

SMOKEHOUSE

LAST OF A BREED



Lynn Kippax, Jr.

By Hugh T. French

THE JOHN P. McCURDY Smokehouse in Lubec, Maine, juts its body into the swift saltwaters of the Narrows. Painted bright red trimmed with white, it is the last of a breed in the United States.

Where once every breach in the shore along this far eastern coast of Maine was littered with the smell of herring being smoked, only a few graying hulks of the smokehouses remain. They stand waiting for sounds they will not hear again.

The slish, slish of herring being strung onto a blackened wooden stick. The tick of those

sticks hitting a table. Their former workers grow old with the sounds still in their heads. For the houses, there is only the whistle of the wind and the lap of the tide.

Except at McCurdy's.

And McCurdy's herring are hidden under a maze of wraps. If you go into a fish market anywhere in the United States, the chances are you will not find any of their boxes of packed herring. If you go to Lubec in the middle of July and ask at the fish market there, they will tell you that they haven't any either.

If you look to ask at the McCurdy plant itself, you will have equal difficulty. There is no listing for the plant on the main street where it is supposed to be located. Locals have no need for such listings.

You ask for directions at the Western Auto hardware store in the center of the street, and will be told you have passed the plant four times. So you ask at the plant, which includes two former main street stores with a series of smaller wooden buildings on a wharf behind. You say you'd like some boned smoked herring. You will be told they haven't any.

If you do find some in a fish market or if you return to Lubec in the early fall when the packing of the smoked herring begins each year, you will be handed a plain box made out of wood shooks that bears the stencilled words:

BONED SMOKED HERRING
Net Wt. When Packed 10 lbs.
MCCURDY FISH CO.
LUBEC, ME.

It will cost you 20 bucks. When you open the boxes, you see a mass of golden brown to brown strips of herring meat.

What you do not know is how the strips got there. To say the herring are hand packed like a sardine is packed in a can does the McCurdy operation a decided disservice.

John P. McCurdy, the owner, and Henry Ford are about as far removed from each other on a scale measuring automation as two people can be. McCurdy's plant is a rhythmic pantomime of hand movements. It is as if John P. McCurdy signed a church pledge years ago to resist the temptation of any automation of any sort whatsoever, much as he might sign a pledge to spurn liquor.

To give an idea of the absolute reliance on the hand at McCurdy's, each single strip of meat that you pick out of that box and begin to chew, went through over 20 separate hand motions as it was processed.

That herring when it was whole was lifted in a dipnet by hand from a tub of salt brine and dumped into a basket. The basket was wheeled on a two basket cart by hand over to a table where it was spilled across the top.

Individually the herring was picked up by hand, gill opened, and slid onto a stick held in another hand. When full, the stick was placed on a cart which was wheeled by hand to a smokehouse where it was hung by hand over a smoke fire that was kept lit and tended to by hand.

Later that same stick of herring was rehung higher up from the fire. Still later it was passed down by hand to a man who placed it on another cart. The cart was wheeled to a room where the herring was taken, again by hand, off the stick, its head cut off, split in two, its skin peeled off, and placed in a box which was then taken one at a time, by hand, to a scale for weighing. A cover was then nailed on top.

By hand.

