

THE SMITH BROTHERS



FROM THE second-story windows of the Smith Brothers Fish Shanty, we watched the steam rising from the green open waters of the inlet below. The eternal herring gulls drifted in the metallic January sunlight like a clutch of decoys. Beyond them the pack ice began and disappeared in the searing white glare beyond the Port Washington breakwater.

The ship-to-shore radio speaker crackled.

"KSE 750. Calling WB Three One One One. Over."

Lincoln Smith moved to the microphone.

"That's Captain Nagrocki calling," he said, "on the tug *Oliver*. He's been with our family for thirty years."

He flicked a switch.

"WB Three One One One," he said. "Go ahead."

"Dropped one gang on Northeast Reef," the deep radio voice droned. "We've been looking for our first gang for over an hour now but the ice field has moved in and covered the buoys.

We might as well come in. Over."

"Roger KSE 750. Where are you?"

"About ten miles straight out. In about four to five inches of ice."

"Okay then," Lincoln said for my benefit. "No chubs today."

"Roger. Be in, in an hour. KSE 750. Over and out."

The set went silent and Lincoln pointed to a map of Lake Michigan.

"He dropped his nets here," he said, "at Northeast Reef. We call it that because it lies northeast of Milwaukee. Probably in the old days fishermen out of Milwaukee named it. Anyway, the first gang he mentioned was dropped in this area. Two days ago he dropped another gang over here. In open water he would have seen the buoys that are attached to the gang but today an ice field slid in over the buoys so he can't find the nets. That means today he'll come in empty."

He took it philosophically, I thought, but then his family had been working the Great Inland Sea since 1848 and commercial fishermen learned to be philosophical about ice fields and storms and the caprices of nature. The Smiths have lived side by side with Lake Michigan for over a century. They have developed a deep and healthy respect for her.

"Winter ice," Lincoln said. "The lamprey. The alewife. If it isn't one thing, it's another. I sometimes think Mother Nature herself is set against us. Now I think you'll want to meet my cousin Lloyd."

We left the office, strolled through the upstairs dining area, down the heavy, creakless oak stairs to the main dining room, where Lloyd was to meet us for coffee. We shook hands and seated ourselves in the sturdy, polished captain's chairs.

Lloyd at 30 is manager of the restaurant. He is a graduate of Beloit College and of Michigan State University's famed school of Hotel and Restaurant Management. He informed us that in five different dining rooms, served by two separate kitchens, the Smith Brothers can accommodate between 385 and 435 patrons at one time.

"We weren't always in the restaurant business," Lincoln said. "But I don't

see how a commercial fisherman today can make any money unless he is in the restaurant business."

For years the Smiths were strictly commercial fishermen. They got into the restaurant business to insure a steady outlet for the huge surplus of fish that couldn't be sold elsewhere. In the halcyon days before the sea lamprey decimated the great lake-trout schools, Port Washington's trout catch averaged well over two million pounds annually.

"This fishing must have been simply unbelievable," Lincoln said. "They say the sturgeon were so abundant that caviar was fed to the chickens and eventually the egg customers complained of the taste."

In the old days, the sturgeon were so plentiful that it was considered a disgrace for any fisherman to bring one in that weighed less than 200 pounds. *Their wholesale value was 50 cents apiece.* Now, a sturgeon commands at least \$1.50 per pound on the smoked-fish market.

Originally, commercial fishermen conducted their operations in small open wooden boats, either row or sail. Because the boats were small, the first gill nets were also necessarily small, being crude affairs anchored to the bottom of the lake by a stone and set in shallow waters near shore.

When the steam tug replaced the sailboat, it was possible to venture further out in search of new fish grounds as the fishing dwindled close to shore.

The early fishermen developed three principal effective methods of taking fish in the Great Lakes: *the gill net, the pound net, and the hook line.*

Both types of net were lifted by hand power, and lifting heavy nets from deep waters in a rolling sea is no picnic. That back-breaking chore is eliminated with the motorized winch-like lifter which painlessly whirs the nets to surface.

