

# Vinalhaven Historical Society

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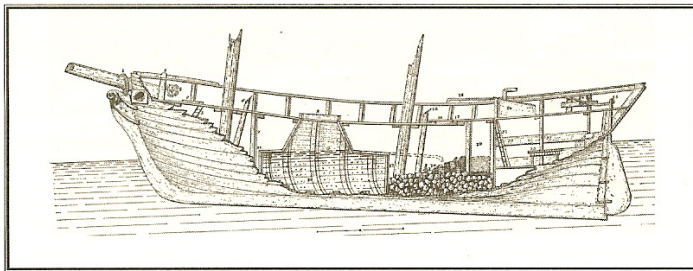
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## Annual Newsletter 2010

### Vinalhaven's Role in the History of Lobstering



While it might be difficult for some seafood gourmards to comprehend, lobsters, while plentiful during the 1600-1700s, were once considered pauper's food. There are stories of indentured servants insisting a clause be added to their contracts that lobster not be fed to them more than twice a week.

Fortunately, its delicate taste caught on, and the lobster industry as we know it today, began. During the late 1700s through the early 1900s, lobster smacks (see illustration) purchased the live crustaceans directly from the fishermen, and later from lobster dealers. Captain Elisha Oakes, a smackman, purchased 35,000 lobsters from five or six fishermen between March and July, 1841. By the late 1840s, Oakes was collecting between 18,000 and 22,500 lobsters per fisherman during the same time period!

Originally lobsters were gathered by hand along the shoreline, but by the mid-1800s traps were being used. Among the first traps were hoop nets, which were later replaced by lath (wooden) traps. In the 1930s, wooden parlor traps were used. However, wooden traps needed to be repaired frequently, costing the men much time and money. Ultimately wire parlor traps were introduced (early 1970s) enabling lobstermen to fish with less time lost on repair.

It might be interesting to note here the various types of bait used throughout the years. Halibut, cod and hake heads were used in the early years, followed by sculpins, flounders and small herring. In more recent years bait has ranged from bream, herring, mackerel, and alewives, to artificially made bait. Today new regulations to protect the herring stock make it more difficult to obtain fresh herring; fishermen must now rely on other kinds of bait, such as hard bait. Hard bait is simply fish heads and their filleted skeletal remains, also known as racks.

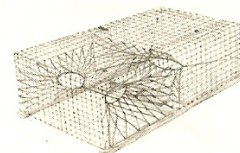
### Types of Lobster Traps Used



Hoop Net



Wooden Lath Trap with Parlor Door

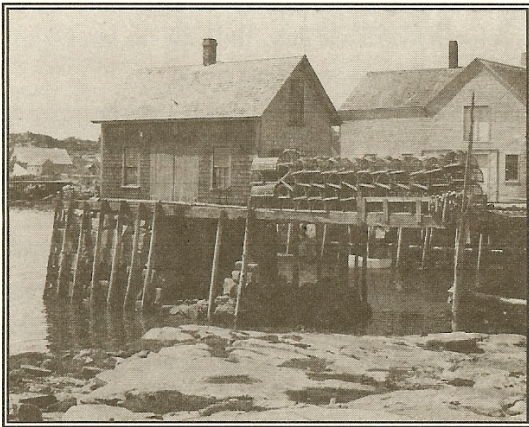


Wire Parlor Trap

By the mid-nineteenth century, lobster canneries were cropping up all along the Maine coast. Vinalhaven was no exception. A large factory was built in 1847 on West Main Street on the site of the former Claw Island Seafood building. The business was run for several years by various owners. In 1866 another factory was built on the Reach, again operating throughout its twenty-one year span by at least three owners. A large canning factory was erected on Hurricane Island in the mid-1880s and women from Vinalhaven were ferried over each day to can mackerel, cod, clams, halibut and lobsters, much to the delight of the hundreds of single men employed there in the granite industry. This business lasted until 1892 when newly enacted lobster laws more carefully regulated the size of a "legal" lobster. Previously there had been no limit on the size of a lobster being caught – selling the smaller lobsters was depleting the population.

The first lobster pound, a long term storage facility, was built in Vinalhaven in 1875. In 1884 Messrs. Johnson and Young of Boston constructed a huge lobster pound at the Basin in which up to 150,000 pounds of lobsters could be kept. The lobsters were taken out during the winter months and shipped to Boston. At that time a barrel containing 140 pounds of lobsters sold for \$5 to \$14. In today's market 140 pounds of lobsters would fetch between \$455 and \$560!