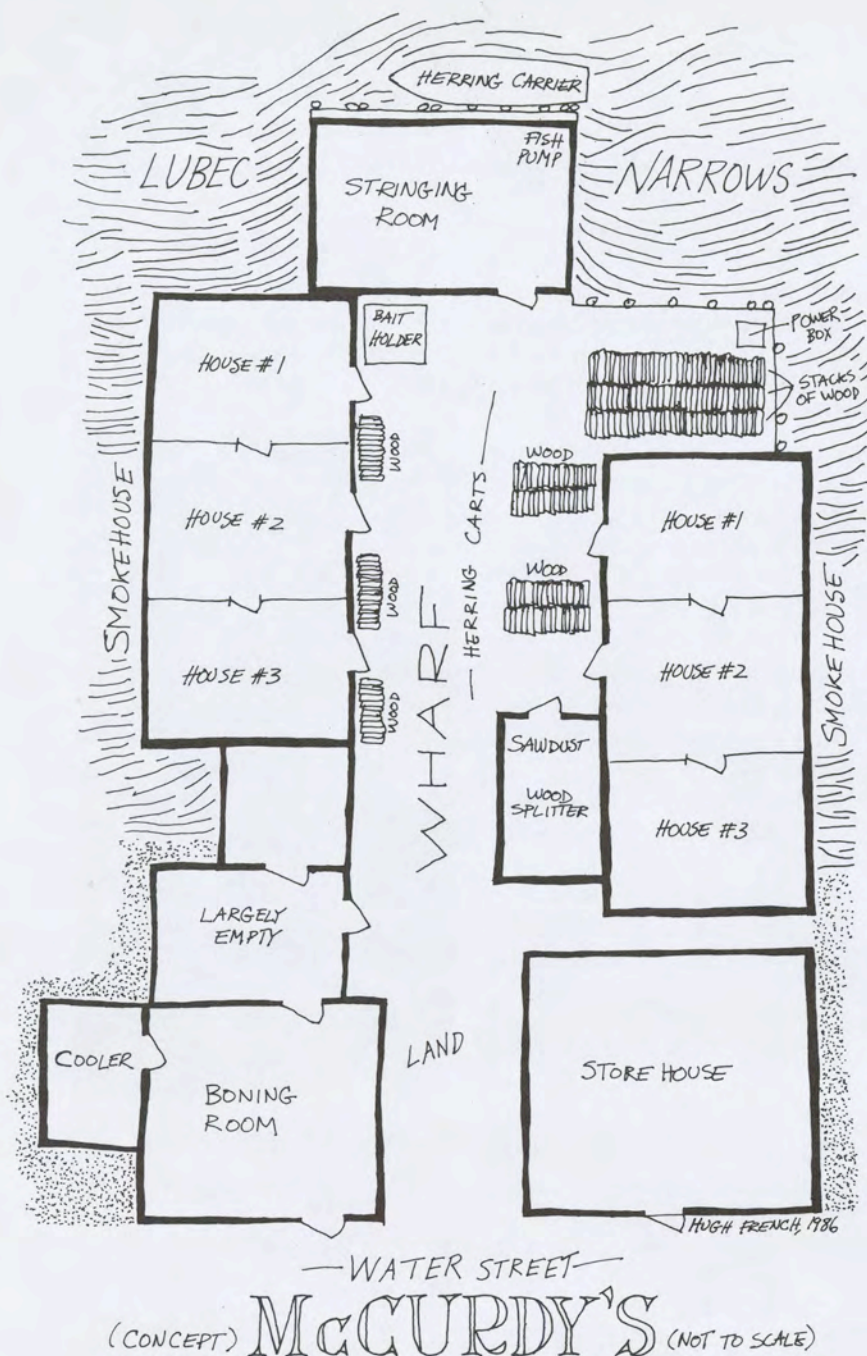
When you consider that each box holds somewhere around 100 strips of herring and that in 1983, McCurdy packed about 16,000 boxes (160,000 pounds) or 1,600,000 strips of herring meat, you begin to grasp the magnitude of moving hands.

What is even more amazing is to learn that your chances are fair that the same strip of herring meat you continue to chew was first strung onto a stick and at the end, cut, split, skinned, and weighed by a



Rosy Elliott

Angie has
strung herring
for 64 years.



single woman now in her seventies who has worked in a smoked herring factory for 64 years.

THAT WOMAN'S NAME is Angie Sawtelle. On the morning of the 25th of July, 1984, she is found in the McCurdy building at the end of the wharf that sits over the

Narrows. This is the stringing room.

To get there you pass between the two store fronts and a smokehouse on either side. It is a low single story building, painted red, with a wet dark interior lit by bare electric bulbs.

Inside, three men and a woman stand with Angie in a row along a stretch of two trough-like aqua colored tables. They are the entire stringing crew today. At its largest, the crew numbers only

two to three more, or eight in total. They string all of the herring that are strung at McCurdy's.

The only sound is the slish, slish of stringing herring.

Angie works near the middle of the line of stringers. Her smallish frame is bent slightly. She is intent on her work, seemingly oblivious to what is around her.

The fastest stringer here today is Angie. A hand darts out, runs over the pile of fish in front of her before selecting one. The hand closes over and slides up its back, the point of the thumb opening the gill.

It's lifted upwards by its head to where the pointed end of a stick held in the other hand drives through the gill and out of the mouth, the hung fish slid down the stick.

