

Shad Fishing on

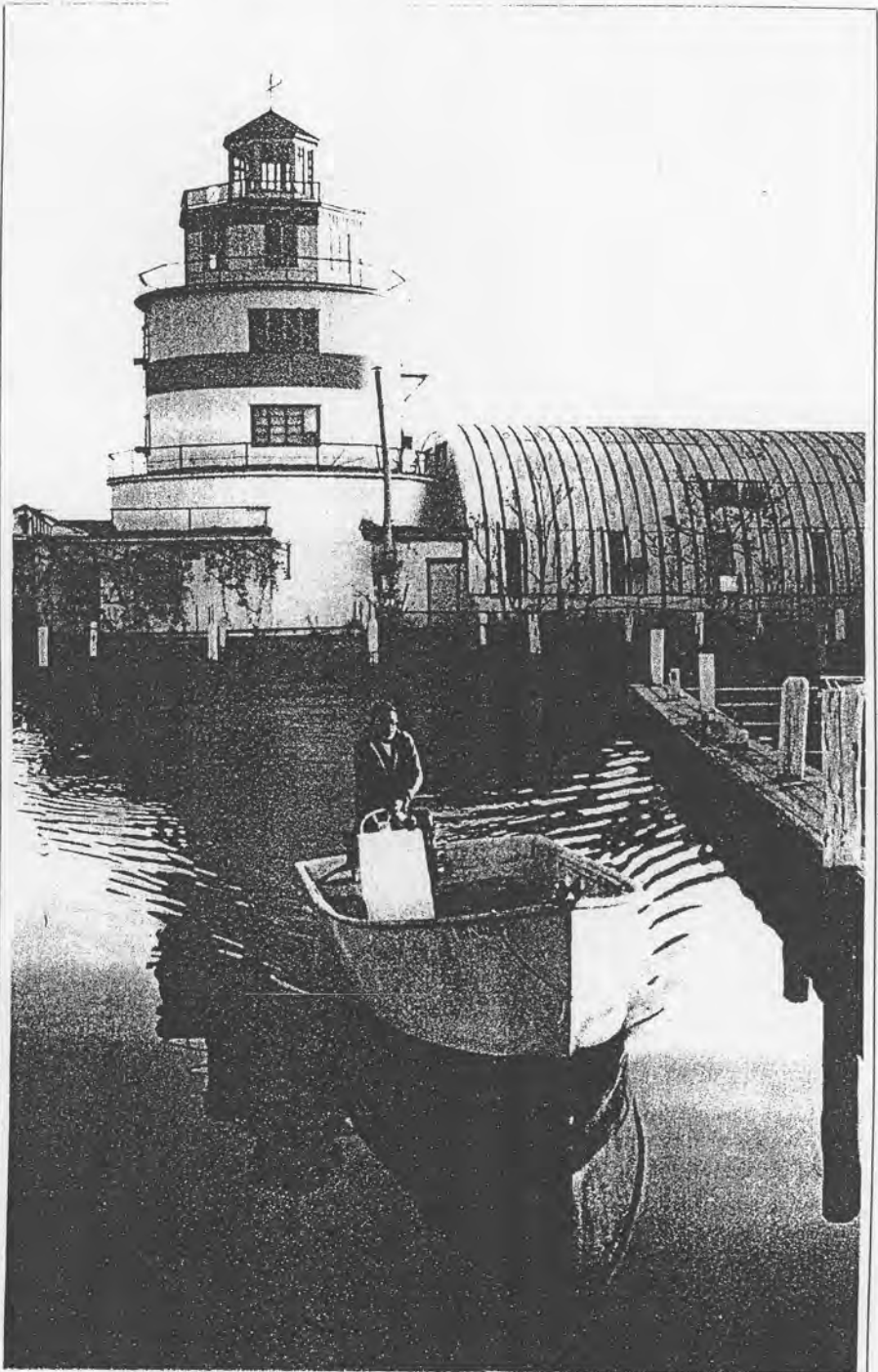
*They're still
doing it the old-
fashioned way. . .
hand over hand.*

For a few weeks each spring, a commercial fishing industry comes to life on the Hudson River. From early April to mid-May, schools of shad make their way from the Atlantic Ocean to spawning grounds up the Hudson River, and a few dozen fishermen go onto the river in small boats to catch them.

The shad is a large member of the herring family, and the roe sacs of the female are highly prized as a gourmet delicacy. While the oily flesh of the shad is booby-trapped with needle-like bones and not a popular dish, the roe is served sautéed, poached, broiled or baked in the finest restaurants. Hudson River shad have the distinction of producing the largest roes on the East Coast.

