

CAPT. JAMES CLEARY, ALPENA, MICHIGAN.

INTERVIEWED BY

WM. WAKEHAM AND RICHARD RATHBUN,

AUGUST 26, 1894.

Experience

(Capt. Cleary is Master of the fishing tug "Maxwell A", belonging to the Alpena Fish Co., one of the largest fishing tugs on the Great Lakes. He is regarded as a good fisherman, and as reliable in his statements).

Fishes decrease

There has been a big decrease along this whole shore. I have fished about 23 or 24 years in all. I fished below here before I came here. I do not exactly think that the fish have been caught off for you take it in 1881 there was big trap (pound) net fishing in this bay and it dropped off all at once, and I always thought these mills had a good deal to do with it, the sawdust

f. g. w.

Cause

Saw mills

rafting

Pollution

and this raft towing is another thing. I have not fished out of here but about 6 or 7 seasons, and there were as many mills here then as now. The most of the mills throw their sawdust into the water. They would throw it in the river and the current would carry it out into the lake. There is a mill up at Middle Island and it is located right on the shore and everything went into the lake. And when the raft towing came on I think that hurt the fish more than anything else on this shore, for whenever we get a blow we get lots and lots of bark from the saw logs of the rafts. The sawdust will float for perhaps 2 weeks and then it will sink. We never notice it, as sawdust is something that will not come up in the nets. I presume this bay is pretty near full of sawdust on the bottom, but you will not notice it in gill nets, but the bark

bark

Sawdust

will catch in the nets and hold. I have had to throw nets away they were so full of bark. They have not towed any short logs to amount to anything within the last 10 years. Alger I guess has towed long logs longer than that, but where they only tow one or two rafts a week you do not mind it as it takes quite a while to get the lake full of bark.

The towing has been going on now for about 10 years. They have been towing logs to Bay City longer than they have here. They have only been bringing them in here about 2 years. They have been taking them down to Tawas for about 5 years. The grating of those logs together will peel every bit of bark off them. They are making a very big kick about it in Canada and I guess they are trying to make them peel their logs, and that is the only thing that will stop it. If

you should oblige them to feel their logs it would probably be cheaper for them to cut them on the other side than to raft them. I lifted nets last fall out on the big reef, which is about in the middle of the lake, and there was so much bark in them that we could lift them only by spreading them out so that the bark would mostly run out into the lake again, but the nets were entirely ruined. The nets will never fish as good again after they get bark in them.

I do not suppose there is 1-4 of the refuse there used to be goes into the water now. They have burners and burn their sawdust and the slabs and edgings are kept on shore now. Here in the fall we get bad weather so that there is a current that brings up slabs and edgings, and everything else in our gill nets way outside.

There is no doubt that the fish have been

*Fish
decrease*

F. G. J.

overfishing
Small fish
9.
P.

wf.
size

Increase mesh
Throwing out
small fish

caught off also. Of course we do not catch many small fish in our gill nets, but the trap nets do. There is no mistake but what it is just ruining the whitefish. You catch a fish weighing 1-2 lb. or less, and if that fish was left for a couple of years more he would probably weigh 6 or 8 lbs.

The only way to stop it would be to increase the size of the mesh or oblige them to throw out the small fish. They could throw the small fish out just as well as not if they would, because those little fish are not harmed a bit when they lift the nets. I do not know anything about trap nets, but I should think they could use a bigger mesh so that they would not catch the small fish. It would be safer to make an arrangement for them not to catch the small fish than to have them throw them away.

North ground

What we call the north ground here is a

shoal bay north of Thunder Bay Island. It used to be the greatest whitefish ground we had in the fall in the spawning time, and there have been years we could not catch any fish there at all. Last fall, for instance, there was no fishing there, but perhaps this fall there may be good fishing there. If we happen to get a few pretty hard blows just before spawning time comes on and clean that ground off of the bark and all the dirt, we will get fish there sure in the spawning time. You take some grounds fish will work on some years and some years they will not, but if they have a spawning ground they go to that ground every fall in the spawning time, but here they will not unless it is cleaned out.

One imp't for
 ● m.b.
 decrease

Cleaning dirt
 off ground

Fish return
 to spawning
 ground

●
 bark

You take it here in the spring and you will get that bark that is rotten and all slimy, and you might get your nets full of

it and when you set them back it seems to shoot right out of them, and it does not do half the harm it does in the summer. If the bark was prevented from going into the lake the lake would clear out that bark in 3 or 4 years. I know that it does not bother us one half as much in the spring as it does in the fall. It would take the sawdust quite a few years to decay, but I suppose it would in the course of time. But it would take a good many years for the sawdust to rot.

Sawdust

There is more towing in this lake than in any other of the Great Lakes. The pulp wood would not be as bad as pine. Pine is the principal wood they raft in Lake Huron. The bark of the pine is the worst bark you can get. It is kind of stringy.

bark

The trout hang more in deep water than the whitefish. You never, in any lake, get

*Trout
m.f.
depth
effects*

whitefish in deep water, and I think that is the reason they have suffered the worst, because that is where the dirt is stirred up, oftener and more in shallow water. You take it in 50 fathoms it takes an awful gale to move the bottom, while in 15 or 20 fathoms it does not take much of a gale to stir it up.

