

WINTER SMELT FISHING OUT OF ENSCANABA, MICHIGAN

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BACKGROUND

Escanaba, Mich., is located on Little Bay de Noc which extends north out of Green Bay. Little Bay de Noc is frozen over in the winter, permitting pound-net fishing through the ice. The rest of Green Bay is, to a large extent, open water or subject to breakups which can be very disastrous where nets are used. It is for

this reason that the first smelt of the season to reach many of the midwest markets are "Escanaba Smelt" from the waters of Little Bay de Noc. During this early period of production there is practically no competition from other sources and demand is usually brisk and prices good. In 1955 nets were set and the season began on January 25. The season can extend until the ice breakers come in to open the port of Escanaba to commercial shipping in the middle of April.



Fig. 1 - A smelt fisherman near Escanaba, Mich., on Little Bay de Noc using a chain saw to make an opening in the ice through which to draw the pound net.

A fishing company which gets a big share of the commercial smelt catch stated in February 1955 that smelt fishing was good but would be termed only fair when compared with what it was in the bumper years before the smelt staged a fadeout about a decade ago. During 1942-43 all but a comparatively few of the smelt in the Great Lakes perished. It was predicted, at that time by the fishing interests of the area that Escanaba's status as the "Smelt Capital" was over. However, the smelt began to come back. The return was gradual and for a time there wasn't enough to supply the market. But that is not the case now. The catch at this time is practically back to almost the productivity of former years. In February 1955 the fishermen of Little Bay de Noc found a good market for their catches with jumbo bringing 12-14 cents ex-vessel and regular smelt averaging 5 cents a pound.

GEAR USED TO FISH SMELT

The pound nets in Little Bay de Noc number into the hundreds and are located for miles along its shores. Delta County has about 200 licensed fishermen who employ 500 extra men--and all depend to a certain degree on smelt for a considerable portion of their livelihood. The nets used in this winter fishery average about 40 by 40 feet at the sides and are 80 feet deep. The size of the mesh is $1\frac{1}{8}$ inches. A floor of the same material is at the net's bottom. A larger-meshed wing or lead is set to run from the funnel to shallower water, about 30 feet deep--or toward a bank or shoreward. Thus the operations are mostly close to shore. To sink the pound,

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a large hole of practically the same dimensions as that of the net has to be spudded out. In operation the net is drawn daily through a daily-renewed opening in the ice



Fig. 2 - Lifting a pound net through an opening in the ice of Little Bay de Noc.



Fig. 3 - Dipping catch of smelt from pound net.

about two-feet wide and running the width of the net. This hole in the ice through which the net is drawn and the catch removed (fig. 2 and fig. 3) is usually chopped out manually, but some fishermen are now using chain saws for this purpose (fig. 1).

SMELT NOW USED MORE EXTENSIVELY

In the earlier years of this fishery when the market became oversupplied (and that was very shortly after the smelt run was little more than started), much of the catch went to waste. Commercial fishermen are still confronted with a limited market, but due to vastly improved facilities for processing perishable foods and to broader channels of consumption, the waste has been reduced. Use as feed for mink has taken care of many tons of surplus smelt and their conversion into canned food for cats has also served a good purpose. But purchases for these purposes occur only when the market is oversupplied and regular market sales few.

Freezing and processing of smelt for human consumption has increased during the last few years. There are several processing plants in the Escanaba area that are packaging and freezing smelt for the grocery trade. In some instances they are dressed, in others they are also breaded and seasoned ready for the pan (fig. 4 and fig. 5).

NETS LOST IN MENOMINEE COUNTY

It was noted earlier that Little Bay de Noc winter fishermen had an advantage because of the solid freezeover, while the rest of Green Bay is open water or subject to ice breakups. To emphasize this, it can be pointed out that on February 21, 1955, Menominee County bayshore commercial fishermen lost 18 to 20 poundnets when Green Bay ice moved out, due to brisk southwesterly winds in the Cedar River area from Kleinke Park to the mouth of the Bark River. Menominee County lies directly south of Delta County (and Escanaba). Most of the



Fig. 4 - Dressing smelt for packaging and freezing in a plant in Escanaba, Mich.

pound nets are weighted and attached with cord so that they drop to the bottom in the event the ice moves. Fishermen attempt to recover the nets by going out in boats and searching with grapple hooks.



Fig. 5 - Dressing smelt in a plant in Escanaba, Mich.

when the ice went out on February 15. That year the bay didn't freeze until late in January. It didn't freeze until late this year and when it did a sudden cold wave made the ice brittle. Fishermen had predicted it wouldn't last too long.

The ice in Green Bay usually breaks up in four stages. The first stage is usually in the Cedar River area, the second as far south as Ingallston about 10 miles north of Menominee, and the third along the channel of the Ann Arbor car ferry between Menominee and Sturgeon Bay. The southern section of the Bay is usually the last to go.

Only once in the last 55 years has the ice gone out completely in February. That was in 1944



WAFER-THIN OYSTERS

Oysters as thin as wafers were grown last winter in Tedious Creek, Dorchester County, Md. The novel specimens grew by accident rather than by design on the bottom of a boat stationed in the area.

"The bottom was literally covered with oysters about two inches in diameter and thin as a wrist watch," said the skipper. "The amazing thing is that they grew that size since last June--right over a new coat of copper paint."

Oysters normally require about two years to reach two inches in size. They also prefer to attach themselves to cultch such as oyster shells, stones, or some other hard surface lying on the bottom. Although frequent reports of small oysters growing on boat bottoms are received, the wafer shape is novel.

--The Compass, July 1955,
Department of Tidewater Fisheries,
Annapolis, Md.