

E100

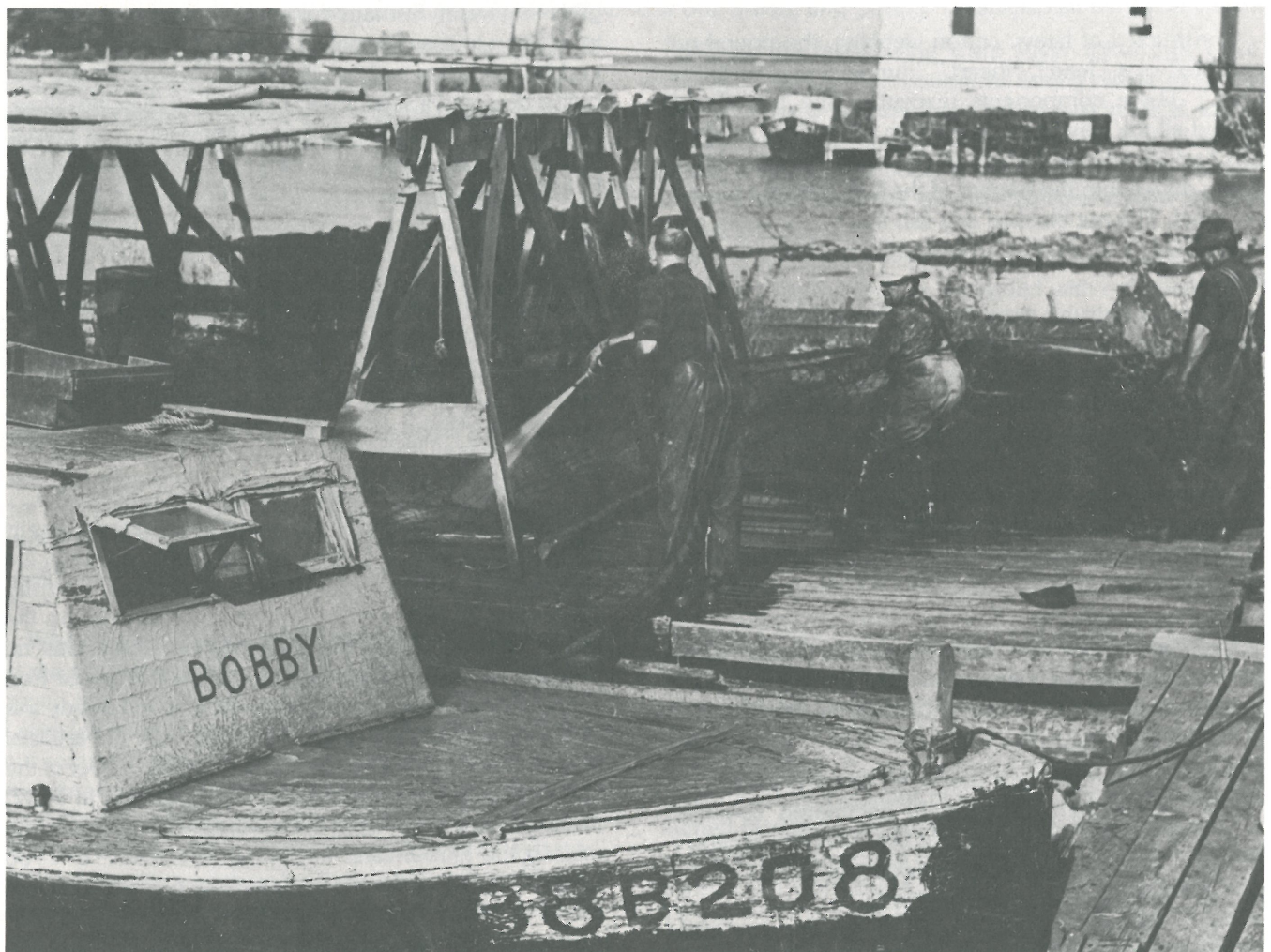
MICHIGAN HISTORY DIVISION  
Michigan Department of State  
Richard H. Austin  
Secretary of State

EDITORS  
Saralee R. Howard  
Timothy N. Walters  
  
Series 3, Number 1  
Michigan Industries

# GREAT LAKES INFORMANT

## COMMERCIAL FISHING IN MICHIGAN

By Saralee R. Howard and  
Alan Moore  
Michigan History Division



*Fishing in the St. Mary's River*

Surrounded by water on three sides and bounded by a shoreline of over three thousand miles, Michigan boasts a vital commercial fishing industry. From early settlement onward, fishing has aided the state's economic development. Frontier accounts refer to abundant supplies of fish on the Great Lakes (four of the five lakes border Michigan), which were a food staple for Indians, settlers, and traders.

