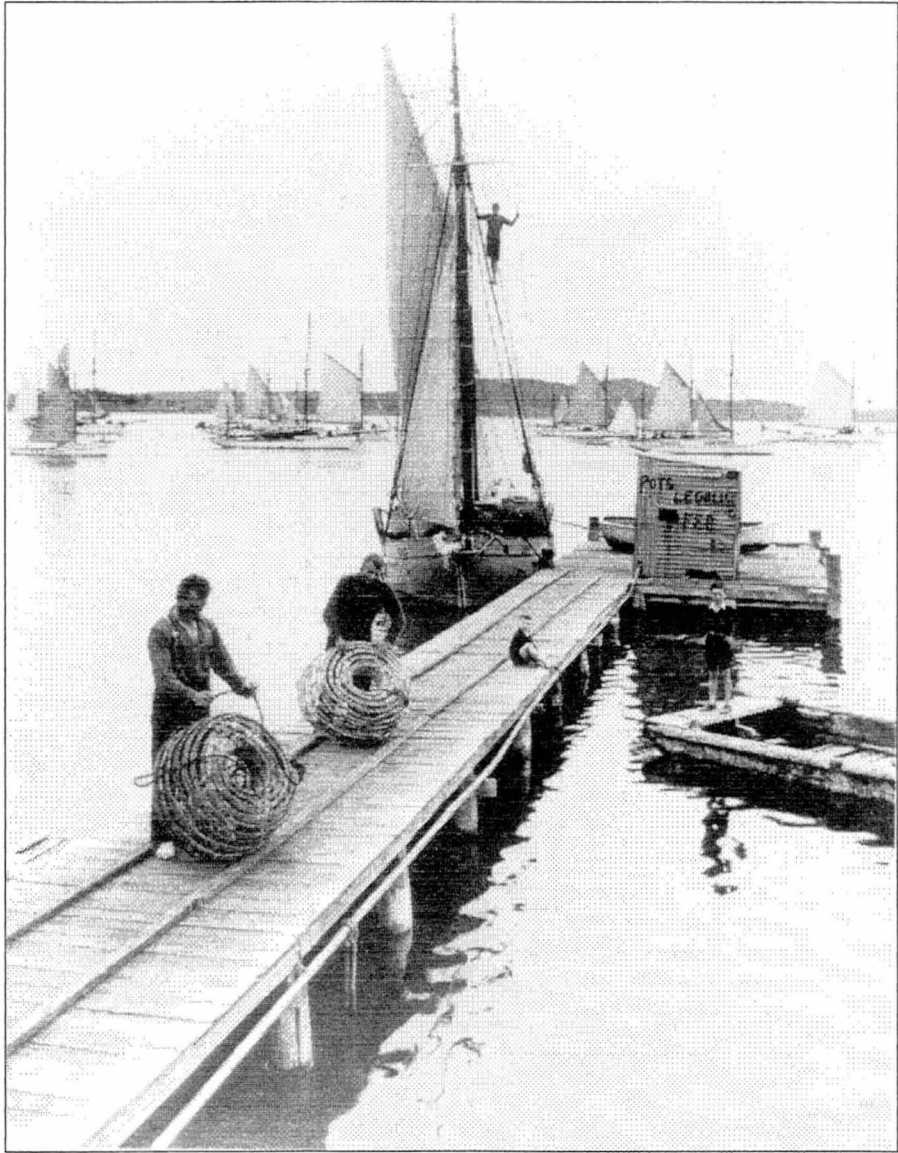
The legal situation remained unchanged until late 1924 when certain fishing regulations were challenged and found invalid.⁴² As a result, an enquiry was set up to look into the crayfish industry, and met in May, 1925.

³⁹Launceston Examiner, 6/11/1920. Page 7.

⁴⁰Letter from H. B. Burgess, Torquay, Queensland. St.Helens History Room.

⁴¹H. Rattenbury, Op.Cit. Page 6.

⁴²Hobart Mercury, 4/12/1924.



Cray pots on jetty at Dunalley
circa 1926

Photograph courtesy of Archives
Office of Tasmania

CHAPTER TWO

1925 -1940 THE BEGINNING OF CHANGE

There were five members of the 1925 Committee of Enquiry into Tasmania's crayfishing Industry. These were the Chairman, Mr. H. T. Gould, Col. Clive Lord (the Commissioner of Police), Mr. W. Gates, Mr. T. Murdoch and Professor T. T. Flynn (who had been the Royal Commissioner at the 1916 Enquiry).

The Enquiry sat from 4 May until 4 June, 1925 and its main area of concern was the legalisation of cray pots throughout Tasmanian waters. On other issues relating to the industry there was a fair degree of consensus but on cray pots the witnesses divided into almost equal opposing groups.

Heading up the group in favour of the legalisation of pots were the Dunalley fishermen represented by the Tasmanian Fisheries Co-operative.⁴³ Secretary of the Co-op, Mr. William Spaulding, who was also a Fisheries Commissioner, said that his members fished along the east coast and that in 1924 they shipped 9,226 dozen crayfish interstate valued at £6,000. He stated that the time had come to legalise pots and that many of his members had been using them since 1916. The present regulations were very difficult to police and he estimated that 90% of the crayfish caught for the Hobart market were captured in pots. He claimed that rings were only suitable for use in sheltered waters and that the use of pots had not affected the size or quantity of the crayfish caught on the fishing grounds used by his members.

Spaulding also claimed that Victorian boats were a threat to the Tasmanian industry, not only because they used pots but in that they took undersized crayfish which were transported directly to the Victorian market where the legal limit was less than in Tasmania. He suggested that all Victorian boats should be required to call at Flinders Island, for inspection of their catch, before leaving Tasmanian waters. In evidence about the operations of the Co-op., Spaulding said that the crayfish were not officially inspected, but that they never processed undersized fish. He believed all export fish should be inspected and he thought there was a need for a special board of management for the industry.

According to Spaulding, both boats and fishermen should be licensed and the revenue collected from this process should be used to fund a patrol boat to police the fishing regulations. He was not in favour of a license fee for each pot but said there should be a limit on the number of pots per boat.⁴⁴

⁴³This is the same organisation as the Tasmanian Fishermen's Association previously mentioned and they seem to have used both names at various times.

⁴⁴AGD 1 1924 -1927 File 24/4/7, Archives Office of Tasmania.

The argument against the legalisation of pots came from a group of Hobart fishermen, mainly small boat owners, who operated in Storm Bay, around Bruny Island and along the Raoul Shore as far as Tasman Island. One of their most vocal advocates was a Mr. Patrick Appleton, a fisherman with 35 years experience who was quite a notorious character in his day.⁴⁵ Appleton claimed that the crayfish were being exterminated by the use of pots and the further up the coast one went the worse the problem became. He claimed that the small fishermen would suffer if pots were legalised and alleged that the Dunalley boats were expanding their fishing grounds and were venturing around Cape Pillar and on to the Raoul Shore.⁴⁶

This is an interesting comment for although there was nothing to stop fishermen working anywhere in the state, there was obviously some concept of territory and this was probably more predominant amongst those with smaller vessels as they were limited in their mobility by the risk of bad weather and the lack of adequate living space aboard their boats. The Dunalley fishermen denied intruding into Storm Bay but at least the Rattenburys were fishing around Tasman Island and as far afield as Bruny Island.

Evidence was also given about the declining number of crayfish in Storm Bay and locations were mentioned where it was taking far longer to obtain a load of crays than it had done ten years previously.⁴⁷ George Bridge from Nubeena stated that pots were like fly traps and were capable of being worked 24 hours per day whilst rings could only be worked for 10. Horace Rush, skipper of the fishing boat "Clarence", claimed that the only reason that the Dunalley boats were still catching the same amount of fish was that they were using more fishing gear.

These last two comments are interesting for they raise the concept of effort and could imply that, with a declining resource, catch figures can only be maintained in the short term by improved technology (pots are more efficient than rings), more catching mechanisms (the same boat can use more pots than rings), or longer hours fishing (pots can be left down overnight). Over the next 50 years increased effort was to become one of the main concerns of the crayfish industry.

⁴⁵Mr. Jim Bridge claims that it was quite common for Appleton to raise a "muster" of fishermen at the wharf and lead a deputation to see the Lord Mayor over some grievance that the fishermen were concerned about. Personal interview, L. J. Bridge, East Moonah, 29/4/93.

⁴⁶AGD 1 1924 -1927 File 24/4/7, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁴⁷ibid.

Oscar Thompson, a retired fisherman, strongly objected to legalisation of pots and claimed that thousands of crays were destroyed inside pots by marauding octopuses, whilst several of the smaller fishermen claimed that pots were a lazy-man's way of fishing. Evidence was also given that the price of crays at 14/- per score was 10/- per score higher than ten years previously.⁴⁸

From the processor's point of view, Gregory Casimaty said that he owned 3 boats, two of which were using 20 pots each, and although he thought that pots would eventually deplete the beds, 95% of boats were using them. William George Bowtell, a fish exporter, with 40 years experience, claimed to be strongly in favour of pots although he had opposed them in 1913. He claimed that Victorian boats took undersized fish, and females in spawn, and recommended the provision of a patrol boat.⁴⁹

One of the last people to give evidence was the Fisheries Inspector, Senior Constable Tom Challenger, and he set about "tipping the bucket" on several of the other witnesses. He claimed he had received no help from William Spaulding of the Dunalley Co-operative, and that when he had inspected crays there he found 25% to be undersize. He had also seized 7.1/2 doz. undersized crays from Casimaty, and claimed 50% of exported crays were undersized. He had confirmed this during a visit to the Sydney Market.

Challenger offered the opinion that the stocks of crays had declined by 50% in the last 10 years but claimed that the reason was not the use of pots but the taking of undersized fish by both Victorian and Tasmanian boats. He gave evidence of seizing fish from the "Myrtle Burgess" and the "Dauntless", a large proportion of which were undersized. Challenger was in favour of legalisation and he said the only way the present regulations could be policed was if pots were banned from boats altogether. He complained that some Fisheries Commissioners advised fishermen of his movements thereby hindering his work. Part of the problem of policing was that he only had use of a 25ft. boat and he estimated the cost of a suitable 35ft. patrol boat at £1,000.⁵⁰

The evidence given to the Enquiry reveals a paradox in the views of Tasmanian fishermen that is present even today. Many expressed their concern over the depletion of the resource and pointed out that breaches of regulations were taking place. At the same time some of the same people admitted to illegal fishing and appeared to be more concerned about their immediate catch results than they were about the future of the industry. Many fishermen felt that it was

⁴⁸ibid.

⁴⁹ibid.

⁵⁰ibid.

up to the Government to come up with tough regulations to control the industry. Sadly these were not often forthcoming and when they were it was often fishermen who opposed them.

Just as those who gave evidence to the Enquiry were divided on the issue of legalisation of pots so was the Committee in its reporting. Messrs. Gould, Lord and Gates recommended that there be no easing of the regulations prior to a thorough investigation of the crayfishing grounds over 2 or 3 years and/or an investigation by a fisheries expert of high qualification and free from local influence. A minority report was presented by Mr. T. Murdoch and Professor T. T. Flynn which recommended that pots should be legalised on the following conditions -

- A. Size and shape of pots to be defined.
- B. Estuaries and harbours to be closed to pots.
- C. A closed season of November and December be instituted.
- D. Size limits to be defined and strictly adhered to.
- E. Boats to be licensed and carry distinguishing marks on sails, buoys, etc., and an annual fee to be paid.
- F. Female fish to be given special protection.⁵¹

In October, 1925 the Government introduced a bill to repeal the previous Fisheries Act and to set up a Sea Fisheries Board (SFB) consisting of three members including the Commissioner of Police. (This was increased to five members at the second reading.) The Bill also allowed for the searching of boats for illegal fish and the confiscation of boats for breaches of regulations. There was also protection for seals, which fishermen had regularly blamed for depletion of their catches, and a prohibition on the use of dynamite and poison in fishing.⁵²

During debate on the Bill, the Minister, A. G. Ogilvie, said that tests had indicated that crayfish could escape from pots. However, legalisation was not included in the Bill. Concern was expressed in the House about the activities of Victorian boats.⁵³ In the Legislative Council a clause was inserted barring anyone from membership of the SFB who had interests in the selling of fish, which was to prevent Professor Flynn from being a full member of the Board.⁵⁴

⁵¹ibid.

⁵²Hobart Mercury 16/10/1925.

⁵³Hobart Mercury 29/10/1925.