Shad are caught in nets in a "primitive" fishery that has changed only slightly over the last several hundred years. Today's shad fishermen may have fiberglass boats, outboard motors and electric lights at night. But when the nets are full on a cold, rainy April night, they are still hauled in hand over hand, just as they were in the 18th century.

**PULLING INTO THE DOCK AT DAWN-
NYACK, N.Y.**



the Hudson

Story and Photos
by
Paul Margolis



LOADING THE BOATS — NYACK, NY.

Hudson River shad fishing is done using variations of two distinct netting systems. These are anchored nets and free-floating drift nets. Each method is best suited to a particular part of the river, and was developed accordingly.

Anchored Net Fishing

Anchored nets are either strung between poles driven into the muddy river bottom or attached to large end-weights

that hold them in place against the current. The upper portions of the nets are buoyed so that the nets ride a few feet below the surface, and are held open constantly by a series of small stabilizing weights on the bottom. Gill nets—so-called because fish swim into them and are caught behind their gills—with five to six-inch diamond-shaped meshes are used.

Shad swim into the nets while feeding or are pushed in by the current. They are

harvested just before slack water, while there is still enough pressure from the tide to hold them in the nets.

Fishing with anchored nets is a labor and equipment-intensive operation. It is possible to pull in several tons of shad every tide, as the larger operations often do at the peak of the shad run. This kind of fishing requires two or three boats, crews to man them, refrigeration to store caught fish and trucks to ship fish to market. Because of these demands, this type of shad



A STRAY STURGEON: IT SHALL BE RELEASED.

fishery is the province of only a handful of properly equipped and dedicated fishermen operating from Edgewater, New Jersey, to the area just below Peekskill, N.Y.

Most shad boats have two-man crews, although there are fishermen who prefer to work alone, and operations with three or four to a boat. In anchored net fishing, one man pulls in the top line, which brings in the fish-laden net, while the other pulls the bottom line to keep the net moving along smoothly. When there are many fish in each section of net, both men will "pick" fish out of the meshes and either box them or let them pile up on the deck. Boats can come in loaded down almost to the gunwales at the height of the season.

Drift-Netting

Drift-netting is a simpler method of fishing that is better suited to the middle and upper reaches of the river. Narrower channels and less tidal action make it more practical to set and retrieve nets over the span of a few hours.

At slack water, just before the tide turns, the drift-netter will set out in a 16 to 18-foot skiff. Nets, with floats and bottom weights attached, will have already been loaded into three-sided boxes with all the care that goes into packing parachutes. Each box carries a 200 to 500-foot length of net, called a "shot."



FOUR-MAN BOAT NEAR FT. LEE, N.J.



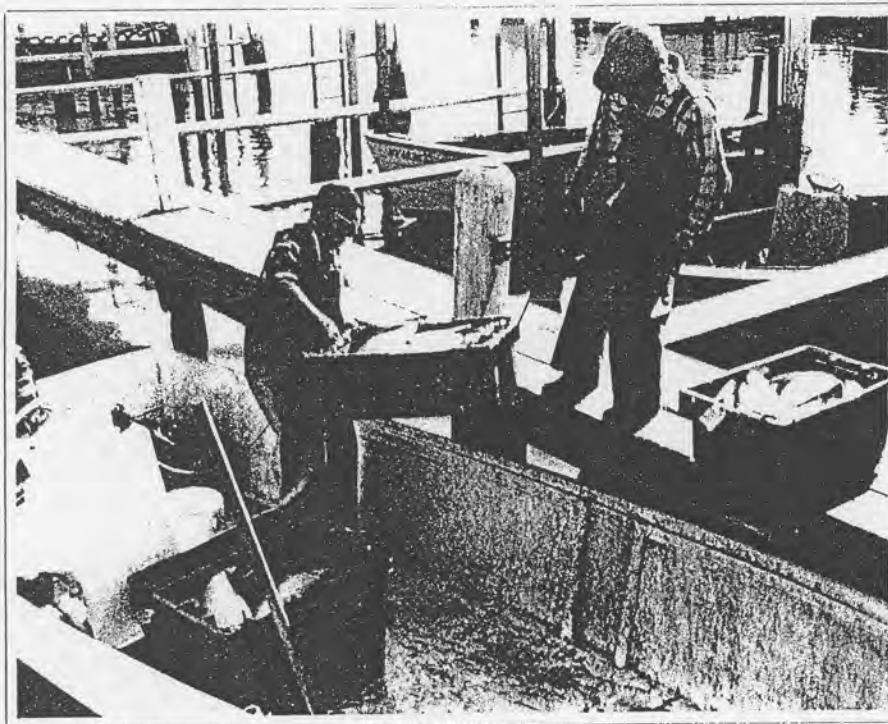
TWO-MAN BOAT "PICKING" FISH NEAR GRANDVIEW-ON-HUDSON, NY.



