Fishermen prove in big way that we're halibut capital

Commercial fishing is a booming industry in Prince Rupert where a multitude of people — equivalent in number to the population of a small city — make a seasonal livelihood from the sea.

With a record halibut harvest, a salmon season that had the distinction of being the "year of the pinks", and herring production that maintained a high level, fish processing plants and canneries were kept humming during 1962.

In the Prince Rupert area about 5,000 men and women labor each year in the commercial fisheries, at the height of the season. These are fishermen, plant and cannery workers, packing boat crews and office staffers.

$5 million

The second most valuable species landed here—halibut—gave the industry $5,000,000 last year.

Landings at Prince Rupert amounted to 17,770,000 pounds, compared with 16,915,000 pounds in 1961, 15,733,000 pounds in 1960 and 16,792,000 pounds in 1931, always a key comparison year.

How does that stack up against landings at other Pacific coast ports? As far as B.C. goes, it represented more than three-fifths of the provincial landings which totalled 25,478,000 pounds. Vancouver took in 4,551,000 pounds, and other B.C. ports, 3,157,000 pounds.

The entire southeastern Alaska region produced 23,051,000 pounds, and all Pacific Coast ports, Canadian and American, landed a grand total of 74,905,000 pounds compared with 69,000,000 pounds in 1961 and nearly 72,000,00 in 1960.

Valid claim

Not only do these figures show that Prince Rupert makes no wild boast when it calls itself the halibut capital of the world. The total production, when viewed in relationship to the 44,200,000 pounds harvested in 1931, illustrates how the industry has been building up in maximum yield.

A total 453 boats from Prince Rupert out of the total fleet of 1,050 which reaped the big crop, pitted men and equipment against the weather and the mysteries of the sea in this success saga. As any fisherman will tell you, his ventures are fraught with uncertainty, and his rewards are won with hard work and a good deal of risk.

Then, of course, there are the variables of market conditions and prices. Last season's Canadian starting prices were 30.3 cents a pound for medium, 33.7 for large and 17 for chickens, way up from the 1961 starters of 21, 22 and 14.

1963 season's opening prices were 24.1, 26 and 18.1.

Of the total landings at Prince Rupert, roughly 1,500,000 pounds go fresh to markets in Eastern Canada and United States cities such as Chicago, Boston and New York. The rest is frozen whole or in various cuts, and sold to Canadian and American customers and even a few abroad.

Local handlers are B.C. Packers, Atlin, the Co-Op, Babcock, Royal, Booth Fisheries, Pacific Fisheries, Northland Industries and Nelson Brothers. Local processors are B.C. Packers, Atlin, Royal, Babcock and the Co-Op.

Fishermen and processors alike are keeping well abreast of new development, and are constantly improving their equipment. Right now keen interest is being taken in machine heading instead of the chine heading which is in early stages of development in Alaska, instead of the traditional hand-knife heading of halibut.

Upgrading of equipment is pretty well a continuing process. In fishing, it means the change from cotton and hemp to nylon nets and ropes; in plants, replacement of wooden equipment with aluminum or stainless steel.

Inspection new

Three of the plants now have the Canadian government inspection service introduced two years ago for the first time in the industry's long history. Fresh and frozen fish products must pass requirements of the Canadian government specifications board under this system.

While it's still too early to predict trends for the 1963 halibut season, the industry hopes for a repeat of 1962 performance. Total landings of halibut to April 16 this year from the Bering Sea, by American and Canadian boats, were about 4,800,000 pounds.

Biggest load to arrive so far this season was 160,000 pounds brought by the Vancouver-owned Dominator all the 2,500 miles from the Bering Sea. Rupert fisherman Percy Pierce's Blue Ocean took 142,000 pounds to Sandpoint. These bring to mind the Prince Rupert-owned Northern Dawn, a Co-Op fleet vessel, which brought in a record 175,000 pounds on one trip last year.

