



## Reminiscences of a Weir Fisherman

By Ciperly Good, the Richard Saltonstall Jr. Curator of Maritime History

Captain Richard “Dick” Young of Gouldsboro is a third-generation weir fisherman. His grandfather, Francis “Frank” Young, built the weir on Point Francis in Gouldsboro Bay and passed it down to his son Charles “Charlie” Young, and then his grandson Richard. Dick only fished it the one year, though. Even by the 1960s, the influence of purse seining was felt by the near shore weir fishermen of Maine.

In our effort to gather stories from herring fishermen for our ongoing exhibit, *Sardineland*, and our archives, we interviewed Dick about weir fishing, and have transcribed his reminiscences for this newsletter. If you have stories about the herring fishery, we’d love to hear from you, too. Join us on Saturday, October 4 at 4pm for the Salty Tales portion of our SardineFest. Or drop us a line: by phone: 207-548-2529, by e-mail: [cgood@pmm-maine.org](mailto:cgood@pmm-maine.org), or by letter: Penobscot Marine Museum, PO Box 498, Searsport, ME 04974.

### Dick Young on building the weir:

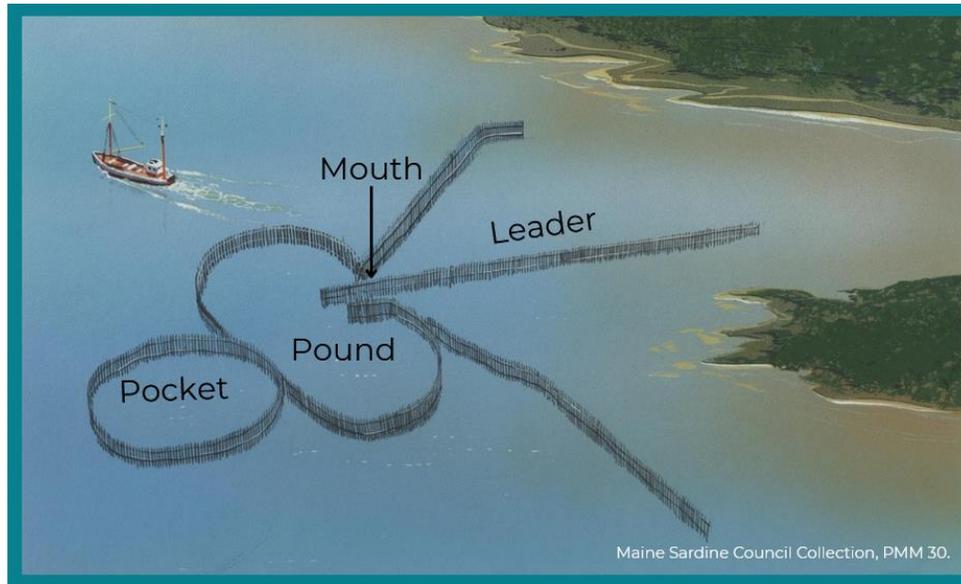


*Maine Sardine Council Collection, PMM 30.*

Back in those days, you had to build [the leader] out of brush... What they called pea brush, which was Birch... You put it on these binders, which was like a fence all the way out to the pound. You put [the brush] upside down so

consequently... with the tide coming and going, seaweed caught in the branches of these birch trees upside down and it built a big dark wall underwater.

### How design of weir entraps the herring:



The leader stopped out at the pound and the pound was shaped like a big fat heart. And it was open on both sides of this leader. When the fish came up the Bay... along the shore feeding, they hit a black, dark wall. They'd stay 6, 8, 10 feet away from it and swim for deep water. When they did, they went right into the mouth of the pound, and the pound being shaped like a heart, [the herring would] circle around. They'd hit the wall in the pound, and they'd swim right around and around and around and around in a circle until you went out and seined them.

When you go out there, [you] put a ladder on the backside of the pound, [and] climb up that ladder, and you look in. If you think you had enough to put in the pocket to save, well, we'd take the seine raft out and the scow. And we'd close off the mouth of the pound. You had to be careful, too, because [the herring] spooked... So you had to be quite quiet doing it.

## A Family Affair:

My grandfather was 96 when he died [in 1967]. He and another guy built this [weir] originally back before my father was born [in 1914].... Then my grandfather turned it over to my father. He had a couple of other guys running it, but then in the summer of '63 when I graduated, he wanted me to go down. We had a cabin on Point Francis, and that's where the weir was. We had to get there either by boat or by four-wheel drive truck—in through a road a little over a mile long. Me and another guy stayed in the cabin down there, and there was another guy that worked with us from Gouldsboro Point. If we had fish, we'd have him come down, and it took three of us to seine it and put them in the pocket.

My grandfather could crawl up on that pound at 91 years old. And he said, right, you've probably got 20 hogshead, 25 hogshead, somewhere right in there. And of course, you probably already know hogshead is 17-and-a-half bushels.



