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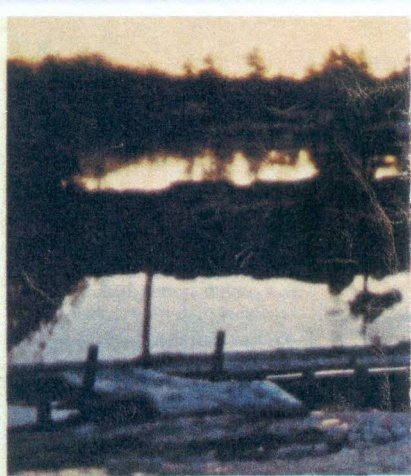
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MAGAZINE



**Fishing the
Great Lakes:
a dying
business**



Al Milligan (left) and Lid Haggart.

Story and photos, including cover,
by Peter Martyn

"THE FIRST FULL moon in November, the whitefish is on the shoal," is an old saying of the Great Lakes fisherman. The fall fishing begins in earnest then, and men like Lid Haggart and Al Milligan brave the often bitter weather to carry on a dying occupation.

We're up before dawn on a crisp November morning — it's below zero outside — with a cup of strong, sweet tea to get us going. Then down to the dock with a kettle of boiling water to warm up the boat's motor. Once she's running, the water from the cooling system runs into a barrel on deck — source of hot water for thawing frozen ropes, nets and fingers.

Dawn is breaking as we steam up Shawanaga Inlet. While gliding through a channel so narrow you could jump to shore on either side, we spot a mink scampering across the snow-dusted rocks.

Haggart and Milligan are commercial fishermen on Georgian Bay. Fishing is their way of life. Their devotion to it allows them to endure hardship and frustration because they are happy out there fishing.

The sun's just up when we reach our destination, an area of treacherous shoals. This is where the whitefish come to spawn.

We sight the first buoy — one on each end of a gang of nets — and haul it aboard. The water's fairly calm now, only a long swell from a "three-day blow" which ended with yesterday's snowfall.

The gentle breeze freezes me to the marrow. I know the photos will look like a summer day, but the wet nets are freezing stiff as they're coiled into the boxes. And the cold wind is blowing little patches of mist across the warm water.

Haggart's face is tense as he coils the nets. They've been out for three

Two Stubborn Men

Haggart and Milligan are
Great Lakes commercial fishermen.
And there aren't many left



"This is my life," says Haggart, "and nothing and nobody will drive me from it." Their fathers also fished these waters for a living. (Also see cover.)

nights because of the storm. The nets are dirty — full of weeds — and many of the fish caught the first couple of nights are too old to sell. Some already have three or four "crabs" (crayfish) preying on them.

When both gangs of nets — over a mile — have been lifted there's only about 100 pounds of marketable fish. A disappointment, but not unexpected. And Bill Metcalfe, a retired CN engineer along as chief cook and dishwasher, remarks that, "If there wasn't two kinds of luck you wouldn't have any."

Now, after an hour of handling freezing nets, Haggart takes off his rubber gloves, stiff with the cold, and warms his hands in the hot water barrel. It takes a few moments before your fingers can even feel the heat.

"During the 20s fishing was a big industry," Milligan tells me. "My dad used to fish five ton of lake trout a day." But the lake trout is gone now — victim of the lamprey.

The whitefish still run in the fall, but not in the numbers of the past. "Nineteen fifty-five was the last good — no, decent — year we had," says Milligan. "We haven't seen a good run of whitefish since. The last heavy run was in '53 — 11 ton; in '54 we got six ton, in '55 3,000 pounds."

For several years in the late 50s the female whitefish were sterile. Haggart caught "females with only two little red lines for a spawn sack, where there is normally a pound to a pound and a half of eggs — half a million eggs — in a fish ready to spawn".

The reason? No one knows, or if they do they're not telling. "It could have been DDT or fallout or almost anything," says Haggart.

And now, mercury. Over 500 pounds of Haggart's pickerel — worth 60 cents a pound — were dumped this spring because they contained over 0.5 parts per million of mercury. The government paid for them, after five months' delay.

"However," Haggart points out,

"this is the first year that they've been testing marketed fish regularly — this mercury may have been here for a hundred years. It may always have been here.

"The Parry Sound District Fishermen's Association heard of tests done in lakes up North where man has never set foot — and some of these fish had way over the 'allowable' limit of mercury."

Milligan is vice-president of the fishermen's association. Haggart is on the executive board: "I don't like it, this administration business, but somebody has to do it. And we're the only association in the Province of Ontario which sticks together."