However, in the early days when halibut fishing was done by steamers (each 125 feet long with an operating crew of 12 men and 12 dories each fished by two men) catches were astronomical. The motorship cruised around, loading fish from the dories as the gear was hauled. A certain Captain Freeman set a record for dory fishing by picking up 98 loads totalling 190,000 pounds of halibut in a single working day.

HALIBUT: giant of the industry

Rupert's role in fishing goes way back

Prince Rupert has been a traditional centre for commercial fishing and fish processing. It is located near one of the major fishing grounds and next to the salmon runs of the Skeena and Nass Rivers.

Plant facilities have been highly developed over the last 50 years. Capital investment in boats and gear has risen steadily. The harvest of the ocean brought into Prince Rupert in tremendous quantities includes halibut, salmon, herring, sole, cod, crab, shrimp, clams, abalone, and others.

NEARLY ONE MILLION CASES OF SALMON PACKED HERE

Salmon production in the northern area was double that of the last five-year average in 1962, and canning reached close to a million cases. The big pink salmon run had a lot of influence on the picture.

Roughly 75 salmon go to the case, and 80 per cent of the total production was pinks. Canners here are Nelson Brothers, Canadian Fish, B.C. Packers, Babcock, North Pacific and Cassiar. Major part of the pack goes to Britain and the Continent.

All the canneries worked a maximum capacity at the height of the season, and three brine packers in operation in the northern area provided real savings. The pressure unloading system used successfully to the south, was tried on an experimental basis.

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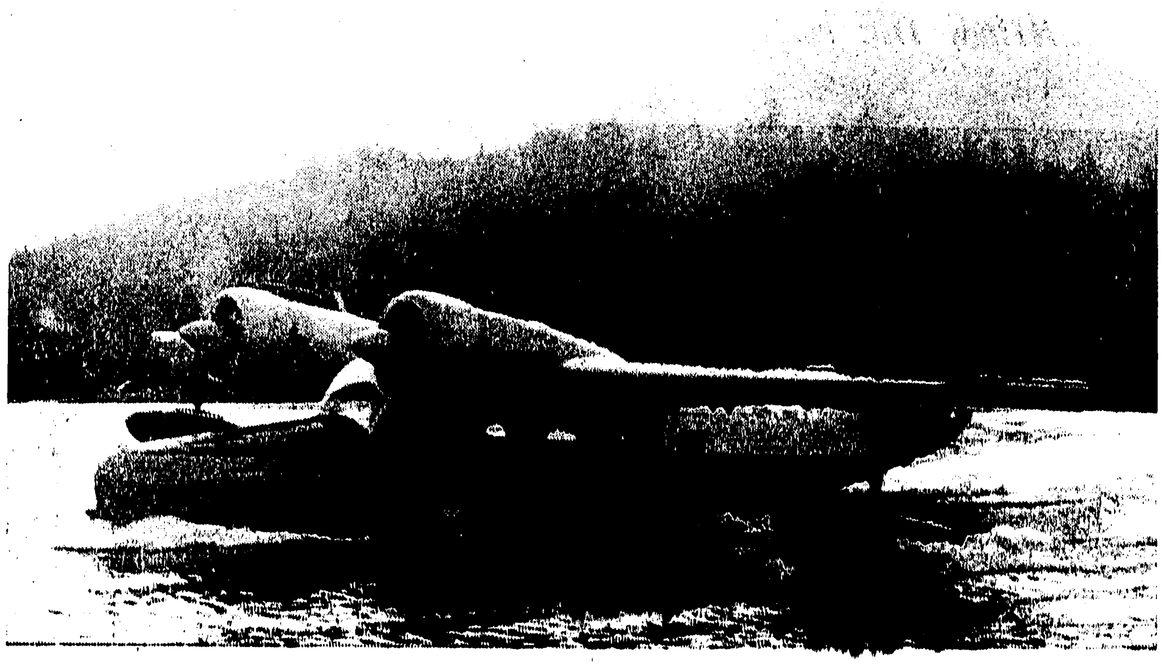

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