⁵⁴Hobart Mercury 19/11/1925.

The appointment of the SFB was not universally well received; a letter in the *Mercury* on 30th October criticised the payment of members and a note appears on the file from Challenger in which he reported Patrick Appleton making a speech on the Domain accusing the Minister, A. G. Ogilvie, of putting down small fishermen and appointing cronies to the Board. The Royal Society of Tasmania also complained about not being asked to provide a representative.⁵⁴

By early 1926 the Government had acted to legalise pots, and a scale of charges for crayfishing boats was announced. These ranged from £16 per year for a boat of 5 tons or under with 10 pots, and up to £100 per year for a boat of 30 tons or more which could carry a maximum of 30 pots. One motor dinghy per boat was allowed for an annual fee of £5, and fishermen were also to be licensed for 5/- per year. Fishing boats that did not carry pots were to be licensed for - £1 under 5 tons, £3 5-8 tons, and £5 over 8 tons.⁵⁵ Storm Bay, the Derwent River and the Dentreasteaux Channel were to be excluded from the new pot regulations and reserved for fishermen using rings. At the end of 1927 there were 239 licensed boats and 371 licensed fishermen.⁵⁶

This was the first significant attempt by the Government to regulate fishermen and charge them for the privilege of exploiting the resource. The next 14 years were to see various Ministers for Fisheries, through the SFB, take an increasing interest in the industry especially in encouraging the possibilities of large-scale fishing. On the other hand, the average fisherman continued in his small-scale operation taking advantage of technical improvements, such as better engines, and power winches for scalloping. Some fishermen also made progress in obtaining a voice in the industry through organising themselves into a union.

A Fishermen's Union affiliated to the Trades Hall in Hobart had been in existence as early as February, 1925 when it was refused representation on the board of the old Fisheries Commissioners.⁵⁸ There was no representative on the new SFB and it was to take several years before this matter was rectified.

The reason why Professor Flynn was denied a place on the SFB was that he had an interest in a proposed large scale fishing operation for the east coast. On 1 July, 1927 Flynn wrote to the Minister advocating the establishment of a canning and preserving industry and proposing the migration of fishing families from England.⁵⁹ A bill had been passed in Parliament in 1925 giving Tasmanian Fisheries Development Co. a monopoly over an area of the coast

⁵⁵AGD 1 1924 -1927 File 45/1/27, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁵⁶Hobart Mercury 23/2/1926.

⁵⁷AGD 1 1924 -1927 File 45/1, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁵⁸AGD 1 1924 -1927 File 45/3, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁵⁹AGD 1 1924 -1927 File 45/1, Archives Office of Tasmania.

from Cape Portland to Cape Tourville for certain species of fish on the understanding that the company was to spend £35,000 over the next five years.⁶⁰ Flynn was a director of this company. This project was the first of many ambitious plans during this period that did not come to fruition.

Despite his official exclusion from the SFB, Flynn was invited to act as biological adviser and accepted. He was not, however, asked to the first meeting of the Board on the pretext that there were no biological matters to be discussed. Flynn was incensed and submitted a letter of resignation to the Minister. The letter bears a note in Ogilvie's handwriting stating that the resignation was withdrawn after personal discussions.⁶¹ Flynn was in attendance at future SFB meetings.

The onset of the great depression brought problems for the Tasmanian crayfish industry for it caused the loss of refrigerated sea transport to Sydney and therefore isolation from a major crayfish export market.⁶² Even when transport was restored the market was subdued and it was reported from Sydney that crayfish was regarded as a luxury food and people were tending to spend their money on more basic varieties of fish. The price paid to fishermen for crayfish fell from 16/- per score in 1929, to 8/- in 1933.⁶³ In 1931 there were 56,635 dozen crayfish sold at prices ranging from as high as £1 per score to as low as 5/-.⁶⁴ After an initial rejection the Government agreed to reduce license fees by 50% and a total of £280 was returned to the SFB for distribution to hard pressed fishermen.⁶⁵ The 1929 bill that allowed for the reduction in license fees also removed the provision for payment to members of the SFB.⁶⁶

The diversified nature of Tasmania's fishing industry made it less difficult for fishermen to survive the depression, for when the market collapsed for crayfish they went out and caught scale fish, particularly 'couta which could be sold for manure as a last resort.⁶⁷ As a retired fisherman pointed out "...we did not sell all that many fish but people had to eat and fish was an inexpensive food."⁶⁸ Stories are told of people offering their services for free just to get a trip on a

⁵⁹AGD 1 1924 -1927 File 45/1, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁶⁰Hobart Mercury 18, 20, and 26 /11 /1925

⁶¹AGD 1 1924 -1927 File 45/8, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁶²AGD 1 1928 File 45/2, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁶³AGD 1 1933 File 112/33, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁶⁴AGD1 1932 File 113/4, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁶⁵AGD 1 1928 File 45/2, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁶⁶Hobart Mercury 19/12/1929.

⁶⁷L. J. Bridge, The Bridge Family, Unpublished paper, 1989.

⁶⁸ Neil Drake, Personal interview, Triabunna, 12/5/1993.

fishing boat where they would at least be provided with food, and many fishermen agreed it was better to be fishing than ashore.⁶⁹ Fishermen had their share of problems but most survived in the industry, often doing odd jobs ashore to help out with finances.

The depression years also brought their share of new proposals for fishing projects but most had little financial backing. In 1932 Mr. Robert Hall wrote to the Minister asking for a concession area, taking in a large slice of south eastern Tasmania, in order to establish a floating fish meal plant. The Mercury reported Hall was going to spend £40,000 but, upon investigation, the SFB found that he only had committed capital of £815, had no market and no fishing or meal production experience. Wisely the Board advised against pursuing the matter.⁷⁰

There was also a proposal from a firm called International Products which wanted to lease a suitable large inlet on the east coast to establish a fish farm. This company apparently had some overseas experience and the Government was in something of a quandary as how to proceed. It invited the company to send representatives to visit Tasmania but nothing further transpired.⁷¹

In its report for the years 1930 to 1932, published in April, 1933, the SFB reported that the depression had reduced the market for fish and had cut prices. Only crayfish were being exported and there was no market at all for oysters. The only bright spot was that there had been an increase in the catch of scallops from 5.4 million to almost 6.3 million. Some beds in the north of the Dentreasteaux Channel had been closed to rest them and the license fees for scallop boats had been increased. On the regulatory side the new patrol boat "Allara" (length 48ft, beam 12ft, draught 6ft, and powered by a 30hp Kelvin engine) had covered 10,046 miles in 3 years. There had been only 9 prosecutions and 5 boat confiscations, all of which had been returned. In most cases of detected breaches of regulations skippers had been cautioned as it was their first offence.⁷²

In April 1934 the Commonwealth Government announced that it would make £20,000 available for fisheries research, and this would involve deployment of

⁶⁹Clyde Clayton interviewed by Jack Darcey of Murdoch University, March 1990 NS 1468/20, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁷⁰AGD 1 1932 File 113/32, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁷¹ibid.

⁷²AGD 1 1933 File 112, Report of Sea Fisheries Board, Archives Office of Tasmania.

a research vessel and investigations into canning, curing and preserving, transport and distribution. This was the first Commonwealth research venture since the "Endeavour" surveyed the continental shelf around Tasmania in 1914 before being lost with all hands off Macquarie Island.⁷³

In 1932, a petition had been sent to the Minister for Fisheries asking, amongst other things, for representation of fishermen on the SFB but it was not until 1934 and 1935 that the campaign really got under way. A union calling itself the "Tasmanian Fishermen, Fish Workers and Scallop Dredgers Association", based at the Hobart Trades Hall, expressed a number of concerns about the Dentreasteaux Channel scallop industry. There were allegations ranging from lack of inspection of scallops from country areas to the exploitation of child labour, but the substance of the problem was part-time fishermen.⁷⁴

With the development of the industry in the Channel it became quite lucrative for local orchardists to take out licenses and go dredging for scallops during the season, which was in the late autumn, and after they had harvested their fruit. This was a sore point with full-time fishermen who thought that these "Cocky Farmers" were not only skimming off the cream but were keeping the buying prices low by increasing the supply. There seems to have been some truth in these allegations, for Challenger reported that the catch for 1934 was over 9.5 million scallops. Competition had forced prices down from 25/- to 9/- per thousand.⁷⁵ One of the processors benefiting from this reduction in price was Mr. G. Casimaty who defended the part-time fishermen's right to supply the market. This was to cause bad feeling between the Union and Casimaty, and may have been one of the causes of the agitation that led to the 1940 Fishing Industry Enquiry.

Many of the part-time fishermen felt that they had played a significant role in developing the industry and they seem to have had the support of Challenger and the SFB. One thing, however, that did come out of this debate was that the Government legislated for fishermen to be represented on the SFB and the Union was asked to nominate a board member.⁷⁶

Nominated as representative of the Union was Patrick Appleton who had not only been a vocal critic of A. G. Ogilvie and the SFB but had been convicted in 1926 of abusing Challenger in the fish market. He was clearly not the candidate the Board would have preferred and they wrote to the Minister casting doubts on the legitimacy of the Union and suggesting that a representative from the

⁷³AGD1 1938 File 113/2/38, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁷⁴AGD1 1935 File 113/1/1/35, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁷⁵ibid.

⁷⁶ibid.

Dunalley Co-op. could be chosen. This was how the matter stood over the Christmas break but in early January, 1936 two communications were received by the SFB. The first was from Mr. R. A. Smith claiming that he was the duly nominated representative of the Union, not Appleton, and the second from Mr. Arthur E. Sward representing 60 Channel scallop fishermen (who were probably part-timers), objecting to Appleton's appointment. Discrete enquiries by Challenger revealed that the Union Secretary had appointed Appleton himself, confirming Smith's claims. Smith was duly appointed to the SFB as the fishermen's representative despite claims from the Union executive that he was not actively engaged in fishing.⁷⁷

In the latter half of the 1930's things started to move in the area of canning and large scale fishing, if only on paper. In 1936 the Commonwealth transferred fisheries research to the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and announced a budget of £80,000 whilst the Tasmanian Minister for Fisheries, Mr. E. Ogilvie, brother of the Premier, began to take an interest in the establishment of a canning industry and particularly the catching and processing of tuna. Interest was also shown in the possibilities of a fish export market, and here the west coast resources were recognised but so were the problems with transport as there was still no road from Strahan to Queenstown.⁷⁸ There were proposals to establish a haven for fishermen at Conical Rocks, three miles south of the Pieman River and moorings at New Harbour on the south coast, both aimed at opening up the west coast.⁷⁹ These were deferred through lack of money. The New Harbour moorings were, however, installed in June, 1939⁸⁰ but it was to be a further twenty years before the potential of the west coast was to be realised.

During the late 1930's things were a little better for the small fisherman, who was still conducting his family business without too much interference. Crayfish prices had started to improve and the 1938 scallop catch had risen to 17 million.⁸¹ Also in 1938 came the first enquiries about what was to become of the Flinders Island Cannery, and later in the year Mr. S. W. Dunkerly announced that he was to spend £6,000 at Flinders, the cement and steel were already on the site and the plant should be completed in 5 or 6 months. The Government arranged for the transfer of land near the Lady Baron wharf for the project.⁸²

⁷⁷AGD 1 1936 File 113/1/36, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁷⁸AGD 1 1936 File 113/7/36, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁷⁹AGD 1 1936 File 113/11/36, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁸⁰Hobart Mercury 6/6/1939.

⁸¹AGD 1 1938 File 113/38, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁸²AGD 1 1938 File 113/1/38, Archives Office of Tasmania.

In this period the Minister was enthusing about the possibilities of a tuna industry but Jones and Co., who were being asked to carry out canning trials, produced two reports, one stating that the tuna trade was practically non-existent in London and the other stating that Japanese tuna was selling in America at less than the local cost of production. A newspaper cutting from San Diego dated September 7, 1938 announced a drastic reduction in production to permit markets to become stabilised.⁸³ There were also local adverse comments on the suitability of tuna as a food source, some of which had racial overtones with rumours that it was a "coarse fish" only fit for "dagoes". None of these adverse reports seem to have influenced the Minister and he continued a very strong promotion of the concept of a tuna industry in Tasmania with the Government offering a bounty of £4 per ton for bonito and £8 per ton for albacore, up to a total of £16,000 to help establishment. The Commonwealth was playing its part and the research vessel "Wareen" was carrying out research on pelagic fish off Tasmania's east coast in mid-1938.⁸⁴

In 1939 after discussions between Challenger and a local fisherman the Government agreed to engage the latter, Mr. Bernal Cuthbertson (senior), his son and the fishing boat "Weerutta" to fish for tuna. The Government was to install an insulated well in the "Weerutta", at an estimated cost of £250, to carry the tuna. Eventually the work cost £620 and this brought queries from the Treasury and the Auditor General. After some initial fishing success it was found that the "Weerutta's" engine was not large enough to enable the boat to keep up with the fast moving schools of tuna and the Government agreed to pay for installation of a new one costing £825 which Cuthbertson was to repay out of the proceeds of the tuna caught.⁸⁵

The Minister seems to have been under the impression that the Government had a lien on the "Weerutta" to cover the engine costs but this was not the case and as the tuna fishing exercise was not a success there was some embarrassment when Cuthbertson could not repay the money. The "Weerutta" was eventually impressed by the Commonwealth during the second world war but the illusive dream of a tuna industry was to live on.

