

FISHERMEN
in a Mackinaw boat
raising gill nets



Commercial Fishing on LAKE SUPERIOR *in the 1890s*

JUNE DRENNING HOLMQUIST

THE SIZE AND QUALITY of Lake Superior's fish and the energy and hardihood of its fishermen have been the subject of comment for more than a century. Because of the nature of the work, however, few

MRS. HOLMQUIST is the assistant editor of this magazine. The pictures she describes were found last fall in Washington by Miss Heilbron, the editor of the quarterly, while searching for pictorial material on the Minnesota area. From an extensive group of Lake Superior fishing views in the Still Pictures section of the Audio-Visual Records branch of the National Archives, she selected the items here reproduced and other pertinent pictures. Photographic copies were obtained for the society's collection through the generosity of its president, Mr. Carl W. Jones.

pictorial records of the commercial fishermen who operated on the treacherous waters of Lake Superior exist in the files of organizations concerned with the preservation of characteristic aspects of Minnesota life. Thus the photographs reproduced in the next few pages are of special interest.

The pictures here reproduced are in the collections of the National Archives, which received them with records of the United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries. They were taken by field agents of the commission's division of statistics and methods during an investigation of Great Lakes fisheries conducted in 1891 and 1892. The name of the photographer is not given, but the published report of the commissioner for 1892 lists W. A. Wilcox and T. M. Cogs-

well as the commission's agents for the Lake Superior region.¹

Since the 1890s, when these photographs were taken, many features of commercial fishing on Lake Superior have changed. Fishermen along the North Shore, for example, no longer depend upon small steamers like those pictured to transport their catches to market. This is now done in trucks which make regular trips along the smooth, paved highway that skirts the shore. Gill net fishing, like that here pictured, is still the leading method of securing fish from the lake. Time, however, has modified the details. Restrictions now govern the size of the mesh that fishermen may employ, and such conservation measures as closed seasons and artificial propagation loom large in attempts to ensure a continuing supply of fish. Sailing vessels and Mackinaw boats are things of the past, and motors now furnish the power for large and small fishing craft alike. Nets, once painstakingly made by hand of cotton, are now woven of nylon by machine.

THE KIND and the amount of fish taken from the lake over the years has varied greatly. Some species, like the bluefin, soon became extinct and disappeared from the commercial lists. Others, principally "rough" fish unmarketable earlier, now make up a significant portion of the annual catch.

Until about 1890 whitefish were the mainstay of the Lake Superior commercial fisherman, but in the three decades that followed they became virtually extinct in many areas. Now, with the help of artificial propagation and restrictive fishing methods, whitefish can again be marketed commercially in appreciable quantities.

As whitefish declined in abundance, lake trout assumed first place in the Lake Superior catch. About 1900, however, with an increased demand for smoked fish, herring began to grow in favor, and by 1908 this fish had topped the poundage of trout obtained from Superior's waters. Since that time, herring has retained its dominant po-

sition. In 1951, for example, it accounted for slightly more than two-thirds of the total commercial catch from the largest of the Great Lakes.²

Herring and trout are the principal fish taken along Minnesota's North Shore, usually in a proportion of more than five to one in favor of herring. Ordinarily, in the spring trout fishermen range twenty-five miles or more out into the lake, while in the fall trout may be taken near shore,

¹ "The Fisheries of the Great Lakes," in United States Commissioner of Fish and Fisheries, *Reports*, 1892, p. 361 (53 Congress, 2 session, *House Miscellaneous Documents*, no. 209 - serial 3264). The story of the "Commercial Fisheries of the Michigan Waters of Lake Superior" is presented by Lynn H. Halverson in *Michigan History* for March, 1955. The issue appeared as the present number of this magazine was sent to the printer.

