

Up North: Chapter Six -- The Halibut Derby

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The Green Hope was rigged to drag the bottom for ground fish and this was our focus but there were other very lucrative fisheries that couldn't be ignored. One of these was halibut. The halibut is a bottom dwelling flat fish species prized for its firm white meat. Now days, the fishery is managed on a quota system. Each vessel involved in the fishery is assigned a quota of the allowable catch based on vessel size and past record.

It wasn't like that in 1984. It was wide open to any boat of any size that wanted to go out. They opened the fishery for four days and then tallied the catch and compared it to the allowable catch. Then they opened it again for one day at a time to get as close as possible to the harvest goal. This created a system that was chaotic as well as dangerous.

When the fishery opened, as many boats as possible went out, from 200 foot long liners, 100 foot trawlers and 52 foot to 15 foot skiffs to get in on the bonanza. Vessels worked, 24 hours a day if necessary, until the boat was plugged to the max. Safety was for the most part cast to the wind and many boats came back to town seriously over loaded. I've see ratty old wooden boats tie up with the gunwales underwater. Bad enough in fair seas, in foul weather it killed a lot of folks. This was the Halibut Derby.

The Company decided that the Green Hope could make some serious money if we geared up and went out for the 1984 derby. The talk was that serious money for the Company meant serious crew shares. Plugging the Green Hope meant several hundred thousand dollars for four days work. We were enthusiastic.

It was decided that Captain Billy didn't have enough experience and the learning curve was too steep to make the most of this fishery in four days. They hired an experienced skipper, sort of a top gun. Don Mathews was a balls-to-the-walls skipper whose reputation preceded him. The first story we heard about him was that one time he dove off the top of the mast of a long liner into the harbor on a bet. They also said he pushed hard and always made money.

When we had our first face to face we were already sort of in awe of this guy. Standing about six feet tall, lean and hard he was dressed in the standard Carhartt uniform with a crumpled Icicle Fisheries ball cap. Hard to tell his age with the sunburned face covered with a full beard but my best guess was early forties. He was a straight talker and let us know what he expected from us and what his plan was. Straight talk and a macho rep. boosted our confidence and we set to work changing the Green Hope over to a long liner.

Top shelf technology in long lining at the time was called snap- on- gear. It required a hydraulic driven reel loaded with shots or lengths of long line. As the line was fed out hooks on ganglions were attached to the line with metal snaps. As the gear was recovered the hooks and any fish were un-snapped and the line re-wound on the reel.

Foregoing this style that would have meant a substantial investment for the reel and other equipment such as an automatic hook baiter, the old way of tub gear was opted for. Tubs referred to plastic basket shaped tubs that were used to store the long lines. One hundred foot long shots or lengths of Brownell line with a loop on both ends made up a skate. Ganglions with a hook on one end were attached at four foot intervals

and this skate was coiled into the basket with hooks and loops protruding. The hooks, two inch mustang circle hooks, were ready to be baited and the loops were ready to be attached to other skates or ground tackle. The tubs had to be stored and secured on deck and so we first began constructing wooden shelves to hold them.

This style of fishing was labor intensive and so Captain Don hired more deck hands to bring the crew up to twelve. Of course these guys were guys who Don knew and had worked with before. Most of them were experienced long line fishermen and we fell in with them to get the vessel shaped up. Many hands make for lighter work and smaller crew shares.

During the five days of dockside work Captains Billy and Don were gone most of the time I suppose doing what captains do. They were buying stuff and supplies like lumber, tubs coils of Brownell, hooks poles, anchors and bait all periodically arriving dock side. A hydraulic block for retrieving long lines from the deep arrived and was installed on the starboard side of the work deck and was plumbed into the Green Hope's hydraulic system. Five long days of work in the warm May sunshine transformed the Green Hope and we shoved off on the evening before the opening to make our fortunes.

Our destination was the Shelikof Straight. After a hearty dinner and a couple more hours of baiting the more than 5,000 hooks we deck hands turned in; dawn and the start of the Derby would come early. As I lay in a top rack still buzzing from the day's labors, looking out the port hole I had a near mystical experience. In the luminous moonlight a pod of killer whales frolicked off the starboard side keeping pace with the vessel's movement through the rolling seas. As I watched them I wondered how long they would follow. I fell asleep watching them effortlessly jump and gliding along.