Slish, slish like a knife being sharpened on a whet stone.

A black apron, tied at the waist, covers a light green blouse and plaid pants, and protects Angie's front from the wet and grease of the fish. Ask her how long she has worked stringing herring and she does not look up.

"Oh, my god I couldn't remember. Ever since I can remember I guess." When a neighboring stringer suggests it's been 62-63 years, Angie yields, "Yea, just about, I guess."

"That's a while," is a response.

"I should say so," laughs Angie from her work. "Too long I guess."

Clifton "Bill" Wallace works to Angie's left, separated from her by an aisle. He wears green work clothes from his neck to his boots, and a gray hat that covers his brown hair. A piece of plastic serves as an apron, tied at his waist with a length of rope.

He has lived in Lubec all his life, or as he puts it, "Almost 56 years of it." He started stringing herring as a boy in one of the big smokehouses that used to stand in Bailey's Mistake Cove—10 miles distant.

Unlike Angie, he has not strung continuously year after year. "No, I've been everywhere, different jobs. Then I started again here last fall."

To the right of Angie is Harold Moores, a thin man with a face made striking by a shock of clear white wavy hair. Like Bill, he wears a plastic apron that is tied behind at the waist and extends to his feet.

He has been stringing herring for 45 to 50 years, "off and on." He adds, "I work when there's no work in (the sardine) factory."

Angie's brother, Ralph Sawtelle, works alongside Harold. His is a leathery face, topped by a red cap that covers his

gray-white hair. A pair of black hip rubber boots corral his legs. A light blue apron wraps his front. He is 74 years old. Like Bill, he worked at one of the big old smokehouses at Bailey's Mistake.

Debbie Moores, the lone young person of the crew, works to Ralph's right. She is a bulky woman with black hair pulled tightly to the back of her head. She has not worked at stringing long. "I've just been at it, oh couple three years."

The five work facing the troughs, four together at one trough, Bill alone at a smaller one. A black wooden wall hangs down from the ceiling to within a foot of the trough top and divides the trough area in two. It separates the workers from the rest of the building beyond.

Above each worker and within their reach are a series of

blackened slots filled with bundles of stringing sticks that are also black. On the side of each worker, in front of them on the trough, each has brought down and placed a pile (15-20) of unstrung sticks.

Whole herring are dumped from a plastic basket by another worker, Leeman Wilcox, at the end of the troughs or behind the wall with a watery slap splattering. They are pushed up and down the troughs.

Each worker has his or her own method of working. Only Angie wears a glove, a yellow rubber one, on her left hand. She alone is left handed. In her right hand, she holds a wooden stick that is pointed on one end, blunt on the other end. Not all of the sticks are the same as Harold speaks of coming across a "big flat one."

An empty stick is first held near its pointed end where the



Scott Vlaun

fish is first speared. Gradually as the stick is filled, the hand moves towards the middle of the stick. The fingers and palms of the workers' hands are worn black by the herring grease and blackened sticks. Herring too small to be strung are picked aside and thrown into black plastic baskets alongside each worker.

The stringers began work at seven o'clock this morning, the same time they begin every morning that they work, arriving at the McCurdy plant at about six-thirty.

In another building on the wharf, John P. McCurdy speaks about the job of stringing. "That's a real hard job. I mean, jee, you stand there all day, put those individually one after the other on those sticks, y'know. By jeez, ya gotta have 'em on there or ya can't do the rest of it." He laughs as he finishes.

"After they're [the strung herring] in the smokehouse, we don't have much trouble. I mean, we got more boners [people who split and skin a finished smoked herring], people that are willing to come in here, the women or men that would want a bone, but they don't wanta, or they don't anyway, they don't string.

"Get frustrated. I mean, ya gotta pick em up, they watch 'em how they fall in [the pile in front of them] there, they'll pick 'em up just so, you know, they'll hit 'em with their hands often, least when they're gonna grab 'em by the head.

"You watch 'em, they'll slip their fingers right up, without even thinking, you know, just, the way they take hold the fish, they'll pick it up, and just go like that, and the gills open.

"So they don't even look. I mean I seen those fellas, and like I say that one man down

there, god, he can just slap those on there just like that, he'll be talkin', he won't even be looking at.

"I've done it, but I have ta keep lookin' at the end of the stick, I have ta pick the fish up, hold it up there, see where the end of the stick is every time."