As the steam engine gave way to the gasoline engine and now to the diesel — the wooden hull has been replaced by steel — it became possible for Captain Nagrocki and his three-man crew to crunch their way through a five-inch ice field in comparative comfort — and certain safety.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

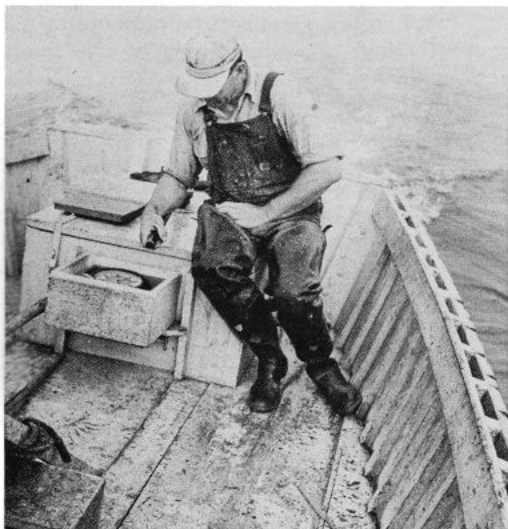
OF PORT WASHINGTON

Where the old timers used the lead line to take soundings and locate fish grounds, Captain Nagrocki relies on electronic depth finders to check the water under his keel.

Where the earlier fishermen could drift for days, completely helpless and out of touch with each other and with shore, Captain Nagrocki can plug into a veritable party line simply by picking up his microphone.

This fishing business is a rough one. It taxes resources to the limit, and the Smiths have managed to survive only because they are a highly resourceful family.

"Our Aunt Evelyn," Lloyd said, "is actually the one who got the family into the restaurant business. The family had set up a fish market in an old waterfront shanty and in 1924 Evelyn got a French fryer and began cooking some of the fish. One day the Electric Company had a picnic and Evelyn was asked to supply a picnic lunch. She bought some rolls at a bakery, spread them with tartar sauce, and filled them with fried fish. The original order for forty fish sandwiches had to be refilled again and



Scenes out of the past:

UPPER RIGHT: The "pot" of pound net fishing was strung on "spiles" which were driven into the lake bottom. This shallow water technique was extremely effective when the great schools of lake trout filled Lake Michigan.

RIGHT: Snubbed up to the "pot," fishermen scoop out the day's catch. As the lake trout declined, the use of pound nets declined and today most commercial fishing is done with gill nets.

ABOVE: Going out to the net by compass and pocket watch.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VERN ARENDT





Gill nets are more mobile, more versatile than the old pound nets. They can be set in shallow water for perch, or in deep water for chubs. Airing and drying the nets after every catch prolongs the life of the nylon.

“... sometimes I think

again, and the family was in the restaurant business.” (At the time of writing, Evelyn was on an inspection trip with her brother Oliver—Lincoln’s father and president of Smith Brothers — of the two Smith Brothers West Coast restaurants in California. Evelyn is now seventy years old.)

“There were plenty of fishermen in the family then,” Lincoln agreed, “but not a fry cook in the bunch. You have to credit Evelyn with guiding the business into a whole new uncharted area for us. As the trout fell off, the restaurant took on more and more importance. I guess it’s a case now of the tail wagging the dog.”

We finished our coffee, and Lloyd promised to show me the kitchen facilities after Lincoln showed me the smokehouse and the net loft.

We turned up our collars and walked smartly around the open slip and into a cluster of ancient frame shanties. The biting wind carried the smell of fish and smoke into my pinched nostrils. Photographer Vern Arendt was scrambling around the net shanty with all the agility of an old salt, his camera dangling from his neck. Vern was holding an aluminum float that looked like a flattened beer can.

“Pressure did that,” Lincoln said. “When you start setting nets in around 400 feet of water, some of the floats collapse.”

He pointed to the nets that were drying on the huge wooden frames.

“These are gill nets,” he said. “We buy the netting bulk and two men do nothing but make them up to our specifications and keep them in good repair. They’re nylon mesh and each one is 1700 feet long and 6 feet wide. We tie twelve of these nets together and that constitutes a ‘gang.’ It’s a day’s work to lift and reset a ‘gang.’ That’s what Captain Nagrocki dropped on the Northeast Reef. Twelve of these tied together.”

“Over 20,000 feet of nets?” I asked. “That’s miles!”

“It takes miles,” he said, “just to stay in business.”

Lincoln went on to say that the same type of gill net is used for both chubs and perch, the mainstays of the Lake Michigan fishing these days. In the summer months, June through October, the perch are fished in shallow water — from 10 to 40 feet deep



that Mother Nature herself is set against the commercial fishermen . . .”

—and the nets are usually dropped within a mile of shore. The chubs are fished the year around in waters from 100 to 500 feet deep and usually no closer than 5 miles off-shore, and outward to 25 miles.

“We can go to midlake under a Wisconsin license,” he said. “Beyond the middle we enter the State of Michigan’s territorial waters and to set our nets there requires a Michigan license. It’s not too feasible to pay for two licenses.”

