

# ASSU OF CAPE MUDDGE

Recollections of a  
Coastal Indian Chief

Harry Assu  
with Joy Inglis

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*University of British Columbia Press*  
*Vancouver 1989*

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Printed in Canada

ISBN 0-7748-0333-9 (cloth)

0-7748-0341-X (paper)

Printed on acid free paper ☉

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Assu, Harry, 1905-

Assu of Cape Mudge

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-7748-0333-9 (bound). - ISBN 0-7748-0341-X  
(pbk.)

1. Assu, Harry, 1905- 2. Kwakiutl Indians  
- Biography. 3. Indians of North America - British  
Columbia - Cape Mudge - Biography. 4. Assu family.  
5. Cape Mudge (B.C.) - Genealogy. 6. Kwakiutl Indians  
- Genealogy. 7. Indians of North America - British  
Columbia - Cape Mudge - Genealogy. I. Inglis, Joy,  
1919- II. Title.  
E99.K9A88 1989 971.1'00497 C89-091375-7

This book has been published with the help of grants from the Canada Council, the British Columbia Heritage Trust, and private sources.

University of British Columbia Press

6344 Memorial Rd

Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1W5

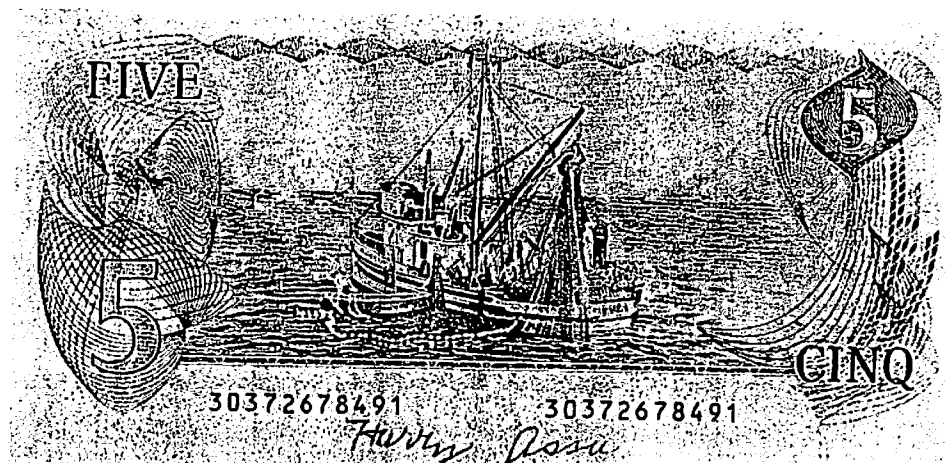
# 5

## My Life in the Fishing Business

The seiner on the old Canadian five-dollar bill was my boat at the time the photograph for the engraving was taken in 1958. We were in Johnstone Strait at the time. Ripple Point can be seen on the right, and Knox Bay Point is shown on the left. I had been running her for eighteen years at the time. I owned the *BCP 45*, having bought her from B.C. Packers in 1941. I don't really know why my boat was chosen, but when I asked the president of the company that question later, he said, "You fished for the company for a long time and were a good fisherman for the company in all those years." At that time I was the oldest skipper in the fleet. I worked for B.C. Packers for forty-nine years. Well, that's a lot of fish brought in for the company all right. I was never low boat, always better than average catch each year. My son Mel skippered the *BCP 45* for me, and I ran the *W9* for the company. I sold *BCP 45* back to the company in 1959 and bought the *W8* from them.

### Plate 22

The old Canadian five-dollar bill with an illustration of the seiner once owned by Harry Assu, *BCP 45*, on the back. In the background is the Bruce Luck, which was owned by Steve and Don Assu.



There were two Assu boats on the five-dollar bill. In the background of the engraving of my boat on the bill, you can see the *Bruce Luck*. My sons Steve and Don owned the *Bruce Luck*. Don skippered her, and Steve ran another boat for the company.

It has been really nice having my old boat on the five-dollar bill. Once when Ida and I were flying to Hawaii for a holiday, the pilot came back to speak to us. We had holidayed often in Hawaii, but this was the first time the pilot had talked with us. Maybe it was because there were so many of our family at the airport to see us off. He wanted to know who we were. He asked me what I did for a living, and I told him I was a fisherman. Ida said, "Show him your boat," so I pulled out a Canadian five-dollar bill. He returned to his cabin and announced to the passengers that we were on our fiftieth wedding anniversary and that my fishing boat could be seen on the five-dollar bills in their pockets. The stewardesses were soon changing American money and larger Canadian bills into fives, and I was kept busy all the way to Hawaii signing them for the passengers. I signed one hundred and forty-five bills! We all had a lot of fun.

Recently a CBC camera crew came up to photograph me on the *BCP 45* in the same waters near Kanish Bay where the original picture was taken nearly thirty years ago. It was shown later on television, and it looked pretty good on the screen though the boat has become run-down over the years. It used to be a table-seiner, but now it is fitted with a drum. *BCP 45* is still in these waters. It has changed hands over the years. Allen Chickite bought her in 1983 from the company. He took her down for a boat parade at the opening of EXPO '86 in Vancouver. About seven seiners from Cape Mudge went down to join in the opening.

My very first boat was a dug-out canoe made of cedar. My father bought it for me from Oscar Lewis's father, who steamed and bent it in the old steaming shed in our village. There were a lot of canoes at Cape Mudge then, drawn up along the shore near the houses. Different styles of cedar canoes were the only boats our people used. I remember four sixty-foot-long canoes drawn up at the north end of our village when I was a boy.

I caught a lot of fish from that little twelve-foot canoe fitted with oars. I'd take my canoe out in the morning and fish in the pass for salmon with just a hand-line and bring in a twelve- to fifteen-pound salmon. Then out in the evening again, and come in with maybe twenty fish. There were so many fish in Discovery Passage then you could walk on them! I got paid fifty cents cash for each spring salmon at the cannery at

### Quathiaski Cove.

When we were young and the water was filled with salmon, we used to get them with our hands right out of the gravel on the beach in front of our village. My brother Frank and I caught coho that were chasing the herring up the beach. The beach would be covered with "snake herring," we called them, that got buried four or five inches deep in the gravel by the surf. The salmon swarmed in after them, and we clubbed them. One afternoon we got thirty-five at low-slack tide. Every year in August we got coho that way. They were pretty well full-size by then. The scow from the cannery called in at the village, and we got fifteen cents each for coho.

Our people had always hand-lined from canoes, and we took fish in traps in the mouth of the rivers. So far as I know, it was only after non-Indians came that we fitted our canoes with oars and sail.

We got paid for our fish around here for the first time when Pidcock brothers opened their cannery in Quathiaski Cove in 1904. We continued to troll by canoe for the company right up to the time that W. E. Anderson took over as manager in 1912. After that we began to drag-seine, setting a net off the beach. We did that here in front of our village, in the mouth of the Campbell River on the spit, and at the mouth of the Nimpkish River. The Nimpkish band owned that northern area but allowed others to use it. I worked with Dan Cranmer on the drag-seine up there. It was heavy work. Boy there was a lot of fish! We took sockeye that way from around June first to mid-July.

My father bought the first gas boat here at Cape Mudge in 1912. Within two or three years everybody here at Cape Mudge had been able to buy a gas boat with money we were paid for our fish. They could see the advantage of this type of boat. My father always urged saving and planning for our people. He told us boys to be looking ahead two or three years to what boat would give us the best return and to save our money to get it. That way our people grew up in this fishing business and always kept ahead and are successful in it.

When the first cannery men came to this coast, they put up the canneries at places where our people were living—at the best salmon rivers—and we knew how to take the fish in our own waters. The cannery managers needed the Indian men to bring in the fish and women to work in the canneries. It was good. We were working together, cooperating. Later when other people got into the fishing business, we had to fight for our place in it.<sup>1</sup> We have to fight for our place in it even today! Of course, we were working in other kinds of industry that were coming in. Pidcock brothers owned a logging company in Gowlland

Harbour and Sam Lewis, Solomon, and Jack Naknakim from Cape Mudge worked there. There were other lines of work. Furs brought in money: weasel, mink, coon, and bear. Around 1914 I did quite a bit of otter-hunting for skins up at Otter Cove south of Chatham Point. In the 1920's there was a bounty on cougars. Jack Naknakim and Francis Drake were cougar hunters.