That "one man down there" isn't there today. Those that are there speak of the man, Charlie Holmes.

"Charlie ain't here," says Bill.

"He's really fast," Harold adds.

Debbie is discouraged by such talk. "I wish I could pick up his knack. I got one speed."

THREE BRIGHT RED low lying carts rest behind the workers. One is behind Bill, one behind and between Angie and Harold, and the third behind and between Ralph and Debbie. Each cart consists of a wood horizontal and rectangular frame resting on a set of rubber wheels in the front and two legs at the back.

When a stick is full, the worker turns around and places the stick in a line over the edges of the frame so that the herring hang vertically in between the frame.

Talk in the room turns to how little change the industry has seen over the years.

"All the one style," says Bill.

"It's always been the same thing," Ralph concurs.

"Same old thing," agrees his sister, Angie.

"I've often thought why someone hasn't come up with a machine, stringin'," muses Bill. "Really."

There have been some minor changes. "They never use ta have those carts, we use ta have ta carry 'em," Ralph remembers. The carts are a

relatively new innovation.

"After you see one loaded, you'll know what we carried," Bill challenges a visitor.

He continues. "Well, it's the same way with takin' fish outa the boat. Ya use ta have ta scoop 'em in them tubs and heist the tub up. Now they drop a line in there and suck 'em up [by a pump]. Yea everything's changed."

"Except," begins Angie.

Her brother Ralph finishes for her. "Except the stringin'." The room erupts in laughter at the remark.

"That's changed," insists Bill. "The stringers are older, they ain't as young as they were." Big laughter stirs again.

"That's right," agrees Angie. "That's the only thing that's changed is the age, that's all."

"Yes sah, boy," says Bill.

A visitor asks if they get faster as they get older.

Angie answers. "No, we get slower. I can tell ya that much."

"No," agrees Bill. "You're like the car, ya don't drive 'er so fast after ya get a little age on 'er."

"When ya get 75, why ya bound ta slip little bit," laughs Angie as she continues to work.

"Ya use yer brakes more often," finishes Bill. There is more laughter.

They conclude thinking more has remained the same than has changed in their lifetime.

An account of the smoked herring industry around the Lubec area nearly a century ago in George Brown Goode's classic multi-volume work, *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States* (1887), bears their conclusions out to a remarkable degree:

"In stringing the stick is held in the left hand by the blunt

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end while the fish is clasped by the right hand and held with its back away from the stringer. The left gill-cover is then raised by a movement of the thumb and the pointed stick is inserted and passed out through the mouth, the fish being moved down to its proper position. It requires some time to become expert in this work, but after one has the knack he can work very rapidly, as only two movements are necessary to complete the operation.

"The most rapid workers will string 1,000 sticks in from eight to ten hours, while an average day's work for a professional stringer is from 500 to 700. Each stick holds from 25 to 35 fish, according to their size, while a hogshead (5 barrels) of herring will make 80 to 90 boxes of herring when smoked. The stringing is usually done by boys and girls who are hired for this purpose, though when the fishermen have leisure they frequently string their own catch, or, in some cases, they hire men for the purpose."

STRINGING HERRING are scarce this year. The herring strung today are part of only the second lot of herring that have come into the McCurdy plant so far.

The length of the stringing season depends on two factors: the time when the particular size of herring fit for stringing are obtainable, and cold weather. There is no wall insulation or heating device in the stringing room. Obtainability sets the starting point of the season, cold weather the ending point.

In the most recent years, the season has run for five months, from July to November. Formerly it ran two months longer

because the herring were available earlier, from May to November. No one is sure why the herring run has changed.

In the slots above the workers' heads, each bundle of stringing sticks numbers 100. For every 100 sticks that a worker fills with herring, he or she gets a punch that is worth five dollars. On bigger herring than those strung today, John McCurdy says he pays less. "Where these ones here are kind a messed up, yer expect to pay a little more."

Today, Wednesday, the stringers are on their second day of work for the week. They expect one more working day before the week's end. It takes little calculating to figure just how little the workers may earn stringing herring during a poor, short season. But all five stringers here today also work at skinning the smoked herring that begins later in the year.

