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Making Ready — *Photo by Cabeen*

Skill, Patience And Hardihood Needed In Provincetown's Weir Fishing

The Largest Industry of Its Kind On the Atlantic Coast

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The Town of Provincetown has more fish weirs than any other fishing port on the Atlantic coast.

Right, Fishermen driving one of the $4000 weirs off Provincetown. Each weir has 70 poles of stout Connecticut hickory. Provincetown does more weir-fishing than any other port in American waters.

By JACK JOHNSON

TODAY Provincetown fishes in her front yard. Years ago, at the opulent heyday of her career, her crews went "down to the sea" for the whales and the smaller fishes, and many a fine fortune was amassed this way. Paradoxically, there are no fine fortunes being amassed today, even though huge and varied hauls of fish are being landed in this ancient port of the Pilgrims; hauls netted within a comparatively narrow confine of waters, almost within hailing distance of kitchen doors, that are brought up to the wharves in faster time than was ever dreamed of by those romantic old-time crews.

The Provincetown weir-fishing industry, combined with the four local freezer plants, represents a million-dollar business. There are sixty of the great weirs staked out in Provincetown harbor and surrounding waters, each valued at four thousand dollars. But, fishermen call them "traps," and weir-fishing, in their lingo, is always "trapping."

Crews totalling 75 men fish them—in specially constructed "shock-proof" boats. In the freezers 300 more men are employed. During the trap-fishing season, that extends from April to December, the full bounty of the sea is scooped from the great nets—many millions of pounds of whiting, mackerel, herring, butterfish, tuna, Spanish mackerel, squid, sea bass, sand eels, cod, pollock.

It's the greatest business of the kind on this continent. For nowhere on the coastline of North America is there the number of weirs that Provincetown boasts, and nowhere in American waters is there the grand-scale fishing of this sort.

Nor are thrills and danger lacking in the daily routine of these 1939 crews, who, in less than an hour's time they leave a mooring, will return with a load of 200 or 300 barrels of fish.

"One time I tried a new way of gaffing a big 'horse mackerel'," recalls Capt. Frank Souza, who, like all Cape Cod fishermen refer to the tuna as horse mackerel. "You have to work fast on those babies, because some of them weigh up to a thousand pounds.

"I shoved the gaff down his mouth with everything I had. A few minutes later I woke up in the bottom of the boat with a big goose-egg on my head.

"Another time, a young fellow in our crew was dragged overboard, gaff and all. The tuna towed him clear out of the trap. Luckily, the boy let go of the gaff as the tuna dived under and escaped."

WHEN A BIG tuna dives and comes up with full force against the underpart of a trap-boat, it seems to the landlubber that the craft has surely been given a death-blow. But nothing happens, for these craft are put together with heavy timbers to offset just such hard whacks.

Often a man is swept overboard in the wild jousts with the horse-mackerel. Occasionally an arm or a leg is broken. However, despite its size, the powerful fish never attack a man. The fisherman merely has to keep a weather eye out and keep clear of the mighty tail of the tuna; also he must exercise good judgment, realizing in a split second just who is master of the gaff.

The tuna haul from the Provincetown trap runs into the thousands in a season. Countless fish weighing 500 to 700 pounds each are caught, and last Summer Captain Souza brought in 365 tuna, averaging 75 pounds apiece, from one drawing of a trap.

His theory is that the tuna school into Cape tip waters in