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How to Catch a Fish: The Weir Fishermen’s Control of the Sardine Herring, 1876–1903

Brian Payne

In 1876, Julius Wolff of New York’s Wolff & Ressing cannery firm arrived in Eastport, Maine to try his hand at producing a domestic sardine that could compete with the European imports. He successfully canned 600 cases of sardines, which quickly sold in the New York market for up to $12.00 a case. The following year Wolff & Ressing started the Eagle Preserved Fish Company in Eastport. Although Wolff tried to keep his new business venture a secret the profits were undeniable and new sardine factories quickly sprung up in Eastport, Lubec, and Robbinston. The sardine industry expanded so rapidly that by 1887, Hugh Smith of the US Fish Commission reported that “a large majority of the people, both along the American shore and on the British islands, are wholly dependent upon the sardine industry for a livelihood.”

By 1899 sixty-eight plants in Maine produced 1,170,568 cases of sardines valued at $3,352,076. Not only did the added competition among the canneries decrease the retail value of sardines, it also increased the cost of the principal raw material, the herring fish. The factories were in such fierce competition with one another in acquiring the...
juvenile herring fish from the local weir fishermen, who wholly controlled the supply, that they were forced to pay the fishermen, according to Hugh Smith, “a very much larger figure for their fish than the business will warrant.” Throughout the period of 1875 to 1903 weir fishermen maintained high prices for their catch by selling it via an auction system that directly pitted competing canneries against one another. In an effort to stabilize the price of herring a number of plants formed an association in 1885. This association tried to establish a fixed price for the herring fish in order to break the weir men’s use of the auction system, but a small group of the more profitable weir fishermen responded by opening their own cannery and paying high prices for the juvenile herring fish. This forced the other canneries to, one by one, break from the association and return to purchasing the fish on the open market. In 1899 the sardine factories were more successful in forming a combine. In that year two different syndicate factions formed, and two years later these two syndicates combined to become the Seacoast Canning Company, also known simply as “The Syndicate.”

The Syndicate controlled 75% of the canneries in Maine, but was only able to bring 25% of the weir men under contract. Because there were a few significant independent canneries still in operation there was still intense competition for juvenile herring. As such, weir fishermen refused to enter pre-arranged contracts, and continued the auctioning system that secured their control of the natural resources and its market value. It would seem that Smith’s observation that the population of Downeast Maine was “wholly dependent” upon the sardine industry is partially inaccurate. A more accurate statement would be that the sardine industry was wholly dependent on the weir fishermen who controlled access to the base material of production, juvenile herring, independent of canneries’ management, and could thus exercise a considerable degree of economic power.

Following Wolff’s initial success in 1876 he established the Eagle Preserved Fish Company. Between 1876 and 1879 nine factories were built in Eastport, Lubec, and Robbinston. In 1882 there were twenty-eight sardine factories in Maine and by 1899 there were sixty-nine. During the spectacular growth of the industry between 1875 and 1903 the weir fishermen remained the very basis of this production capacity. Historian Richard Judd argues that the fishermen quickly and easily integrated the catching of herring for the sardine canneries into their “mix of occupations,” which allowed them to remain “independent from any single source of income.” Judd emphasizes the weir fishermen’s folk culture and economy that pitted them against the rise of capitalism in coastal Maine. “While the canneries operated within the larger capitalist system,” Judd writes, “the weir men enjoyed a rare independence based on their varied income options. Herring supplies for the canneries were accordingly uncertain for cultural, as well as natural reasons.”

Yet this celebration of the worker folk seems to dismiss the ability of the weir fishermen to successfully manipulate that capitalist market via their supreme control of the price of the raw material. The weir men’s use of the auction system clearly indicates that they were fully in tune with the theories of supply–and-demand and quite capable of successfully working within the competitive bull-versus-bear price market. Hugh Smith, of the US Fish Commission, even reported that Maine’s weirs were largely abandoned prior to the introduction of the sardine industry. Smith reported, “since the erection of sardine canneries a few of the fishermen have been induced to rebuild their weirs, and the herring prove to be fully as abundant now as formerly.” From
Smith’s observations, it appears that the capitalist sardine industry was the impetus for the reintroduction of the quintessentially folk weir fisheries, which suggests an important challenge to the oppositional nature of the two players in the sardine industry.