From the time Michigan was settled to about 1830, only the Indians, the Hudson's Bay Company, the American Fur Company, and the North West Company fished commercially. Others simply angled fish for individual consumption. But about 1830—the beginning of two decades of untrammled settlement and extremely rapid population growth—commercial fishermen started to haul in catches from the Detroit, St. Clair, and St. Mary's rivers



as well as the Straits of Mackinac, Lake Superior, and Saginaw Bay.

The introduction of more effective equipment and techniques aided the emergence of commercial fishing. "Seines nets," "gill nets," and "pound-nets" enabled fishermen to draw in large amounts of fish. Commercial fishing statistics for Michigan in 1830—the first year such figures, even if incomplete, were available—show a yield of 1,920,000 pounds of fresh fish valued at \$40,000. Whitefish, lake trout, and yellow pikeperch made up most of that haul. As more sophisticated boats and more complex nets were utilized, the geographical distribution of commercial fishing widened, and the poundage jumped dramatically. One such discovery introduced from Scotland in 1836 was the "pound-net" which gave tremendous impetus to the commercial fishing industry and ultimately hastened its decline.

Constructed of heavy cotton webbing, the pound-net consisted of a "lead," "heart," "tunnel," and "crib" or "pot." These components (excepting the tunnel) extended all the way from the bottom of the lake to about two feet above the surface of the water. Poles or long stakes driven into the bottom of the lake held the pound-net erect. The net blocked any fish that swam along past the webbing and eventually pushed the catch into the net's tunnel.

Fishermen strung pound-nets along the shore and through various levels of water to cover a broad expanse of territory. Initially placed in Lake Ontario, their use rapidly spread to other locations—Lake Erie in 1850, Lake Huron in 1854, and Lake Michigan in 1856. By the Civil War every principal fishing center as far north as the Straits of Mackinac utilized these highly effective nets. "With the general use of pound-nets shortly after the Civil War, production rose at a rapid rate, and, it is said, the era of the general decline of Great Lakes fisheries was ushered in," states one expert.

Depletion of fish, the simple but decisive factor behind the leveling off of the commercial fishing industry output in the twentieth century, resulted because of the following:

1. Over fishing
2. Small mesh nets destroyed immature fish
3. Fishermen deliberately decimated so-called "rough" or undesirable fish such as sturgeon
4. Fish were caught in spawning grounds
5. Massive man-made pollution
6. "Natural" enemies such as sea lamprey killed fish

Although the drain of the fish stock may have begun in the 1860s, it was not immediately discernable. In 1873 Michigan commercially produced 28,000,000 pounds of fish—surprisingly close to the 1934 annual fresh water fish poundage of 28,648,600. In 1976 Lakes Erie, Huron, Michigan, and Superior yielded 13,881,000 pounds of fish for Michigan. This leveling off of the commercial fishing industry in the twentieth century occurred despite mechan-

ical apparatus for lifting fish, motor-powered boats and vessels rather than sail or row boats, and modern fishing equipment.

Commercial fishing has dominated the life and economy of numerous villages and cities such as Grand Marais on Lake Superior, St. Ignace on Lake Huron, and Leland on Lake Michigan, during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of these areas have diversified. Gone or altered are their picturesque harbors. But the fishing village of Leland remains intact and deserves a closer look for it is an example of a village "created" by the commercial fishing industry.

Leland, established in 1854, is one of the most scenic towns in Michigan. Situated in the confluence of the Carp River and Lake Michigan, it affords a pleasurable view of the North and South Manitou Islands across the clear, glistening water. Perhaps this scenic feature of the village, in addition to its water power, attracted Antoine Manseau and his son when in June of 1853 they settled there and built a dam and a sawmill at the mouth of the Carp River. The following year, others joined Manseau, and the village, which had such a small beginning, began to develop. In 1859 Messrs. Cordes and Thies bought out Mr. Manseau and built a dock, as well as a saw and gristmill. When Christopher F. Reynolds moved to Leland in 1861 to engage in the wood business, he too constructed a dock. Later, a third dock was built by Messrs. Barton and Pickard. By 1867 the village had grown to about two hundred inhabitants. Its principal business was the manufacturing of lumber, and although the dam went out in that year, business was stopped only temporarily, for it was quickly rebuilt.