"Before you can take 'em for stringin' herring, they ought to be at least that long," explains Bill. His hands spread to about 10 inches apart. "But some of them down there mixed in. It's only 'bout that long [4 inches] we have to throw 'em away. They're good fish for the factories to pack, sardines, but they're no good for a smoke herring."

Angie recalls the herring found earlier in the year. "Way too small."

"Too small, way too small," agrees Bill. "Ya got ta take some ta get any at all, if we didn't you wouldn't get no fish at all. Ya got ta put up with somethin'."

"Then July and August, September and October," continues Angie, "last year we got done in November stringin'. The 20th of November."

"It was pretty cold then,"

remembers Ralph.

"I tell ya it was cold," Bill says with emphasis. "Man." Angie laughs.

Beyond the black wall, John P. McCurdy, leans over a wooden tub full of herring in brine and talks to a visitor on a tour. He is a sturdy man in his fifties and speaks with force.

"Not all these fish aren't anywheres near the size we wanted, see lot a sardines in these things here. We had ta take 'em. We got a have 'em nine and a half inches. Don't see one."

But eventually he does and he picks it up out of the tub. "Now that right there's about 10 inches. I can span nine, see, that's pretty good, that's what we'd like ta have and bigger."

"Now there's all these little ones scattered through here." He picks up a small one. "Now that's really too small. They'll throw that out, put it up for lobster bait."

He picks up another large one. "This is what, that's the kind a fish, that right there is known as a stringin' herrin'. See we had a whole boat load a ones just like that, that's what, and as I say you can get 'em too, I mean we just don't happen ta have this year."

McCurdy looks to the smaller herring again. "See what happens. This is where all the trouble come this year in the fish, sardine business. That's right there would be a nice five fish [sardine] can there, four or five."

"Now see what's happenin'. That thing's full of feed. Every fish over there off Nova Scotia where these fish are comin' from, they're all feedin' on shrimp. Well, what happens, the small ones gouge themselves I think more than the big ones, perhaps tryin' ta grow

and they get overfilled and that feed, that shrimp will eat right through the fish.

"See, it ruins the fish. You take that shrimp and that water right there, leave them in there any length a time, and they'll weaken the gill on that fish, so when they string 'em out there, we get a lot a drop." By drop he means the herring's gill will give way and the herring will drop off its stick.

"Now if you got weir fish down here on the shore somewhere that's all been shut up two or three days then you don't have this condition cause the feed goes out. That's what we want right there. If we could have a boat load a those, we'd be in real good business here. But in a year like this, ya gotta, like I say, we just have ta take anythin' that's all.

"Lobster bait market is, ya know, and you can get yer money back out a the waste there, I mean, yer not gonna well, I don't know, you won't lose there too much."

Typed on a sheet of paper tacked to a post in the "boning" room (where herring that are through smoking are split and skinned) is a list of bait prices:

Bait 1984	
Price	Amount
19.50	55 gallon drum
12.00	1 barrel
4.00	1 bushel
1.75	5 gallon bucket
(3) bushel — 1 barrel — 70 pounds	
(5) barrel — 1 hogshead	

A man comes into the stringing room and asks if a Richard Munson who works in the smokehouses proper is there. He isn't. And talk turns to where he and his co-worker might be. Probably watching television they say, maybe Perry Mason or "Maybe Reagan's got a story on there or somethin'." The talk shifts to

Reagan and the poor. "The only thing about it," says Bill, "if he gets back in he can't hurt us cause he can never make us any poorer than we are. Yea, he's gone his limit right now. So if he gets back in, we'll never be any poorer than we are now."

Ralph turns and says, "Says unemployment's already down, did you see that in the paper?"

"It has. Christ, it's been down now for the last ten years," grinds Bill.

"Yea," responds Debbie, "they can't sign up."

"That won't bother me too much," replies Bill.

"Anybody can fish," offers Ralph.

"I don't want ta sign up, anyway, I don't want 'em tellin' me how much I can earn, the hell with 'em," continues Bill.

"Five hundred and thirty seven dollars and fifty cents in two different quarters, sixteen hundred and twelve dollars and fifty cents for a year," says Debbie.

"Yea, unemployment's gone down," someone quips.

"I would say it's gone down on both ends," says Bill.

"Fifteen hundred and somethin' and there's a good many of 'em won't make it," says Ralph.

"Prob'ly nobody make it," says Angie.