² Walter Koelz, "Fishing Industry of the Great Lakes" in Commissioner of Fisheries, *Reports*, 1925, p. 572 (Washington, 1926); A. W. Anderson and C. E. Peterson, *Fishery Statistics of the United States*, 1951, p. 246 (United States Fish and Wildlife Service, *Statistical Digest* No. 30 - Washington, 1954).



where they go for spawning. Herring, on the other hand, may be found near shore in the spring and again in the fall.³

Seines were the earliest type of equipment employed on the lake, but as fish became less abundant, more efficient pound, gill, and fyke nets were used. Seines and pound nets, which were introduced early along the southern shore, were never popular on the rocky northern borders of the lake, where gill nets have traditionally been the favored fishing gear. Until early in the 1890s, gill nets had to be lifted by hand, sometimes with the aid of a roller, but automatic lifters of various types have since become available. Hook fishing, which involves the baiting and setting of as many as

³ William E. Scott, "Fishing in Lake Superior," in the *Minnesota Conservationist*, June, 1936, p. 10, 11, 21.

⁴ Koelz, "Fishing Industry," 556, 571.

⁵ A detailed account of this early fishing venture may be found in Grace Lee Nute, "The American Fur Company's Fishing Enterprise on Lake Superior," in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 12:483-503 (March, 1926).

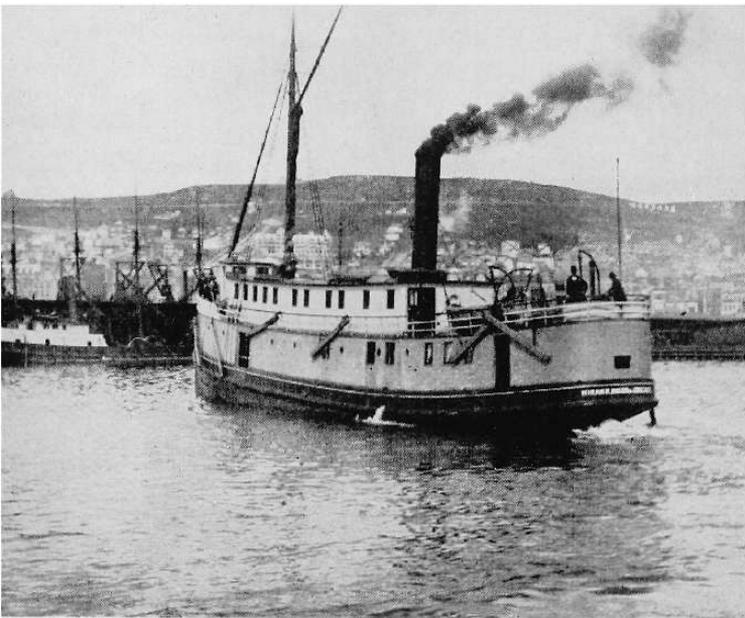
several thousand hooks on a heavy line, is also used to a limited extent along the North Shore, principally for lake trout.⁴

MORE THAN a century has passed since the first commercial fishing enterprise began on Lake Superior. Although the Indian fisheries at Sault Ste. Marie early received attention from explorers and travelers who passed that way, the earliest known commercial fishery of any size dates from 1834, when Ramsay Crooks, head of the American Fur Company, revealed plans to add "to the usual returns of our trade, a new and important item"—Lake Superior fish. Subsequent years saw the company establish fishing stations around the lake, with a number on Minnesota's North Shore. The organization pursued its efforts with varying success until 1841, when fishing as a profit-making part of the company's trade was discontinued.⁵

Apparently large-scale fishing was not again attempted on Lake Superior until about 1860, when a commercial operation was begun at Whitefish Point on the extreme southeastern bay of the lake. By the end of that decade other fishing stations dotted the southern shore of the lake westward to Duluth, and commercial fishing had also been opened up in Canadian waters.



OFFICES of the Booth Packing Company in Duluth about 1892. A commercial fishing concern, with headquarters in Chicago at this time, the Booth company and its boats helped write a significant chapter in the history of Minnesota's North Shore. Its Duluth office was located on Lake Avenue in the 1890s, and the company specialized in "Whole Fish, Oysters, & Cold Storage." As the sign on its building indicates, passengers could obtain tickets there for the "Hiram R. Dixon," a mail steamer operated by the company.