Weir fishermen most often auctioned off their catch to competing boatmen, who were contracted by the sardine canneries (see the sidebar in this article for a more thorough description and history of weirs). In 1888 the collecting boat fleet numbered 125 vessels and about 200 crewmen, most owned and worked by Canadians. It was during this auctioning system that the weir fishermen most demonstrated their ability to work within the capitalist market economy. Contemporary observer Hugh Smith wrote in 1888;

The boatmen act as agents for the canneries, with instructions to purchase the fish as cheaply as possible. When the boats from several canneries meet at a weir, the fishermen find it advantageous to put up their fish at auction and sell them to the highest bidder; and rivalry between the boatmen usually leads them to bid until they have reached the extreme limit named by the factory, and the one who can afford to pay the highest price takes the fish.

The elevation of market value for juvenile herring was also affected by the compensation due to the boatmen. Previously, boatmen were paid a set monthly salary, but in order to encourage the boatmen to be readily on the job when the weirs were full of fish, and thus get the fish to the factory in the freshest state possible, the factories added the compensation of fifty cents per hogshead of fish brought in, thus providing the boatmen with real market incentive to bring in more fish.

After just one decade of fantastic growth in this boom economy the sardine industry began facing its first real problem. By 1886 retail prices for a case of
Weirs are essentially brush nets that use the tide to capture migrating schools of fish near the shore. Weirs were first developed by Native Americans long before the arrival of Europeans to North America, and were first mentioned in colonial literature in 1641. By the 1850s Maine weir fishermen were catching herring for the smoked-herring trade, the frozen fish trade, and to be used by offshore fishermen as bait for codfish, halibut, and other ground fish. Weirs were set in waters ranging from twenty-five to thirty fathoms deep, or in channels as deep as sixty fathoms, where the tide ranged from twenty to twenty-two feet. Stacks, typically made of birch wood, six to seven inches in diameter and eighteen to thirty-five feet long were driven into the mud about three feet apart. Spruce, cedar, and alder brush was then woven in and out of the stacks. By 1889 there were 273 weirs along the Maine coast, valued at $52,022; second only to lobster pods in number in Maine’s fisheries.

Most were concentrated in eastern Maine; in 1893 there were 240 weirs in or near the Passamaquoddy Bay alone.

The weirs themselves became increasingly elaborate and many would not qualify as primitive apparatuses utilized by part-time folk fishermen. Hugh Smith noted that after 1880 the weirs were “considerably larger and more expensive than formerly.” Prior to 1880 weirs averaged an initial construction cost of $300 to $400, but following 1880, construction cost increased to an average of $600 with some costing $800 or even $3000. The labor-intensive construction of weirs normally took place in the spring, between April 1 and June 1, and certainly consumed a large percentage of the fishermen’s time during that period. Weirs required additional annual maintenance that could range between $40 and $1000, most averaging between $200 and $400, of additional investment. Weirs were such a considerable investment that the fishermen often named them as if they were boats or ships. According to the Bureau the Industrial and Labor Statistics the financial cost of a weir was such that “sometimes a number of men own a weir in common, and sometimes the proprietors of factories are part owners.” Other contemporary accounts make note of the increasing profitability of the weir fisheries on account of the sardine industry. Some weirs had such a positive reputation that they were rented out annually for up to $2,000 plus $3 for each hogshead of fish taken. Even at this high rental cost, the weir still made good for its lessees. Larger weirs could take up to five or six men to work while the smaller ones got by with two or three. Most weirs were worked by the multiples of people invested in the weir, while others hired out laborers for $25 to $30 a month plus board. It would appear that the folk work of weir fishing was easily and quickly incorporated into a capitalist market that placed financial value on material objects, production capacity, and, most importantly, the herring fish.
sardine cans had dropped to $4.00, less than half the price from 1880. Too many start-up competitors were entering the market, driving down the retail value of the product and driving up operational expenses such as wages, the cost of tin and solder, and the expense of herring. The solution to this economic problem, concluded many cannery owners, was to add more rationality to the industry via a more integrated business system. In his 1887 report, Hugh Smith noted the first effort to combine into a kind of trust occurred in 1885 when factories sought to break the weir fishermen’s control of the price of herring. The effort was quickly defeated when “wealthy weir fishermen of Deer Island,” resisted the uniform fixed price set by the cannery trust by starting their own factory in Eastport to begin “independent operations.” This independent operation refused to obey the fixed price of herring and “caused the other factories to break their agreement and renew the competition.” The first effort to form a syndicate or trust was thus an effort to control the price of the herring fish and did not relate to the supply level or production capacity of those herring fishermen, who willingly sold to the syndicate when the factories recognized the fishermen’s stance as an independent producer within the industry.