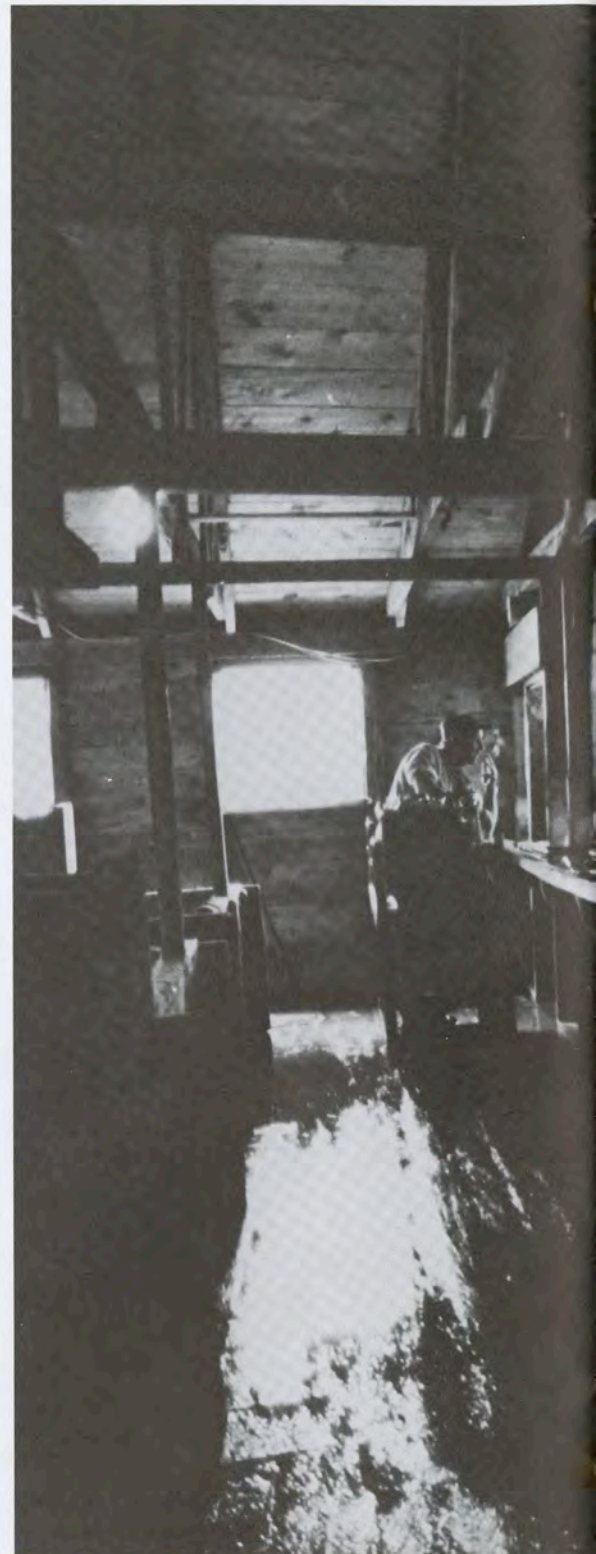
"Oh, you can't make that, Ralph," says Bill.

"No."

"You can't do it."

LUBEC IS A TOWN whose fortunes have declined in the last 75 years. In 1910 the population stood at 3,363. Today, it's about 2,000. Bill Wallace laments the change.

"That's all ya got left now, is this and two sardine factories.



Had American Can, cat food, three or four smoked herring stands going then. We must've had what: one, two, three, four, five, six sardine plants here. And they're all gone.

"Bowlin' alley, movie



Heather Joy Lane

theater, drug stores, and clothin' stores, and jewelry stores, and" his voice rising, "radio shops, bicycle shop, and barber shop, and what have you got, nothin'."

Angie laughs.

"Plywood shops," says Ralph.

Bill continues. "Yea. Plywood front street. Yes, had one, two, three, four restaurants. All kinds a stores, ice cream parlors. Oh, yes, Christ,

they had everything. Now you ain't got nothin'. Next year there won't even be the foundations left prob'ly.

"I can remember when I was old enough to run around on my own, 13-14 years old, you

couldn't walk up the sidewalk cause there wasn't room enough. Ya had to git on the road ta git up the street. It's hard thing ta believe. But Ralph can remember that, too."