A history of the Traverse Region notes that Leland's only flaw as a commercial and manufacturing town was its lack of a good, natural harbor. Indeed, in the early days the Indians had a village north of Leland and called it "Mishimi-go-bing" which is said to mean "the place where the Indian canoes ran up the river because there was no harbor." In 1870, when the Leland Lake Superior Iron Company began operations, they decided to remedy this situation, and shortly thereafter they built an artificial breakwater. As time went on and the size and power of the boats increased, a better harbor was necessary. In 1937, therefore, two stone-filled breakwaters were constructed, making the harbor safer and more substantial. In 1966 Leland Township, the State Waterways Commission and the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers designed and constructed an even larger harbor. Dedicated in July 1969, the 1¼ million dollar harbor allows space for thirty boats, 32 to 68 feet in length, to dock, and also provides a launching ramp for outboard boats and two harbor lights.

Although the lumber and iron smelting industries were important to Leland, a good harbor was also necessary for fishing, and industry which flourished alongside the other two and persisted after their decline to the present day. Actually, Leland has been a productive fishing port since settlement began. Commercial fishermen began using the





Early fishermen are Chief John Boucher, famous Sou guide, and Young, rapids pilot.

Carp River as early as 1870. The number of crews increased with the years. As sailboats and power boats required, the harbor was gradually improved. Although the harbor needed improvements, the fishing was usually excellent. Whitefish and lake trout were caught by the ton, as well as smaller fish such as chubs and menominee.

A state gazetteer for 1884 lists two fishermen, Charles Allard and Michael Daly, in Leland. Two years later the *Leelanau Enterprise and Tribune* reported that a certain A. Pahoral had shipped 6,500 pounds of fish during that particular week. In 1890 the paper announced that a fisherman had caught over 3,000 pounds of fish in one day, one-half of them whitefish. Also, a state gazetteer of that year listed fish along with hardwood lumber, railroad ties, and pig iron as products shipped from Leland. In 1914 the *Elk Rapids Progress* asserted: "Fishing is the most important industry in the little resort town." At its peak Leland boasted eight full-scale commercial fishing operations.

When the lake trout and whitefish of the area fell victim to the sea lamprey about 1945, Leland's fishing industry began to decline. Many commercial fishermen either left Leland or entered other businesses as the profits dropped; but some remained and continued fishing. At the present time three commercial fishing families work out of Leland. Two of these families have fished at Leland for over sixty-five years. There are at least thirty people in Leland who depend directly on fishing for their livelihood; and fishing adds much to the economy of the town as well as the state. Although the fishermen ship much of the fish to various parts of the state, thousands of pounds are smoked and sold in Leland, contributing even more to the town's economy.

While fishermen live and die, the section of Leland that developed in response to the fishing industry—Fishtown—still remains, the shanties that comprise it being relatively unchanged. Fishtown began around the turn of the century; some of the shanties are as old as sixty-five to seventy years, while others are forty to fifty years old.

Where the fast-flowing Carp River flows into Lake Michigan, this colorful commercial fishing village known as Fishtown has grown up. From a dam built in 1908, to the mouth of the river, the shoreline is lined on both sides by fishing shanties and boats forming a picturesque scene which makes Fishtown one of Michigan's most unique historical attractions.

The gray, weather-beaten shanties were constructed by the fishermen themselves. Designed with only their utilitarian purpose in mind, they housed the materials used to repair nets, and provided storage of fish boxes and nets. They are square or rectangular in shape, typical dimensions being 35' x 15' and 12' x 20'. Many of the shanties are roofed with weathered cedar shingles, and some are also shingled on their sides.

The structures standing behind the shanties on the south shore are in poor condition. They were originally ice houses, smoke houses, a net shed, a gas house and an oil shed. The buildings behind the north shore shanties were all ice houses. Constructed of the same materials as the shanties, the ice houses are, however, larger. A typical ice house in the district is two stories high with a ladder attached to the outside of the building on one side of the door and stairs leading to the second story on the other side. The smoke houses, which are used to process the catch, are small cement block structures having double arched facades, each arch encasing a wooden door.