Up early to a quick breakfast of coffee, scrambled eggs, sausage and then more coffee, we went back to work baiting hooks. The bait consisted of frozen Pollack chopped into two inch sections put onto the circle hooks in a way that it stayed on. Some technique was involved. The continuous baiting of hooks was an activity that continued non-stop for the next four days. This is one reason why we needed a lot of guys on deck. Squatting on the rolling deck, bent over cutting and handling frozen fish caused the hands to numb up and gave new meaning to the words back-breaking work to the greenhorn. By 8 A.M. we were where we needed to be according to Captain Don. The weather was clear, seas were at a modest three foot swell and the Green Hope crew was standing by.

At 9 A.M. the 1984 North Pacific Halibut Derby opened on schedule and we began deploying the gear. First over the side was a twelve foot aluminum pole with a float and a weight on one end and a bright orange floating ball. The buoy would act like a bobber and the flag and a radar reflector on the top of the pole should make it easy to find when we came back. Next the anchor and float line went over extending 1200 feet to the bottom. This heavy weight, as it plunged to the bottom, dragged the skates with baited hooks out of tubs and down to the sea floor to begin their work. One skate is 100 fathoms or 600 feet with hundreds of hooks. One set could be made up of several skates.

There was a real danger in this set-out operation due to the heaving deck and the sharp hooks flying out of the tubs, over the rail and into the deep blue. If you happen to be in the wrong place a flying hook could tear off a finger or some other pound of flesh. Hooks that snare rain gear or other clothing could drag a fisherman down to meet Davy Jones. The most experienced guys worked the rail as we set out the gear.

After more than six hours setting the gear we broke for lunch as the skipper steamed back to the first set. With the help of radar, GPS and plotting the skip knew exactly where the gear was. The real question was; was it in the right spot? That would become clear once we started hauling the gear. Don was getting the captains full share to put us on the fish. During the hour run back to the starting point there was an air of optimism and excitement for the task and anticipated rewards ahead. For the greenhorns we didn't know yet what was in store for us. Ignorance is bliss.

Working the rail while hauling the gear was not only dangerous due to high speed sharp things but it was critical to the success of the whole effort. As the captain pulled up on a set the bobbing pole and buoy should become clearly visible. At around twenty yards distance the rail man makes his throw with a three pronged stainless steel grappling hook attached to a quarter inch line. When I watch a guy make a throw it reminds me of the days of old when sailing ships closed on each other and threw grappling hooks to start the boarding. A guy was expected to snag the line on the first throw. Too many misses endangered both bragging rights and one's claim to the prestigious position itself.

Once the line was hooked it was hauled to the rail, the pole and buoy were disconnected, the down line was wrapped around a hanging block and put in the wheel of the hydraulic hauler and the set was hauled up from the bottom. Next comes the heavy lifting, the ground tackle and the set with several hundred hooks and whatever halibut were on.

Halibut are the largest flat fish in the Pacific Ocean ranging from the 'chickens', less than a hundred pounds, to the 'barn doors' weighing from two hundred up to three hundred plus pounds, couldn't do it without the miracle of hydraulics. The rail man and his helper stood with long gaffs to gaff the fish and haul them onboard. These guys had strong backs but sometimes it took a winch to get a barn door over the rail.

As the fish came onboard they were thrown on the butcher table. In order to keep the quality as high as

possible over the duration of the trip the fish had to be butchered as they came onboard. With a sharp knife the gills are removed and the belly was slit from anus to nape. All the guts and internal organs were pulled out by hand and my favorite; you had to reach way back inside, locate, grab and pull out the gonads. The final step was to scrape and wash the belly cavity. Once butchered the fish were thrown down the hatch into the hold where they were iced and stacked by the 'Ice Man', Melvin and sometimes a helper. Standing at the butcher table was my job through most of the trip. After mastering a couple of knife and hand techniques it, at first, seemed to be a manageable task. It wasn't long before the fish began to stack up on the table and no matter how fast we worked the fish kept coming faster.