THE "HIRAM R. DIXON" leaving Duluth on one of its regular trips to Port Arthur. The steamer played an important role in the life of the North Shore near the turn of the century, for it made two round trips a week, depositing mail and supplies and collecting fish. Unlike most other fishing steamers, the "Dixon" was equipped to carry passengers. Until about 1883, when the Booth company began to operate boats like the "Dixon," settlers along the North Shore had no regular water communication with Duluth. Many references to the ships on this run have been left by the tourists, settlers, and sport fishermen who traveled on them.

At the end of the 1870s, fishing was still an unimportant activity on Minnesota's North Shore. In 1879 a government survey revealed that thirty-seven men engaged in fishing in the Duluth vicinity had secured about 280,000 pounds of whitefish, trout, and herring, and about 16,000 pounds of pike. By 1890, about the time these pictures were made, government investigators found a total of fifty-one men engaged in the fisheries there. As time passed, however, many of the Norwegians who settled along the North Shore engaged in fishing. In 1917, the first year for which the state of Minnesota collected statistics, 273 commercial fishermen applied for licenses, and one writer made the comment that "there is almost one fisherman for every half mile of shore all the way from Duluth to Grand Portage."⁶

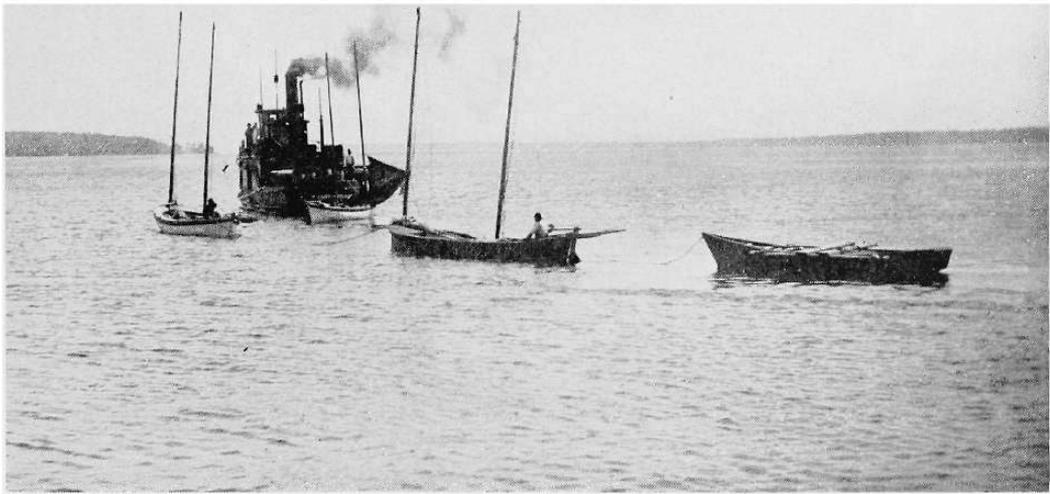
With the development in recent years of the resort and taconite industries along the North Shore, fishing as a source of income has become somewhat less important. It does, however, continue to provide at least part-time employment for a sizeable number of people there and to swell the figures of the Lake Superior catch. Of a total of more than sixteen and a half million pounds of fish se-

cured in these waters in 1951, the latest year for which national statistics are available, Minnesota fishermen accounted for one-eighth of the catch, or almost two and a half million pounds.⁷

These fish were secured and marketed with equipment and methods vastly different from those depicted in the photographs that follow. Nevertheless, a visitor to the docks and coves of today's Lake Superior fishermen would find unchanged certain basic characteristics of commercial fishing on this vast inland sea. The search for fish in the clear waters of the lake is frequently an uncomfortable, unprofitable, solitary, and dangerous business. Lake Superior, with its fog, its uncertain winds, its swells, and its frigidly cold waters, remains an unpredictable mistress.

⁶G. Brown Goode, *et al.*, *The Fishery Industries of the United States*, section 2, p. 634-635; section 5, p. 755-769 (47 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Miscellaneous Documents*, no. 124 - serials 1999, 2001); Commissioner of Fish and Fisheries, *Reports*, 1892, p. 377 (serial 3264); "Herring Fishing Predominates," in *Fins, Feathers, and Furs*, 11 (March, 1918).