SETTING NETS NEAR THE TAPPAN ZEE BRIDGE.



DRIFT-NETTER HAULING NETS NEAR MILTON, NY.



UNLOADING FISH—NYACK, NY.

The skiff is positioned so that it points across the river, with one man keeping it on course with the oars while the other guides the net over the stern. Two or three shots are set and are then allowed to drift upriver as the incoming tide gains momentum. Floating along with the tide at two or three miles per hour, the nets will catch shad in their meshes.

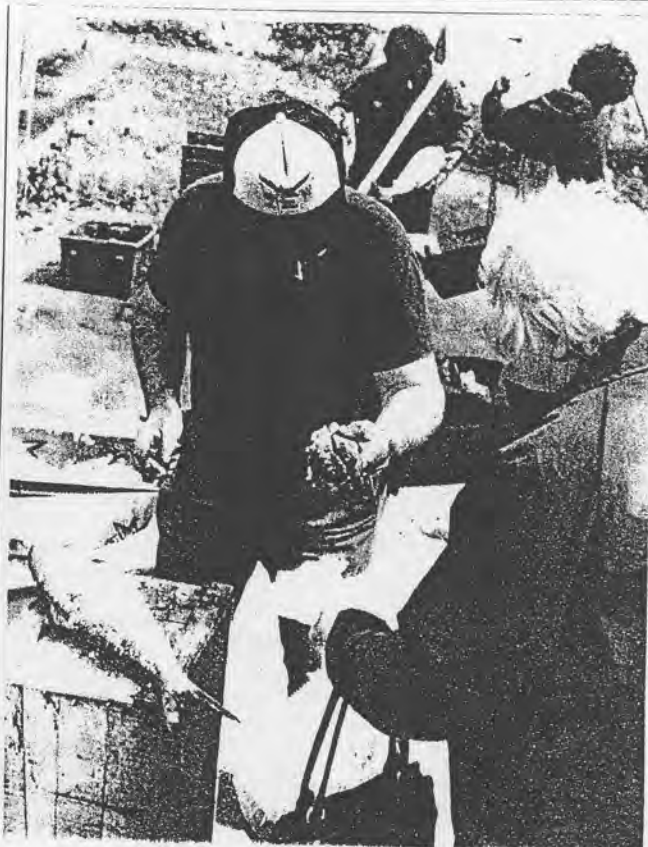
Drift nets float about 18 feet below the surface, which keeps them out of the way of most river traffic. Only the wooden buoys are visible above the water.

While anchored, net fishing can be frenetic, drift-netting is almost leisurely by comparison. I spent one of the pleasantest afternoons in recent memory with a pair of drift-netters. After the shots of net were thrown, the boat was pulled ashore, we had lunch and a couple of beers, and watched the orange-flagged net end marker buoys on their slow drift upriver. It was a glorious afternoon; the perfect sort of day

SHAD FISHING



WEIGHING AND BOXING THE CATCH FOR MARKET.



SELLING IT FRESH OFF THE BOAT.

to be on the river. After an hour or so, we motored a mile or two up the river and my hosts began hauling in the nets.

Drift-netters have one man pulling in the nets over the stern while the other rows the skiff and keeps the boat moving parallel to the line of net buoys. This system works fine for the smaller boats and catches of drift-netting.

Both anchored net and drift-netting fishermen must observe a 36-hour "lift" period, during which time their nets must be out of the water. This allows fish to pass freely upriver to their spawning grounds.

As the Hudson has cleaned up over the past 10-15 years, shad runs have increased in size. Other fish, like the sturgeon, which were once thought to have left the river, are now appearing in shad nets. Men who have fished the river for five or six decades told me that each successive shad run for the last few years has exceeded anything in living memory.

Despite the growing abundance of fish, the ranks of the shad fishermen thin out with each season. Most of the men I saw were middle-aged or older, with only a sprinkling of relative youngsters. On stretches of the river where old-timers remember dozens of competing operations, only one or two now remain.

I became intrigued with the shad fishermen when I moved from Manhattan to the Hudson River town of Nyack. They reminded me a great deal of the small-boat fishermen—clammers, scallopers and haul-seiners—of the East End, where I grew up. I was also fascinated by the idea of a commercial fishing industry within sight of the upper peaks of the New York skyline.

In 1984, I made a few contacts among the shad fishermen, just before the brief season ended. The following two years, I went out on the river to photograph them whenever I got the opportunity.

As much as possible, I tried to work in an unobtrusive documentary fashion, keep-

ing out of the way of nets and flying shad. Probably the men who allowed me to take up space in their crowded boats questioned my motives and sanity, but they were too polite to ever voice their suspicions to me. I owe them a debt of gratitude for letting an obsessive photographer join them while they were hard at work. ■

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world?



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