When I was around seventeen years old, my father helped my brother Dan and me to get hold of an old gill-netter. We rebuilt it – cabin, decks, engine, everything. We ran it for about three years, and everybody in the village could use it if they needed it. They didn't have to ask. That's the way it used to be back then – really nice, just like one family. If you stepped outside your house to chop wood, four or five guys would come along with saws to help you. There is hardly any of that left in the village today. When my family got the very first telephone in the village, we left the door of the house open so that everybody could come in and use it.

There were still many of our traditions left in my boyhood. It must have been around 1914 when we were coming back from gill-netting around Steveston and I was on my father's boat. It was fall, and about thirty of our boats were pinned down in Baker Passage in a big storm. The wind and waves prevented us from putting out to cross the Strait of Georgia to our village at Cape Mudge. We anchored there two or three days waiting for the wind to die down. Finally, the men said, "Now we are going to start the wind we need to take us home." They rolled logs down the beach to the shore and made a raft. They set a fire burning on the raft and shoved it out into the Strait. That calmed the wind that was against us, and we made it home to Cape Mudge.

In the old cannery days the fish were everywhere in great numbers. Not like it is today. All those little mainland creeks and rivers had their runs. In Topaze Harbour the dog salmon ran up the river just north of our old village of Tekya, and coho ran in the river just south of the village. Coho went into Loughborough Inlet in August, and sockeye came into the inlet at Heydon Bay near the reserve at Homayno. I'd be about seventeen years old that time I went into Loughborough Inlet with my skipper McPherson and got permission from Loughborough Bill, who owned those waters, to fish in there. We made one set and brought in five thousand fish. A big logging camp ruined the fishing at Loughborough after that. Stocks are only now building up again.

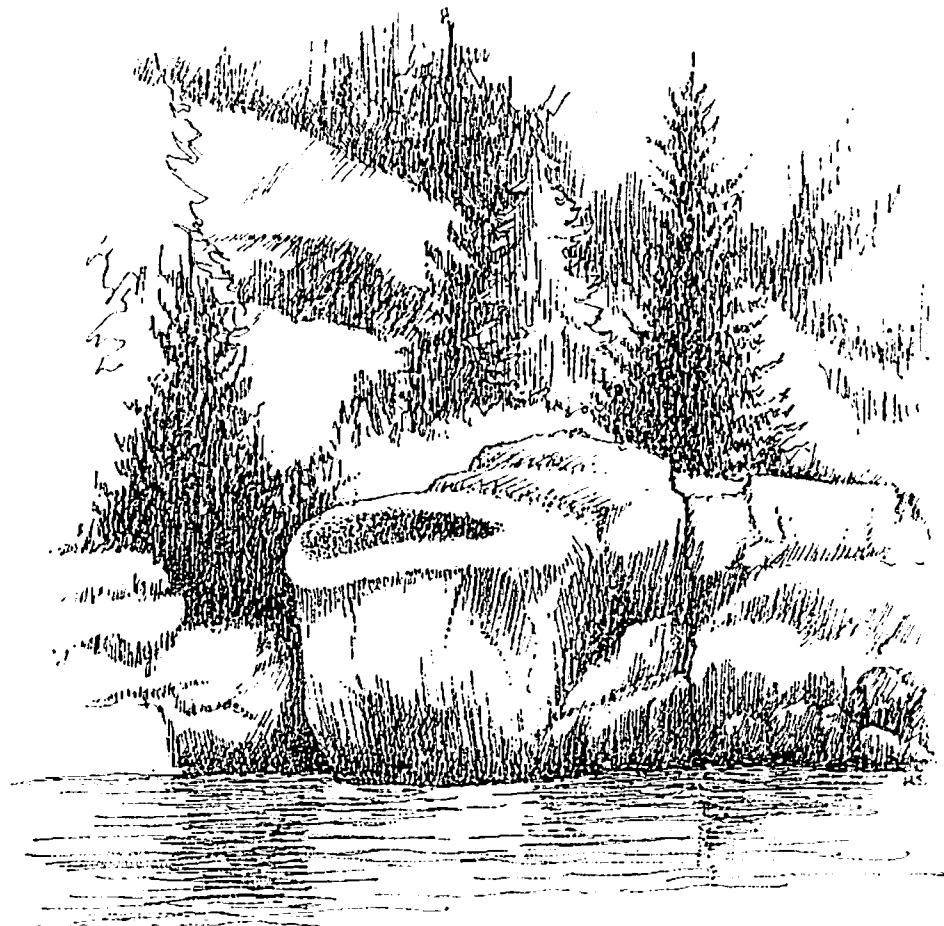
My father was recruiter for native workers at the cannery at Quathiaski Cove. He called Indian people around Ladysmith and arranged for them to stay on our reserve south of the village. Even after the cannery burned down, they came each summer from Ladysmith,

and while the men fished, the women spun wool and knitted Cowichan sweaters. They were still coming every year in the 1960's. Most of the native men and women working for the cannery were from Cape Mudge, but some at Comox with relatives in our village came up to work with us, and a few were from Campbell River and Salmon River. A recruiter was paid so much for each worker signed on by him, and my father was held responsible for the workers in Quathiaski Cove cannery. He represented their rights in any dispute.

Aluminum tokens were given to us as payment for our fish at the cannery, and during the canning season they could only be cashed at the company store. Our people didn't like that, and so my father put a stop to it. The metal coins were taken off in the 1920's, and after that when our catch was brought in, the amount of fish was recorded in the "fish book." We were paid off in cash at the end of the season. That money was real money and could be spent anywhere, but my father urged people to save, not spend.

In those days quite a few loggers and fishermen blew everything they had at the end of the season. There was a lot of that. We had a joke about "going in the hole." You know, "Quathiaski Cove" is a Comox word meaning a bay with an island in the mouth, but to us it sounds like

Figure 11  
The large chamber-pot-shaped rock at Whiskey Point, Quadra Island, located by Gerrie Dinsley and Pauline Dowler, volunteers at the Kwagwiltz Museum, Cape Mudge, on information from Harry Assu, in 1988. Sketch by Hilary Stewart, 1989





a word in Kwakwaka that means "piss-pot." There really is a big rock bowl in the Cove just off Whiskey Point. Well anyway, when Sandy Billy was fishing up at Rivers Inlet and his wife Mary was working in the cannery at Quathiaski Cove, and any one asked Sandy how Mary was he would always say: "Oh, she's in the hole at Quathiaski Cove!"

On the tenth of August 1921, my father called a meeting of our people with the cannery manager on the wharf at Quathiaski Cove. We had no quarrel with management; we wanted a federal government regulation changed so that native men could be seine-boat skippers. Up to then only white men and Japanese men could be seine-boat skippers. Yet Indians were top fishermen, and the company was in favour of giving us this right. They did not want to stand in our way. W. E. Anderson, part-owner and manager, was a close friend of my father and one of the finest men I ever knew. Bill Nye, the foreman, was married to my father's sister Pauline. It was like a family.

Allan W. McNeill, M.P. for Comox-Alberni, was at that meeting on the wharf, and he offered to take our grievance to Ottawa. Word came back that Indians could skipper seine boats. My father was a good seine-boat skipper, sure was! That first year he took the seine boat into Loggers Bay, two miles north of Deepwater Bay in Discovery Passage. That's a big deep pool where migrating salmon move slowly in and out again. He had the deepest net and my skipper, a Scotsman named McPherson, was sure he was going to snag it. Well, he never did. He pulled in over four hundred thousand salmon in one season—June to September. Nearly half a million fish! There sure were lots of fish back then, and my father knew where the fish were going to hit.

The company had around five seine boats at the time, and my father arranged that where the skipper was not Indian, two native men would be taken on in every crew of six. That was when I was first taken on as crew on a seine boat along with Harry Moon, the son of the ranking chief at Salmon River. We all got along fine. McPherson was our skipper. They were all fine men. They used to laugh and call us "sunburned Scotsmen"! It always makes me laugh to think about it.

Every boat had a Chinese cook, and on our boat we had a man named Ying, who had cooked in the Hotel Vancouver. We didn't have him long, you bet! When W. E. Anderson learned about it, Ying was taken off our boat to cook for the Anderson family.

As well as Chinese who were cooks on the boats, there was a crew that came up from Vancouver every summer to work the cannery. They gutted and cut the fish into slices that fit the tins. Some of these men cut tins from metal sheets three feet by two feet. Then they soldered them.