We begin gill netting about the first of March. I set the 5th of March this spring. We get out just as quick as we can. I have worked my way out here when the ice was 14 inches thick. In the spring we generally set in from 25 to 35 fathoms, and get trout, and a few whitefish, but not many. In 24 or 25 fathoms may get a few. We will fish in from 25 to 35 fathoms for probably 2 months in the spring, and then we go for the edges of the reefs--the big reef, and there are some reefs inside of that, and we fish

By Long
Season
Loc.
depth
trout
m.f.

9.

then in from 20 to 25 fathoms right along the edge of the reef. We fish those grounds until fall and then we go right up on the reef where they are spawning. Once in a while we get a few whitefish during the summer, but not to amount to anything. The sail boats get a few inside, but we do not fish the inside grounds. In the fall we go on the north ground and fish that, if there are any fish in there. If we set on the north ground and the fish come on the spawning ground, we would get nothing but whitefish, but where we fish what we call the big reef there is nothing but trout on it. I never saw any whitefish on that ground, but the inside ground is all whitefish, and when they come on to spawn you get nothing but whitefish.

The sail boats do not fish on our grounds as they cannot reach them. In the spring

(Spawning)

boats
 rock
 season

g. they generally go into deep water and get trout, but they do not fish the same grounds we do. They go over on the north ground into deep water, 35 or 40 fathoms, over the reef, and catch nothing but trout, but our grounds are too long runs for sail boats to reach. I fish right with Au Sable tugs when I go out.

Season (Aug)
For the last 5 years we have pulled out here generally from December 20 to 24. I think it was the 23rd last fall, the fall before it was the 23rd, and the fall before that the 24th.

back
clinkers
On the big reef we find the bark also. You see the Bay City towing goes right across that reef from French River to Bay City. We get quite a few steamer clinkers in our nets and they give us considerable trouble. The sail boats suffer worse than we do from the clinkers, as they are more

in the track of the steamers.

A 2 lb. trout will go through a gill net where it would not in a pound net.

I fish around pretty close to the Ducks in the spring sometimes. Our boats here never go over on the Canada side, however.

These charts of yours are not correct as to the depth of water. On the main part of the big reef, the shallowest part out in the middle of the lake, we have as shallow water as 9 fathoms; and there are places where the chart will give 20 fathoms and it is only 12 or 13 fathoms. There are depths of 12 to 14 fathoms over a much greater extent than is shown on the charts. In fact the big reef starts from Middle Island north of Thunder Bay and extends diagonally across the lake to off the region about Point Clark, and then extends southward into the southern part of the lake, being the shallow water

P. mesh
trout

q.
low
season

Big reef
described

included between the contour lines as shown on the chart of Lake Huron; the main patches of the shallow water are shown out in the middle of the lake east of Alcona. The big reef as generally designated is that shallow part in the middle of the lake. There is a place on the north ground where you can get 4 fathoms of water, and they do not give it on the chart. We do not fish Grayling Reef at all in the fall, as the trout do not seem to come on it then.

The north ground is a whitefish spawning ground.

The shallow water trout spawn around Thunder Bay Island, Middle Island and close to shore. They fish the whole shore north for trout. East of Presque Isle, and east of Fishers, and pretty much all along that shore where the conditions are suitable, they get trout. They do not work in much

W. V.
Spawning
loc.

North
Spawning
loc.

fishing
loc.
along shore

Trout

along the shore between North Point and False Presque Isle. Never heard tell of their fishing for shoal water trout down the shore. South of the big reef proper they do not seem to get any trout. I have fished there in the summer and got lots of trout, but in the fall I never fished there for them. The spawning points are rocky ground mostly.

fishing S. of Big reef.

Spawning ground.

9. loc. season

The gill nets in the spring are used at any place inside the big reef. We go clear down abreast of Au Sable, in depths of 35 fathoms. I have never struck 40 fathoms at any place inside that big reef, although it is marked on the chart in 2 or 3 places, but 37 is the most I have ever found. Spring gill net fishing inside the big reef is in depths of 35 to 36 fathoms, and I have fished as far south from here as Au Sable. West of the Duck Islands I have fished in 60 and 65 fathoms, and shoaler. I do not fish

up as far as Spectacle Reef. The tugs and small boats together fish the whole ground here.

In the gill nets with 4 5-8 inch mesh, I do not think our nets would gill anything (whitefish) smaller than 1 1-2 lb. fish dressed. Once in a while we get smaller fish in our nets that happen to get tangled or caught by the jaw, and we throw them over board. The trout would be about the same size that we take in the gill nets. Trout and whitefish are all the fish we get.

Do not get any catfish. Sometimes when off in the deep water we catch the long jaws, but they are pretty small for our nets. They seem to sell in place of whitefish, but we do not catch over 50 or 100 lbs. at a lift. We get the bloat out in deep water. You take it around the edges of the reefs where we are fishing now and we

g.
mesh
w/ff.
trout

Chief catch

No. cat
long jaws

bloat

very seldom get any of the bloats. In the spring just as quick as we go into deep water we get them. I think the long jaws and the bloat are two different fish altogether. Once in a great while we might get the blue fin. I have seen but very few of them here. They get them up in Lake Michigan. We never used to get them here until late years.