The gangs of nets are sent to the bottom and are held upright in the water by a combination of lead weights on the lower edges and aluminum floats on the top edges.

“Like a fence?” I asked.

“That’s right,” he said. “The fish swim into the mesh — or the fence — and are hung up by their raky gills until the gang is lifted. And of course surface buoys are tied to each end to mark the gang.”

Utilizing the gill net exclusively now, each of the two Smith Brothers tugs — Captain Richard Nagrocki’s *Oliver Smith* out of Port Washington and Captain Albert Witte’s *Smith Brothers* out of Sheboygan—produces between 180,000 and 200,000 pounds of chubs annually.

Lincoln motioned to a pile of heavy ropelike net in the corner.

“That’s part of an old pound net,” he said. “They used to be tied to long poles or spiles driven into the lake bottom. The pound net or trap net worked on the minnow trap principle where fish followed a funnel into the trap and then couldn’t find their way out. They were used a lot for trout in the old days but their use declined as the lake trout declined. Around the mid-1940’s.”

Lincoln picked a good-sized barbed hook from a shelf and fingered it gingerly.

“When I fished with my father as a kid,” he said, “we were still using the ‘hook line.’ It was simply a long heavy line that floated free in the water. At 15-foot intervals a smaller line, or ‘snood,’ holding one of these hooks was tied on. The hook was baited with a minnow and the whole thing was dropped overboard. It was effective for trout especially but you can imagine the snarl of tangled line. We kids used to spend hours and hours clearing the fouled hooks.”

He put the hook back on the shelf. “It’s a collector’s item now. Hook-line fishing went out with trout.”

It was the sea lamprey that decimated the lake trout. (See *Wisconsin Tales and Trails*, Autumn 1962.) The lamprey, an eel-like parasite, attached itself to the soft-scaled trout by a sucker-like mouth, rasped a hole in the flesh, and literally bled the fish to death. With the depletion of the lake trout, many commercial fishermen were forced out of business. The Smith Brothers, diversified as they were with the restaurant business, were able to weather the lamprey disaster. However, the lake trout on their menu now comes from Lake Superior, the last trout outpost of the Great Lakes.

They have leased their fishery at Houghton-Hancock in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula in exchange for a share of trout catch.

The federal government has spent close to seven million dollars to control the lamprey, and Lincoln feels that the poisoning of tributary streams during the spring spawning migration seems to be paying off.

“The State of Wisconsin,” he says, “is experimenting with the stocking of young trout in Lake Michigan. These fish turn up in our nets with increasing frequency. Of course, most of them are still under the 17-inch legal size, but it’s encouraging to know they’ve lived a year or so out in the open lake. A lot of the trout don’t even have a lamprey scar on their bodies.”

Does he think the lamprey will ever be completely eradicated?

“No,” he answers. “I think you’ll always have some lampreys in the lakes now. But I do think that if the state and federal people keep on controlling them, we will see the lake trout come back strong in ten years or so. They’ll never be as strong as they were; those good old days are gone for good. But I think we’ll be fishing trout again.”

He paused, and seemed very pensive. “Of course,” he continued, “we’re plagued with the alewife too now. That’s a trash fish, kind of related to the shad, that has no commercial value at all. It’s bony and spiny and tastes terrible no matter how you fix it. And Lloyd’s been trying. It’s just useless as far as commercial fishermen are concerned. Now

we’re afraid that the alewife could affect the chub fishing because they both eat the same food. At the risk of being repetitious, may I say again, if it isn’t one thing, it’s another, in this business.”

We left the net shanty and entered the smokehouse. At one end of the building four men were pulling freshly smoked chubs from a tall mobile rack and packing them into five-pound cardboard cartons. On the rack, the fish hung head down, hickory smoked to a golden brown.

