

Fillet O' Fish

Captain Dan speaks out on PCBs.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

We were aboard the charter boat "Dumper Dan" trolling outside the entrance to the Sheboygan harbor for the big king salmon that seemed to nose right up to the murky, brown water that the river carries out into the lake like a curving plume of oil spill.

In September, kings and brown trout are working up into the river, and given his druthers, Captain Dan Welsch would have opted to start his trolling inside the harbor. But for three days now the Corps of Engineers had had a big dredge at the harbor mouth sucking up the sand that had built up there over the years. The dredge had cleaned out the south side of the channel, and yesterday it had moved and repositioned itself to clean out the north side.

The dredge, with its warning lights burning, looked like a poor man's Texas oil rig squatting there. The buoys surrounding it marked the pipe on the bottom. That pipe was carrying the sucked-up sand far down the southern shore, where it was deposited to make new beach.

"They got all summer to do that," the young skipper wailed. "Naturally, they pick the time when the fish are coming into the harbor right where they're sitting."

From his seat behind the wheel, Dick smiled and said "Naturally! And you got to put up with it every five years!" Dick is Captain Dan's father, and he was aboard as the replacement for the regular mate, Joey, who had worked

the Dumper Dan all summer long, but, as he did every football season, left when his high school team started practice. Joey was a senior this year and played in the line.

Captain Dan said that as much as Joey loved fishing, he loved football too, and this arrangement worked out well, with Captain Dan's father filling in at the end of the season.

"Of course," Captain Dan said with a smile, "it means that I'm working back here rigging the rods, which is what the mate is supposed to do. And he's up there steering the boat, which is what the captain is supposed to do."

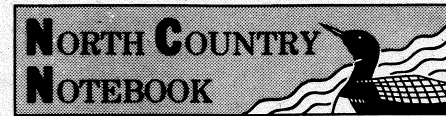
Neither father nor son seemed too stressed over the arrangement. Dick had taken his son along on Lake Michigan fishing expeditions in the halcyon pioneer days of the first salmon plantings, and they had caught fish just about as big as little Dan.

They remind you of the doting father who never played pro baseball but had taught his son everything he knew, and now his son was playing pro baseball. Captain Dan watches the trolling rods with the coiled anticipation of the shortshop watching the batter. Dick watches his son like a hawk, like a coach, like a doting father.

"I don't know why they're dredging anyway," Dick said. "They always said they needed a 27-foot channel for the coal boats, but the coal boats don't come in here anymore."

Captain Dan didn't want his downriggers hanging up on the dredge pipe, and besides, Dick added, with all that noise and vibration from the dredge, the fish were probably being scared off anyway and staying out in the lake.

Captain Dan talked to other charter boats, and everybody said they were



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going to try out in front of the harbor and work the "mud line." Captain Dan said they often had good luck trolling there because king salmon seemed to hang out at the edge of the mud line, the line that separates the clear lake water from the soup.

There must have been a dozen boats working the mud line, most of them private non-charters.

We asked Captain Dan if charter fishing on Lake Michigan was adversely affected by the stories and studies concluding that the salmon and the trout were chock-full of PCBs and toxins and probably should all be stamped with a warning from the surgeon general.

"I don't mind them testing the fish," Captain Dan said. "What I mind is how they test the fish. They take a big salmon, grind it up and then they test that, which is the *whole* fish, ground up.

"You do it that way and sure, you're gonna find PCBs in there because it's the whole fish. Nothing got trimmed off and thrown away. Nobody eats salmon that way.

"DNR tells us PCBs settle in the fat. In the layer under the skin. In the belly straps.

"So, when we clean a fish for fillets, we cut out all the fat and we cut off the belly straps. Of the whole salmon, only the fillets are left. Now, if anybody wants to do a real test on how dangerous those fillets are to eat, they should grind up just the fillets and test them, because that's what people eat.

"The way they're testing fish is ridiculous. It would be like grinding up a whole chicken, feathers and all, and testing that. What do you think they'd find?"

At the wheel, Dick rolled his eyes.

(DNR, as Steady Eddy likes to point out, doesn't always stand for "Damn Near Russia." Sometimes, it stands for "Damn Near Right.")

The fishing, as they say in these parts, went good. The three of us wound up with 10 fish—nine kings and a 12-pound brown. As Vince was fighting one of the kings, Captain Dan said to get our licenses out because DNR wardens were coming to check us.

They came in their Boston whaler, cut the power and bobbed off starboard, waiting respectfully as Vince fought the big fish up to the stern where Captain Dan netted it.

"Nice fish," one warden said. "Please hold up your licenses." We all did, so the wardens could see the salmon stamps affixed to them. The wardens thanked us and sped away. Vince's king salmon weighed 25 pounds. As none of us is pregnant or a child, we plan to eat only the fillets. ■

George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Sunday nights at 9:30 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WERN (88.7 FM).