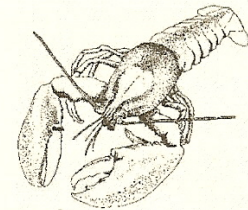
The first lobster boats were powered by oar or sail. The dory, a high-sided, flat-bottomed rowboat was inexpensive to build or buy because of its simple lines. The peapod, a double-ended and round-sided boat, enabled the lobsterman to row from either direction, usually in a standing position and facing forward. Other types of boats were used as well. In 1910 gasoline engines began to replace many of the sailboats and rowboats and became the impetus for changes in the design of future boats.



Lobstermen could now venture farther and haul for lobsters more days each year. Gear no longer had to be hauled by hand; power from the gas engine could be diverted to a pot hauler.

With the advent of fiberglass, some would say lobster boats became easier and less expensive to build. In addition, they are more durable and much easier to maintain. Today's powerful engines increase speed and distance. Advanced technology has changed the way lobstermen do business. No longer solely dependent on a compass and markings, the twenty-first century mariner uses a depth finder, GPS system, chart plotter, VHF radio or cell phone and many other instruments to make navigation and locating gear and good ocean bottom easier, faster and safer.

Conservation methods, such as trap limits, measure and vent increases, biodegradable clips and the keeping of log books have all been implemented to help maintain the lobster population and hopefully insure there will be a lobster industry for decades to come. However, today the future of the lobster industry remains uncertain due to increasing costs for gear, fuel and bait, coupled with the lower per-pound price for lobsters.



*Homarus Americanus*

## First Lobster Union Formed in Vinalhaven

A.W. Roberts, an early lobster fisherman from Vinalhaven, provides a glimpse of some of the problems that faced those who harvested lobsters for a living. At the turn of the century, he estimated that a fleet of about 7,000 sloops were employed in lobster fishing along the coast, but most were confined to summer fishing, since winter fishing was notoriously more challenging and hazardous.

The cost of a sloop ranged in price from \$150 to \$800. Peapods, for those who could not afford a sloop, cost about \$50. More money was needed to replace or repair traps. Each trap cost a dollar and most lobstermen fished one hundred traps. Most felt the expenditures were a real hardship, since many earned only one hundred dollars a year and the most successful only six to seven hundred dollars. As harvestable lobsters grew scarcer each year, it became necessary to go into deeper waters. More rope added to expense for gear.

During this period, there was a fairly constant demand for lobsters and lobster buyers competed for the catch. The lobstermen sold to the "highest bidder." This was soon altered when lobster buyers or "trusts" sought to control the price they paid for the shellfish. Challenged by the declining lobster population, the increased expense of engaging in fishing, and buyers "fixing" the price, the lobster fishermen of Vinalhaven formed the first independent lobster union in February 1905. With the help of Stuart Reid, general organizer of the American Federation of Labor, the Lobster Fishermen's International Protective Association was established. AF of L's president, Samuel Gompers (pictured), visited Vinalhaven during the summer of 1905, and was well-received. Here he enjoyed the hospitality of the locals, who greeted him with cheers and renditions of patriotic songs played by the band.



An evening speech at the Memorial Hall motivated the local union to continue their efforts, and on January 22, 1907, a charter was issued to them as an affiliated international union.

*From Labor's Heritage 2 (1989) Dr. Charles Scontras article. Dr. Charles Scontras is affiliated with the University of Maine's Bureau of Labor Education with Resources from the George Meany Archives. Picture of Samuel Gompers from www.wikipedia.com*

## Vinalhaven Lobstermen's Co-Operative, 1938

In July 1938, Birger Magnuson of Vinalhaven wrote to the Co-operative League of the United States of America, inquiring about the possibility of sending an organizer to the island to help form a cooperative among fishermen. The letter was turned over to Edward Holmes, who knew a great deal about managing co-ops, and he in turn, visited the island. Several informal evening meetings prompted discussions about the decline of the lobster industry, the fall of lobster prices and the lobstermen's dependence on local buyers. A formal meeting was scheduled and the group agreed to form a lobster fishermen's cooperative buying club. Marine supplies would be directly ordered from wholesalers, and distributed to members at cost, plus a small charge to cover shipping expenses. Shortly after, the group decided to incorporate for marketing as well as buying. Holmes did all he could do to get the new group "up and going". *From Labor's Heritage 2 (1989) Edward M. Holmes article.*

## Maine Lobstermen's Association

Of particular interest to the lobstering industry in Vinalhaven is its part in organizing the Maine Lobster Association. The brainchild of Leslie B. Dyer, Sr., who felt that dealers were manipulating prices, the Maine Lobstermen's Association was founded in 1954, with Dyer being its first president. Its objectives were to increase profitability, improve marketing techniques and lobby for favorable fishing legislation. Today there are 1200 members from Kittery to Eastport. The MLA advocates for the preservation of our communities and way of life.