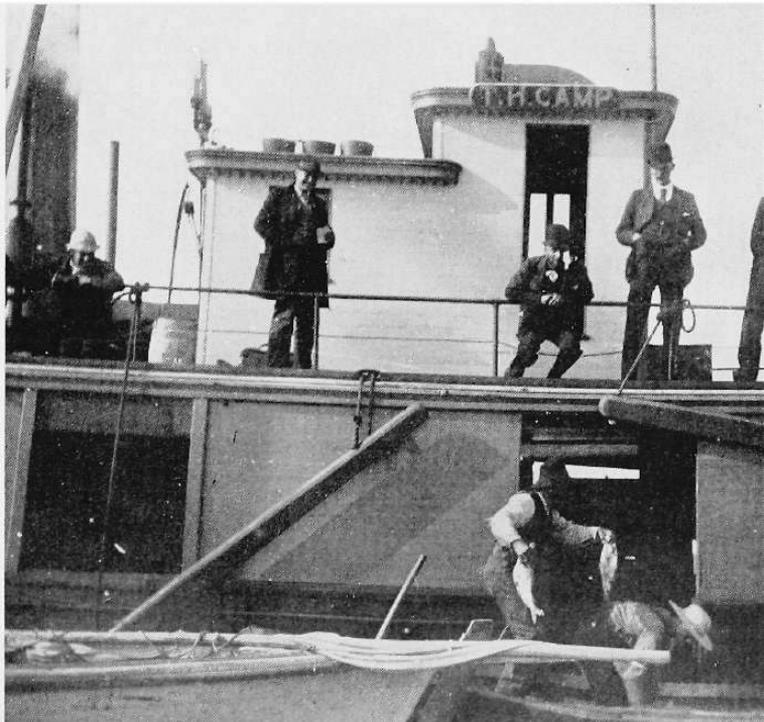
⁷Anderson and Peterson, *Fishery Statistics*, 1951, p. 265.



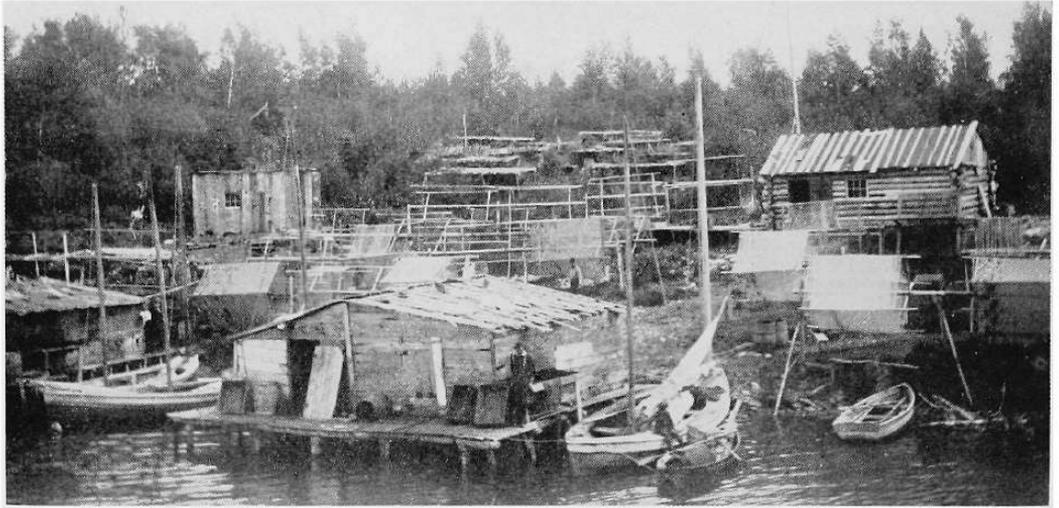
THE "T. H. CAMP," owned by the Booth company, leaving Bayfield, Wisconsin, with two Mackinaw boats and a dory in tow. The flat-bottomed Mackinaws, with pointed bows and sterns, are said to have been used longer, more extensively, and with less loss of life on the upper lakes than any other type of boat. They are believed to have been adapted from the North canoe of the fur trade.

