

Up North: Chapter Two - Green Hope Days

Michael Downey
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The salmon season was over and so was my job as a tender man. To stay on, I needed another gig. It seemed like I had two choices, go to work in a cannery or go out on a boat. For me, it was a no-brainer. Commercial fishing was not only the life blood of Kodiak. It was probably the most macho job in Alaska. The popular reality show 'The Most Dangerous Catch' has made the Alaskan fisheries familiar to a wide audience. Of course, the king crab fishery is top shelf. King crab fetches the highest ex-boat price, so that's where the big money is made. Notoriously bad weather, long working hours and working with machinery and heavy loads on a constantly moving platform combine to make it the most dangerous job in America. Other fisheries are just as dangerous but for less money.

It is almost impossible to get on a crab boat unless you are born into it or are lucky enough to be in the right place at the time when a boat needs somebody. As a Moonie, I had an inside track to a job on an affiliated church boat. That fall I signed onto the Green Hope an 82-foot steel hulled stern trawler built in Bayou La Batre, Alabama. The skipper was Bill Dalton. Joe Spicciani was first mate and engineer and Melvin Primos was deckhand and cook. They had been together for several years and had brought the boat to Alaska through the Panama Canal from the Gulf of Mexico. The vessel was rigged as a bottom trawler. It dragged a net with a bag along the bottom scooping up whatever fish was in its path. Me and another Joe joined the crew as greenhorn deck hands. Work on a fishing boat was completely different than any work I'd done before. That I lacked skills was a huge understatement.

This wasn't fly fishing on a river. This was an industrial environment and appropriate industrial skills were required. On a steel fishing boat arc-welding, diesel mechanics, hydraulic and refrigeration know-how were essential. If you break down at sea who you gonna call? Also, net repair, knot tying, and splicing were needed to keep the boat fishing. Of course, the captain needed to navigate, use the various electronic devices on board as well as handle the vessel in all kinds of weather including putting it alongside docks and other vessels. Most of these skills were only to be aspired to after mastering the basics; shoveling ice, pitching fish and washing down everything in sight.

As greenhorns, we started at the bottom and were gradually introduced to the tools of the trade by the other guys. As a boy scout, you may have learned to splice rope. Splicing a loop into the end of a 3/4 inch steel cable is the same concept but in reality a different animal. It involved leather gloves, several steel spikes, a vice, liberal amounts of taking the Lord's name in vain and bloody punctures to one's fingers.

My first effort was conducted under the tutelage of Cap'n Billy himself. With a mixture of instruction, complaint and derision, I was led through the process. It reminded me of my dad teaching me to drive. The end result wasn't pretty but was pronounced functional. The captain walked away shaking his head and I went below to try and stop the bleeding and tape the finger nail back on my index finger.

I did learn to sew web. Since we dragged the net along the bottom, we were constantly repairing rips. The bottom is studded with rock outcroppings that wreaked havoc on the gear. We often hauled the net and bag up on the deck, located and repaired tears. This involved sewing with an eight-inch plastic needle wrapped with plastic twine. Although the net looked like a tangled pile of webbing lying on the deck, it was, in fact, a skillfully designed and constructed device that should 'fly' through the water, opening to its full width to most effectively catch fish. Nets of any size were worth tens of thousands of dollars and came with detailed blueprints mapping-out their construction. In order to repair anything with more than minor damage, it was important to be familiar with the design. I figured Cap'n Billy knew all about his nets. It was a mystery to me.

Under his direction, we grabbed the cold, wet web in our numbing hands and sewed it back together. Sometimes the task could be completed in a short time. On other occasions, it was so torn up that it took many hours or even days to put it back together again.

The Green Hope was new to the Alaskan waters and we spent that fall and winter learning the grounds. The Company, ISA, was looking for cod and Pollock to keep the plant working through the winter. The stocks were plentiful around Kodiak Island and in particular in the straits of water that separated Kodiak Island and the mainland, known as the Shelikof Strait, and it became our stomping grounds in the pursuit of codfish. While salmon got as much as \$2.25, a pound cod was only worth .25 to .30 a pound. Pollock was more like .03 a pound. Therefore only huge volumes of fish could make the effort worthwhile.

The Green Hope was an iceboat, that is, the fish had to be packed in ice down in the hold to preserve the quality during the trip. This limited us to short trips. Three days from the first fish on board to delivery was our window. It was 12 to 18 hours from town to the grounds in the Shelikof. Weather also played a big role. The straits were notorious for bad weather. Storms that blew 50 to 60 knots with swells pushing 30 feet high were common. In such conditions fishing was not only ineffective but dangerous. Three-day trips often turned into 7 to 10 days. In bad weather, we were forced to hide in a protected bay as the storm blew itself out.