In another venture into large scale fishing Casimaty Bros. had built a Danish seining vessel, the "Nelson", and in 1938 there had been complaints from fishermen concerning her operations and the damage she was allegedly causing to fishing grounds.⁸⁶ In November, 1939 Mr. Heerey M.H.A. raised this matter

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Hobart Mercury 17/5 1938.

⁸⁵ AGD 1 1939 File 113/1/39, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁸⁶ In Danish seining a large net is set, then hauled over the sea floor by means of long ropes leading to the fishing boat which remains stationary during the recovery operation

in the Tasmanian Parliament, and other matters concerning Casimaty including alleged irregularities in the buying of fish. These allegations led to the Government setting up a Board of Enquiry which met on the 7 March, 1940.



Couta fishing

Photograph courtesy of Dept. of
Environment and Land Management

CHAPTER THREE

1940 -1946 EXPANSION THROUGH WAR

The 1940 Board of Enquiry consisted of Mr. J. P. Clark, Police Magistrate, Mr S. E. Burgess from the SFB, and Mr. A. J. Beck who had been nominated by Heerey to represent the State's fishermen. The terms of reference covered the operations of the "Nelson", the marketing of fish and other relevant areas of concern.

The allegations seemed to be primarily directed at Mr. G. Casimaty of Casimaty Bros. though the evidence provides an insight into how the fishing industry itself was being carried out. Casimaty had been operating the "Nelson" since 1937, following a visit to New Zealand in 1936 to investigate the industry there. The SFB had approved of Danish seineing in Tasmanian waters in 1935 but not in estuaries or restricted waters. Fishing had been carried out by the "Nelson" on a trial and error basis over the past three years and there had been problems such as the loss of an expensive net and a lack of commercial returns. The "Nelson" had achieved some success in the previous six months in catching king flathead which no other fishermen were exploiting.⁸⁷

Evidence was given that there had been complaints in 1938 about the "Nelson" fishing in the Derwent Estuary and that Casimaty had given undertakings that this would cease. There was conflicting evidence about whether these undertakings had been carried out. There was also a wide diversion of views as to the effects of the seine net and its ancillary gear on the sea bed and whether the net was killing small commercial species.

It appears that the operations of the "Nelson" coincided with a reduction in the number of scale fish being caught in the south of the state and also a move by fishermen towards the crayfish side of the industry which was more lucrative. The former was blamed by several witnesses on varying causes such as seasonal factors, climatic conditions, jelly fish and an interesting claim from Challenger (now a Sergeant) that industrial pollution was one of the causes.⁸⁸ This latter evidence was eventually withdrawn on advice from the Secretary to the SFB. The move towards crayfishing led to a shortage of scale fish in the retail sector and a perception amongst the public of a depletion of the resource.

This shortage of fish was probably a factor in the second allegation, that the market was under the control of Casimaty, and to a lesser extent Bowtell and

⁸⁷Evidence of Board of enquiry 1940 AGD1/192/2 page 92, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁸⁸ibid. Page 155.

Bridge, and that fishermen were tied to these dealers and were unable to sell their fish elsewhere. This view was put by Harold Watt, a wholesale fish curer and merchant, who claimed that 9 out of 10 boats (sic) were under personal obligation to sell to Casimaty, Bridge or Bowtell.⁸⁹

Putting the opposing point of view were many fishermen who had enjoyed long-standing business dealings with Casimaty and who regarded him as a friend as well as a business associate. Typical would be Henry Martin, the part owner of a fishing boat, who had 33 years experience and who caught mainly crayfish. He claimed that he had an unsecured loan from Casimaty which was interest free and had no regular instalments for repayment. Martin said that Casimaty obtained a discount for him on a new engine which enabled him to increase his catch. He stated that Casimaty helped many fishermen out during the depression when cray prices were as low as 7/- per score and that fishermen's wives were able to draw on Casimaty when they ran out of money and their husbands were away at sea.⁹⁰ All these people claimed they were not bound to sell to Casimaty.

It could be that these witnesses were coerced into testifying on behalf of Casimaty by the very fact that they relied upon him so heavily, but this is not borne out by interviews with retired fishermen carried out by the writer and by Jack Darcey in his study on behalf of Murdoch University and the Fishing Industry Research and Development Council. Analysing these interviews, the worst that could be said about Casimaty is that he was an astute businessman and protected his interests wherever he could, but many referred to him in glowing terms such as "A very fair man who got many people going....",⁹¹ "A real good honest bloke and a good friend to fishermen",⁹² "He was a bonzer bloke to fish for", "A good name and as honest as the sun".⁹³ Evidence was also given of Dunalley fishermen leaving the Co-op. and selling to Casimaty as they did not have to wait for their money, even though the prices he paid were lower.

There was a suggestion put to the Enquiry for the re-establishment of the public fish market, which had been defunct since the 1920's. The building had been leased to George Bridge since 1931. Bridge retailed fish from the site and also ran a cafe where he sold cooked fish meals for 1/- each.⁹⁴ The public market

⁸⁹ibid. Page 61.

⁹⁰ibid. Page 192-196.

⁹¹Bruce Spaulding, Personal interview, Dunalley, 29/4 /1993.

⁹² Victor Douglas, Personal interview, Rosny Park, 31/5/1993.

⁹³Bill Parker interviewed by Jack Darcey, March 1990. Ns 1468/27, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁹⁴Evidence of Board of enquiry 1940 AGD1/192/2 Page 75, Archives Office of Tasmania.

idea was rejected by most fishermen who claimed they were better off selling direct to the public or through the established dealers.

One thing that Casimaty will be remembered for is the claim that it was he who invented the Tasmanian fishermen's score of 24 crayfish which is still used today. The rationale was that in transporting crayfish some always died en route and Casimaty estimated this at four in every two dozen. Right up to the mid-1940's fish were bought by the score with a slightly higher price paid for larger fish. One result of this system was that with limited space available in wet wells many skippers used to throw the extra large crays back and fill the well with smaller ones.⁹⁵ At the time of the Enquiry the prices were 12/- per score with 1/- extra for large fish.⁹⁶ The practise of paying by weight was then being introduced by the Flinders Island Cannery, and by Jones and Co., for the small amount of crayfish that they canned.

Other items that the Board of Enquiry investigated were the condition of scallops delivered to Hobart for sale, the hygiene at some fish shops and conditions at the Hobart wharf.

There could be a suspicion that the allegations of scallops arriving from the Channel ports in an unwholesome condition had something to do with the long-standing dispute between the Fishermen's Union on the one hand, and the "Cocky Farmer" scallopers from the Channel and Casimaty on the other. This suspicion is reinforced by the fact that Casimaty had close ties with the "Cocky Farmers" whilst a number of those who signed the petition calling for the Enquiry were waterside workers and only fished intermittently. The Fishermen's Union was affiliated to the Trades Hall and there were probably ties with waterside workers. As previously stated the SFB had cast doubts on the legitimacy of the Union and it is difficult to say how many fishermen it represented.

Claims of scallops lying on boats and in the opening sheds for days were hotly denied, and moves to have all scallops opened in Hobart were strongly resisted, as splitting provided much needed work for the families of fishermen from places such as Kettering and Gordon. However, there may have been some truth in the claims of delays in splitting, as it was reported to the writer by one retired fisherman as still being prevalent in the 1950's and was caused by fishermen refusing to stop dredging when the splitters could not keep up with them.⁹⁷ At the Enquiry the Health Inspector reported condemning 30,000 scallops the previous year.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Archie Priest, Personal interview, Dunalley, 28/4/1993.

⁹⁶ Evidence of Board of enquiry 1940 AGD1/192/2 Page 38, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁹⁷ Victor Douglas, Personal interview, Rosny Park, 31/5/1993.

The question of hygiene in fish shops did not have direct relevance for the fishing industry but the City Council Health Inspector had applied without success to have the processing of fish in the metropolitan area declared a noxious industry and this was one area where the Board did recommend some changes.

The conditions at the Hobart wharf had always been a problem, with the Marine Board complaining that it raised no revenue from fishermen and the fishermen arguing that they did not have enough room or facilities. The Harbour Master, Capt. Harold John Watchorn, went as far as to say that the shortage of fish was due to "...lack of energy by the fishermen",⁹⁹ and some fishermen did agree that they spent quite a long time tied up at the wharf with one saying he liked to "...take things as easy as I can."¹⁰⁰ However when one considers that it was possible to get double the price for the fish by selling direct to the public, then staying at the wharf could have been a perfectly rational decision.

One problem that fishermen did have at the Hobart wharf was keeping their fish alive. This was partly due to lack of water circulation through the wet wells, and often boats would have to be rocked or taken for a cruise out in the river. There was also a problem of pollution with the Health Inspector reporting to the Enquiry that there were 44 sanitary conveniences around Sulivans Cove all discharging into the Derwent.¹⁰¹ Clyde Adams said he had lost fish through dirty water and blamed it on discharges from the Gas House,¹⁰² whilst George Bridge, who stored all his fish alive in a floating pontoon at the wharf, naturally claimed that the water was pure but he did admit to having trouble with the harbour water two years previously.¹⁰³

In its conclusions the Board found that most of the allegations had not been proved, made minor recommendations on shop hygiene, and reinforced existing regulations regarding Danish seining and fish handling. What did come out of this examination was the transfer of responsibility for the fishing industry to the Minister for Agriculture (later Primary Industry) where it has remained to the present day. There was also a new Sea Fisheries Advisory Board (SFAB) which had representation from fishermen (one each from north and south), the canning and preserving industry, scientific bodies and the Police Department.

⁹⁸Evidence of Board of enquiry 1940 AGD1/192/2 Page 184, Archives Office of Tasmania.

⁹⁹ibid. page 23.

¹⁰⁰ibid. page 41.

¹⁰¹ibid. Page 184.

¹⁰²ibid. Page 115.

¹⁰³ibid. Pages 76 and 83.

The tasks of the SFAB were to (1) "Enquire into and report to the Minister upon any matters referred to it by him in relation to the fisheries of the State (other than salmon and freshwater fisheries)", and (2) "Advise the Minister on questions relating to the management, control, protection, regulation and development of such fisheries and make such recommendations to the Minister as it thinks fit in relation thereto." The Board met initially in September, 1941 then lapsed due to the pressures of the second world war but was resurrected in the same form in 1946 and met in June, 1947.¹⁰⁴

The war had a marked effect on the fishing industry other than the lapse of the SFAB. The industry was faced with a shortage of manpower and vessels as men went to join the services and many of the larger boats were impressed by the Commonwealth for war service. There was also a switch in importance from crayfish to scale fish. Australia had been a large importer of fish with the value placed at £1 million in 1940,¹⁰⁵ and these supplies were now cut off. Together with this the Australian Army entered the market as a significant buyer indicating in August, 1940 that it was prepared to place an immediate order for 500,000 one lb. tins of fish.¹⁰⁶ By 1945 Challenger was able to report that it was more profitable to fish for 'couta on the East Coast than it was for crayfish.¹⁰⁷ The Commonwealth Government played a part in this transition through price control when they reduced the price paid for crayfish from one shilling and twopence per lb. to tenpence per lb.¹⁰⁸

'Couta fishing was an easy way for young fishermen to enter the industry in that the capital outlay was low, the resource plentiful and it was available within a short voyage from most ports. Because 'couta were caught at dawn and in the evening, it was often possible for young men to go fishing part-time whilst holding down another full-time job. Many fishermen got into the industry this way which is ironic when viewed against the long-standing antipathy to part-timers which most professionals express.

