

Commercial Fishing Part II – After La Pointe

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Northeastern Minnesota had always been and remained Indian land up until 1854. In that year the second treaty of La Pointe was ratified and most of the arrowhead region was opened to white settlement. While the main interest was focused on mineral exploration, there were some that engaged in the commercial fishing business.

By 1857 there were 10 fishermen between Duluth and Knife River and 89 more between Knife River and the Cook county line. Most of these gave up and fled the area during the financial panic of 1857. Activity in the region was pretty lethargic until the arrival of the first railroad into Duluth in 1870. The town began to grow rapidly and commercial fishing once again bobbed up from oblivion.

By 1885 there were 195 fishermen operating out of Duluth alone. Small collection vessels plied the waters of the north shore collecting fish from isolated fishermen. These small vessels made it an easier and more efficient operation. Unfortunately those early watercraft were grossly inadequate when it came to being out on Lake Superior. Most of them ended their days at the bottom of the lake or as wreckage washed up on some shoreline. Some of these boats were so unsound that people routinely predicted their demise.

In 1884 the A. Booth Fisheries arrived on the north shore with their fleet of freight and passenger packets. Sadly the first four of these boats also ended up on the bottom. Finally the United States & Dominion Transportation Company (The Booth Line) assigned some more suitable boats to the north shore run. The U.S. & D. T. packets are mostly remembered as passenger boats, but their main function was to pick up fish from commercial fishermen along the north shore to Thunder Bay and Isle Royale. Booth Fisheries was the largest fish supplier in the U. S. for many years. During 1899 another major fish collection enterprise, called the White Line Transportation Company, began operating on the north shore in direct competition with Booth. They sold their operation to Booth in 1905 after a series of disasters and bad publicity. When the Str. America sank on Isle Royale in 1928, the U. S. & D. T. ceased their north shore service.

By this time most of the north shore fish trade was being collected with trucks. From Two Harbors to Duluth it was either trucks or by railroad. In certain locations special "fish platforms" were provided for the fishermen. By 1946 5,000,000 pounds of herring and 1,000,000 pounds of trout were coming from the north shore.

By the end of the 1950's a combination of over-fishing and the accidental introduction of the lamprey all but destroyed the industry. Today fish populations have greatly recovered and sport fishing has become very popular. Commercial fishing however did not bob up from oblivion this time - at least not yet.