Later machines replaced the slicer and automatically made the cans. The machine that replaced hand-slicing was called the Iron Chink. There was a bunk house at Quathiaski Cove near the cannery that they stayed in, and we called it "Chinee House." In the evening we'd see them there playing cards and passing the pipe.

The Japanese who had been mainly building boats and fishing on the Fraser River from their village in Steveston began settling in large numbers in places further north along the coast and on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Before the 1920's men of the Japanese families around here worked in the lumber camps at Duncan Bay and Loughborough Inlet. Starting around 1916, fishermen from Steveston began coming up here in spring for the cod-fishing. It must have been around 1918 or 1919 that I began to notice the very large number of their boats cod-fishing. I counted thirty-nine of their boats in Quathiaski Cove on one day.

Almost all the boats used by the cannery at Quathiaski Cove were Japanese owned, built, and run. In 1922 when they brought in the regulation permitting our people to skipper seine boats and crew on boats skippered by others, some regulations were applied to Japanese boats. That was when the company began chartering Japanese seine boats. The skipper stayed on, but it allowed the company to hire other people on the seine boats for crew. In the case of skippers for herring seining, a Japanese could only skipper if he was a veteran, and half the crew had to be Indian or no licence would be issued. The company chartered the gill-netters and cod-boats of the Japanese with no restriction on captain or crew.

I worked with the Japanese once when I was twenty-one years old, in 1926. I signed on in Nanaimo to go herring seining for the saltery on Gabriola Island. They dry-salted the fish and shipped it to Japan. They had another big operation on Saltspring Island and another on Blind Channel near Phillips Arm. I worked for the Matsuyama Company on a fifty-five-foot seiner. We used to sing together as we brailed in the fish: "Yu-Mara-Yu, Yu-Nara-Yu." It was really nice. Had a real tune and beat to it! I asked them why they did that, and they told me it makes the work go better. They were good to work with. Everybody working together. A hard-working people all right! Work is nothing to them.

After crewing with McPherson as my skipper for a few years, I went on my Uncle Jimmy Hovell's boat for a season. It was *Annandale*, the first boat he ever skippered. The very first seiner I ever skippered was *Quathiaski 8*. The boat belonged to the company operation at Quathiaski Cove. I was around twenty-nine years old at the time.

I've owned quite a few boats over my lifetime as a fisherman. I owned a gill-netter named *Gildees*. That's our name for a long beach in Johnstone Strait. The *Gildees* was built right here in Cape Mudge Village by John Dick. It was a standard size: about thirty-two feet long. After that I had a gill-netter, *Jean A.*, named for my daughter, wife of Tony Roberts, chief councillor of the Campbell River band. I built the frame of the *Jean A.*, and Robert Clifton planked her. Then in 1941 I bought the *BCP 45*. That's the one on the five-dollar bill.

During the depression years of the 1930's, a lot of non-Indian men, some with families, built shacks along the south end of this island and on past our village to April Point. April Point was called Poverty Point then because of the squatters. They fished with hand-lines from row boats and sold their catch to the scow that came around from the cannery at Quathiaski Cove. Almost all the way along on our reserve land there were squatters. That did not bother our people. Those were hard times for us, and we were all in it together. Times have changed. These little pieces of reserve land are all that we have left to us of all the territory that was ours. We always expected to be recognized as the rightful owners of the land that other people moved in on and took for their own. We are claiming this territory now. Indians signed no treaty here giving up our land and waters!

During the twenties I fished in summer and worked in a logging camp in the winter. The camp was International Logging in the mouth of the Campbell River. Our fellas worked on the booms. We had a boss named "Frenchie," who we got to know really well. We all got along fine. I remember those guys laughing with us and saying, "Okay, Go ahead. You guys must know what you're doing; you own this country!"

We all played in a baseball league together. Harry Moon was our team captain, and Frenchie was playing with us. We played other companies at Duncan Bay, Elk Bay branch of Marine Logging, and as far south as Courtenay and Nanaimo. We were high team, and in our fourth year we lost only one game. We had a great time.

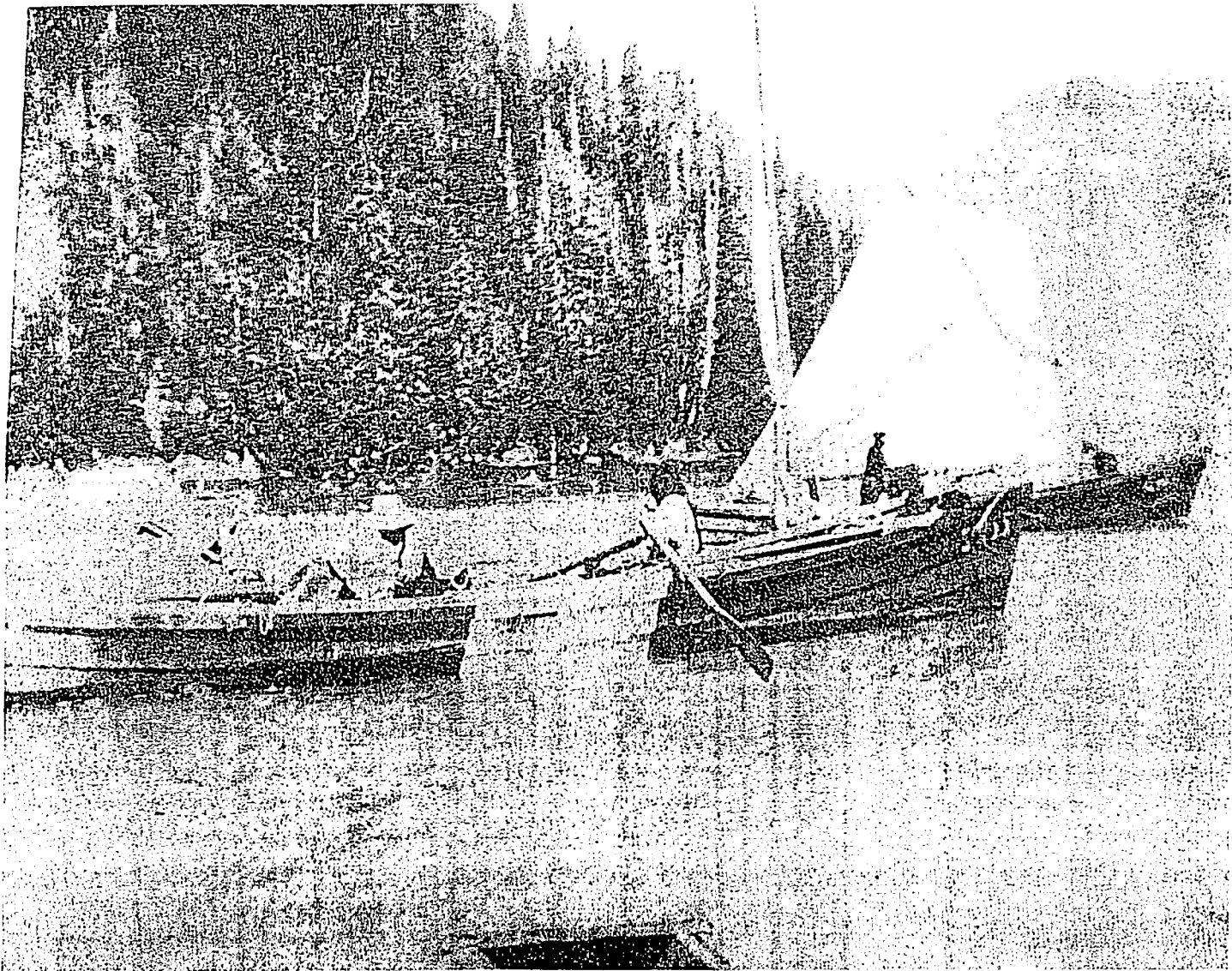
During those tough years of the depression, I'd be working almost all year round. Every year we left Cape Mudge for Rivers Inlet in spring. I signed on first for Rivers Inlet in 1929. Our people all went off together as families around June twentieth on the Union Steamship that called in at Quathiaski Cove twice a week. It was like a summer holiday beginning. It must have been like that in the old days when we had this country to ourselves and our people all started off together in spring from the winter village to head out to the summer camping grounds.