Most 'couta boats were small, often not much over 20 ft., and were fitted with a counter stern which provided a platform on which the crew could stand whilst fishing. Boats generally had an open chute leading into the wet well. Crew members, normally two, were each equipped with a tapered pole 13 to 14 ft. long with a wire chain about 3 ft. long attached to the tip. On the end of the chain was a lure made out of wood, normally Huon Pine, 6 inches long by about 1 inch

¹⁰⁴AA816 1941 -1946 File 18/33/A Page 1 and 2, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹⁰⁵Hobart Mercury 26/6/1940.

¹⁰⁶AA816 1939 -1940 File 18/1, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹⁰⁷AA816 1941 -1946 File 18/3A, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹⁰⁸AA816 1941 -1946 File 18/25/D, Archives Office of Tasmania.

square, onto which two large barbless hooks were fixed. Barracouta are a school fish and once amongst a feeding patch the action was fast and furious. The fish would strike at the lure and be hoisted aboard the boat before they could free themselves from the hooks. They were deposited on the chute where they quickly freed themselves and slid into the well. The lure was then returned to the water for the next strike. The fish were very prolific during this period and catches in excess of 100 dozen were not unusual, all of which of course had to be split and cleaned before the work was done.¹⁰⁹

There was also a move to divert fishermen into the shark fishery as there was need for a replacement for cod liver oil. Although it was thought that many of the small boats were unsuitable for this work, mainly carried out in deep water on the edge of the continental shelf, they did it anyway, and proved again the adaptability of this independent breed of fishermen. Shark fishing requires that the catch be bled immediately it is hauled aboard the boat and this causes the release of ammonia which can be torture on the eyes and sinuses. There were requests that fishermen be supplied with gas masks but no reports of this happening. Regulations setting the minimum size for gummy shark at 18 inches and all others at 24 inches were introduced in January, 1944.¹¹⁰

The Flinders Island Cannery was well under way in 1940 but was being restricted by a shortage of fish. There were just not enough boats and the company did not have sufficient capital to build its own.¹¹¹ In 1941 a Parliamentary Committee recommended that the Government encourage the canning industry and a bill passed the Lower House enabling the Government to invest £25,000 in a joint venture but this was defeated in the Legislative Council.¹¹² Fish Canneries of Tasmania eventually did establish canning and processing plants at Dunalley and Margate and the State Government built freezers at Triabunna and Stanley.

The State Government bought the 62 ft. "Arcadia" as a temporary research vessel in February, 1942 for £1,500, only to have it impressed by the Commonwealth in July, 1943. The only consolation was that the state received £2,580/16/5d. in compensation.¹¹³ There are stories told of fishermen having boats almost completed but refusing to put on the last few planks for they knew once they were finished the Commonwealth would step in and seize them.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹Most of the information on 'coutha fishing comes from L. J. Bridge A Day Trip unpublished paper 1982.

¹¹⁰AA816 1941-1944 File 18/3, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹¹¹ADG/1 1940 File 113/5/40, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹¹²AA816 1941 File 18/6, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹¹³AA816 1941-1944 File 18/5/D, Archives Office of Tasmania.

Even in 1946 boats were still very hard to come by and it was estimated that a boat costing £600 in 1940 would sell for £2,000 by the end of the war.¹¹⁵

The State Government built a permanent research vessel, the 65ft. "Liawenee" which was commissioned in February, 1944, and carried out research in conjunction with the CSIR as well as trials of commercial deep sea fishing. By 30 June, 1944 she had caught over 109,000 lbs of fish but posted a loss for the year ending June, 1945 of £1,770.¹¹⁶ This was a further example of the State being keen to move towards a more capital intensive form of fishing. The war, by increasing the demand for pelagic fish for canning, was providing the climate for this type of move. It is doubtful, however, as to the capacity of ordinary fishermen to have been able to afford the outlay even if boats had been available.

The question of financing boats did come in for consideration during this period and legislation was passed to allow the Agricultural Bank to loan money to the fishing industry. The Commonwealth Repatriation Commission was also providing finance for fishing boats to returned servicemen and there are several letters on file seeking advice as to the suitability of applicants. In these cases the Division of Fisheries relied almost entirely on Challenger to make a judgement on the merits of each case and he gave his opinion on the quality of the applicants and the values of the various boats. Although it was the Secretary for Fisheries who signed the recommendations it was Challenger who was in the position of power.¹¹⁷ This was also the case with servicemen applying for early release to take up fishing. Again Challenger was initiating the recommendations.¹¹⁸

Regional ports benefited during the war, such as Stanley where a new fishermen's dock was provided, Flinders Island where the Government built a slipway, and Bicheno where fishermen were given £500 to erect a jetty.¹¹⁹ The moorings which were laid at New Harbour provided better access to the south and west coasts and there were calls for improved facilities at St. Helens and Triabunna. On the other hand fishermen faced increased restrictions, having to report their movements for security reasons, and from early in the war years having to submit returns of their fuel usage every month and also the amount of fish they had caught.

¹¹⁴Robert Jager, Personal interview, Hobart, June 1993

¹¹⁵AA816 1941 -1946 File 18/6/K, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹¹⁶ibid.

¹¹⁷AA816 1941 -1946 Files 18/10 and 18 /10a, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹¹⁸AA816 1941 -1946 File 18/1/J1, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹¹⁹AA816 1941 -1946 File 18/4/ C, D and E, Archives Office of Tasmania.

Tasmania's fishermen took a major step forward in July ,1945 when at a conference of fishermen from all parts of the state, organised by the Commonwealth Ministry of Post War Reconstruction, the Licensed Fishermen's Association (LFA) was formed. A Consultative Committee was elected with three representatives from the south and two from the north and the Conference wasted little time in bringing forth the concerns of fishermen. These included petrol rationing and its abuses, where one northern fisherman said he thought some boats were licensed to catch fish and others to catch petrol. Concerns were also expressed about the confidentiality of catch returns from the prying eyes of the tax man and many other items ranging from clothing allowances to whitebait licenses, which at £1 per year were thought to be too expensive. The Stanley delegation claimed that 90% of that port's fishermen were in favour of a co-op. and that they needed the Government to provide a freezer.¹²⁰ All in all the LFA was off to a good start.

Total production of fish for the state rose from 4,975,312 lbs. in 1941/42, to 7,668,371 lbs. in 1943/44, and an estimated 9,000,000 lbs. in 1944/45.¹²¹ This increase in yield brought new processors into the industry and the appearance of Luke Wright at Triabunna was to lead to yet another public enquiry.¹²² Luke Wright's good reputation in the industry continued long after his death and he was the first processor to offer the type of service that fishermen now rely upon, such as help with acquisition of stores and unloading the catch. He paid top rates promptly and would take a fisherman's entire catch.¹²³

The Triabunna enquiry held in October, 1946 before Police Magistrate, Mr. G. F. Sorell, was called by the Premier after complaints by Triabunna processor, Mr. Albert Thompson, that Wright was paying fishermen above the maximum price for fish.¹²⁴ Thompson had links with Casimaty and obviously they resented Wright's intrusion into the market. Evidence was given that Wright had about 12 boats fishing for him at Triabunna and it was alleged that Challenger had introduced Wright to the fishermen and asked them to sell to him. Challenger admitted introducing Wright to the fishermen claiming it was on instructions from the Fisheries Division, but he denied asking them to sell to Wright, saying after the introductions he just "walked away"¹²⁵

¹²⁰AA816 1941 -1946 File 18/11/A, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹²¹AA816 1941 -1946 File 18/2, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹²²AA816 1941 -1946 File 18/8/A, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹²³Niel Drake, Personal interview, Triabunna, 12/5/93.

¹²⁴Hobart Mercury 24/9/1946.

¹²⁵AA816 1941 -1946 File 18/9/P1, Archives Office of Tasmania.

There were also allegations of a plot involving employees of the Government cool store at Triabunna, aimed at providing advantage to Wright, at Casimaty's and Thompson's expense. None of the allegations were sustained and with the new competition coming into the processing of fish from Luke Wright and Fish Canneries of Tasmania old players such as Casimaty had to accept that things would never be the same again. On the whole, things were looking better for the fishermen at the end of 1946, as they moved out of a period of expansion and increased control, and into one of unprecedented technological change.



Fishing boats in the Gulch
at Bicheno

Photograph courtesy of Dept. of
Environment and Land Management

CHAPTER FOUR

1947 -1960 TECHNOLOGY AND CO-OPERATION

With the steady return to normality after the second world war the market for crayfish began to improve. Initially the demand for 'couta and shark was also strong and there was increasing exploitation of scallops. The increase in competition from fish buyers, notwithstanding price control, meant that fishermen were looking for ways to improve their catches, and nowhere was this more evident than in the crayfishing fleet.

In the early years most of the fishing had been carried out close inshore and often near to dangerous rocks. Cray pots had mainly been pulled from dinghies and the catch then transferred to the well of the fishing boat. With the introduction of more powerful and reliable diesel engines many boats began to pull their pots from off the deck but many also continued to use the dinghy. Whatever the method, pulling pots from deep water, often through forests of floating kelp, was back-breaking work and the wet rope was very rough on the fishermen's hands. Sometimes, when there was a roll on, the crew could use the rocking and rise and fall of the boat to give them a hand but it was still very hard labour.¹²⁶

The first mechanical pot haulers came into use in the early 1940's but were very basic, more like capstans.¹²⁷ Maurice Pike of St.Helens claims his brother-in-law made a pot hauler out of a motorbike gearbox, in 1948, but this did not have a clutch and could do a lot of damage to pot and/or crew if they did not get the rope off in time.¹²⁸ From here mechanisms were developed from car steering boxes which allowed for horizontal pulleys, but these tended to be too light duty and did not last very long. Then came the adaption of truck differentials and clutched drives which were in common use for many years.¹²⁹

By 1957 the Mercury reported that pot haulers were being used by most of the fleet.¹³⁰ This was allowing pots to be pulled faster and without the fatigue previously endured and we would have to assume that this was resulting in an increased effort, in terms of pot hours fished, than in earlier times.

Crayfish inhabit the rocky underwater areas around our shores commonly referred to as "bottom". This can extend for as little as a few metres from the

¹²⁶Les O'Neill, Personal interview, Bicheno, 13/5/1993.

¹²⁷Bernard (Scotty) Jager, Personal interview, Dover, 1/6/1993.

¹²⁸Maurice Pike, Personal interview, St. Helens, 19/5/1993.

¹²⁹Jeff Felmingham, Personal interview, St. Helens, 18/5/1993.

¹³⁰Hobart Mercury 11/12/1957.

shore to several kilometres, and one of the challenges faced by fishermen was to place all their pots on this bottom and not on patches of sand where they would not catch anything. In shallow water the bottom could often be seen from the deck of the boat but as fishermen sought out new grounds in deeper water they had to rely on other methods. The traditional way of finding bottom was a long line with a shaped lead weight attached. There was a cavity in the bottom of the lead which was filled with fat or dripping and when the weight had been lowered to the sea bed and recovered the particles adhering to the fat would tell the fisherman if he were over clay bottom or sand.

Another method of finding bottom especially offshore was to let the boat drift with a mooring or rock anchor dragging along the sandy bottom. This was often done at meal times or in between setting and retrieving pots. When the boat drifted over a patch of bottom the anchor would snag bringing it up short, and the bottom could then be explored using the lead line. A further novel way of finding bottom was to use the hull of the boat as a sounding box and listen to the side below the waterline for the distinctive tinkling sound of kelp (which does not grow on sand) moving in the swell.¹³¹ One would think that this method would only be effective in relatively shallow water.

All of these methods were time consuming and at best rather "hit and miss" but the introduction of the echo sounder was to change things dramatically. Echo sounders send a pulse of high frequency sound down to the sea bed and pick up the returning echo. This not only tells the skipper the depth of water beneath the boat but also if he is over sand or rock. The first sounders were fitted in the early 1950's and there are several claims as to which was the first boat.¹³² These sounders used rolls of paper charts on which the bottom profile was drawn by a moving pen. The cost of the charts meant it was expensive to use them constantly and later sounders showed the bottom image on an electronic screen. The first sounders came from America and Germany with the German Elak being the most popular. The Mercury reported the cost, installed, for an echo sounder of £800 in 1956 but Jeff Felmingham of St. Helens has a record showing he only paid £350 for an Elak in 1957 so there was probably some variation in prices.¹³³

The results achieved by fitting echo sounders were dramatic for, not only were all of a fisherman's pots now able to be set on productive sea bed, but new areas of unexploited bottom were discovered leading to better catches. Sounders were

¹³¹ Les O'Neill, Personal interview, Bicheno, 13/5/1993.