Once the fish started coming over the rail things became a blur of non-stop activity. Coiling lines, stowing poles and tackle, butchering and icing, baiting of hooks continued around the clock. Clearly Captain Don was worth the money. We were on the fish. After retrieving one set it was immediately set out again. The first several hours standing at the butcher table burned off most of the excitement and adrenalin of the derby. After that the hard work began. By the sixth hour of continuous butchering my back began to ache. Then it was the knees. By the twelfth hour I was in agony and the fish just kept on coming.

The worst was when the hands cramped up. Cold wet hands hour after hour reaching deep inside to yank out the gonads became like claws and had to be massaged to be any use at all. We continued for twenty-four hours without a break except for stand up meals and quick head calls. Under the setting sun, through the short night and into the following dawn there was no rest for the wicked. It was Don's working theory that without any sleep at all we couldn't go on. If we slept for too long it would be impossible to get up and go back to work he had explained to us several times. The solution was that we would each go down in rotation for two hours in every twenty-four hour period. Beginning at dawn on the second day two guys at a time peeled off gloves, rain gear, and boots to crash, mostly face down, in the nearest rack for their allotted two hours. It was noon before my turn came up and my lights went out the instant my face hit the rack. What seemed like two seconds later I was groggily sliding into skins and pulling on boots for my next twenty-four hour shift. There was no thinking only pushing an exhausted body forward. It took only a short while to re-establish yesterday's rhythm and the pace never slackened. The fish kept coming onboard and we kept butchering them and putting them down in the hold.

On the evening of the second day I was rotated to baiting hooks which started out as a relief but was soon just as hand and body numbing. I guess it was around mid-night when I started dreaming about my next rack time. It didn't help. I continually fought my body that just wanted to collapse and my mind that wanted to give up and quit. My treacherous mind told me again and again just quit it doesn't matter. But it did matter. Pride and not wanting to let the other guys down kept me going through the worst of it. It was not a fight I could win once and be done with it. I had to fight and win again and again and then again. Time stood still and the work continued. The two hour sleep time was dreamed about, longed for and used up in an instant.

It may have been on the third or fourth day that the hallucinations began. It was like being in another alternate world where reality shifted. The only constant was the fish coming onboard everything else shifted and I struggled to keep control of my mind and sort out illusion from reality. My body screamed with pain and was my enemy. My mind was my friend but threatened mutiny. With only pride left I continued.

In the end all the days blended together into one and when the derby came to the end I was still standing, just barely. The other guys were also exhausted but nobody complained. All the gear was onboard, stowed and we moved the butcher table and fastened down the hatch. I saw Melvin for the first time in four days. He just grinned. Before the hatch was secured captain Don was headed for Dodge.

Numbers were bandied about; something like 100,000 or 120,000 pounds was an estimate. We wouldn't know for sure until we off loaded and tallied the haul. The Green Hope was riding low in the water with the sea washing through the scuppers, She was plugged and we were happy longliners. The trip back was uneventful. We ate and slept ate and slept again the sleep of righteous victors.

Back in town we tied up at the ISA dock and sat around bullshiting and grinning. There were about three boats in front of us to off load but we hung around to watch our fortune get hoisted out of the hold and dumped into the plant. We watched every halibut come out and marveled at the size of the barn doors we had snatched out of the depths.

The final tally and crew share wasn't announced until the next day. There was some disappointment. Although the boat made serious money the split didn't amount to what we had expected. As a green horn deck hand I got a 1/16 share that only amounted to around \$6,000. But I didn't really care. It was more than I had made all winter. What's more the feeling of confronting myself and winning was worth more to me than a full share. It was by far the most physically and mentally challenging thing I had ever done. Even Marine Corps boot camp wasn't this intense in the short run. At Parris Island we were, by law, given eight hours of sleep a night. The feeling of victory made me feel ten feet tall and gave me a similar confidence in myself that I felt the day I marched across the parade deck on graduation day at Parris Island.

As we dismantled and off loaded the long line gear I thought about what was next. I was sure now that I could make it as a commercial fisherman and I was leaning in that direction. Alas my destiny took a major turn only a week later and I heard the name Egegik for the first time.