## Year in Review

Last year's summer exhibit, *Ernest "Brud" Clayter: His Life and Work* drew attention to his short-lived career as one of Vinalhaven's most popular and beloved artists. The display consisted of many of Brud's paintings of local scenes and a brief biography of his life. Special thanks to those who loaned pieces of work and to his family who recounted so many stories and otherwise unknown details of his life. This show segued into a long term project, headed by Jeannette Lasansky, who is collecting brief biographies and copies of Vinalhaven/Vinalhaven connected artist's work. Already four notebooks have been filled. If you or someone you know is an artist with Vinalhaven connections, we welcome your submissions and will add them to our growing collection.

Our summer programs began with the annual July 4<sup>th</sup> Treasure Hunt for which we supply clues. Last year a total of eight teams participated, with the newest joining team winning first place. In collaboration with the Vinalhaven Land Trust, three August programs were presented. The first, "*Keeper's House*", led by Jim Boone, featured a *Walk and Talk* about the history of Heron Neck Lighthouse on Green's Island. Owner, Dr. Murphy, talked about his role in the restoration of the keeper's house after the 1989 fire. This program was a huge success, with many participants being boated to and from the site. Ken Reiss presented an extremely well-researched and fascinating program about Vinalhaven's granite paving industry, "*Cinderella Stone or How the Humble Paving Stone Saved the Vinalhaven Granite Industry*", followed the next morning by a *Walk and Talk* at East Boston Quarry. In August we participated in the first Vinalhaven Arts Night, sponsored by the Partners in Island Education. Seasonal resident, Cec Girz, produced and presented *Island Doctor: Ode to Ralph Earle*, a program commemorating his life and work. DVDs of this informative and personal account are available at the museum.

Over 1700 visitors signed our guestbook coming from 38 states, three Canadian Provinces and 22 countries, including Kenya, Slovenia, United Arab Emirates and China. Several school groups came to the museum to do research on various topics including fishing and farming of the past, sports, and the granite industry. Prior to the release of Chris Van Dusen's children's book, *The Circus Ship*, Society president Bill Chilles visited the school library and presented a program about the burning of the Royal Tar, a steamship bound for Portland from St. John, N.B., in 1836. Van Dusen's children's book is based loosely on this historical event. Teachers from across the United States visited as part of an island living curriculum in mid-summer. A young woman, working toward her doctorate degree, spent several days researching the topic of her thesis here. We were pleased to be asked to host a Libby family reunion in honor of Jane Libby King and her husband, Bruce's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We also co-hosted a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration for Kevin Hopkins at The Sand Bar. Several Libby family members gave donations in Bruce and Jane's honor and Kevin kindly donated all birthday money to the Vinalhaven Historical Society and the Jerry Michael Scholarship.

## Gifts to the Museum

We are always pleased when items from Vinalhaven's past come to the museum. Some are small: old post cards, candy dishes, photographs and old bottles; some command a larger display area-an original Vinalhaven Chiefs uniform, (belonging to Ducky Haskell), a wooden fish wagon from Lorraine and Ronnie Walker, the Port O' Call sign from Bob Candage, a Frank Winslow painting and a Knight's of Pythias storage cabinet given by Roger Young, two grocery store ledgers possibly from Shag Ingerson's store, donated by Tim and Cynthia Dyer, an old wooden coal shovel from Wayne Cooper, a wonderful hand-drawn warden air raid chart from WWII donated by Peter and Lida Gordon, an old album of Vinalhaven post cards donated by Karen Herzberg for her mother-in-law, June Richards, two top hats from the Huntress Estate given by Marion Young, a sketch of Brud Clayter by Raphael Soyer, given to the museum by Mary Soyer and family, and many other unique island treasures. Thanks to all who choose to leave valued mementos and other artifacts in safekeeping at the museum.