There were eleven canneries in Rivers Inlet. Tom Price of Cape

Mudge was a recruiter for Strathcona, and my father and Oscar Lewis hired the men for Wadhams. I worked for Wadhams for nine years. The company provided us with living quarters and little twenty-two to twenty-four-foot skiffs with sails. No motors were allowed in the inlet then, only sail. There had once been plenty of sockeye salmon in the inlet, but when the logging companies went in the fish went down. So to protect the fish no motors were used. The women worked in the canneries, and the men fished. We worked hard, and we had a very good time too. The best thing was that our friends and families were all there together. I remember that there was a big net-loft where we danced on the weekends. It was a lot of fun.

After spending the spring and early summer at Rivers Inlet, it was

Plate 23  
Skiffs with sails fishing in Rivers Inlet,  
c. 1905. Cheverton Album (8496  
VPL)



time to return home to Cape Mudge. By August first we had moved again from Cape Mudge into the places provided for us by the cannery in Quathiaski Cove. We were fishing for the company in Area 13; Johnstone Strait from Deepwater Bay to Salmon River. The company had a lease on that area until around 1926 or 1927. After that we still fished in that area and didn't have any trouble with others coming in on it, but we were not restricted any longer to that area and could fish wherever we wanted.

Almost all the women at Cape Mudge worked in the cannery in the Cove. The cannery stood where the big net loft is today. Some of the houses for the workers are still there nearby. Ida and I and our family had a little cottage right on the stream by the ferry landing. The women fitted the fish into the cans. Chinese men slit, gutted, washed, and sliced the fish, and our women selected the slices that had to be put together in one can and wrapped the fish to a tight fit with no gap at the centre. They liked the work. Later machines replaced some of the work of slicing the fish and making the cans, but no machine could replace the work native women did in the canneries. They became pretty expert at it. Some could do a fast and good job, and they made the most money because they were paid by the number of cans they could fill.

Around the start of the last war, we fished for dog-fish (shark) right out here off our village. B.C. Packers was buying the fish from us. They removed the livers for oil on a scow in Quathiaski Cove, and the rest of the fish went down to Vancouver to be filleted. I think they sent the fish to England to feed the people or the troops. It was used in England for "fish and chips" they say. Down in Vancouver, they had to quit the operation. The skin of the dog-fish is like sandpaper, and they could not keep the saws in shape that were used to cut them up. I went out on the vessels that were trawling for dog-fish. They used to lay a drag-net on the bottom. The most we ever got in one day was ten to twelve tons.

If you were above average in the fishing for the company for ten years, you got to run a herring boat. After the fall salmon fishing, sometime in the 1940's, I'd be out for herring from November to Christmas and from mid-January to March. We were on an eighty-two-foot seiner between here and Prince Rupert. When I think back on the stormy seas, how cold and tired we often were, I think its lucky I haven't got arthritis like so many of our people. For the last six years I fished I was only home to stay at Christmas time.

Long ago when I was a boy if the old people would see the sky clouding over in the late fall and early spring, they would say we'd<sup>2</sup>ulis, meaning white clouds. They knew the overcast sky had come to protect the

herring at spawning time. Well, that's a lot different than the way people look at the herring fishery today when you have to take all you can to make good in the fishing business.

We were out herring fishing and logging in the usual places in winter, then fishing for salmon at Rivers Inlet in spring, followed by summer fishing at Quathiaski Cove. Many of our people fished each fall off the Qualicum River. It wasn't my custom to fish down there. The company wanted me to go to Qualicum, but I didn't always go along with the company telling me where to fish. If a fight broke out, I'd tell them, "I'm quitting." Pretty soon they come around to say to me, "You can go where you want to." In my lifetime native people were still moving around with the seasons like they did in the days before other people ever came here. And we don't have to be told where the fish are! We are the experts on that!

In 1938, B.C. Packers Ltd. purchased the company from Anderson. Before the business was sold, we were called in and questioned on who we would be willing to work for. He said, "I'd like to see you people satisfied." My father wanted Bell-Irving because he knew him and had worked for him. Jimmy Hovell wanted Nelson Brothers. John Dick and I wanted B.C. Packers, and that's who Anderson sold out to. He told us then, "If I had sons to go into the business I would never sell out." We understood that. Anderson had three daughters.

In those early cannery days a lot of our people learned the trade language: Chinook. That was all that was spoken in dealings between Indian and non-Indian people. I could understand some, but I spoke Kwakwala and English. Compared to these languages, Chinook is simple. Very few non-Indians ever learned to speak Kwakwala. One man I knew for years in the fishing industry management spoke Kwakwala. Oh, he could speak it like a native! Only a few months ago I was down in his office in Steveston, and he was talking easily to me in our own language. That always surprised and pleased me. Then a guy from the Japanese people came into his office, and my friend said, "Excuse me," and started talking to him in his own language!

At first there were no radio intercoms on boats, but as soon as they were installed, there was a regulation put on so that we could not talk to each other in our own language. Alert Bay men sometimes use Kwakwala language on their boats, and I have told my sons to do the same. I tell my boys, "You use English and you might as well tell all the boats in this area where the fish are." Why not use our own language? The Yugoslavs and the Japanese use their own language. They don't want to tell the rest of the boats where they have found the fish! Why should

they? Sometimes today when a few of our boats are nearby, we use our own language, but mostly it's in English because that's what our skippers speak most easily today.

When the intercoms were put on the boats, the company always tried to find out from us where our guys were getting the fish so that they could send other boats to fish there. I didn't want to tell them where the fish were hitting. I was independent and didn't always go along with direction from the company. Once my son Don and I and Ed Chickite were fishing off Nanaimo and took in sixteen thousand fish between us. I called in for the packer. "Where are you?" "Never mind," I said. "You send the packer into Active Pass and we'll meet you there!"

There were times when the company told me to fish someplace, and I wouldn't go there because I knew the fish had gone through. One of those times was when I was coming home to Cape Mudge after a week's fishing up around Alert Bay. I had a crew of five with me and it was getting rough, so I tied up in Robson Bight. I just happened to check with the blue book and saw that in the year past on the same date the fish were up around Addenbroke Light. So I left that night and went north. It was slow going in the weather, but we reached Addenbroke around eleven in the morning. Two boats were already there, and the men on them called over to me and told me that I had just missed my boys Steve, Mel, and Don and their cousin Bobby Clifton. The company had ordered the four boats further north into Whales Channel. After that, the two boats pulled out, and we went 'round into the channel behind Addenbroke Island. There were millions of fish, heading south for Rivers Inlet! Well, I told the crew we'll just go ahead and have our meal and wait for the fish to round a certain point of land. Then we hauled in four thousand salmon in four sets. The next day I got seven thousand fish in six sets, and we headed for the nearest packer at k'akum (Kwakwaka'wakw Inlet). After we offloaded, I took my boat into Namu for the night. There I got my boys on the phone and told them the fish were hitting at Addenbroke and to get on down to join me.

In those days Ross Nicholson in Vancouver held a conference at 8 P.M. with all the boats fishing for the company. The skipper on the packer had tipped him off about the number of fish we had brought in, so he got me on the phone and wanted to know where we got them. I didn't want to tell everybody on the boats where the fish were, so I said, "In the water." Oh, he got mad! "Please tell me where you got those fish!" I told him at Addenbroke; and my records showed they would be there. "Your record must be pretty good," he said.

We went out to Addenbroke again the next day, but there wasn't

much, so we headed home. On the way I got a call from Ross. He wanted to know why I left Addenbroke. I told him, and he asked me to call in at the office in Alert Bay. The product manager there called me into his office and ordered me back to Addenbroke. So I told him, "You want to own me *and* the boat! Well, you can't own me! You go ahead and take the boat! I'm not going back to Addenbroke." I knew that by this time the fish were down south heading for Johnstone Strait. He said, "What you going to do?" "I'm going to pull my net off. You want to run the boat, so take it! There are lots of other companies who want me to fish for them."

Well, Ross Nicholson flew in to Alert Bay from Vancouver, and he came down to the wharf and asked me to come up to the office. "What for? I don't like anyone that tries to run me! I'm the fisherman. He just sits in the office. He doesn't know what goes on on the water." So after a while with people going up and down between the wharf and the office, Ross came down and said to me, "I don't want to lose you. We're not going to bother you again. Go ahead and do what you like." So we fished down Johnstone Strait on the way home and brought in two thousand salmon to the packer at Knox Bay on the way.