Sometimes three or four boats waiting in the same bay would raft up sharing one anchor. Books, food and other creature comforts were freely passed back and forth. Of course, needed spare parts were never denied to even a bitter competitor. Once we were tied up to a factory ship with a Japanese crew. The most important foodstuff for the crew was rice. One of the other boats attempted to make a delivery of a pallet of bags of the critical commodity but somehow managed to drop the pallet into the bay. The bags broke and the bay slowly turned a spooky, milky white under the arc-lights of the boats. I bet the Japanese crew's faces turned a similar shade of white.

The most critical job on any fishing boat was to put the boat on the fish. This was the exclusive job of the captain. A lot of methods are used by skippers to find fish. Electronics, fish surveys, tips from other guys and experience play a big part. More important is luck, persistence, superstition and even magic. What he lacked in experience in the local waters, Cap'n Billy tried to make up in dogged Irish persistence. I never met a successful fishing captain that wasn't stubborn as the proverbial mule. Our skipper did not lack in the donkey department. It made for a hit or miss experience that season. Sometimes we returned to the dock plugged with fish but often we came up short.

The Green Hope was known as a whaleback design with the house forward. The back deck was the work space equipped with two huge hydraulic winches wrapped with $\frac{3}{4}$ inch steel cable. There were also two net reels one forward and one on the gantry located on the stern. There was also a ramp from the stern to the water line. When the skipper figured we were 'on' the fish, we deckhands swung into action. The cables were played out and attached to two huge 'doors' that, as it had been explained to me, functioned as wings allowing the net to 'fly' as it was towed through the water. The ends of the net were attached to the doors and were spread wide open by the movement of the doors through the water. At the head or top of the net were floats causing it to spread up. At the foot or the bottom was the roller gear and weights. The weights caused the foot to sink to the floor of the sea and the roller gear should allow the foot to roll over rocks and other obstructions. This operation was drawn out on a chalkboard enough times for us to know what was going on. As for me, I still wondered what was really going on down there. At the end of the net was the bag. It was constructed of webbing and was designed to hold everything that was scooped up.

After the gear was 'set,' the captain towed it until he figured the bag was full. Some tows were relatively short, 30-40 minutes. Others lasted for hours. I think Cap'n Billy could tell if the bag was filling up by the increased drag on the boat. Any time the tow lasted more than 20 minutes, we bone tired deck hands would be in our racks sleeping. We slept in our clothes and our rain gear with rubber boots already in the

pants legs like firemen's turnout-gear, stood ready to jump into. When the skip was ready to haul back, he had no patience for slow, sleepy reaction time.

As the winches labored to haul the bag up, we stood on deck and peered out off the stern anticipating the appearance of the sea's bounty but dreading the backbreaking work. The bag, if full of fish would, buoyed by numerous fish bladders, pop up about 30 yards off the stern. The more sudden the bag popped up, the more fish were in the bag. As the bag was hauled up the stern ramp, the doors were secured to the gantry and the net was wrapped onto the reel. Next, a hook attached to an overhead winch was secured to the bag; it was hauled up and dumped on the deck.

The steel deck was covered with wooden slats that allowed the sea water to run out the scuppers overboard. The deck was also divided into grid by wooden bin boards to keep a deck load from shifting in the constantly moving seas and sending us all to meet Davy Jones. We sorted the catch by species and size while discarding illegal and under sized fish.

On the deck were several hatches leading to the fish hold below. Before leaving town, the hold was filled with ice. Once the fish were pitched into the hold the ice-man, usually Melvin, would chuck them into a bin and shovel in a layer of ice. It was laborious back breaking work. Often it would take three hours to clear the deck. In the meantime, Cap'n Billy was making another tow. If we were 'on' the fish the work continued till the hold was full or we came to the end of the three-day limit. I always had mixed feelings when a full bag popped up.

Of course, there were plenty of times when the bag came up empty. Our target was cod but when you drag the bottom all kinds of stuff would come up in the bag. The best was crab. One time we pulled up a whole bag of tanner crab (opillio). When we dumped it on deck, we were knee deep in the pricey, delicious crustaceans. It hurt to toss it all overboard but it was highly illegal for us to have it. We did fill up a chest freezer as a reward for our hard work. We did keep any Pollack, rockfish, lingcod and various kinds of flat fish that we dragged up. Due to its indiscriminate nature of harvesting, bottom dragging nowadays is considered an ecological no-no.