## Remember When

### A Collection of Oral Histories

Over the past few years we have been gathering oral histories from islanders, both year-round and seasonal. Available early this summer will be the culmination of these stories in a book titled, *Remember When - A Collection of Oral Histories*. The information we have collected is invaluable in preserving local history. This is an on-going project and it is our hope to publish a second book in the near future. In this newsletter we have included a few excerpts from Athene Anthony's Vinalhaven *Reminiscences*, oral histories which were published in 1978. Each of the following selections reveals a brief look at the lobstering industry in Vinalhaven many years ago.

"We went lobstering when we were twelve or fourteen years old and sold the lobsters at a market in North Haven. We used to go lobstering in a dory. It took two of us to get a pot over the side. One summer we got a thousand flounders; got a cent apiece for them. We got a ten dollar bill, we thought we were rich." *Hollis Burgess*

"When I was a child, lobsters were four cents a pound. Later on, I sold them for ten cents a pound, lots of times. I started lobstering when I was eight years old. I went to the University of Maine for two years and then came home and went fishing." *Roy Ames*

"I remember selling lobsters for 10 cents a pound lots of times. Usually we'd keep the lobsters until July, when we'd get a pretty good price. We'd put them in those big lobster cars, feed them, and by July we'd be getting 50 cents a pound. I had a lobster car over where the James family lives, - in a little pond that doesn't drain out. There's good circulation of water there-water comes in on flood tide and goes out on ebb." *Clyde Poole*

"When I worked for Ern Ames, I caught herring. I went home one day and Father said, "There's lots of herring in Lairy's Island harbor." We went out about sundown and the harbor was full of herring. Ern said, "We'll go get the seine and run it out for a lead and drive them in." We drove in 3,000 bushel. Hilton Ames and I had to tow them all in dories to the cold storage. We had nine dories and took about 5 bushels in each dory. We started about 12 o'clock at night and got through at two the next afternoon." *Ted MacDonald*

Listening to, but more importantly, writing down oral histories is one of the single most important obligations we have to our loved ones. We need to ensure that future generations will be able to understand what life was like many years ago. Anyone, at any age, can (and should!) ask questions. When and where were you born? What games did you play? Who were your friends and where are they now? What did your father do for a living? How was your life different from mine?

Inside this book you will find many such questions along with answers. Several of the interviews were conducted by Vinalhaven's 3rd, 4th and 5th graders as part of a living history project during the school year 2004 - 2005; all others are by Susan Radley or Jeannette Lasansky. It is our hope that you will want to find out more about your own family's past, ask questions and keep a written account of their personal history for your family to enjoy for many years.

If you are interested in purchasing a copy of the book, *Remember When... A Collection of Oral Histories*, please call us at 207-863-4410 or email us at [vhissoc@myfairpoint.net](mailto:vhissoc@myfairpoint.net). We will get in touch with you as soon as the books arrive and will let you know the cost, plus postage, should you want it sent to you.

## Vinalhaven Historical Society's Mission Statement and Annual Appeal

*"The purpose of our organization is to collect, identify, preserve, exhibit, interpret and make available for education and research, information and artifacts which illuminate the history of Vinalhaven and its families from its beginning to the present."*

This year as we prepare for another season, we are facing major maintenance issues with our building. We are in need of exterior painting, new roofing and replacement of deteriorating boards and sills. A long time member and friend of the society has offered to match up to \$10,000 toward the cost of painting two sides of our building. We need your help to make this happen; your assistance will also ensure that our basic operational costs are met. This year we are striving to increase our membership list. Please visit, see what we are about, and become a part of this worthwhile organization. Your membership is important to us and will help us preserve Vinalhaven's history for you and your children for many years to come.

### 2010 Summer Schedule

June 15-Sept.18  
Tuesday-Saturday Noon to 5 p.m.  
July and August - Open Daily  
Other Times by Appointment

### Exhibit: Vinalhaven's Role in the History of Lobstering

Our summer exhibit will show examples of lobster gear and items associated with the industry and will explain how each was used. Also included will be a brief history of lobstering, personal stories and several images. We invite you, your family and friends to visit the museum to get a first-hand look at this special exhibit.

This season we are planning several summer programs. Among them are the release of our **Oral History book**, *Remember When*, sometime in June, the annual **4<sup>th</sup> of July Treasure Hunt** and our co-sponsored Walk and Talk (with the Vinalhaven Land Trust), **Swimming Pool Hill** led by Jim Boone July 17<sup>th</sup>. Other programs are planned, but dates are tentative at this point. Be sure to watch the WIND for further details.

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