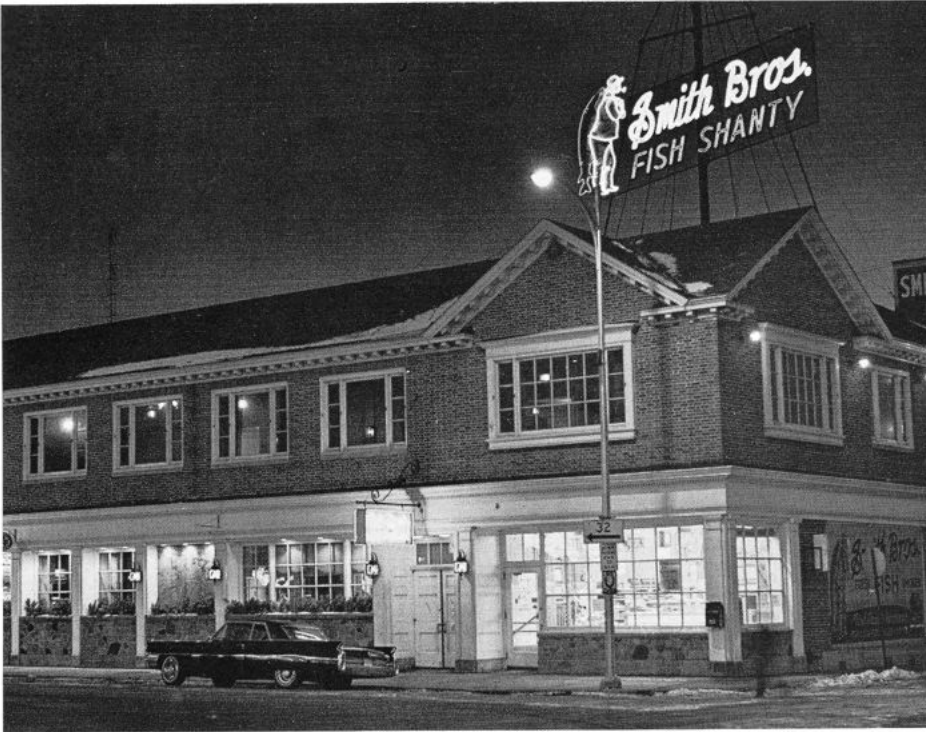
Lincoln took a chub from the rack and we munched and watched. The fish was delicious. Firm and smoky, white. The golden skin peeled away like paper. Lincoln reported that most of the cartons were destined for the Smith Brothers wholesale outlet in Milwaukee. The remainder would be sold right from the Smith Brothers fish market across the slip.

I commented that automation hadn’t raised its ugly head yet.

“Not in the smokehouse,” he agreed. “Over here.”



The chub has replaced the lake trout as the “money” fish in Lake Michigan. The chubs are smoked over hickory chips, packed in 5 pound cartons and distributed throughout the country.



The famed Smith Brothers Fish Shanty. After a disastrous fire in 1953, the new restaurant was built on the old site at a cost of \$300,000.



In the old days the Smiths operated four fishtugs. Now they operate two — both "gillers". Here, the Oliver is inside the Port Washington breakwater after a lift.



He pulled back a sliding door, revealing two men in rubber boots and aprons next to a huge gray machine on the concrete floor. One man was feeding fresh perch into the machine and the machine was cleaning them clean as a whistle. The other man was carrying them away in trays.

"Of course, winter isn't really the perch season. In the summer when we fish them that machine is worth its weight in gold."

He closed the door and asked if I was ready to go back to the restaurant for lunch. I didn't tell him I would have been perfectly content to stand in the smokehouse and munch on a few more chubs.

Back in the restaurant, after Lloyd had given me the grand tour of the kitchen facilities, we slid again into the comfortable captain's chairs and studied the menu. I asked Lloyd what the "domers" on the menu were.

"Domers are steamed fish," Lloyd said. "Back in the old days when the fishermen used steam engines on their tugs, they would often fix a little snack on the way in. They'd take a fish from their catch, wrap it in a newspaper, and stick it on the top of the boiler dome. Of course, now we use a pretty fancy steamer and the fish are wrapped in tinfoil, but we still call them 'domers.'"

The "domers" are a good example of how tradition lingers at Smith Brothers. There are real ship's running lights on the walls, huge mounted lake trout, gill nets in glass cases, a ship's binnacle bolted to the floor, parts and pieces of the storied lake's past.

"We used to have a lot of real flotsam and jetsam in here," Lincoln said. "Pieces of wrecks. Life jackets. Ships' wheels. It was a regular museum. The fire we had in 1953 destroyed all that and we had to start from scratch."

The Smiths built their present restaurant on the site of the gutted old one at a cost of \$300,000. They now employ over 100 people and must be ranked as one of Port Washington's leading industries.

While we waited for our orders I complained that a single day was too short to do justice to the Smith Brothers story. I told them that I would have liked to go out with Captain Nagrocki on the *Oliver*

"Well," Lincoln smiled, "I think that can be arranged. If Captain Nagrocki will have you. When do you want to go?"

I told him that I was a fair-weather sailor.

"When it's warmer," I said. "How about in spring?"

"Spring is fine," Lincoln said. "We'll be here."

The food came, the conversation slowed down considerably, and all during the meal I had the feeling we were on that ancient steam tug rolling out beyond the fish grounds and eating "domers" fixed in old newspapers.