¹³² There were probably firsts in each port with Bill Parker a leader at Triabunna (Neil Drake, Personal interview, Triabunna, 12/5/1993) and E.W. and A. D. Young at Dunalley (Mercury 15/12/1953.)

¹³³ Hobart Mercury 15 /11/1956. Jeff Felmingham, Personal interview, St. Helens, 18/5/1993.

also an aid to navigation particularly at night when skippers could keep a check on the depth of water they had under the keel.¹³⁴ All of these advantages put increasing pressure on the resource and led to more intensive fishing.

The ability to fish the new offshore grounds discovered even before echo sounders, was limited by the floats and pot lines in use at the time. These were cork floats which had little buoyancy, and coir, hemp or sisal lines which did not float. In deep water the weight of the rope would often sink the float and the pot could be lost. To overcome this problem the practice emerged of fishing pots in sets of up to 10 with an oil drum float at each end of a long line to which the pots were attached. The extra buoyancy of the drums allowed this type of gear to be used in much deeper water. There were some problems, however, particularly in areas with large tidal variations, of drums being dragged under and crushed by the water pressure. Some fishermen used stainless steel fuel tanks out of war surplus aircraft that could withstand the pressure and in general this type of fishing was successful and enabled the increased exploitation of off-shore waters. To work these unprotected waters, however, there was a need for larger more powerful boats which increased the capital outlay.

The advent of better floats and pot lines in the late fifties and early sixties was a further boost to deep water crayfishing. The first floats to replace cork were glass and these were followed by a new range of plastics which had far more buoyancy than cork, without the fragility of glass. This step forward was enhanced by the introduction of floating rope and together these two innovations allowed for the setting of individual pots or pairs in very deep water.

A further spin-off for fishermen from war surplus stores was the availability of two-way radios. These were often fitted in the fo'c's'le living quarters on boats as they were quite bulky, but also because they had a broadcast receiving band and provided entertainment in the evenings. There were disadvantages, in that the radios were not easily accessible in an emergency, and eventually regulations were introduced requiring radios to be carried in wheelhouses.¹³⁵

In 1949 there was an application for a radio base station in the Furneaux Group and the Minister for Fisheries made a statement stressing the need for radios in fishing boats. By 1959 radios were very widely used and the Tasmanian Fishermens Co-op. was planning to install a transmitter to cover the north coast and increase the security of its fishermen.¹³⁶ Other benefits brought about by the installation of radios were contact with processors, which ensured the coordination of berthing and catch unloading, and the ability to get messages to

¹³⁴H. Jager Op. Cit. Page 209.

¹³⁵Gordon A. (Ging) Castle, Personal interview, Triabunna, 12/5/1993.

¹³⁶Hobart Mercury 16/5/1959

and from families whilst at sea. Not all appreciated this new technology, with one retired fisherman claiming he had not installed a radio until he was forced to and that they were always "chirping like a load of penguins". He also said he would back a set of sails to get him out of trouble anytime rather than a radio.¹³⁷

Following close behind radio came radar and in 1956 Mr. Vic Hardy of Stanley fitted a set to his boat "VSP" which already had radio and self-steering gear.¹³⁸ The installation of radar allowed boats to travel safely at night and in bad weather and therefore increased the time spent fishing. Other technical innovations were the installation of gas cookers and refrigerators which indirectly increased the fishing time by cutting out the need to collect firewood and enabling perishables to be kept for longer periods. The end of the 1950's saw some skippers replacing the traditional wet wells with tanks which could be filled up to deck level increasing their holding capacity. The disadvantage was that water had to be pumped through these tanks continuously, requiring an auxiliary engine. All of these measures, although very helpful to fishermen, increased effort and the pressure on the fish resource, whilst making boats more expensive and access to the industry more difficult.

Whilst increased technology was providing better returns to crayfishermen, at the lower end of the industry, the area of traditional entry, 'cوتا fishing, was not going so well. Although the immediate post war years had been good, with Tasmania marketing 7.7 million lbs. of 'cوتا in 1948,¹³⁹ by the early 1950's things were not so great, and in late 1951 the whole north coast was depressed with all but one boat at Wynyard tied up because of the failure of the 'cوتا run.¹⁴⁰ At this time the decline in 'cوتا was restricted to Bass Strait waters, and the east coast catches remained normal, but by 1954 there were poor runs on both the east and south east coasts whilst there was almost complete failure in the north.¹⁴¹ There was some improvement in 1955 but the once massive runs of 'cوتا were no longer a reliable source of fishing income.

As well as the resource problem, the market for 'cوتا was reducing from the peak of 1948 when Davel Products of Ulverston reported a sale of 5 million cans of 'cوتا to the United Kingdom. There was a gradual fall in the export trade as the traditional European and Japanese suppliers of canned fish returned to compete in the international marketplace. The decline of 'cوتا fishing as a dependable source of income cut off one of the easy access points to the

¹³⁷ Neil Drake, Personal interview, Triabunna, 12/5/1993.

¹³⁸ Hobart Mercury 19/5/1956

¹³⁹ T. C. Roughley, Fish and fisheries of Tasmania, Sydney, 1951

¹⁴⁰ AD 9 1951/2 File 18/17, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹⁴¹ AD 9 1954 File 18/22, Archives Office of Tasmania.

industry for the younger fishermen, and made it likely that they would have to borrow money to get into the more capital intensive areas that required larger boats.

As early as 1949 the Minister for Sea Fisheries, Mr. Dwyer, was calling on the Commonwealth Government to impose a protective tariff on tinned fish and warning of a decline in the British market with the possible cancellation of some orders.¹⁴² By 1957 the situation was serious with canneries reporting their inability to sell stock even when the prices were reduced by one third. One cannery had already closed and there were fears about cheap Japanese imports.¹⁴³ In November, 1957 it was announced that the Margate cannery of Fish Canneries of Tasmania, was to close and in August, 1958 Premier Eric Reece announced the Government's intention to buy the canneries at Margate, Dunalley and Bridport and lease them to the Eastern Tasmanian Fishermens Co-operative (ETFC).¹⁴⁴ This Co-op. had been established at Triabunna in 1956 by the local branch of the LFA and at one time had 200 members state-wide. The ETFC was founded to process and market fish on behalf of its member fishermen and followed on the heels of the Stanley Co-op. which was formed in 1948, and the Bridport Co-op. formed in 1949.¹⁴⁵

In November, 1958 the Reece Government introduced a bill into Parliament which allowed it to buy the canneries at Margate, Dunalley and Bridport for £58,000, and to provide a guarantee of £30,000 for the ETFC which was to lease and operate them.¹⁴⁶ The bill passed the Legislative Council after some criticism and an attempt to get a government representative on the ETFC board.¹⁴⁷ The ETFC was a fine example of the ability of fishermen to organise when their industry was under threat but, as one Legislative Councillor said when the Cannery Bill was being debated, "Fishermen are individuals",¹⁴⁸ and this was to prove one of the factors that prevented the long-term viability of the operation.

A further area where technology was to effect the fishing industry was in the re-design of the scallop dredge but this was not to the long-term advantage of the fishery. Production of scallops had increased from 1942 to 1947, but from 1947 to 1952 there was a reduction in the catch and also in the number of boats fishing, which fell from 51 to 38. Research by CSIRO scientist, A. M. Olsen, found that annual spat-fall was sporadic and that it took 6 years for scallops to

¹⁴²Hobart Mercury 8/6/1949.

¹⁴³Hobart Mercury 21/9/1957.

¹⁴⁴Hobart Mercury 21/8/1958.

¹⁴⁵The original Dunalley Co-op. had sold out to Fish Canneries of Tasmania during the war.

¹⁴⁶Hobart Mercury 5/11/1958.

¹⁴⁷Hobart Mercury 13/11/1958.

¹⁴⁸ibid.

reach maturity. From 1952 to 1955 there was significant increase in the catch per boat and also the number of boats operating.¹⁴⁹ This build up in the effort being applied to scallop fishing was almost certainly due to an increase in price achieved by the fishermen.

In 1950 fishermen sought an increase from 9d. to 1/6d. per lb. for scallop meat. This was met by widespread opposition from processors and the press, with the Mercury calling for the resumption of price control and a housewife boycott.¹⁵⁰ The LFA responded by refusing to supply fish processors and by setting up their own retail outlet to sell to the public for 1/6d. per lb.¹⁵¹ This time the fishermen won their increase and over the next four years the price was to rise to 2/9d. per lb.¹⁵² Again it was technology that was at least partly the cause as improved refrigeration techniques allowed scallops to be frozen and exported to the mainland where they could be released slowly on to the market thus avoiding gluts and maintaining price stability.

Concerns were expressed throughout this period on the long-term viability of the Channel scallop beds but catches were maintained with some variation from year to year. In 1956 the Channel beds were not in as good a condition as the previous year, but a new fishing ground had been found at Norfolk Bay and this brought additional fishermen from Dunalley into the scallop fleet, which reached a record of 100 boats.¹⁵³ Norfolk Bay was to become an indicator of the future of the scallop industry for, with heavy exploitation, the resource was almost completely wiped out within two years.¹⁵⁴

The technological threat to the scallop industry came in 1958 with the introduction of the Baird or Sputnik dredge. Traditional or Lip Dredges had been shallow cyclone wire baskets on a steel frame, four feet wide, with a two inches deep spring steel lip at the front which scraped along the sea bed and directed the scallops into the basket. The dredge was attached to the boat winch by a half inch steel wire hawser.¹⁵⁵ A limit of two dredges per boat had applied since 1949. The new Sputnik dredge was fitted with teeth or prongs on the leading edge, together with a pressure plate, which when dragged through the water forced the teeth into the sea bed. This design was very effective in deep water but many fishermen felt that it was destructive in that a lot of scallops were

¹⁴⁹R. A. Perrin, Op. Cit. Page 38.

¹⁵⁰Hobart Mercury 2/5/1950.

¹⁵¹Hobart Mercury 6/5/1950

¹⁵²Hobart Mercury 5/6/1954

¹⁵³Hobart Mercury 27/4/1956

¹⁵⁴R. A. Perrin, Op. Cit. Page 39

¹⁵⁵L. J. Bridge, Scallops, Unpublished paper, 1991.

crushed and the sea bed was churned up disrupting the normal marine life and scallop breeding patterns.

One feature of the new dredge was that boats had to be more powerful to pull them and this led to larger, more expensive engines which could only be paid for by increased effort and longer hours fishing. Some fishermen caught scallops faster than their splitters could process them and incredibly there are reports of unopened scallops, four days old and rotten, being taken to sea and dumped.¹⁵⁶

The LFA called for a ban on the Sputnik Dredge in 1958 and the SFAB accepted this recommendation but the ban did not come into force until July, 1959.¹⁵⁷ A modified version of the dredge, fitted with runners to raise the basket off the sea-bed, was legalised in 1960 and it was announced that the conventional dredge was to be banned.¹⁵⁸ This announcement was followed by controversy and a fear that the Channel beds were badly depleted, and the Legislative Council set up a Select Committee to look into the industry¹⁵⁹

This Committee reported in 1960, and again in 1961, when it recommended that the Sputnik Dredge be banned in the Dentreasteaux Channel, but not in other waters, and that the temporary ban on night dredging in the Channel become permanent. There were also recommendations for a later start to the season and the establishment of a special license for the scallop fishery but these changes had come too late for the Channel beds and the industry, which the Committee estimated to be worth £157,500 per year, had been permanently damaged by over-fishing and inappropriate technology.¹⁶⁰

As the scallop industry came under threat new forms of fishing were being developed. As early as 1954 the Minister for Sea Fisheries, Mr Dwyer, announced the introduction of abalone licenses and his opposition counterpart, Mr. Pearsal, stressed the need for conservation of this new fishery.¹⁶¹ Abalone were plentiful but had not been part of the Australian diet and it was only in this period that the possibilities for the Asian market was first recognised. Prices and demand were low and most fishermen started off as part-time divers, often using masks and snorkels. It was to be the next decade before the industry became organised.

¹⁵⁶H. Jager, Op. Cit., Page 13

¹⁵⁷Hobart Mercury 18/7/1959.

¹⁵⁸Hobart Mercury 2/4/1960

¹⁵⁹Hobart Mercury 24/6/1960.

¹⁶⁰Legislative Council Select Committee Interim Report, Parliamentary Paper No74, 1960 and Final Report, Parliamentary Paper, No. 49, 1961.