We were always able to take care of ourselves. Indians don't join unions. I look at it this way. There is no help from the unions. If you are fired, the union cannot give you a job. It's the company that gave you the job. In the early days before I bought a boat of my own, I ran a company boat. In the company, if they thought you were a strong union man, they wouldn't have anything to do with you.

Native people and the people who managed the canneries worked pretty well together from the beginning. When the unions involved our people in a big strike up at Rivers Inlet around 1916, we lost out on our whole summer fishing season. What we lost out on was not just a job. Fishing is our living, our way of life! We own these waters, and we have to be able to fish them. That's why we have small reserves. Interior Indians have big land reserves. They need them for ranching and trapping. We need the sea for fishing.

After that strike our people got together at a big meeting at Alert Bay. My father and brother Dan went up, and an association for native fishermen was formed. My father and Dan went to all the villages in our area and on the West Coast and told our people how to protect themselves with their own association. Later, in 1936, we widened the membership to include seiners, gill-netters, and trollers. That was the Pacific Coast Native Fishermen's Association. It worked well for us. Then in 1938, Alfred Adams, Douglas Edenshaw, and Heber Clifton came down the



coast from the Charlottes forming the Native Brotherhood. When they reached these parts, we turned over the money we held in the Fishermen's Association and joined the Brotherhood. My father is still remembered all up and down the coast for his part in protecting the fishing rights of our people. The Native Brotherhood is still strong in our area.

In 1929 we were going to strike right here at the cannery in Quathiaski Cove. Our Brotherhood representatives went with us to see W. E. Anderson. We demanded a higher price for fish. We were really surprised at his reaction. No questions asked. "If you guys want it, you got it!"

August 1937 was the last great fishing season in the old cannery days. That year I brought in twelve thousand sockeye, sixteen thousand pinks, and nine thousand chums to the cannery. In one lucky day I brought in forty thousand fish in two sets! I took my boat into Johnstone Strait and brought in twenty-five thousand fish in the first set: pinks, coho, and sockeye. After that set we went over to Green Sea Bay on Sonora Island and made a second set. From there we could see the salmon jumping all the way across the passage to Rock Bay on Vancouver Island. The crew wanted to tie up to shore, but I said no. If we had tied up to shore, we would have ended by having to dump four to five thousand fish because there would be no room in the holds of our boat. We used half a net and pulled in another fifteen thousand.

At the cannery at Quathiaski Cove, they couldn't keep up with the loads of fish coming in. The cannery would be working till eleven o'clock at night or later and starting up again at seven in the morning. In this particular year they were going from June to October. Spring, pink, sockeye, and chums were all heading down to the Fraser River. Fish brought in to the cannery that could not be handled before the night was through would be taken out into the middle of Discovery Passage and dumped; otherwise the fish went soft and were not fit for canning. Sometimes ten to fifteen thousand fish were taken out and dumped. There were so many fish that the cannery could not get the packers out to where the boats were. We were told to take only one load a day. I'd set once in the morning, fill my boat, and in an hour and a half be in to the cannery. Oh, there were a lot of fish of all kinds!

Fishing fell off after that, and in August 1941 when the cannery was in full swing, the whole operation was wiped out by fire. It happened in the early morning. When the watchman came along to blow the whistle, he saw the fire and fainted. I was in my boat up in Johnstone Strait. The cannery manager was on a boat nearby. I don't know how he knew about the fire because we had no telephones on our boats, but he came along-

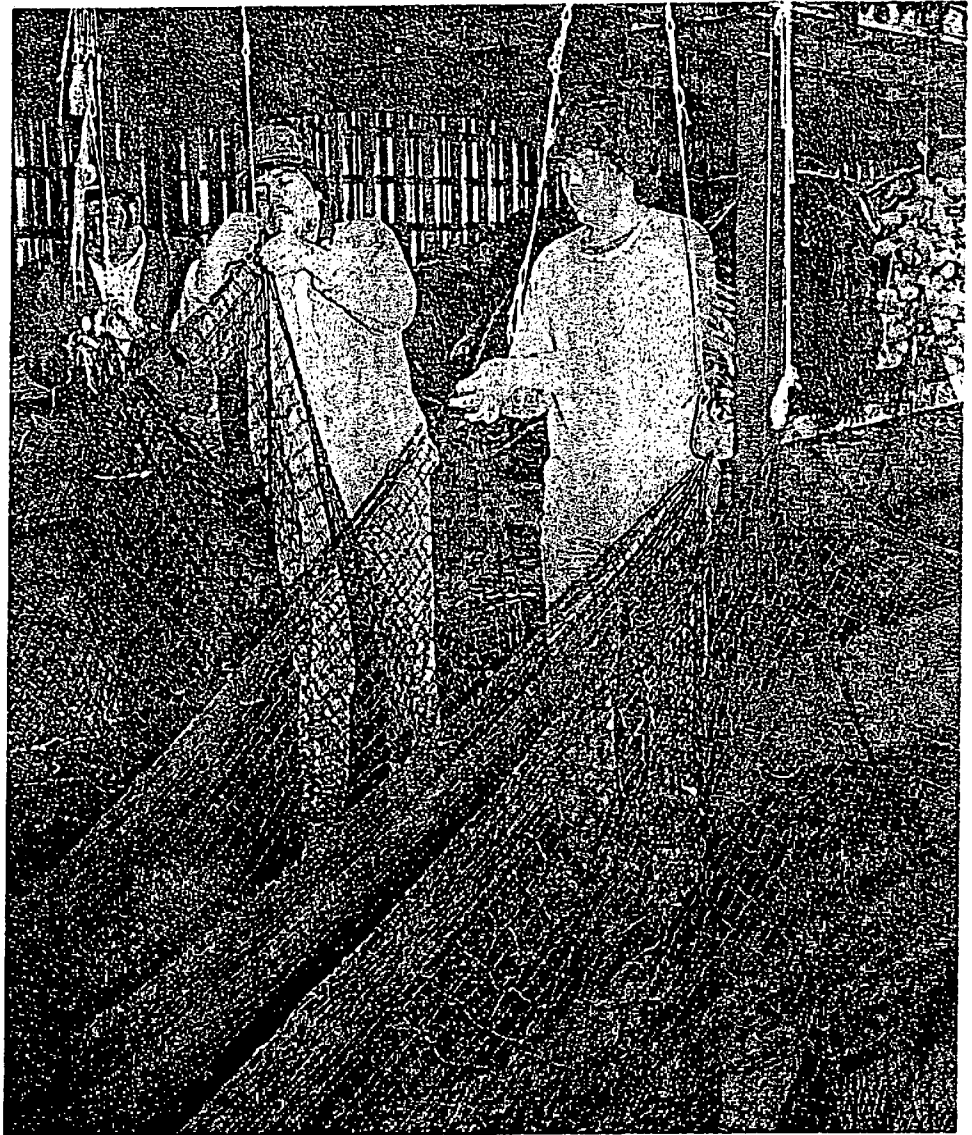
side and told me, "Our cannery has burnt down."

There used to be a lot of fish, but what has been allowed to happen on the coast where we are has made the numbers go down. It is the logging that has ruined the fishing.

Before 1930 there was a regulation that prevented logging within half a mile of a salmon spawning stream. There have to be trees along a river bed, or it goes dry and the fish do not have the water they need. That's what happened to all the little creeks that went dead and to big rivers like the Oyster that are only now coming back to life. Now second-growth timber growing on the old cuts is beginning to hold the water in the gravel beds where the salmon spawn.

But now in the 80's the logging companies can take the trees right up

*Plate 24  
In the B.C. Packers net loft, Quathiaski  
Cove. From left to right, Mel Assu (in  
shadow), with sons Perry and Douglas  
Photo by John Gordon, 1985*



to the stream bed. If they get a big price, like a thousand dollars a tree for fine cedars along the stream, they go right ahead and fall them. If there are only a few spawning salmon left or the price of fish is down, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans won't try to stop them.

Everyone realizes that fishing has been sacrificed for logging in British Columbia. Until this year when the stocks of fish are building up again, it looked to us like our fishery was being wiped out.

