

GUEST COLUMN

Remembering commercial carp fishing in Cook's Bay in the 1920's

by Ben Steers

When I was about 17 years old I worked for the Bradford Fish Company, which was owned by a man by the name of Gus Spencer who lived on Racine Street. This was 1925 or there about. At that time he was living on the 10th Concession of West Greenbury about three miles from Gifford.

The main fish that we were fishing for was carp, a fish that was in great demand by the Jewish people. The carp was a fish that lived mainly in the roots of wood piles which was quite plentiful in the bay at that time. They also ate the rice that fell off the ships when ripe. For this reason the carp had to come from the bottom of the bay and into the mud to get their food. This is why the fish had a muddy taste when eaten, although I have eaten carp and the gullies in our bay the roots for the company seemed to come low to coast it. The

wood to hold it right or start to rot. He may have asked something or what because I did not know. I really do love that a lot of the carp salmon that was available in those days was really carp.

At the end of the pier at Gifford the company had three buildings, a coal and timber store, a bathhouse, and a large building just north of the Gifford pier which was used as a work shop and a place to store the carp. To pack the fish, the fish had to be alive when they reached their destination as they had to be killed by a table. The carp was a fish that would live for a long time and when packed in ice would live when shipped away as far as New York.

When the ice was 14 inches deep and I have never seen it so thick, we would have to store about a thousand boxes and were packed in sawdust and well covered it would last an

summer.

We had a large ice crusher in this building which would crush the ice into small particles which we packed the fish. The fish were shipped in boxes that had two pieces. They were about three feet long and around 30 inches wide usually made of hard wood lumber. When it was stormy or too rough to fish on the open water, we used to cut in sections of making these boxes.

In the fall the first thing that had to be done was to drive down poles into the bottom of the lake in the areas where we intended to fish under the ice. There we built a platform and a shelter large enough to hold the machinery and a large reel on which the nets could be stored. A ship was built from the front of the platform down to the bottom of the bay. This was used to hold the net upon the platform.

As soon as the ice

was thick enough to hold against about two inches deep of the ice the first thing to do was to run ropes under the ice to the ends of the corner posts that had been driven into the ice before the season. This was accomplished by using a pine board about six inches wide and around 18 or 22 feet long with a rope attached. Starting at the platform we would cut a hole and put the board under the ice and with a pole push those in as far as we could in the direction of the first corner post. Then we cut another hole and give the board with the rope attached to it another shot forward. This was done until we reached the first corner post, about 500 feet away from the platform. With a pulley we continued joining the poles by rope.

By the end we had a way of pulling the net out from under the ice. The nets were known as seine nets and were about 50 yards long with lead

weights on the bottom of them so that it would sweep the bottom of the bay. Cook's Bay was in the top of it to make it float in the top of the water.

As the net was hauled around the east of these poles a man had to be there to take the rope out of the pulley and put another rope which was attached to the front of the net through the pulley when needed. We had a net that would sweep a width of about 200 yards wide in a semi-circle.

The fish would be a mile wide back toward the center of the net and the net was pretty well all back to the platform before you saw how many fish you were getting. One certain day each year I saw perhaps only two or three hundred pounds.

Of course there are almost always certain fish in the bay that had to be thrown back as it wasn't legal to fish with a seine net for game fish

such as muskellunge, bass, pickerel, or whitefish. Sometimes you would get a carp or all but maybe three or four hundred pounds of muskellunge or bass or pickerel. These were valuable. We also used to get a lot of what we called dog fish. There was no market for them so we just threw them out on the ice for the gulls to eat. The carp were for them was long and I understand they were in some places they were called a defecator and there is quite a demand for them.

The largest haul of carp that we got while I was working there was something over 40 tons in one haul. It was in two days and one night to empty them out of the net.

As we pulled the nets in we ordered every day for fish we had to take wide sheets of ice to be cut by a boat that was in the bay and down to the water where the fish were stored in them the

water flowed through them on all sides. The way it worked was that when we didn't get many fish but had some orders, we always had the crates of fish to fill back on.

Our main company, Cook's Bay, was situated just at the mouth of the river where it enters the bay. Our boss was a man from Bradford, George McDonald. We received 400 a week and our boss which in those days was considered pretty good wages. On Saturday night changes were paid the best money I expect was to be paid the Gifford store and they 25 cents worth of chocolate bars, six 1/25 cent and about three times as large as what you would pay it cost for today.

As soon as it seemed like the ice was going to break up in the spring we would carry a long pole with us in case we happened to step on a place where the ice was loose. I remember one sharp

See page 18