

STEWARDS OF THE SEA IN BODEGA BAY

Honoring The Fishermen of Bodega Bay

by Andrea Granahan - 2021

The fishing industry has gone through many changes through the years since World War II. One of the most dramatic was its changing role from “**farmers of the sea**” who harvested their catch, to the “**stewards of the sea**”. Fishermen in general and especially our local fisherman play an important role in conserving and protecting the fishery and the waters off Bodega Bay and the California Coast. It was not an easy or peaceful transition, but some key players turned it into success.

Farmers of the Sea

During the war only esoteric scientists even used the word “environment”. Bill and Steve Smith, two brothers, ran the only fish receiving business in Bodega Bay, until war was declared. “Food” was the operative word in play, because the troops needed valuable protein. Then, two important things happened: California banned ring nets for catching crab and more fish receiving stations moved into Bodega Bay, including one that would prove to be an important protein resource, *Meredith Fisheries*.

Phasing out ring-nets led to the Carpenter family moving to town from the Oregon Coast. Ring-nets were time consuming, demanding constant care by fishermen. Ring-nets were inefficient, catching just one or two crabs at a time while scooping up and killing loads of other sea life

In Oregon, fishermen made and used round, durable crab pots that made a real catch possible with each trip. One of the most successful fishermen, **Ray Carpenter**, made the move and taught locals his skills. His son Earl Carpenter, married Glenice Ames and became one of the most respected fishermen in Bodega Bay, earning the nickname “The Captain” by his colleagues for his work and influence in the industry, as well as his successful catches.

Until the war ended, all anyone could think of was feeding the troops. By that time, the general public had discovered the joys of fresh crab, not canned, and frozen fresh fish so it could be enjoyed far from the coast. Business thrived in Bodega Bay. Food was still the driving force in the fishing fleet.



But something ugly was rearing its head.

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Fishermen were forced to wrangle with greedy fish buyers, wholesalers wanting more and more profit. Buyers squeezed out fishermen who actually went about the dangerous business of catching fish, paying as little as possible for the sometimes tragic work. Each fisher was in business for himself, making it easy for the buyers to pick off the fishers one-by-one with low-prices. So the fishers banded together to form the **Bodega Bay Fishermen's Association** to effectively bargain with buyers as a group. Back in Washington DC, when McCarthy-era politicians learned of unions, they determined collective bargaining leaned towards socialism. Collective bargaining was outlawed in 1952.

Fishermen were back at the mercy of the buyers. The former members of the outlawed association tried to figure a way to continue collective bargaining. They came up with a clever idea and formed a local chapter of the Grange. **The National Grange** was originally formed after the Civil War in rural areas so widowed and orphaned children of rural farmers killed during the war could collectively bargain and purchase supplies, aid and educate each other. Bodega Bay's fishermen successfully made the case they were "Farmers of the Sea" and formed Chapter #777. Politicians could eat their hats and the fishermen united were a powerful force. Together with 150 members, local volunteer labor built our Grange Hall, a key public gathering place in Bodega Bay. It is still one of the few "fishing Grange."



A decade later in the 1960s, the rural co-op movement became popular. Consumer cooperatives, owned by members, used the co-op to purchase the goods or services that they needed, eliminating the wholesaler. The fishermen, using the laws that allowed co-ops, re-formed their association, but by that time the Bodega Bay Grange had become a major institution which thrives and which supplies their community to this day. For years teens got their first cars with loans from the Grange Credit Union, and Grange Chapter #777 handed out generous scholarships to them when they graduated.

(To be continued in the RBHS Spring 2022 issue)