Lincoln got up some fine twine nets with small mesh. His twine is 2 cord. You take it for instance on this south ground we get a run of pretty small trout sometimes and his nets would fish better. You take it on this big reef where we catch trout during the spawning time and they are all big fish, weighing from 5 to 8 lbs. as a rule.

It would not be much trouble to take the eggs from the fish in the fall and fertilize

bluefin

*g.
Small mesh
for small trout
on S. Ground*

*On Big Reef
all big fish*

*Fishermen
returning spawn*

them, but we would have to have an extra man to do it. When we fish that big reef we get so much honeycomb rock that it keeps our men busy. If we have nice weather we do not get so much of that rock, but if we have a blow we do. By having an extra man we could save the spawn all right. Here there is no spawn wasted and never has been since I have been on the tug. The hatcheries saved every spawn there was to save, both whitefish and trout. I think it would help fishing very much and I do not see why any man who is interested in fishing could not do it, as he ought to be interested in it. If I was running a rig for myself or anyone else I would want to see the fishing keep up. But of the sail boat fishermen there are not many who would as they are simply looking out for their wages.

Big Reef
honey comb
bottom

Hatching here
saves all
spawn

interest in
keeping up
fishing

P.
meat
fish

I hardly think a 2 lb. fish would pass

through a 3 1-2 inch pound net mesh. You take that twine and draw it, and it is heavy twine anyhow, and it stays there just like a wire net, and that twine will not shape to the fish, as it is very stiff, while our twine will and the fish will get through a 3 1-2 gill net mesh that would not get through a 3 1-2 inch trap net mesh, and we can catch as small as 1 1-2 lb. fish dressed I caught a trout here last summer that weighed 55 lbs. dressed.

g.
mesh
fish

Siscowet

We do not get many siscowet here, but once in a while get one. Get more of them up in Lake Superior. They are an awful fat fish. I fish sometimes in 75 feet of water, and we get a kind of pot-gutted trout and poor quality. They are not so very fat but they are a very thick bellied and pot-gutted fish, and do not keep very well. Our best quality of trout are around the

Pot gutted
trout

Best quality
of trout

edges of these reefs. They are a nice round hard fish and keep good.

I would not fish in any deeper than 35 fathoms of water for trout. For whitefish would go into 25 feet, which is about as deep water as we can catch whitefish in in this country.

*Trout
w/ depth.*

Of little trout perhaps we will only get half a dozen at a lift, and we always drop them right overboard, as, if we brought them ashore, we could not sell them.

*Trout
Small 9.
throw over*

We get more trout during November than any other one month. It is about the best month in the season for trout with gill nets, but we get good fishing in March and April also. A close season in November would be a hardship and it would kill this big reef ground certain. But if it increased the quantity of fish so that we could catch a larger amount at other times of the year

*Trout
Season*

*Close
Season*

it would make up for it. As far as I am concerned, I would not care if they did not fish in November, for fishing that big reef in the fall is a dread to most of the fishermen. It certainly would help the fishing to have a close season in November. The hatchery would have to have somebody fish these spawning grounds then to supply them. There has been only 2 tugs fishing out of here until Lincoln started in and the hatchery has handled all the spawn they could get from those two tugs. You cannot put the trout back in the water after you strip him as he would not live as a rule, and whitefish are worse still. If you could take the trout in pound nets and take them out and strip them they would probably be in as good condition as they ever were.

Nov. fishing on Big Reef scarce

Obtaining eggs for hatchery

g. tugs.

trout not die after stripping

In November here we get the most of our

trout eggs. You would have to make your

trout spawning season close season

close season for trout all through October and November for the different localities around here. You can catch these fish in July and August, and that spawn has not come to maturity, and it is lost, but if you catch that fish in the fall and save the spawn you are not wasting as many fish as you are when catching them in the summer. Of course we get lots of fish that the spawn is not fit to save, but it is lost just the same if you catch them in July or August, only you do not get quite as many of them. Mr. Alpern will do anything he can to help the hatcheries.

Pound net fishing here in the bay is played out. The ground at Miller's Point is probably as good as it was 10 years ago, or ever was. It is sort of a shoal spot and the action of the water keeps it clean, and it is an out of the way place and no

P.
 Frank's Bay
 decline

mills around it.

Current

There must be a downward current in this lake, when we get a wind from the northwest we get a current from the northwest after it blows a little while, and we will often set nets to the northward and get a slack set of the nets, but setting to the southward, I do not care if it is blowing a gale of wind, you will hardly ever get a slack set of the nets and I do not know as I ever got a slack set to the southward. A south-east wind will not make current enough but what you can set against it. The current will go down 20 fathoms at least. In great depths of water, of course, it would be less felt than in shallow water, and take it 50 or 60 fathoms I do not think they get any current at all. I do not consider throwing bottles out is a fair test, because the wind will affect it, and the current is not the

same at the surface as it is down 2 or 3
feet.

