

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Bodega Bay's Fishermen - A Proud History of Activism

by Zeke Grader - 2007

Fisheries have been an integral part of Bodega Bay's history, as would be expected in this coastal community, one of the few left in California, or even the nation, that can truly be called a "fishing village."

Most of us know of the early Coast Miwok and Pomo people who fished and hunted in this area, harvesting clams, seals, and salmon returning to the coastal streams nearby. After World War I fishing as an industry began to develop at Bodega Bay, primarily around salmon, and it was the dredging of the harbor during World War II that helped put the community solidly on the map as a fishing port.

What is less known perhaps has been the activism of the local fishermen, whose leadership at the local, state and regional level set the course for sustainable fisheries and fishing communities. Let me share with you a little of what I know from working with and for Bodega Bay's fishing men and women during the 30 years I have been with the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations and my 50-some years of being around commercial fishing.



Following World War II, during the anti-union fervor of the late 1940's, the U.S. Government acted to break up the west coast fishermen's union, which represented salmon and crab fishermen among others. Without a union, fishermen lost the ability to collectively bargain on price for a perishable product with much more powerful processing interests. In the early 1950's to bring equity to the bargaining table and get a fair price for their catch, fishermen in a few west coast ports, including Bodega Bay, organized, under agricultural marketing laws, to form marketing associations. These associations, similar to farmers' cooperatives, gave fishermen the legal ability to come together to negotiate for prices, much as the union had before. The Fishermen's Marketing Association of Bodega Bay even took this agricultural connection one step further and became members of the Grange, and remains so today.

The marketing associations also became the political vehicle for fishermen to begin addressing regulations and conditions in their ports. Their establishment could not have been more opportune as California's salmon fishery was threatening to implode. The federal water projects in the Central Valley - such as the Central Valley Project's Friant Dam on the San Joaquin River - were beginning to take their toll, as were logging operations in coastal streams, on salmon populations. In 1956, the Legislature closed the west coast's oldest non-native fishery - salmon net fishing on San Francisco Bay and the Delta - and there was fear the ocean salmon fisheries would be next.

Responding to the crisis, fishermen - commercial and recreational, fish processors and fish scientists - decided to band together. They formed Salmon Unlimited in December 1956, with the goal of rebuilding the state's salmon fishery, instead of closing it. This was no small effort; the state had declared as policy, it was "not in the public interest to maintain the salmon fishery." Among the leaders of the fledgling Salmon Unlimited was Bodega Bay fisherman Ray Carpenter and his son Earl.

BODEGA BAY FISHERMEN

The early efforts of Salmon Unlimited helped to slow or even stop the continuing decline of salmon. The Carpenters and other Bodega Bay fishermen were among the most active in Salmon Unlimited and later coalitions and committees, such as the Legislatively-created California Advisory Committee on Salmon & Steelhead Trout. Earl Carpenter, for example, would serve as the fishing industry representative on a key state committee on the Delta, where some 90 percent of California's salmon migrate from the Sierra streams to the sea. He was chair of the citizen's advisory committee when it initiated the legislation to reverse California's old salmon policy and set out instead a doubling goal for the state. This goal was later enacted in federal legislation to reform the Central Valley Project.



Starting from the 1950's, Bodega Bay fishermen, like the Carpenter's, Ames', Wedell's and others have been the leaders in California's fishing industry. They, for example, worked with Congressman Don Clausen to get the first legislation introduced in the Congress to create a 200 mile fishery zone, the precursor to today's Magnuson-Stevens Act. They also had the foresight to realize real political power would only be achieved by uniting fishermen under a single banner, so they worked to bring together the disparate marketing organizations under an umbrella called the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, or PCFFA. Over 30 years old now, PCFFA's current President is another Bodega Bay fisherman, Chuck Wise.

The leadership of Bodega Bay's fishermen was, in fact, quite extraordinary. Not having a local port authority to act as a lead agency, the Bodega Bay FMA sought out and got a federal EED grant to fund the study for the construction of a badly needed modern marina. They were the only fishermen's organization ever awarded such a grant and this culminated in the building of Spud Point Marina. The Bodega Bay FMA, not only worked successfully to gain the federal funding for the project, but they helped work through problems in the California Legislature with then Senator Barry Keene and Assemblyman Doug Bosco to get state funding and the necessary permits. Keep in mind, all other harbor developments such as this have been spearheaded by port authorities, but having none, the Bodega Bay FMA took the lead.

In a brief look at the activism of Bodega fishermen, their work with scientists cannot be ignored. The close relationship that has developed between Bodega fishermen and the UC Bodega Marine Laboratory has demonstrated the value of fishermen and scientists collaborating to improve our knowledge of fish and the marine environment. Largely due to the good relations the Bodega Bay FMA has had with this University of California facility, the Bodega Marine Laboratory was central to the first ever captive brood stock program for an endangered run of salmon; the lab both raised fish at their facility and developed the genetic science needed to identify these fish from other runs.

Whether others would have risen to the occasion if there had not been the leadership from Bodega Bay fishermen, we'll never know. What we do know is because of their leadership and their activism, there are salmon in California, there is a safe port of refuge in Bodega Bay, there is a state-wide organization to represent commercial fishing men and women, and there are today these special fishing villages like Bodega Bay.

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