Despite the setbacks, despite the frustration, despite the risks, they still go fishing. They're stubborn men.

"This is my life, my way of living," says Haggart, "and nothing and nobody will drive me from it. A man can still make a living out here for his family, and this is what keeps me free."

In September Haggart heard that he was to be laid off. He works part-time as a master machinist for a construction firm in Parry Sound: "I called up my boss — and I'm proud to call him my friend — and told him 'I hear I'm going to be laid off... well, take it as of now; I'm going fishing!'"

After lifting the nets we head into the fishing camp, Milligan piloting us through the shoals which shelter the harbor.

Safely moored, we head up to the cabin. "The Ponderosa", they call it. It's one big room, with bunks against one wall, an oil stove and a wood burning cook-stove, a table and chairs. The jar of homemade pickles on the table is frozen solid.

Metcalfe fires up the stove, and in a few minutes he's serving hot tea and rum. Most effective warming medicine. Soon the cabin's too warm to see your breath, and by dinner time the pickles will be thawed out.

Down at the dock Milligan and

Haggart are "picking fish" — clearing the fish from the nets. The nets are frozen stiff, and it takes a pail of hot water every few minutes to keep them pliable. But the morning sun is warm now, and if you're sheltered from the breeze it's quite comfortable.

The nets are cleared and laid in metal boxes ready to set again. Unmarketable fish are dumped on the shore for the gulls and racoons.

Dinner time — Metcalfe serves gargantuan helpings of fried pike and left-over partridge stew. And proves Haggart's contention that, "Old Bill, he's the best damn cook and dishwasher on the Great Lakes."

After listening to the news and weather on the radio it's time to go out and set the nets.

Whitefish nets are set on the shoals, in only a few feet of water — their floats on the surface and sinkers on the bottom. Very efficient, it would seem. If you're in the right place.

"That snow will have cooled the water down," says Haggart. "It has to be at 39 degrees before the whitefish come inshore to spawn. This is one of those things you learn after a few years fishing."

A few years! Haggart's father started fishing these waters during World War II! "He had a rowboat licence — it cost \$5 and allowed you to set all the net you could manage by hand."

Haggart's boat is a 32-foot steel hull, but only draws 30 inches of water (Milligan's tug, the *Albert M.*, draws five feet).

Haggart bought the hull in 1953, cut the canoe stern off with an acetylene torch, and welded his own fantail stern onto her. It was a winter's work in his Parry Sound back yard to fit her out.

The nets wind in amongst the shoals in the hope that they'll be between where the fish are, and where they want to go.

Haggart sometimes dreams of "a man who could show me where the

fish are, even if he's right only half the time. But such a man doesn't exist, and if he did I couldn't afford to pay him. Come to think of it, I don't know whether I'd even want him along..."

After the long gang of five-inch mesh nets have been set for whitefish, two gangs of three-inch mesh are set in deeper water. These are for cisco, a cross between whitefish and herring. It's very popular for smoking.

Back at the "Ponderosa", Metcalfe hands around mugs of steaming tea, and soon supper — plates hidden under mounds of spaghetti with home-cooked meat sauce.

After supper we relax and talk. And memories of other days and other ways crowd back the blustering November night.

"You should write a history of this area 90 or 100 years ago, when a man was a man," Haggart tells me. But, Captain Haggart, in 1971 you are as close as I can come to a primary source of information.

"My grandfather," said Haggart, was a weaver from Paisley, the suburb of Glasgow. He came to Canada when my father was only five.

"The family went to Port Loring, near North Bay. They had to cut their own trail through the bush from McKellar with a team of oxen and all their worldly possessions. That's 23 miles as the crow flies.

"When they got there, there were trees, little more. So they cut timbers, hewed them square, built a house and chinked the spaces with cow manure."

Al Milligan's grandfather was also a Scot: "He was just a roamer, I guess. He emigrated to the US, then moved back and forth to Canada several times.

"My father was born in Dollartown Midland [now it's just Midland, Ont.] in 1891.

"When the family was in Green Bay, Wisconsin, my father worked at Nash Motors and fished with my grandfather. Then they decided to

Continued



Solitaire helps Haggart relax during storm. The next day is rough; there are damaged nets to mend but there's compensation — 500 pounds of fish.

“A feller better not look out there—might lose his appetite”

come over here.

“My mother, with my two sisters and I, was sent up by train while my father and grandfather sailed the fishing boat over from Green Bay.

