

FROM THE ARCHIVES

A brief history of the Fishing Industry in Bodega Bay

It all began with the Smith family, descendants of Capt. Stephen Smith, the 1840's grantee of the Bodega Rancho and their Coast Miwok mother named Tsupu (also known as Maria Checka). Captain Smith's and Tsupu's son William (Bill) Smith was born in 1843. He married Rosalie Charles and they had 12 children. Mark Linares, their second great-grandchild wrote their story.

By the tum of the 20th century William Smith was fishing from small boats off the sand spit now known as Doran Beach. He sold his catch from a truck and his small fish market on the 300th block of Santa Rosa's Fourth Street. In 1919, Williams six sons, the "Smith Brothers" bought the first drag boats into the Bay and contracted to sell fish in San Francisco establishing themselves as the first true commercial fishermen in Bodega Bay.

It was in August 1844 when Captain Stephen Smith successfully petitioned the Mexican Governor of California, Manuel Micheltorena to grant him 35,487 acres of land. Captain Smith purchased the buildings from John Sutter, who had purchased Fort Ross from the Russians. Smith's Bodega Rancho stretched from the Russian River along the coast south to Estero Americano. Captain Smith owned a small vessel called the Fayaway, which he sailed between the Port of Bodega and San Francisco. In 1849 the passenger fare was \$14. Bodega Bay was Smith's shipping port which helped develop the area into a commercial fishing port.

In the early 1900's with the help of his Coast Miwok family William Smith founded the commercial fishing industry in Bodega Bay. William Smith purchased land along the bay from the Dorans for a place for his fishing business and home. The family home was located where the Bodega Coast Inn now stands, next to the post office. Their business lasted until the early 1970s. The Smith Brothers wharf and warehouse was the first in Bodega Bay. Smith Brothers Road is named in honor of the brothers. The Smith Brothers wharf was where the Bodega Harbour Yacht Club is currently located diagonally across from the Bodega Bay Post Office.

For years Bill Smith continued selling his catch in Sonoma County making a fair living for his family. As his children reached maturity they too became involved in the business. In 1911 five of the Smith brothers went to fish in Alaska. In just one season they earned enough to buy two 50-foot trawlers from the Boat Works in Sausalito, named Smith Brothers #1 and #2. The brothers began selling their catch at the fish market they operated on Fourth Street in Santa Rosa.

Salmon Discovered. It was sometime around the "Great War" World War I when Bill's sons discovered large runs of salmon at Bodega Bay. Up until then salmon fishing was farther north at Fort Bragg but during the war fisherman were too short-handed to go that far. Discovering salmon caused a tremendous surge of fishing in Bodega Bay.

Sometime before 1927 according to Young (Pinky) Smith, the Smith Brothers Fishery was incorporated with five of the working brothers. They were joined by boats skippered by Bobby Friscia and the Cacacci brothers. The port was more mud flat than water. There was no real town just a community known simply as Bay with a schoolhouse and a few houses. By the 1930s the Smith brothers had the largest fleet in the bay and were doing business with Paladini, the San Francisco fish firm. The Smith Brothers' fleet would take fifty or seventy boxes of salmon or bottom fish per day. After more than 70 years as a fisherman Bill Smith passed away on November 9, 1936. The business Bill started prospered and his sons continued running the Smith Brothers Fishery.

Bill Smith Jr. recalled the "old days" when the brothers were just boys and their father started the commercial fishing industry. He said that his family had been fishing in Bodega Bay "almost ever since there's been a bay here." Adding "There's a lot more to commercial fishing than just going out with an empty boat and coming back with one filled with fish or crabs. There's a lot of work bringing it to the table."

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The "golden age of the fishing industry begins." The 1940's were when Dungeness crab became part of the fishery. Although the Smith family had netted crabs in the bay and ocean for years, the crab industry was really born during World War II. The early 1940s brought forth quick freezing techniques. Changes in technology turned the crab industry into a new line of work for fishermen and women. By 1943, "the fishing industry at Bodega Bay had shore-side installations valued at \$230,000 and locally owned boats valued in excess of half a million dollars."

During the Second World War, commercial boats were exempt from fuel rationing. Glenice Ames Carpenter wrote an article for the Rancho Bodega Historical Society's newsletter. "During this time, the fishing boats were engaged in catching soup fin sharks because their liver was valuable for vitamins. Catching sharks for livers brought a boom to Bodega Bay's fishing industry." But when synthetic vitamins began to be commercially produced, "Many fishermen were left with a shed full of nets and nothing to fish." Glenice Carpenter's husband Earl Carpenter fished for a half a century from Bodega Bay. Earl said "The Smith brothers made enough money from shark fishing to build their wharf." The fleet numbered about a dozen when the Carpenters arrived in 1942 and increased with the dredging of the channel in the early 1940's, when the "golden age of the fishing industry began." The Smith Brothers Fishery continued with the five Smith brothers. When two of the brothers passed away the Fishery closed in 1963. The three remaining brothers fished until 1970 or so.

The Golden Age of Commercial fishing is well, over. Unfortunately salmon fishing took a tum for the worse in 1989 when human alteration and damage to streams and rivers where Coho salmon spawn took its toll on the fish population. This tum of events sent many a fisherman looking for other employment while those that remained looked for short-term relief and long-term solutions. In the spring of 1995, Salmon fishing prospects began to look good again, but the previous few years tempered the optimism with caution. It recognized that the health of the fishing industry is too fragile to take for granted. In the recent years salmon fishing has decreased drastically due to restrictions by the California Department of Fish and Game, because of warmer waters and a seven-year record breaking drought. Restrictions and Marine Conservation Reserves are in place to help prevent the extinction of the Wild King (Coho) Salmon.

Fishermen sought other species of fish and sea life such as crabs and sea urchins to make their living. Then in 2015 and 2016, Domoic Acid, a neurotoxin, severely curtailed the crab fisheries. Nonetheless the fishing industry remains an important part of today's Bodega Bay with crab, rockfish and sole fisheries of major importance. A sea urchin industry developed to serve the Japanese market where the spiny creature's roe is considered a delicacy, and because of our recreational fishing industry, the local fishermen's eateries continue to thrive. ■

