

# Meet the last fisherfolk of Purcell's Cove

by Isaac MacEachen

The alarm wakes her up at 4:30 and minutes later, after a quick nourishing breakfast, she packs the lunches prepared the night before, bundles up in her Helly Hansen oilskins and floater coat, and heads out into the minus 5-degree December morning air. The sun is just beginning to rise over McNab's Island as Marlene Duggan and her husband Bary, drive down to their wharf in Purcell's Cove. Bary knows it's going to be a great day for lobster fishing and both of them anticipate a really good day's catch. They load today's supply of fresh bait onto the boat and then Bary starts up the outboard. Marlene pulls her orange toque down over her ears and starts cutting bait as Bary skillfully maneuvers the 23-foot Cape Islander "The Cari Lynn", through the rising mist over the frigid waters and heads to Sleepy Cove where today's work will begin.

Marlene and Bary have been doing this same procedure many days through the late fall and winter and early spring for many years. In 1970, while still in her teens and with a fulltime secretarial job, Marlene began her part-time career as the deckhand on the Duggan boat. Marrying into a fishing family from Purcell's Cove, Marlene knew she would be involved in the business of harvesting fish. Besides, she soon realized that if she wanted to see much more of her new husband, who was then working fulltime at Maritime Tel and Tel, it would have to be in their 18-foot fishing boat, "The Mabaca". She had so much to quickly learn: getting up at a painfully early hour on those mornings when the temperature can hover around -15 degrees, how to deal with persistent icy winds which seemed to always blow directly into your face, choosing between eating lunch with bulky smelly gloves on or with half-frozen fingers. There was also the challenge of trying to keep your lunch down as their boat lunged and tossed in the choppy waters around the shoals known as Hens and Chickens off Point Pleasant Park. One of the most difficult lessons, and perhaps the most important one for her, was the proper way to handle a flailing lobster and the safest way to slip a band around its pinching claws. The damage that this crustacean could do to her fingers was always in the forefront of her mind. Today Marlene can show you several hand scars and misaligned fingers-all the work of aggressive lobsters. Another challenge for her was dealing with the bulky clothing that seemed to be designed for men much larger than her petite frame. There were also those awkward rubber gloves that made doing her job so much more difficult. Because of the inconvenience of many layers of clothing and no washroom facilities, Marlene



quickly learned that coffee for breakfast was a major NO NO!

I asked Marlene about getting seasick when she first started fishing. "Well, I was so busy all day that I never even had time to think about it," she responded with a laugh. There was so much to do on the boat. Bary

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would empty the lobsters onto the table, allowing Marlene to grab them one at a time and band their claws. Sometimes she would be the one to refill the trap with fresh bait before the trap was dumped back into the water. Occasionally she would have to take the wheel and guide the boat to the next buoy, an extremely tricky job in those strong winter winds. After eight to ten hours on the water, they would have checked at least 150-200 traps, each one containing as many as eight lobsters. Seldom on one trip were they able to manage to check all 250 traps set in the waters around Halifax Harbour.

Marlene told me that she was the captain of this license for 16 years through the 1980s and 1990s. Bary was officially her deckhand-and

scupper in the back of their 18-foot boat and, as they sped out to the middle of the harbour, Marlene noticed the boat was filling up with seawater. They began to bail but quickly realized that the powerful sea was getting the upper hand. With the aid of a nearby fishing boat, they got things under control and the Duggan's quickly got back to fishing lobster. "Just another day on the water" Bary told me. Then there are the storms. On really bad days the decision to fish is made early, perhaps the night before, but there are some days when a storm comes up quickly causing a complete change in the weather. The waves are continually pounding the boat, but when the spray hurls across the bow and over the deck, things can get pretty icy and make for a very dangerous workplace. In the winter a snowstorm can come up quickly so that even the shoreline and familiar landmarks are

don't think she didn't take advantage of her position, at least on the boat. She did, however, graciously allow him to handle the trap hauler during those long winter days on the water. Marlene and Bary had some interesting adventures over the years. While preparing the boat one day,

Bary heard a sudden scream and looked over to see Marlene flailing in the icy waters just off the wharf. Using a long pole, he was able to rescue her before she succumbed to the freezing temperatures. Bary did give her the day off to dry out and to be ready for the next day's trip. The Duggan's have been battling with the seals in Halifax Harbour for many years. Bary has had to rework his trapping system several times to stay ahead of seals which seem to have a real appetite for the raw mackerel he uses for bait. Then there are the eels which often get caught in the traps. Marlene insists that removing a slimy, wiggling eel with massive teeth is not included in her job description.

One day Bary forgot to insert the

invisible. These are the times Bary and Marlene will decide to curtail fishing for the day and head back to the safety of their little cove. Winter fishing is a very challenging profession. So, the next time you are driving through Purcell's Cove and see the little Cape Islander either heading out or returning to the wharf, give a toot to the last fishing folk of this area. And the next time you enjoy a feed of lobster, think of that woman who might have been the one to slip the bands over its tasty claws.