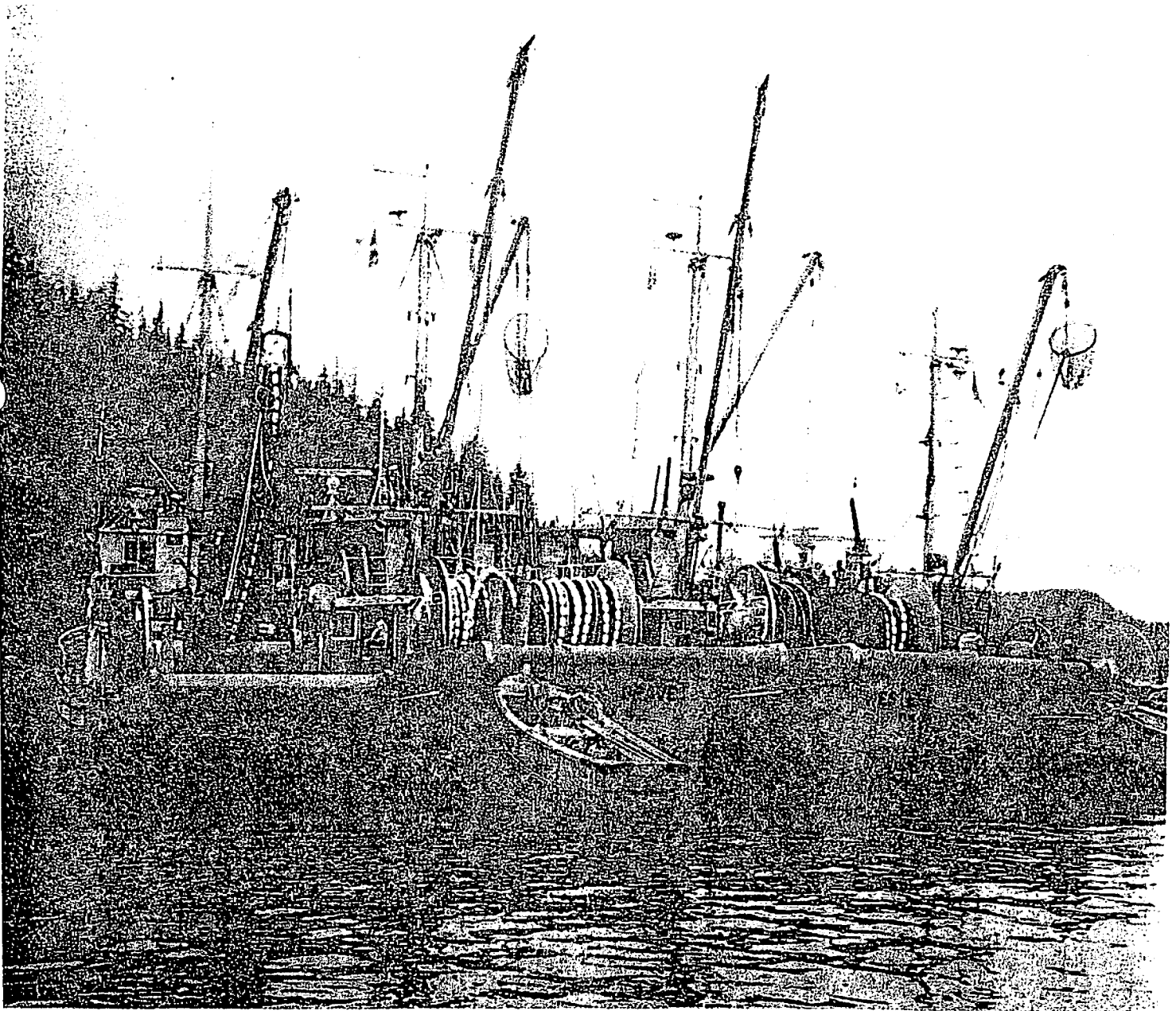
In the summer of '85 there were around six hundred seine boats in all on this coast. Only one hundred of these would be run by native people. The number of our native people fishing in their own waters here on the coast has fallen off with the poor harvests and the restrictions on fishing. While our people lost out in many places, the number of non-Indian "fishermen" buying seiners on these waters built up. In my days as a full-time fisherman, there were only about three hundred seiners, and the fish were here in great numbers as they had always been. Because too many boats have been chasing too few fish, some of our people who were fishing people here for thousands of years have been forced out of business.

Fisheries want the seine-boat fleet to be cut down, and I have been consulted by Fisheries on how to do it. A few years ago when Dr. Pearse was heading a commission to look into the whole matter of how to handle the fishing crisis on this coast, he phoned me and asked my opinion.<sup>2</sup> I told him that the fair way to cut down on the number of seine boats fishing is to take off the drum. If these seiners had to take off the drum, *real* fishermen could make a living in this business. But the "prairie farmers" and business investors would have to go. They would have to get out of the commercial fishing because they couldn't handle the job. When you are table-seining, you have to know what you are doing – what time to set your net, how to get it in when it's snagged, and all that.

Families fishing since 1925 know how to use the power block and tackle and could handle the table method. While I was in Japan recently, they arranged for me to stay with a fishing family in a village where they drag-seine off the beach for needle fish. Over there, if a family is fishing, they stay fishing. Nobody else can get in. That is the way I see it too. That is the right way. Indians would continue to fish here even if they took the drum off because our families know all the ways of fishing from the beginning. They are fishing people. People coming into the fishing business lately who are not real fishermen would be the ones to get out. If it wasn't for the drum, half the boats would be out of the fleet, and that's what's wanted. Anyone willing and able to handle the table

*Plate 25*

*The seiners at the centre are Western Brave, owned by Don Assu, and Western Eagle, owned by Steve Assu. At left is the W9, owned by Don Assu and skippered by his son Brian. Photo by Patrick Assu, 1980*



method could stay in.

Pearse said that there would be a problem because of the millions of dollars that have been invested in big modern seiners with drums. When our people move into big modern seiners with drums, we have a licence to run that new boat. It is transferred from whatever boat we owned before. We wonder where the businessmen who are investing their money in big seiners are getting their licences from. A new licence isn't legal. You have to get a licence from someone going out of the business. Legally there are no new licences. This is supposed to control the competition on the water for the limited number of fish. So where are the new licences issued by the federal government for big new seiners coming from?

I was the last to put a drum on my boat. I was fishing for B.C. Packers, and they asked me why I was doing it. I was always better than average each year. I had to do that to get men to work for me! It's a lot easier with the drum. If they took off the drum, fewer fish would be taken. You can make twenty-five sets a day with the drum and only five with the table. Fishing with the drum is dangerous. Even with tons of ballast it is risky. Many boats have been lost and lots of men drowned since they put on the drum.

Once when I was out on my son Don's boat, the *Western Brave*—a seventy-foot seiner—and we were going through Seymour Narrows at Ripple Rock, we slowed right down because it's really dangerous there. Behind us two boats were coming on at full speed, and when they hit the rip they shot clear across the channel. Lucky they didn't roll over—not much experience and in dangerous water, with boats top-heavy with drums. Repair bills for one boat salvaged after a roll-over in the narrows came to \$100,000. Well, that's why marine insurance companies are going broke!

Just get rid of the drum, the radio, and the sonar if you want to know who the real fishermen are. Some of the latest gear for tracking fish doesn't seem right to me. The fish don't have a chance. The sonar that showed the schools of fish under the boat now lights up red or green tracking the fish as they move north or south under the boat. I went after the government to try to stop it. It makes me uneasy because the fair chance between the fish and our people that we always had in the old days is going forever. I'm against that.

Fisheries officers never used to listen to us. Now there seems to be a policy that they should consult us. They listen, but they don't hear. The department seems to bring in officers from the prairies. It doesn't make sense. They don't do anything about the serious situation the fishermen

are in on this coast because they don't understand what's going on.

In 1984 when I was down at Willow Point, just south of Campbell River, a storekeeper showed me a truck loaded with fish in hot ice. He had been watching these guys bringing in one truckload of fish after another, and he wanted me to check on it. They were not sports-fishermen taking only a few per person because of the legal limit. They were taking all they could get their hands on, probably to sell in Vancouver. I phoned Fisheries in Campbell River. I told them what was happening and asked them to get down there quick. Their office is only a fifteen-minute drive from Willow Point. I waited there wondering why they never came. Finally, I phoned them back. They said that by the time they could have gotten there and back, it would have been after their office hours!

That's not the only time I have called Fisheries to help me control people breaking the law. A guy from Campbell River had set up a holding net for "herring" off our wharf at Cape Mudge. He was taking them across Discovery Passage to the wharf on the Campbell River side to sell to boaters or fishing resorts or whoever is buying herring bait for salmon. I went down and had a look at these fish. There were eight tons of young salmon. They were curling and flipping, and I knew all the kinds. I asked him, "Do you know what you have there?" "Herring," he said. "Listen here," I said. "Those are not herring; herring don't jump like that!" I was really mad. I told him: "You are breaking the law." He only said, "Oh, I didn't know." He knew.