¹⁶¹Hobart Mercury 2/9/1954

Harold Rattenbury had discovered the presence of deep sea trevalla, cod and ling on the edge of the continental shelf in 1951.¹⁶² The "Liawenee" carried out tests on drop lining with 750 yds. of line and 250 hooks, and later with a steel line, and got good results.¹⁶³ Again it was to be the 1960's before this type of fishing was to be commercially exploited.

Australian Salmon had traditionally been caught by the use of a beach seine net which was rowed out around the school of fish in a dinghy, then pulled up to the beach and the fish secured. This tended to be a local operation as was the case with Nubeena fishermen, Gordon Johnson and Ian Parker, who caught 24 tons of salmon in 2 days and paid for their equipment, valued at £250, six times over.¹⁶⁴ This type of catch, of course, could not be relied upon and most fishermen regarded a haul of salmon as a bonus rather than part of their regular work.

This was to change in 1959 when Victorian fisherman, Mr. R. (Dick) Ritchie, began operating in Tasmania. Ritchie used an aircraft, which he piloted himself, in conjunction with a fishing boat.¹⁶⁵ The aircraft was used to spot schools of salmon and with the aid of radio the pilot directed the fishing boat to them and supervised the seining operation. Instead of the salmon being hauled up the beach they were transferred to the fishing boat and transported to port for processing. By using the aircraft Ritchie took most of the guesswork out of salmon fishing and made it a specialised operation, but with a very high capital investment compared to the traditional method. Ritchie was very successful, obtaining large catches of salmon, and based his Tasmanian operations at Bridport.¹⁶⁶ Following his lead other fishermen began to cooperate with aircraft owners who often took a share of the catch.

The 1950's saw increased fishing on the west coast which up until then had been the domain of a few experienced crews who each tended to have their own section of coast to themselves. Among these was Clyde Clayton, who was one of the few skippers to have his wife as "first mate", and together they set up home at Port Davey, first at Bond Bay and then a Melaleuca Inlet. They used to send their fish to Hobart with other boats and only visited "civilisation" at infrequent

¹⁶²H. Rattenbury, *Op. Cit.*, Page 20.

¹⁶³Hobart Mercury 26/6/1966 and 14/5/1952.

¹⁶⁴Hobart Mercury 27/8/1957.

¹⁶⁵Hobart Mercury 4/9/1959.

¹⁶⁶Hobart Mercury 9/9/1959.

intervals.¹⁶⁷ Des French was based at Temma for 19 years and in that time lost a brother and a nephew when their boat was wrecked in rough seas off Sandy Cape.¹⁶⁸

In the 1950's more boats began to visit the west coast for single trips of one or two weeks but often weather conditions would cause them to lay up in Port Davey for an extended stay. In 1958 a group of fishermen ran out of food and had to use the newly opened air strip at Melaleuca to fly out for supplies.¹⁶⁹ In the same month the fishing boat "Lyndenne" lost her propeller off South West Cape and in a fine example of co-operation 5 other boats went to her aid.¹⁷⁰

The weather was not always bad on the west coast and if the winds were easterly the rewards were outstanding. This was the case in the spring of 1956 when two Stanley based boats caught 25,000 lb. of crayfish in two months, and the Stanley fleet caught 76,000 lb.¹⁷¹ With the increasing use of the west coast there were moves to improve services and the LFA conducted a long running campaign for a navigation light at Port Davey, even offering to maintain it, The light was established in November, 1959.¹⁷² Bill Dennis who skippered the "Flying Scud" for Bern Cuthbertson (junior) claims that they were the first cray boat to be based at Strahan in 1952/3. The catch was unloaded there and trucked to Hobart for processing.¹⁷³

Fishing on the west coast called for larger and more powerful boats, such as that launched for Mr. R. Petman in December, 1958 which was 52 ft. long, driven by a 72 Hp engine, and costing £7,000.¹⁷⁴ These boats were the first of the trend towards all-weather cray boats which were to take more fishing effort to pay for and maintain. In 1956 a Hobart businessman sent a 63 ft. boat, with a crew of three, deep sea crayfishing off the west coast¹⁷⁵ and there was to be an increasing trend towards non-fishing owners.

¹⁶⁷Clyde Clayton interviewed by Jack Darcey March, 1990. Ns 1468/20, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹⁶⁸ Des French interviewed by Jack Darcey March, 1990. Ns 1468/23, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹⁶⁹Hobart Mercury 6/3/1958

¹⁷⁰Hobart Mercury 14/3/1958

¹⁷¹Hobart Mercury 14/11/56

¹⁷²SFAB file 1959, Dept. of Sea Fisheries.

¹⁷³Bill Dennis, Personal interview, Hobart, 9/6/93

¹⁷⁴Hobart Mercury 24/12/1958.

¹⁷⁵Hobart Mercury 23/11/1956.

There were changes in the retail marketing of fish in Hobart during this period with the condemning of the fish market site in 1947¹⁷⁶ and the controversial banning of fish cleaning at the wharf in April, 1960.¹⁷⁷ This meant it was no longer possible for members of the public to select a live fish from the well of a boat and have it killed and cleaned there and then. Although the fish punts were still able to sell dead fish and the Bridge family continued retailing fish until the mid 1960's, these regulations put severe restrictions upon the amount of time fishermen could wait at the wharf to sell their fish. The retail alternative had been virtually removed.

The policing of regulations saw some changes during this period with Tom Challenger ending his illustrious career in 1950 at the age of 65. Challenger was sent a letter of termination which was later withdrawn to allow this proud campaigner to resign. He lost some superannuation entitlement through his transfer from the Police Department to Fisheries in 1945 but the Government gave him a gratuity of £698/7/6d. on his retirement. Sadly he died in May, 1951, so had spent little of his life away from fishing.¹⁷⁸

Mr. E. E. Andrews took over as Chief Fisheries Inspector and reported in 1956 that most fishermen were complying with the rules and that there had been 44 convictions and 4 dismissals for fishing offences in the previous year. Of those convicted 17 had been commercial fishermen and 27 amateurs.¹⁷⁹ There were increasing concerns about the capacity to police the west coast and there was a continuous battle going on between inspectors and some fishermen who were using more than the maximum of 30 pots. Bern Cuthbertson tells of the ways he outwitted Andrews, once by throwing the excess pots overboard and retrieving them later. He was finally caught red-handed in Port Davey after disclosing his position over the radio.¹⁸⁰

A long-standing concern of fisheries inspectors and responsible fishermen alike was the use of undersize crayfish as bait in fish traps. Harold Rattenbury claims to have introduced the wire fish trap to Tasmania in 1934¹⁸¹ and each fishing boat was allowed to carry two. They were used to catch bait for cray pots and, as smashed up crayfish made ideal bait for the traps, one can imagine the temptation to use the undersized crays that should have been returned to the

¹⁷⁶Hobart Mercury 1/8/1947.

¹⁷⁷Hobart Mercury 16/4/1960.

¹⁷⁸T. Challenger, Personal file, Division of Sea Fisheries, Hobart

¹⁷⁹AD 9 1956 File 18/17/D, Archives Office of Tasmania.

¹⁸⁰Bern Cuthbertson interviewed by Jack Darcey March, 1990. Ns 1468/21, Archives Office of Tasmania.

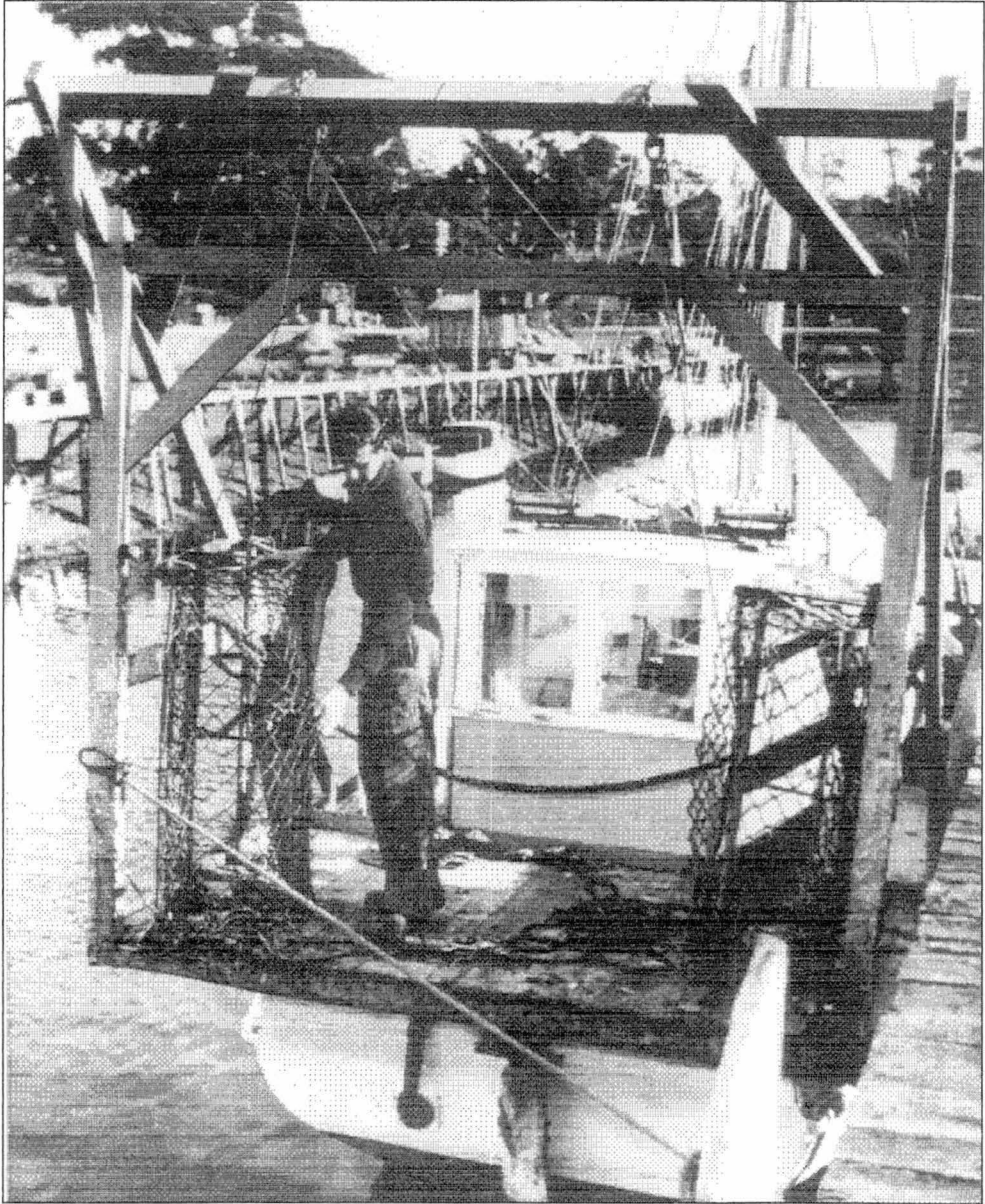
¹⁸¹H. Rattenbury, Op. Cit. Page 11.

bottom when pots were emptied. There were several attempts to ban fish traps in the 1950's but these were not successful and it was almost impossible to catch offenders.¹⁸²

The provision of bait was always a problem for fishermen and as well as using fish traps they were continuously netting with graballs. Some used more unconventional, and not always legal, means of obtaining bait, such as shooting wallaby and killing penguins and porpoises. With the introduction of ice boxes and, ultimately, refrigerated wells there was a move towards the buying of bait from processors in the form of salmon and 'couta heads.

Attempts were made in this period to ban the use of pots by amateur fishermen, and the Government moved to do so but was defeated in the Legislative Council. Fishermen were becoming concerned about the level of exploitation taking place and their security within the industry. This resulted in calls for restrictions on the number of licenses being issued and in the next decade there were moves towards restricted entry.

¹⁸²Fish traps were banned in 1981 as they were being used as extra cray pots. A modified design was legalised in 1984. The Management Policy of the Rock Lobster Industry, Anon., unpublished paper, Dept. of Sea Fisheries, Page 18.



Scallop fishing boat at Bridport
circa 1960

Photograph courtesy of
Archives Office of Tasmania

CHAPTER FIVE

1961 -1970 TOWARDS CLOSURE

In the 1960's fishermen took a wider view of their industry. They increased their sophistication, in outlook, methods of fishing and in attempts to display a more professional image to the general public. Co-operatives broke down and whilst fishermen resisted what they saw as excessive regulations, they took the first steps to control entry into their industry.