Steamers are said to have been introduced into the fisheries business on Lake Superior about 1871. Motor boats are thought to have been used first in 1899 by a Marquette, Michigan, fishing firm that fitted a sailboat with a twelve horsepower naphtha motor. Men fishing out of Bayfield in the 1890s customarily ranged among the Apostle Islands and eastward along the shore for at least a hundred miles.

THE "T. H. CAMP," taking on whitefish and trout from a small fishing craft in the Apostle Islands. Steamers like the "Camp" picked up fresh fish along the lake and transported them to warehouses, where they were salted or iced for shipment. Before 1900 most of these fish were shipped fresh, but some were salted and a few were smoked. The Twin Cities furnished the principal market for Lake Superior fish, although some went also to Chicago and other not-too-distant cities.



Summer 1955

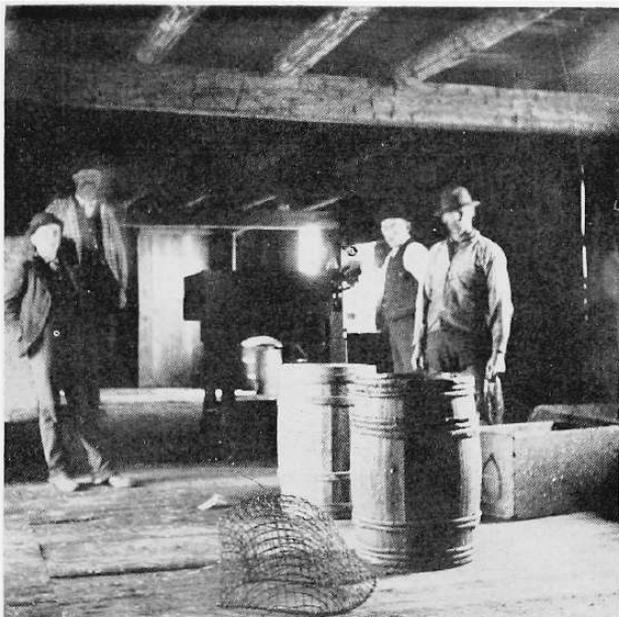


A TYPICAL gill-net fishing station at Tobin Harbor on Isle Royale about 1892. Note the fish spread out on drying racks in the center background of the photograph and the masted Mackinaw boats tied up in the foreground. The deep waters about Isle Royale have long constituted one of Lake Superior's most important fishing grounds. As early as the 1830s, the American Fur Company operated an extensive whitefish and lake trout station there. Today Isle Royale is a national park, but its fishermen, many of whom are of Scandinavian descent, retain life interests in their stations.



GILL NETS and drying reels at Portage Entry, one of a number of Russian-Finnish settlements on the Keweenaw Peninsula of Michigan in the 1890s. During that decade, gill nets accounted for over eighty per cent of the annual American catch from Lake Superior. In the early days, stones were used for weights and hand-whittled cedar splinters served as floats. Later these were replaced by the oval wood-en floats shown here. Still later floats were made of aluminum; now plastic is used.

INTERIOR of a typical fish warehouse of the 1890s. Fish were removed from "lake boxes," like that on the floor, and packed in barrels, boxes, or fish cars for shipment. Most of the catch of that period was iced and shipped fresh. As early as 1872 a government investigator noted that a patented freezing process was in use in "all the important cities on the lakes." After the turn of the century, a Duluth company conceived the idea of shipping fish frozen in a cake of ice via parcel post in winter. Its products were advertised as "Frozen with the Wiggle in Their Tails."



THE BOOTH COMPANY'S wharf and fishhouse at Bayfield, Wisconsin, about 1892. Barrels, like those shown here, were the standard unit of measurement among early commercial fishermen. In 1857 James Peet, a Methodist missionary at Bayfield, noted in his diary that it took ninety fish to make a barrel. Alexander McDougall, inventor of the whaleback who also tried his hand at commercial fishing on Lake Superior, reported that in 1876 he packed and salted his fish "in one hundred pound half barrels" for the regular trade.





Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).