“She was an old two-cylinder job. At Fox Island [in the northern end of Lake Michigan] the connecting rod went out of her — so they took her engine apart and pulled out the rod and piston — and brought her across the lake on one cylinder!

“They settled up here in an old, log house on the Little Shebeshecong, close to where I live now.”

Lid Haggart was born on Haggart's Island — half a mile from his present cottage — in 1910.

“I ran away from home when I was 14 and got a job on a steambot, as deckhand and coal passer. You made \$1 a day and your board — big money in those days. And you always got lots to eat.”

In 1930 Haggart got his mate's licence. “I was the youngest mate on the Great Lakes, 20 years old. I lied about my age — you had to be 21 to write your examination.” And at 23 he was Captain Lid Haggart.

When he was 18, Haggart spent the winter as cook in a logging camp.

“There were 165 men. I used to cook half a cow a day, and beans by the bag. I baked 50 loaves of bread and 75 pies a day, six days a week. You didn't do any baking on Sunday.

“We got corn syrup in 45-gallon barrels, dill pickles and sauerkraut in 90-gallon hogsheads, and jam in 25-pound wooden pails.”

But in the present the hour grows late and the lights are put out.

Later our sleep is disturbed as a rising wind rattles the chimney. We're up at 6, but it's pitch black outside.

Milligan gets the local weather report from Red Rock lighthouse over ship-to-shore radio, South-sou'westerly winds of 25-35 knots. Snow, sleet or rain, perhaps all three. “It's a bit of a dirty day,” comments Haggart.

No use trying to lift nets — there are six-foot waves running over the shoals, eight or maybe 10-footers farther out. The pitching of the boat would snap the lead and cork lines of the nets, destroying them.

Disgusted with the weather, Haggart begins a succession of games of solitaire. You can feel the tension. Milligan paces to the window, peering out. And Metcalfe. And Haggart.

Dinner is a magnificent roast chicken (Haggart raised it himself, at his cottage) with fresh-picked-cranberry sauce. But the weather's getting everyone down. “A feller better not look out there — he might lose his appetite.”

The afternoon drags interminably. Sleeping, eating, playing solitaire, reading. Today is a shipping day, but the boats can't even get out of the harbor, much less lift nets.

The whitefish nets are set far too shallow for this kind of a blow — they can be torn to shreds on the shoals. And nets are expensive — they're worth about a \$100 per 600-foot piece.

Tension erodes the spirit. There is no banter, no telling of tales. Metcalfe, fed up with hearing the same news on the radio every hour, shuts it off. “Let's listen to the h'elements.”

Night falls without color. Changing from sullen grey to murky twilight, then to damp black with occasional lashes of sleet.

We nibble half-heartedly at supper and snacks, then turn in and try to sleep.

After a fitful rest we're up and breakfasted. The sky's still threatening, but the wind's in the nor'west and still swinging. Fine weather for fishing.

But ill luck deals another blow: the storm has swung Haggart's boat over a rock. The steel skeg into which the rudder fits is weakened, and gives way as we're leaving the harbor.

“We're damn lucky she broke in

here and not out there amongst the shoals, especially with a bit of a sea running,” he said.

Out in the tug to lift. There is indeed “a bit of a sea running” — enough to break a lead line and damage part of a net.

But there is compensation — 300 pounds of cisco. “Not much, but good enough for the start of the run,” Haggart points out.

Now a decision must be made: whether to leave the whitefish nets in the shallow water for another two days until Haggart's boat is repaired, or to risk lifting them with the tug.

Decision arrived at — the *Albert M.* braves the shoals. The wind, east of north by now, has flattened down the waves somewhat. The swell's still there, though, and the storm has left the water so roiled you can't see the rocks at all.

The lift proceeds with utmost caution. Several times a line breaks, and Haggart must search the heaving waters with a grappling hook to retrieve the lost end.

Once the boat shudders, almost imperceptibly. Feels to me as if we just grazed a shoal.

Several good whitefish come aboard, assisted by Milligan who stands ready with a landing net lest one fall back off the net lifter. A jumbo whitefish can weigh over 10 pounds.

One short loop of net in very shallow water hit the run. Perhaps if the whole gang had been set that shallow, there'd be half a ton of fish in the nets.

“But there'll be better days.”

In the meantime there are 200 pounds of whitefish and 300 pounds of cisco to be cleaned, weighed, and packed in ice ready for shipping.

The heavy run? “Maybe the day after tomorrow, when my rudder's repaired,” laughs Haggart. Or, as Bill Metcalfe said, “Well, they don't figure on being millionaires anyway.” ◀