As part of a move to increase membership, the LFA called on the Government to make it a condition for the issue of fishing licenses.¹⁸³ This call was ignored, by Government and the Minister for Sea Fisheries, who claimed that the organisation was unrepresentative having only 170 members.¹⁸⁴ A change in name to the Professional Fishermens Association of Tasmania (PFAT) in 1963 could be seen as a way of improving the image of fishermen, as was the appointment of a full-time paid secretary, in 1967, following the retirement of Reg. Roberts.¹⁸⁵ The new Secretary, Mr. F. (Minty) Johnson, was also to become Treasurer of the State Council of the Liberal Party, which would have improved the status of the PFAT, but might have been of doubtful advantage in dealings with the Reece Labor Government. The increasing power of the PFAT is demonstrated by the fact that the Minister called on them for a detailed submission on fishing industry policy in 1969.¹⁸⁶ Attempts to improve the image of fishermen were evident in claims by the President of the PFAT in 1964, that they were not a "rough uncouth mob",¹⁸⁷ which could indicate that this was the way the public had seen them previously. This is borne out by a remark passed by the manager of a conference venue who expressed the view that they had acted with great decorum, as if he had expected less.¹⁸⁸ This search for a better image could have been a reason for fishermen's wives also becoming involved in the organisation, and in 1968 they raised \$214 by organising an Auxiliary Ball.¹⁸⁹

The PFAT started to take an interest in the effects of pollution on the fishing industry, with Mr. Ian Cowie raising the problems of the Burnie Acid Plant, and contamination of Macquarie Harbour and Savage River, in 1969.¹⁹⁰ There were

¹⁸³Hobart Mercury 20/10/1964.

¹⁸⁴Hobart Mercury 2/10/1964.

¹⁸⁵Hobart Mercury 29/9/1967.

¹⁸⁶Hobart Mercury 19/7/1969.

¹⁸⁷Hobart Mercury 1/10/1964.

¹⁸⁸Ian Cowie, Personal interview, Howrah, 15/6/1993.

¹⁸⁹Hobart Mercury 4/9/1968.

¹⁹⁰Hobart Mercury 23/9/1969.

several similar expressions of concern over the next few years and these reached a level of radicalism when, in 1971, Bern Cuthbertson proposed a "protest sail past" of the Hobart Zinc Works and, failing that achieving results, the dumping of abalone shells at the EZ gates. These concerns resulted in the PFAT setting up a sub-committee to devise an anti-pollution campaign,¹⁹¹ and the Government's announcement in 1970 that it was to appoint a Pollution Officer.¹⁹² In 1971 the PFAT objected to the dumping of jarosite off Tasman Island by the EZ Company and, with a remarkable level of foresight, the discharging of ballast water into Tasmanian waters by foreign ships.¹⁹³ If this warning had been acted upon the current problem with the northern Pacific sea star might have been avoided.

The PFAT was not without its critics and was faced with competition from breakaway groups from time to time. The Bridport branch was disbanded in 1964 and replaced with the Bridport Commercial Fishermens Association, and in October, 1968 Mr. R. F. Nichols, the President of the Hobart Branch, resigned and formed the Master Fishermens Association, accusing the PFAT of only representing 10% of fishermen, of being too close to processors, and of having agreed to increased government charges.¹⁹⁴ The other breakaway group was the Tasmanian Fishermens Union (TFU) based at Dover and led by Mr. Frank Hursey. The TFU was concerned about over regulation and license costs and intended to affiliate with the ACTU.¹⁹⁵

This Union raised the question of who had control over coastal waters, and claimed its members were free to fish for scallops outside the three mile limit if they had a Commonwealth license even if they did not hold a State permit.¹⁹⁶ When one of its members was prosecuted the TFU threatened to take the case to the High Court of Australia. There is a chance that they may have been successful as the Chief Justice of Australia, Sir Garfield Barwick, was later to express the opinion that the state governments had no power to legislate below the low water mark.¹⁹⁷ We must assume that the Union ran out of money as the legal challenge was replaced with a petition to the Queen with the predictable negative results.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹¹Hobart Mercury 28/9/1971.

¹⁹²Hobart Mercury 30/9/1970.

¹⁹³Minutes of PFAT meeting 13/10/1971, held by Mr. Ian Cowie.

¹⁹⁴Hobart Mercury 28/10/1968.

¹⁹⁵Hobart Mercury 24/1,28/1,30/1 and 10/2 1969.

¹⁹⁶Hobart Mercury 27/11/1970.

¹⁹⁷A. J. Harrison, *Op. Cit.*, page 87.

¹⁹⁸Hobart Mercury 24/4/1972.

The question of the control of coastal waters was raised in another context throughout this period. There was a growing concern amongst fishermen regarding the intrusion of foreign fishing vessels into Tasmanian waters. This could have developed because there were more boats around, with Japanese and Russian fishing fleets operating in the Southern Ocean, but it was also exacerbated by the need for Tasmanian boats to travel further afield to maintain their catch and the recognition that local inshore fish resources were being depleted.

There is little hard evidence that foreign boats were actually poaching in Tasmanian waters but the debate created a fair amount of heat with calls for an increased naval presence and the closing off of Bass Strait to non-Australian vessels.¹⁹⁹ Legislation was introduced to allow Federal patrol boats to operate within the three mile limit, there were aerial patrols by Commonwealth aircraft, with negative results, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr D. Anthony, promised the 1970 Fishermen's Conference that there would be Commonwealth action on the problem.²⁰⁰ Finally, in November, 1971 Federal Air Minister, Mr. Drake-Brockman, advised that Tasmanian coastal waters were under constant surveillance.²⁰¹

Fishermen over the years had in general been in favour of the establishment of a set of standards for fishing boat safety, and some recognition for the skills of skippers. There was, however, widespread opposition when in 1967 the Navigation Survey Board announced a tough new set of regulations for survey approval for boats and a plan to examine and certify skippers. There were suggestions of fishing boats being registered in other states and others only operating outside the three mile limit to avoid the regulations. There were also calls for a full parliamentary enquiry. Eventually the Survey Board abandoned its plans to examine skippers and made 20 modifications to its requirements for fishing boats and peace was restored to the industry.²⁰² This problem arose again in 1969 when Stanley fishermen went on strike over a compulsory radio survey and the PFAT called for the transfer of survey regulations to the Minister for Fisheries. They were told that they would be allowed to vet any new regulations but were denied a seat on the Survey Board.²⁰³

Whilst fishermen were making their voices heard through their associations, the co-operatives were breaking down. One of the problems facing the co-ops. was

¹⁹⁹Hobart Mercury 17/7/1968.

²⁰⁰Hobart Mercury 23/9/1969, 28/5 and 29/9 1970.

²⁰¹Hobart Mercury 12/11/1971.

²⁰²Hobart Mercury 6/4, 7/4, 8/4, 22/4, 27/4, 20/5, 2/6, 18/7 and 19/7/1967.

²⁰³Hobart Mercury 3/6, 23/9 and 12/12/1969.

the individualistic nature of their members. This led to everyone thinking that they knew how best to run the co-op., long unwieldy meetings, and dissatisfaction with majority decisions. Fishermen would also sell their fish outside the co-op. if they could obtain a slightly better price. Some did this openly and were black banned whilst others sold part of their catch on the side and said nothing.²⁰⁴

The Eastern Tasmanian Fishermen's Co-op. (ETFC) increased its debt in September, 1961 to £66,000, which was covered by a State Government guarantee, and in June, 1962 Reg. Roberts, manager and co-founder, resigned after a dispute over policy. The first public signs that anything was really wrong came in a denial of imminent closure in February, 1963 which was followed by a statement of support from members. In July of that year the Co-op. closed its Margate cannery and announced it had £50,000 worth of stock of canned fish which, because of foreign imports, it was having difficulty in selling. Manager, Mr. Dennon, said it was hoped the closure would be temporary and denied any intention to sell out to mainland interests.²⁰⁵

By November the value of canned fish stocks had risen to £80,000 and 25 tons of salmon had to be diverted from Bridport to Eden, NSW, as the Co-op. could not process it. A receiver was appointed in May, 1964 when the Co-op. was reported to owe the Government between £150,000 and £170,000. Tenders were called for the purchase of the assets of the Co-op. and in September, 1964 it was announced that these has been sold to mainland processor, Safcol. On 29 September, Safcol announced that from two days hence it would take all the fish that Tasmanian fishermen could supply,²⁰⁶ and this was the start of a long and mutually beneficial relationship. ETFC members who fished exclusively for Safcol had the full value of their Co-op. shares refunded by the company after two years²⁰⁷ but the State Government was left to foot the bill for losses of £57,330.²⁰⁸ In May, 1964 mainland interests bought the St.Helens plant of the North East Fishermens Co-operative and in 1965 the Stanley Fishermens Co-operative sold half of its shares to Crest Pty. Ltd., forming Stanley Fish Pty. Ltd.²⁰⁹ The Stanley fishermen sold out their remaining shares in the early 1980's.

²⁰⁴Les O'Neill, Bicheno, 13/5/1993, Edwin France, Bridport, 20/5/1993, and Victor Douglas, Rosny Park, 31/5/1993, Personal interviews.

²⁰⁵Hobart Mercury 29/9/1961, 26/6/1962, 13/2/1963, 27/2/1963 and 13/7/1963.

²⁰⁶Hobart Mercury 19/11/1963, 20/11/1963, 6/5/1964, 19/5/1964, 3/7/1964, 11/9/1964 and 29/9/1964.

²⁰⁷Gordon A. (Ging) Castle, personal interview, Triabunna, 12/5/1993.

²⁰⁸Hobart Mercury 30/9/1965.

²⁰⁹Hobart Mercury 17/9/1965.

Safcol was to become one of the major buyers in the State's newest commercial fishery, abalone, which in the 1960's was in its development phase. Abalone, or "mutton fish", had always been plentiful around the coast but had never found a commercial market until in the late 1950's a small group of largely amateur divers, using masks and snorkels, had begun to sell a few fish. As the possibilities of the Asian market emerged these operations were extended, first by the use of scuba equipment, but because of their limited time span, air bottles were soon replaced by motorised compressors and air hoses. These compressors, often modified paint sprayers, were mounted in small boats with an air hose leading down to the diver who was collecting abalone on the sea bed.²¹⁰

The first air hoses were heavy and sank, causing problems of mobility for divers, and when floating hose was offered for sale operators jumped at it. Unfortunately some of this hose was not suitable and Jim Hursey tells of surfacing one hot summer day off the south coast to find his air hose had expanded in the heat of the sun and was almost six inches (150 mm) in diameter. Thankfully there do not appear to have been any fatalities at this experimental stage of the industry.²¹¹

Officially the abalone industry was not recognised until 1964,²¹² but there was a report in the Mercury in 1963 of a team of divers working at Bicheno which suggested that there was a bright future in exports for the industry.²¹³ One of the major factors in the development of the fishery was the move to the west coast where there was an abundance of abalone. Jim Hursey caught \$9,000 worth in three months when the price was 9c. per lb. On one occasion they caught so many abalone that the boat was in danger of sinking when they entered the less buoyant semi-fresh water of Macquarie Harbour.²¹⁴

A combination of plenty of fish and the unpredictable weather led to the establishment of mother ships, where the skipper provided a large boat with accommodation plus dinghies and compressors, in return for a share of the diver's catch. Bern Cuthbertson was one of the pioneers of this method of fishing and on his first trip with 5 divers they caught 25 ton of abalone in 5 days which would have a present day value of \$400,000.²¹⁵ In time, individual divers

²¹⁰Ken Petith interviewed by Jack Darcey of Murdoch University March, 1990 NS 1468/28, Archives Office of Tasmania.

²¹¹Jim Hursey, Personal interview, Stanley, 25/5/1993.

²¹²Tasmanian Year Book 1969.

²¹³Hobart Mercury 3/10/1963.

²¹⁴Jim Hursey, Personal interview, Stanley, 25/5/1993.

²¹⁵Bern Cuthbertson interviewed by Jack Darcey of Murdoch University March, 1990 NS

bought their own trailable boats fitted with compressors and the mother ships were only used for working on the west coast.