My house is right above the wharf. I went straight there and phoned Fisheries. I asked them to stop him when he brought the next load of salmon fry into the wharf at Campbell River or to come across to our side and I would show them what was in the holding net. That man took five boatloads across to Campbell River. The next morning I phoned Fisheries. "Why didn't you get him when he came in on your side?" I asked. They had never even gone down to the wharf!

We all know about this; that's the way it is. Fisheries blames it on too few men on the job. They did a lot better in handling the fisheries when they had only one man on the job in my time!

Once when there was a lot of our boats up around Robson Bight waiting for the 6:30 A.M. time for setting our nets, we all saw this guy setting ahead of time. We decided to report him to Fisheries. In the afternoon we all went in to Port McNeill and phoned Fisheries. So, what happened? Nothing happened! Now when the Fisheries people come to me saying that some of our people are breaking the law, I remember those things. I tell them "That's your business, if someone is breaking the law,

arrest them. Don't come to me!"

Nineteen eighty-five turned out to be the greatest fishing year in many years. For sockeye it was the best year since 1913. In the fall Johnstone Strait was a river of fish. There must have been five million chums running south to spawn. It was the first year in twelve years that we were permitted to take chum salmon. They were sweeping in from the cold waters of the North Pacific and moving down Queen Charlotte Strait, Johnstone Strait, and Discovery Passage. Out on the west coast of Vancouver Island, the fish rounded the southern tip and headed across the Strait of Georgia into the mouth of the Fraser River. It was a great year for fishing, but we were told we couldn't go out and fish!

While I was in Japan recently, the head of their Fisheries for Hokkaido Island was sitting next to me at dinner. He told me their people had tracked the salmon down the Pacific Coast to California and all the way back up to the Arctic where they make a big turn and head down the coast again to their spawning streams in Canadian waters. Before the fish head for California and are in international waters, the Japanese take them in huge factory ships. They run out lines for five miles, baited every two feet with hooks and bring in loaded lines with the salmon weighing two and a half to three and a half pounds. They put them up in tins right there on board ship. One reason for the big run of fish in our own local waters in 1985 was that the Japanese fishermen were on strike. Japan has had to move its fishing limit line back a hundred miles toward their own coast, and that helps preserve the salmon returning to their streams in Canadian waters.

The fish stocks here were building up, and we knew that 1985 was going to be a big one, but Fisheries kept the restrictions on fishing time for seiners to twenty-four hours in any one week or, at the most, forty-eight hours. In 1984, I wanted to prove to them that there was an increase in the numbers of all kinds of salmon passing through Johnstone Strait because we wanted to be allowed one additional twenty-four-hour period to take them. There were a lot of salmon. I took Fisheries officers out on my grandson Brian's boat—the *Western Monarch*. It was the end of the season; we were the last boat farthest south in Johnstone Strait. All other boats north of us had a chance to take the salmon before we did. I told Brian where to tie up and set, and we brought in two thousand fish of all kinds in two sets. Even that didn't convince the federal Fisheries people here that more fish could safely be taken by commercial fishermen without affecting the spawning.

Thousands more fish were passing under the boat in Johnstone Strait. They were heading for the Fraser River. There were too many salmon al-

ready entering the river! We told them that. Fisheries will call you in to consult: they ask your opinion – I don't know why, because you can't tell them anything.

In 1985, the Americans, who are restricted from taking too many sockeye returning by the southern route round Vancouver Island to their spawning grounds in Canada, have been taking our chums over the limit. These fall fish are covered by the treaty between our countries which limits the American take to a small proportion of the run. American gill-netters and seiners waited off Point Roberts, and when the tide went out sweeping the fish into U.S. waters, they scooped them up. Ninety thousand in one day! And while this was going on, we were tied up at the wharf! Canadians, refused the right to fish!

Up until the late 1930's I food-fished for our people in three villages, Cape Mudge, Campbell River, and Comox. It had been necessary ever since native people sold the catch they made each year to the company. So I'd bring in two or three thousand fish in a set and distribute them to all the families for their winter food. In the early forties I got the regulation on food-fishing changed so that families could go out and get their own fish twice a year. The regulation today makes it possible for any native fisherman to apply for a food-fishing permit, stating the number of fish required and for how many families. Fisheries boats are supposed to stand by. These fish for food have a fin and tip of nose cut off so they can't be sold – except illegally. We want this illegal sale stopped. We don't want the sale of food-fish made legal either. It would wipe out the fishery for honest fishermen, native and non-native alike.

Today native fishermen can apply for a cheaper licence for their boat; but with that restricted licence, only another native fisherman can buy the boat that uses that licence. But all Assu boats pay the full sixteen-hundred dollars to renew their annual licence so that they are not restricted. Our boats can incorporate as a business. It is of no advantage to the skipper/owner, but no income tax needs to be paid on the crew's wages because the business originates on the reserve. This helps the younger men coming on as crew to get started financially. We are negotiating with the government for a loan fund so that when our people are ready to get into the business they can buy a boat. It is hard for native people to get into this high-cost business today. Insurance on boats is high. And if there are not enough days opening to catch fish, you can lose your boat. It costs some of our seiners a thousand dollars a day just to be tied up at the wharf.

Because we are prevented from taking the salmon, there is a terrible waste of the fish. On the Skeena, the Fisheries made a mistake and as



usual underestimated the number of sockeye that could be taken in 1985. Thousands of fish died trying to enter the river to spawn. The fishermen knew they were there because they are the experts, but the Fisheries thought they knew better. Now it is the same up Rivers Inlet, Bute Inlet, Loughborough Inlet; the salmon returned to spawn in their millions, but we were prevented from taking them. By taking these fish, we would have stopped the second run from digging out the eggs of fish that had already gone upriver and spawned. There were too many fish up the rivers already.

Here in Johnstone Strait they closed the fishing the first week in September when the pinks had gone through. Then they permitted only one day after that, on October 7th, for just twenty-four hours for chums. In area twelve and thirteen - Alert Bay to the southern end of Johnstone Strait - 381,000 fish were taken by four hundred boats on that one-day opening. It should have been plain proof to Fisheries that a great run of fish was underway, but they kept on with closure.

Over at Nitinat on the west coast of Vancouver Island an opening was allowed for one day extra. Fisheries figured on a surplus of a hundred thousand fish. The fishermen took in over a million fish on that one day. There was no problem for the canneries. Most of the catch was sent up to the Prince Rupert canneries. Any chum salmon brought down to Fraser were just iced up and shipped to Japan.

Our biggest problem is getting enough time on the water to make a living fishing. We have only twenty-four hours a week for seining; and at best we may get two days a week; yet the cost of this business has shot up high.

Even when we know that a great number of fish are passing through Johnstone Strait, we can't get Fisheries to understand that. They refuse to grant another day opening or an extension of the season.

I know what is happening in the sea. I know how many salmon are moving down to the Fraser River to spawn and how many we can take without affecting a good spawning. I know because I have a lifetime of experience on the water and the experience of my people before me. In 1984 I went to Fisheries to tell them that there were a million salmon between our area and the Fraser River, so we should have a few more days fishing here while the fish are in good condition and bring the best price. The Fisheries officer said to me, "Oh, is that what you think?" "No!" I answered. "That's not what I think, that's what I know."

We have the Native Brotherhood to take up problems like this for us. They negotiate the price we receive for our fish with the companies every year. The Native Brotherhood works out the price with the United

Fishermen and Allied Worker's Union, but we are independent. The Native Brotherhood has meant everything to the Indians. We get together in convention every year and handle our legal problems and anything else that comes up. That's where we plan for the future. During the fishing season the officers of the Native Brotherhood are out fishing, so sometimes we have to take direct action ourselves until we can bring it to the meeting; then they back us up.

The Native Brotherhood is as active here now as it used to be farther north along the coast. The numbers of boats owned or operated by native fishermen in our area has built up in recent years, and we are all Native Brotherhood here. Most of our boats used to be gill-nets, but after the 1940's more seiners came into use. We'd be changing over during the season, with the gill-netters going north to Rivers Inlet in June, and when they returned in August, a shift over was made to the seiners.