*Sardine carrier IDA MAE tied up at the dock in Winter Harbor.  
Carroll Thayer Berry Collection, 1977.55.4065.4.*

Uncle Arnish ran a boat called the IDA MAE for Stinson Canning Company in Prospect Harbor. Old Cal Stinson had two or three factories at one time up and down the coast.... We'd get [Uncle Arnish] to come up with the boat. We'd tie this sardine boat up alongside the pocket and we'd start purse

seining the one side of the pocket [by herding] all the fish down to one side and eventually down into one corner and the sardine boat had these great big pumps... at least a 6- or 8-inch diameter hose with... a filter on the end of it, Herring would fit through it, but nothing else would.... They pump them into the hold inside the sardine boat. Now, before they did that, the captain on the sardine boat would scoop up a couple, 3-4 herring in a bucket and he'd run his thumb down the belly. If they squirted out red instead of brown, that means they were full of red feed, which is a plankton.... That's what red tide is. Anyway, if they had red feed in them, we had to drop the pocket back down. Give them 24 hours to clean up. And then they'd come back, and check them again, because they couldn't pack them with that in them. But anyway, then he'd load them in the sardine boat and take them back to Prospect Harbor where they were canned. My grandmother, my mother, I don't know how many of my relatives back then used to work in the factory.

**Side gigs while waiting for the weir to fill:**



*Seine skiffs work the inside of a brush weir.  
Maine Sardine Council Collection, LB1998.12.10.*

I had an 18-foot skiff outboard that we used around the weir. I had 150 traps that I hauled by hand. So if we're going to seine midday on the tide, I'd go out at daylight and haul half my traps. Hauling by hand back then you didn't have these pothaulers or anything, and you had one trap to a line. 'Course that summer, I think shedders is worth 35 cents a pound and hardshells 45 cents to fishermen. And I'd haul half of them, and I'd come back in, and we'd seine the weir out, which was about a three- to four-hour operation.

### Influence of purse seiners:



*Seiner works a school of herring within sight of a cannery.  
Maine Sardine Council Collection, LB1998.12.14.*

A weir didn't catch herring like the purse seines could, you know purse seine could shut off a whole cove and then they'd go in there, and, if there was 200 hogshead right in there, they could just shut the whole Cove off and they'd catch them all.... That kind of put the weirs of out of business because for the work you put in, it took like a month and a half to build a leader and get the twine on the pound. And then get everything ready to go. I mean, there was a lot of work.... With a weir, we could get 25-30 hogshead on a tide.... If we only got like 5 or 7-8 hogshead, we put them in the pocket and we'd wait, check the next tide because when they were running they usually run maybe two or

three days in a row.... At the end of three tides, with three days, you'd have 30 hogsheads or 35, which made it worth the sardine boat coming and getting them. If we only had two or three hogshead and we didn't catch any more, we put them in the scow and sell them to lobster fishermen for a dollar and a half for a 5-gallon bucket.

I remember there were a couple three times during the summer that we seined at night, the fish were running so good we'd go out there and you couldn't use flashlights. You had just do everything by feel. And what very little you might be able to see as there weren't any moon at all (with a full moon it was poor fishing because with any kind of light, herring would dive to deeper water), and I remember one time we had 60-65 hogshead in the pocket, and we had a boat come up the night before, so we could pump them out next morning. We got a thunder, lightning storm that night that hit on the low tide, which was very bad because that lightning drove the sardines to bottom. Well, that many fish in that small of a pocket, they smothered. And then we had to bail them all into scows and take them all out of Gouldsboro Bay, outside of Sally Islands because if we'd dumped them in the Bay and anywhere near the weir that would kill the fishing for that weir. That was the reason that fishermen couldn't set a trap within 500 feet of a weir because of the dead herring in the bait bags. At least that's what I was always told, and the guys were good.

Then I remember another night we were going out, a nice warm summer night, and seine. We were catching fish on these tides, and we shut the mouth of the pound off. I'm up on the binder, the framework for the pocket. I was up there hauling the pocket down, before we were going to herd them in. You stand on the bottom binder, hang on the top on the binders, a probably three- to four-inch poles spiked to the upright binders. Sliding along that binder that night, I slipped [and fell] probably at least 15 feet. And so I hit the water. When I come up, it's pitch black. I didn't know where I was. Course you always wore a pair of hip boots a size bigger so if you did fall overboard, you would kick them off when it started filling with water. Otherwise you're going down. And Ben, one of the guys working with me, he said, 'Dick are you alright,' and I said, 'Yeah, but I don't know where the Hell I am,' and so then he turned flashlight. And I swum to a binder pole. But I didn't have to take my boots off. I got to the binder pole before I started sinking. I was young and

strong back then. That was an experience. But I'll tell you, I've never work so hard in all my life.

**Demise of weir:**



*Fisherman repairs the nets on his weir. National Fisherman Collection, LB2012.15.14456.*

By 1963, instead of using brush, they were using seine twine [for the weir construction, but it was] more expensive.... In October of '63, we were still fishing, because there always used to be a late run of fish in October and November. About late October, we had the storm, I don't remember if it was hurricane or not, but it was a southerly wind at 70-75 miles an hour. It came up Gouldsboro Bay, which ran north and south and we were right on the end of Point Francis. [The storm] came right up the Bay at low tide, of course, and that twine full of seaweed, was just like a big sail and it collapsed. We lost the whole pocket and a lot of twine. So that summer's profit wasn't as good as it could have been.... We lost probably \$6,000 worth of twine. And back in '63, that was a lot of money. You know, that's a lot of herring to cover that. But we

did have the best summer in '63 than we had had in, I think it was, almost six years. At least we didn't end up in the red....

That's the breaks, but you know it was about then that the purse seiners were starting in.... They could shut the coves off and they'd be catching the fish before they ever come up the Bay to go into a weir.... I can't say they should have put a minimum on it back then, when the seiners were catching so many and doing so good. But I don't know. Maybe [the herring] get caught up other places too, before they get up here.

But we lost so much that fall of '63, we never built it back. If it wasn't for the purse seiners there, we'd have built it back because, it did make money over the course of the summer.