Commercial licenses were brought in for abalone divers in the mid-1960's and a minimum legal size of 5 inches was introduced. The shelling of abalone at sea was banned in 1967 to protect undersized fish.²¹⁶ Divers were invited to join the PFAT in 1968 and the same year a recommendation that licenses be restricted to a total of 125 was accepted. This restriction caused licenses to become a commodity and today they are worth almost one million dollars each. The first license to change hands did so for less than two thousand dollars.²¹⁷ Regulations were brought in to prevent the carrying of cray pots on abalone boats and in later years diving equipment was banned from cray boats. These regulations were to prevent crays being taken by divers but also had the effect of further increasing the specialisation in the fishing industry. By 1966/67 abalone production had risen to over 4.4 million lbs. valued at \$641,660 and Tasmania was producing over half of the nation's exports. By 1969/70 this figure has risen to 5.7 million lbs.²¹⁸

Shark fishing was also going through a radical change during this period of improved materials technology. The traditional method of catching shark had been by long lines suspended just above the ocean floor and fishermen would set up to 2,000 baited hooks. The development of synthetic nets in the early 1960's was to revolutionise the fishery, as they did not need tanning and would not rot. Up to 7 nets, each 600 metres long by 1.5 metres deep and having 175 mm mesh, could be set from a shark boat and this made the industry very cost efficient.

There were disadvantages in that the sharks died quickly in the nets and were often attacked by sea lice. The new synthetic nets were almost indestructible and if lost they continued to catch fish as they drifted about the ocean floor. Concerns were expressed about this "ghost fishing" in 1965, with a suggestion that there should be a degradable element included in the nets, but no action was taken.²¹⁹ Some fishermen believe that shark netting should have been banned, as they claim it has depleted the resource, and because of netting they are now not allowed to long line for shark as this is classed as drop lining and requires a separate license.²²⁰ A further suggested consequence of the introduction of nets

1468/21, Archives Office of Tasmania.

²¹⁶Hobart Mercury 20/4/1967.

²¹⁷Bern Cuthbertson, Personal interview, Sandy Bay, 9/6/1993.

²¹⁸Tasmanian Year Book 1969 and 1972.

²¹⁹SFAB meeting 30/4/1965 SFAB File, Dept of Sea Fisheries.

²²⁰Des Carson, Personal interview, Stanley, 25/5/1993.

was that the reduction of shark caused an explosion in numbers of octopuses which in turn were killing crayfish inside pots.²²¹

One of the developing ports for shark fishing was Strahan where J. R. Barnet extended their processing plant in 1961 and were joined by a second processor, West Coast Fisheries, the same year.²²² In 1964, the Government installed a slip costing £26,000, to take up to 65 ft. boats, and there were moves to get a better air strip for the movement of fish.²²³ The main disadvantage for Strahan was the weather and in 1968 three months of storms reduced the fish catch for that period by 90%.

The problem at the northern port of Bridport was not the weather but the river mouth. In the days before Bridport became a fishing port a local landowner had diverted the Great Forester River through a new outlet to the sea to prevent flooding of his land. This stopped the old entrance at the port being scoured out by the annual flooding of the river, and resulted in constant silting. From 1961 Bridport fishermen were calling for action on this problem, and with Dick Ritchie having to divert catches of salmon away from the port because of the shallow river, the matter became serious. In 1965, 200 residents petitioned the Government for the river to be returned to its original course, and in 1966 local fishermen re-marked the silted channel. Finally in 1970 the Government agreed to spend \$240,000 on deepening the mouth of the river,²²⁴ but the problem did not go away and today there is still talk in the town of diverting the river back to its old course.

The Government also improved the entrance to Georges Bay (St. Helens) spending \$14,200 on extending the sea wall and this did make crossing the notorious bar safer.²²⁵ At Dover an improved deep water jetty and a new processing plant and cannery improved the services to fishermen. Better technical knowledge on refrigeration led to the installation of saltwater cooling tanks where salmon could be held for up to 15 days without freezing.²²⁶

Conditions on boats were also changing with the introduction of gas heating and cooking and the availability of TV. Where there had been a tradition of socialising with the crews of other boats on overnight anchorages the "box" now provided a self-contained form of entertainment and some of the close non-

²²¹Hobart Mercury 24/9/1969.

²²²Hobart Mercury 24/3, and 2/11, 1961.

²²³Hobart Mercury 11/4, and 1/5, 1964.

²²⁴Hobart Mercury 18/8/1961, 2/9/1965, 4/11/1966 and 28/7/1970.

²²⁵Hobart Mercury 30/11/1968.

²²⁶Hobart Mercury 10/6/64.

commercial interaction disappeared. There were of course many areas where TV reception was impossible and the traditional forms of amusement continued. As one fisherman put it: "We read so many westerns that if you opened the hatch you could not see for gun smoke".²²⁷

The long standing issue of a tuna fishery again came to the fore in the 1960's with a combined Commonwealth and State survey of the resource taking place. This survey found that the presence of tuna in significant numbers relied upon water temperatures being between 62⁰ and 68⁰ fahrenheit. In Tasmania these conditions were not reliable from year to year, and depended upon the position of ocean currents. The likelihood, therefore, of a major tuna industry was remote.²²⁸ Ironically it was at this time that fishermen from Triabunna were working out ways to catch tuna during slack periods in the crayfishing season. Neil Drake, and Ian and Noel Cowie, invested in a number of drift nets which they bought from Hong Kong and after some experimentation, including doubling the depth of the net, they caught a considerable amount of striped tuna. Despite all the money it had spent on researching this fishery the Government refused to help these innovative fishermen with the cost of their experimental net. Eventually the low price of tuna forced them to return to crayfishing full time.²²⁹

In its report into the scallop industry in 1961 the Legislative Council had recommended the establishment of a marine laboratory. This was commenced in the late 1960's with the Minister for Fisheries, Mr. Aitken, laying the foundation stone on the partially completed building at Crayfish Point in November, 1968, and the facility was reported as being scheduled for occupation by September, 1969.²³⁰ The building of this laboratory was to mark the State's return to playing a significant role in fisheries research which over many years had been carried out mainly by the CSIRO.

It was advice from CSIRO researchers that led to fishermen agreeing to a reduction in the minimum size of female crayfish in 1966.²³¹ This is a decision that many fishermen regret for they believe that it has led to a depletion in stocks.²³² Even in the short term the advantages were limited, for because of the increased number of females caught in the 1966/67 season, the price of crays

²²⁷Les O'Neill, Personal interview, Bicheno, 13/5/1993.

²²⁸Tuna survey, Dept. of Primary Industry, Canberra, 1965/66, held by Ian Cowie, Howrah.

²²⁹Neil Drake, Personal interview, Triabunna, 12/5/1993.

²³⁰Hobart Mercury 10/12/1968, Annual Report June, 1969, Sea Fisheries Division.

²³¹Hobart Mercury 21/9/1966.

²³²This view was expressed by a majority of fishermen interviewed.

declined substantially. In early November, 1966 they were 35 cents per lb. compared with 76 cent per lb. at the close of the previous season.²³³

It was also in 1966 that the Government limited the number of crayfish licenses to 420.²³⁴ This move to restrict licenses can be seen more as a protection of the incomes of existing fishermen than a method of conserving the resource. This was the first move towards restricted entry to the industry but crayfishermen were still able to increase their effort by upgrading their boats to meet the 30 ton requirement for the maximum of 40 pots. Licenses for pots had now become a commodity and despite the restriction on extra participants, by 1972 the number of pots had increased by a further 2,000 to 9,500.²³⁵ The number of pot licenses was eventually frozen in June, 1972 at 10,930 and from then on some attempts have been made to reduce them. In 1986 they totalled 10,600.²³⁶ As previously stated, the number of abalone licenses was limited in 1968, and a special shark fishing license was introduced in 1970.²³⁷ The fishing industry was moving towards increased specialisation and closure.

²³³Hobart Mercury 11/11/1966.

²³⁴Hobart Mercury 3/11/1966.

²³⁵Letter to A. J. Harrison from L. W. Miller 4/2/72, File 18/22, Division of Sea Fisheries.

²³⁶Seminar on Rock lobster industry 15/9/1986, notes taken by Mr. Ian Cowie.

²³⁷Hobart Mercury 28/7/1970.



Measuring the crayfish catch

Photograph courtesy of Dept. of
Environment and Land Management

CONCLUSION

From the late 19th Century there was a perception, amongst Government and the general public, that Tasmanian fishermen were not producing enough fish for the local market. This resulted in a Government push towards a more industrialised form of fishing, and inspired a need by the small scale fishermen to prove their efficiency. This need was not just a matter of economics but a desire by individual fishermen to prove their worth, by way of good catches, to their peers and to the world at large.

Tasmanian fishermen have also constantly sought out new fishing grounds, again not always for economic reasons but also from a sense of discovery and adventure. The fact that new grounds generally brought good results merely added to the incentive. Similarly with new technology there was a chance to improve the catch and therefore the standing of the individual fisherman and the industry as a whole.

On the other hand these innovations, both of seeking out new ground and embracing new technology, meant that, over time, boats became larger and fishing equipment more sophisticated and expensive. As the years progressed these trends, and the decline of the low capital sectors of hand lining and 'couta fishing, meant that those entering the industry were faced with a greater capital outlay. However, improving overseas markets, particularly for crayfish and abalone, encouraged banks to lend money to fishermen, who traditionally had either saved for their boats or borrowed from family or their fish processor. This development brought the need to cover interest costs and fixed loan repayments and led to increased fishing effort.

Effort was also increased by the use of the new technology, with echo sounders, pot haulers, radar, better floats and floating rope all leading to increased efficiency in the crayfishing sector. Similar developments also occurred in the other fisheries. Ironically, whilst increased effort put a strain on the resource, the reduction of fish numbers forced fishermen to apply even more effort. Thus, whilst the crayfish catch went from 1,268 tonnes in 1947 to 1,707 tonnes in 1970, the effort rose from 188,000 to 791,000 pot days during the same period, and the catch per unit of effort in kg. per pot day declined from 6.74 to 2.15.²³⁸

The introduction of limited entry fisheries only partially solved the problem, for fishing licenses became a valuable commodity. Establishment costs become even higher as new entrants now had to buy a license and there was a further pressure

²³⁸H. F. Campbell and S. R. Hall, A Biological Analysis of the Tasmanian Rock Lobster Fishery, Page 9, Dept. of Sea Fisheries, Taroona, 1988.

for an increase in effort. In the crayfishing sector the freezing of pot numbers in 1972 did cause a stabilisation of effort for a number of years, but it rose again in the 1980's and in 1984 stood at 898,000 pot days.²³⁹

In the area of resource conservation fishermen have constantly been in a bind. In general they support the concept but, because of their individualistic nature, there is always a wide variety of views as to the best method. Fishermen have expected the Government, through the Division of Sea Fisheries, to come up with strong rules for conservation, but because of the range of views held in the industry any new initiative attracts strong criticism from at least some sections. This leads to a lack of political will by decision makers and poor resource conservation. Decisions to apply quotas for catches of abalone and their current consideration in the cray fishery would appear to be the only way to ensure long term viability.

It was the individualistic streak in fishermen that caused the divisions within the PFAT and was in part responsible for the failure of some of the co-operatives. On the other hand, it is this same trait that makes Tasmania's fishermen so resilient and successful and it should be pointed out that when there is an emergency situation, whether it is in the industry, or someone in trouble at sea, they show an incredible willingness to co-operate and help each other out with little reference to the personal cost involved.

In the period following the early 1970's the trend towards capital intensive fishing has continued with the establishment of the trawling industry and the discovery of the orange roughy fishery. Fish meal production has had mixed success, but the future for aquaculture looks bright, with the successful raising of atlantic salmon in the Dentrecaesteaux Channel and the breeding of abalone at Bicheno. It is probably fish farming that poses the main long term threat to the fishing profession.

A classic example of the changes in the fishing industry over time is the experience of the Barnet family of Bridport. Keith Barnet started fishing in the early 1940's using a 14ft. dinghy which his father built and he bought for £80. He went hand lining for flathead, up to 11 miles off-shore, using 32 hooks, and returning home each night. Later, together with his father, he built a 40 ft. boat which was thought to be a monster at the time. Keith built his first cray boat for \$30,000 including \$2,000 for a cray license and it eventually sold for \$140,000. All of these outlays were from savings and in one case Keith and his wife used the money they had put aside for completing their house. Conversely, Keith's son, Allan, at the age of 19, sold everything he owned and borrowed money to buy his first boat for \$120,000. He now owns a trawler worth \$3 million, runs a fish factory in Bridport and has his own aircraft to search for fish.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ibid.

The fishing industry has expanded and changed over the years and there has been a move towards a more industrialised approach. However, there are still a majority of owner operated boats fishing in Tasmanian waters and the independent family based tradition lives on.

²⁴⁰Keith Barnet, Personal interview, Bridport, 20/5/1993.

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