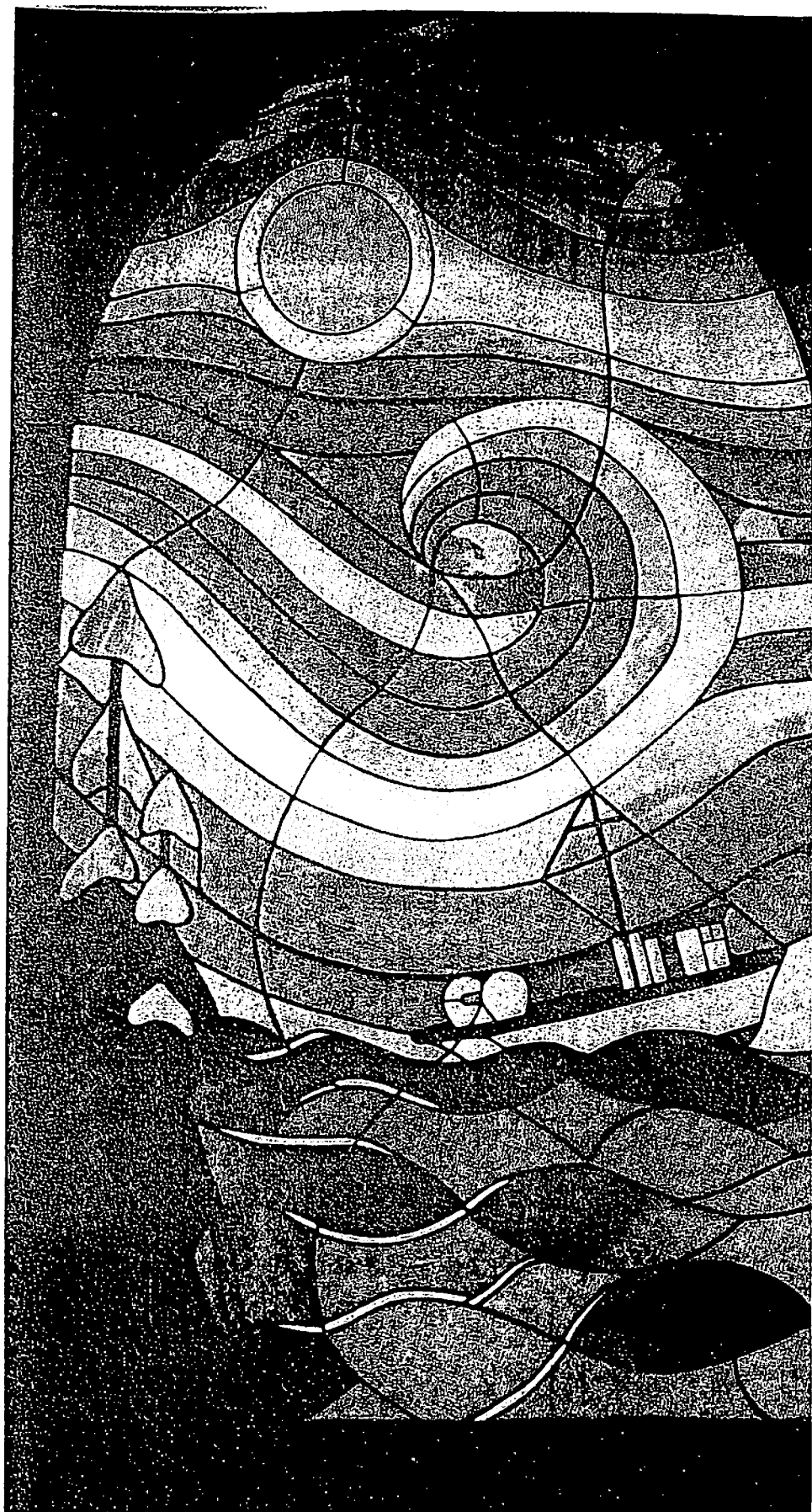
In the old times, the fishing grounds for our people was the Queen Charlotte Strait and Johnstone Strait region and other areas nearby. For the Lekwiltok (our tribe including Cape Mudge) the fishing area was on Johnstone Strait and on the Mainland opposite. We fish mainly today in Johnstone Strait. It's almost entirely seiners now, and seiners can't fish farther south in the Strait of Georgia.

Each family with boats at Cape Mudge and Campbell River has their own place for fishing in Johnstone Strait, and the others understand that. It works like this today; the seven seiners of the Assu family start at Green Sea Bay and fish to Little Bear River. The four Lewis seiners hang around above Little Bear River at Ripple Point. Above that the Roberts family run their six seiners. The four Quocksister seiners are far up around Camp Point below Salmon River. The Dicks have two seiners and stay just below Pineapple Point south of Bear River. The Price family run two seiners, the Billy family run two seiners, and the Chickite family three seiners—all in fishing places around Green Sea Bay. The Chickite family also have two gill-netters. The Greys have a troller long-liner. The gill-netters and trollers fish up around Deepwater Bay, but they can move anywhere in Johnstone Strait or the Strait of Georgia.

A lot of families own aluminum punts with motors for roe-herring fishing. There are very big runs of herring out on the west coast in spring when they come in a path a mile wide and ten to twelve miles long. Some years Fisheries decide to close the herring fishery on the west coast altogether. No openings for us to fish!

The world market for fish has been good. The economy on this coast has been very bad. Our towns rely on the commercial fishermen. If they have a bad year, the retail stores suffer because they are the ones who

Plate 26  
*Fishing imagery in stained glass  
Window in the Quadra Island United  
Church. Commissioned by Ruby  
Wilson in honour of her parents, Louise  
and James Howell. Photo by Bob  
Pleus, 1985*



supply the fleet. Prosperous fishermen ensure a prosperous economy. Some people say that federal Fisheries just doesn't understand regional problems, and we would be better off under the provincial government. But the provincial government is more anxious for the success of the sports fishery because of tourism than they are for the livelihood of local fishing people. Fish farms are being encouraged (newcomers, some of them bringing in Atlantic salmon which are subject to various diseases) instead of solving the basic problems of the fishing people. You can't solve basic problems by encouraging competition in the market for fish.

In 1985, in a last try to show Fisheries that there were millions of fish going through Johnstone Strait on their way to spawn, my son Mel took the guys from Fisheries, Safeway Ltd., and United Fisherman's and Allied Workers Union out into Johnstone Strait to make a test set. We brought in three thousand fish. It was blowing so hard that we had to make a set where we could and not where the fish were. I estimate that five million fish went through the passage then. The take could have been much larger if we could have gone where they were. We were refused another twenty-four hours' fishing, and the season closed.

So, our women went to the Fisheries office to protest. At first no one would speak to them. They went there to demand a day's opening. They know that the Fisheries make these test sets in a pattern and that the fish don't run in these patterns. You have to be a fisherman on the water fishing to know where the fish are running.

I called in at the Fisheries office because I had a meeting there. I was really surprised to see the women crowded into the office; some were even sitting on the floor. My own daughter, my daughter-in-law, and the wife of my grandson were there! When Fisheries officers finally agreed to meet with them, their demand for another day fishing was refused. I figure seiners on this coast lost \$2.5 million in the best season ever since 1937 because of Fisheries bungling. We lost out, the whole community lost out, while the fish died by the thousands at the river mouths.

The last opening of the season was November 25th farther south at the mouth of the Qualicum River on Vancouver Island. By the time that catch was taken the fish were rotting, and B.C. Packers refused to pack the garbage.

It is hard to see into the future for our people. Some people say that we should go the same way as native people in Washington State where half the catch is guaranteed to them by law. If they don't get 50 per cent of the catch, they can use their own methods like weirs to bring in their share.<sup>3</sup> But here the native share of the catch is not the problem. We do well in the industry. What we are struggling with are those things that

affect the whole industry: buying back boats to reduce the fleet, stopping the issuing of new licences, protesting the setting up of fish farms. The regulation governing our time for fishing in these waters doesn't make sense because the Fisheries don't know what's going on out there and can't control it anyway. I told them so at a big meeting here with Fisheries where all commercial fishermen were protesting. I told them, "You should all be fired!"

There will have to be altogether new directions to get us out of this situation. We have to look to the future possibilities. Perhaps flying in fresh fish to the early morning fish market in Tokyo where nearly a million people gather every day to buy. It would bring the highest prices for the finest quality fish. We have to take new directions. That's the way it has always been for our people here at Cape Mudge.