In the early 1890s William O. Grady and Edward M. Lawrence of Eastport formed a partnership with New York financier John E. Searles in another effort to integrate the canneries. The effort failed when Julius Wolff, the largest cannery owner, refused to join. Julius Wolff then began buying up property in Lubec in 1898 and thus the “sardine war” between Eastport and Lubec began in full force. In 1899 investors from Chicago, led by S.G. Stevens, organized the Continental Sardine Company and began to buy up factories in Eastport. The investors dumped nearly $500,000 into Eastport offering owners high prices for their facilities, a share of the stock of Continental, and a job as factory manager in exchange for their cooperation with Continental, which was shortly renamed Seacoast Packing Company. Only two days after Seacoast took over a majority of the canning interests in Eastport Julius Wolff arrived in Lubec and began to consolidate the remaining factories into the Standard Sardine Company. Portland’s Board of Trade sided with local hero Julius Wolff in his battle with Chicago, and warned the people of Eastport that they “will be

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Stainless steel weir gates in Dixon, Illinois

Other fishermen attached their brush weirs to the shore to utilize tides to capture migrating schools of herring.
very soon thereafter a good deal more agitated, when that great business has passed from local control, into the hands and management of a cold blooded trust, having little interest for the people and none for the town.” Even though Wolff was from New York he assured the Board of Trade that “we will make our headquarters at Lubec.”

...ing off their best facilities to investors in New York. By 1903 most of the packers who originally sold to Seacoast had repurchased their factories, normally at lower prices than they had sold them for, and resumed operation under their own name.

With the syndicates’ failures the catching and selling of the base raw material, the juvenile herring fish, remained in the hands of the skilled weir fishermen of the Passamaquoddy Bay. These fishermen used their supreme control over access to the natural resource to dictate the market value of that resource. Weir fishermen eagerly extracted the required amount of herring to meet the demands of the sardine canneries. The canneries efforts to usurp the power of the weir fishermen came from their desire to stabilize the industry on both ends of production and distribution and to break the weir fishermen’s control of the prices, which the factory managers believed were artificially inflated due to the auctioning system.

What the sardine syndicate tried to do between 1899 and 1903 was vertical integration. What the famous, or infamous depending on your perspective, John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie did to bring order to the oil and steel industries, Grady, Searles, and Wolff hoped to do for the sardine industry. Yet the sardine syndicate failed because the weir fishermen wanted to preserve their place in the capitalist market as independent suppliers.

Because enough of the canneries remained independent, the weir fishermen were able to keep up their auctioning methods and resist coming under contract with the syndicates. Considering the time, 1890s–1900s, it is impressive that the weir fishermen succeeded in breaking the integration effort. Weir fishermen did not try to check capitalism in favor of a folk cultural relationship with natural resources, but were trying to check industrial-monopolistic capitalism in favor of small business enterprise, which was nonetheless capitalism.

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