

Down Below: A Day on the Stagehead

by Lester Green, May 2015



Martin Pitcher's stagehead at St. Jones Without. Young people enjoying a day of tomcoding, while fishermen cleaned their days catch.

My mind began to wonder as I looked at this old picture or "snap" as the older people would say. Days spent on father's stagehead. Many hours of catching tomcods and cunners with baited hook of fish hearts dangling from a string tied to an old fishing pole. Some of us would be more adventurous and would try our luck at stabbing flatfish with the prong, often made longer with an attached stick. In those days kids did not need much to past the summer days. Let me take a moment and see if I can recall a typical summers day.

The day would start with the early morning, fog creeping back off the hills and the smell of freshly cut bread being toasted. The toaster wasn't a "Pop-up" but a two-sided toaster that both sides came down on and only one side of the bread was toasted. Now prior to the electric toaster, some of us might recall a coat hanger twisted, molded and placed on the old wood stove. It made an inventive device for toasting bread but required constant supervision or the kitchen could quickly fill with smoke from burning toast. A cup of instant coffee or freshly steeped tea would help wash down our toast

and out the door we went listening for the sound of the old putt-putt. Mixed with the sounds of seagulls and steering, the putt-putt would echo of the harbour cliffs. "They're coming by's, they're coming." We shout as we ran to the wharves Down Below. We were so excited that our feet would barely touch the landing as we jumped on to the wharf.

Rushing to the head of the wharf, we would catch the rope as it was being slung ashore, the putt-putt now gone silent as the boat quietly sliced through the water.



"How much you get?" "Can we prong it up?" "Did you get the big one?" A hundred questions before they could get ashore. Often the answer was "Yes." Now the work began. Grabbing the prong, we began like a bunch of eager beavers. Fish flying from the boat to the head of the wharf. Another person dragged the pronged fish over the wharf and into the stage, placing it into the fish box. After it was unloaded and taken out of the morning sun, Dad and his crew had a quick lunch.

Then, the cleaning of the fish began. A fish was removed from the box and a person known as the “cut-throat” would slice the throat and slit the fish down the belly. He would then slide it to the person called “the gutter” who removed the guts, separating the liver from the puddick and pushing both in separate directions. The liver would land in the blubber barrel and the puddick fell through a hole in the floor. The water below would churn with a feeding frenzy of tomcods, cunners and flatfish, like piranhas feeding on some poor helpless animal that fell into a distant tropical river. Meanwhile, back in the stage, the head was removed and allowed to fall on to the floor, where one of us would quickly cut out the tongues, cheeks or make it into cod heads. The remaining fish went to the splitter who was skilled in removing the sound bone. A good splitter could quickly remove the bone and a loud thud would be heard as the bone hit the side of the stage. The fish was allowed to fall from the splitting table into puncheon tub of water. This process repeated itself until all the fish was cleaned.



Joseph Spurrell splitting fish in his stage at Butter Cove in the early 1970s.

However, being young, full of energy and with the inability to stay focused, we quickly ran out of patience and wanted to catch tomcods,

cunners and any other fish that would come along. Getting our poles, baiting our hooks with hearts from underneath the table, our imagination took us into a world where we were great fishermen and we were on the waters searching for the big ones. Tomcods were quickly caught and removed but the cunners required more skill, if you wanted to avoid stabbing your fingers. Often the poor cunner would be banged against the wharf or the side of the stage to remove it from the hook.

Meanwhile, father would take the split fish and remove it from the puncheon tub. He would take it to the back part of the stage and lay the fish down flat and place salt on top. This would be repeated until all fish were salted.

The rest of the crew would clean the stage by drawing buckets of water and splashing it on the floor, table, wharf and boat. Sometimes an old wooden broom was used to scrub the boards clean.

After the fish was cleaned, salted, and stage washed, father would yell “Time to go, put away the poles until tomorrow.”

By this time we were getting tired and hunger was setting in. It was time for dinner and we would race up from Down Below. Wonder what’s for dinner. For those of you who know me well, what do you think I had....Campbell’s Anyone.