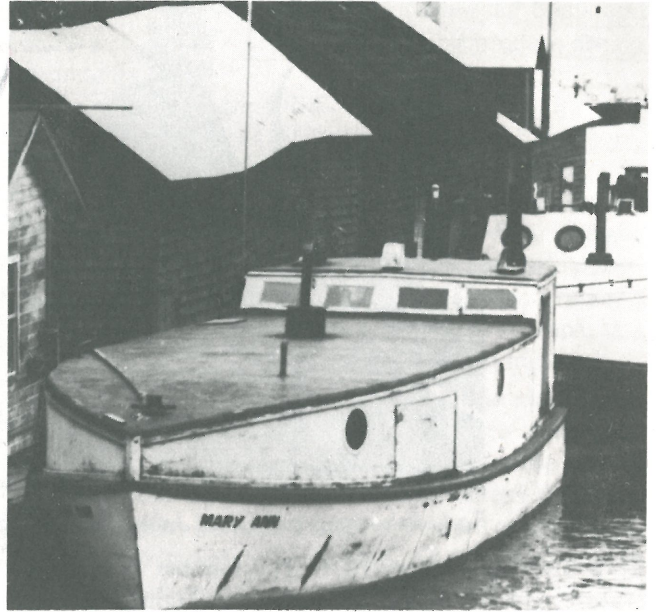
The shanties and the other buildings in Fishtown were constructed from the turn of the century and into the 1930s. All of them remain unmodernized; some are still used by the fishing industry, while others now serve as gift shops, art studios and the like. Two of the older shanties are retail fish stores today.

Color is added to the cluster of gray, weather-beaten structures by the green, white and reddish-brown roofs and the clumps of green grass interspersed along the dirt paths running between the buildings. Paraphernalia of the fishing industry such as oars and buoys as well as an occasional woodpile are leaning or stacked against the buildings. Also adding to the uniqueness of the district are





*Fishnets drying at Leland.*



*Fishing crafts docked at Leland.*

the net-drying racks on which fishing nets are hung to dry and then examined for tears and repacked for future use.

The commercial fishing boats docked at Fishtown enrich the historical milieu of the traditional fishing village. These boats are of the same design as those built at the beginning of the twentieth century, the main change being from wooden to steel hulls. For many years, a Mr. John Johnson built wooden boats of oak for the fishermen in Leland, retiring in 1940. Only in the last ten to fifteen years have steel hulls become popular among Great Lakes fishermen.

In addition to the fishing boats, there are two boats, the 52-foot *Manitou Isle* and the 48-foot *Island Clipper*, that make daily trips to the Manitou Islands, carrying both the mail and passengers. Yachts and outboard motor boats are also docked there.

The heart of Leland's commercial district also forms a part of the Leland historical district. The commercial buildings are quite simple, but are embellished with Gothic Revival detailing. These buildings remain unaltered, or, if altered, have been restored to their original condition. Prominent among them is the Harbor House. It is two stories high with an attic, and it the largest building in the district. Six over six windows are found on the facade as well as the sides. The window hoods are Italianate. Under the show windows are wood panels, and the doorways are recessed to give additional show space. The first story serves as Leland's general store, while the second story had been a meeting hall. It is the most architecturally distinctive building in Leland.

Another noteworthy building in the district is the Leelanau Enterprise Print Shop. When built in 1880 it was known as the Coffee House and functioned as an eating house for the Leland Iron Company workers. It is a two-story frame building, rectangular in plan, with double entrances in front.

Also included in the district is the Hendrickson Cottage of "Greycote," the oldest known building in Leland. A grey painted, one-and-one-half story frame cottage, it is situated on the site granted by the United States government in 1852 to Leland's first settler Antoine Manseau.

The site marker identifying the location of the Leland Lake Superior Iron Company blast furnaces near the harbor is also included within the district. The mute pile of slag on which the marker has been placed is all that remains of the industry that dominated Leland's economy from 1870 to 1884.

While the Great Lakes shoreline was at one time dotted with commercial fishing shanties and villages, "Fishtown" is one of the last remaining groups of buildings to survive the pressures of modernization.

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Detroit Free Press*, August 27, 1873, 1 and 5A.

*Grand Rapids Herald*, July 20, 1958, 3.

*Leelanau Enterprise*, January 24, 1946, 1.

*Leelanau Enterprise and Tribune*, May 17, 1973, 7.

Littell, Edmund M. *100 Years in Leelanau*. Leland: Leelanau County Prospectors Club, 1965, 37-42.

*Michigan State Gazetteer, 1881*. Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co., 1881, 764.

*State Journal* (Lansing), August 17, 1971, B-7.

*The Traverse Region*. Chicago: H. R. Page & Co., 1884, 242-45.

Van Oosten, John, "Commercial Fisheries of the Great Lakes." *Michigan History* 22 (1938): 107-45.