"Oh, yes, oh, there was always, yep—big difference."

And Bill again: "My. Boy, so many people. Now you can ride a motorcycle up and down there anywhere, ya don't have ta worry 'bout hittin' anyone cause there ain't nobody."

"He's advertised it well, hasn't he?" Ralph asks of a visitor.

"He's tellin' it as it is, of course, but—" says Angie.

"It's true all right," nods Ralph.

Bill finishes. "Tellin' ya the truth."

Two years later, a town waterfront project will refurbish the main street area, bringing some hope for a better and new era for Lubec.

IN BACK OF THE WOOD-
en wall dividing the troughs, Leeman Wilcox watches, bringing up baskets of salted herring to the troughs when the piles empty. He's younger than the stringing men, perhaps in his forties, a man with a continuously jovial face and a developing paunch.

A green cloth working cap tops his head. Hip green rubber boots ring his legs. He says he has worked at McCurdy's for at least 20 years, and worked there when his uncle did.

Around him are a series of wooden board brine tanks where the herring are brought for salting by a pump at the end of the building and the wharf from a herring carrier boat and through a water driven sluiceway. He stands

leaning on his dipnet smoking a cigarette.

There are 26 tubs of different sizes. All total, they hold almost 100 hogshead of herring. Wooden posts stand in the corner of each tub, plugging a hole cut in the bottom floor when the tubs are filled with fish, removed when the tubs are cleaned.

John P. McCurdy continues talking to visitors in this room. "These are all hogshead tank,



so many hogshead. Now this one here," pointing to one, "happen ta be two and a half.

"This [lot of] fish here come in here last, it was last Tuesday wasn't it?"

"Yea, last Tuesday," answers Leeman.

"Week ago Tuesday. When they come in like that the tanks will all fill full, then so much water left in there too, ya see, to make a brine." Salt is added to the water to make a brine.

"We put well, in that tank, was there seven 88 pound bags in there. They'll be in there five days. See, we can't start [stringing] em till five days. Now you see, it's takin' us longer. We don't get 'em all out in one day, that's where we have ta start 'em, then we just keep goin' along workin' until we get 'em done.

"Then every other day we come in here, what we call break em up. Take a little spudger, and just keep hittin' em, just push 'em down, push

the salt down off the top, then put another bag on top of 'em. Every other day. Ta keep the brine up. Make sure the ones on the top get salt. If they didn't, they just left 'em there, the ones on the top would hardly have any salt at all.

It is nine o'clock, and the stringers break for coffee up to the deserted "boning" room at the land end of the wharf. John McCurdy remarks, "If Peacock [sardine factory on a neighboring wharf] hadn't been working this morning, we'd have had three-four more [stringers], we'd be all done by now."

A big, overweight young man lumbers into the stringing room and begins to wheel one of the red low lying carts that has been filled with strung herring. He picks up the handles and pushes it toward the door and out to the open air.

His name is Dave Marston. He has worked at McCurdy's since August of 1978. Prior to that he had worked there summers. When he left school, he went to Bangor, but he says couldn't find much work there, and returned to Lubec. He worked for a time for the Budweiser Beer company and in construction.

He works one day a week elsewhere and five days a week at McCurdy's. Once he worked nine hours at the other place and made 50 dollars, and worked two days and made 110 dollars. For five days work at McCurdy's he clears 125 dollars.

He wheels the cart out onto the wharf surrounded on three sides by the stringing room on the east, and the two smokehouses on the south and north. The strung herring are parked in the sun for an hour or two so that the gills of the herring harden before they are hung in the smokehouses.

BRIGHT RED, THE SAME red of the stringing building and low lying carts, washes the outside of the two barnlike smokehouses that border either side of the wharf. They are capped by pitched roofs of ridged silver colored metal. Inside one smokehouse, two men work beneath black canyons that are empty except for three rows of strung herring on the bottom.

Cool darkness hugs the room. The men lay fire piles about the floor, three or four logs to each and a half basket of sawdust on top.

The older man, Richard Munson, is the smoketender. He walks from pile to pile carrying a tin jug full of kerosene and a long poker like stick. He dips the end of the stick in the kerosene, lights it, then touches it to a sawdust pile doused with the same kerosene.

He works quickly. Quietly. In no time, 14 small fires of hell blaze about him in the dark room. The fires hiss. It is an eery scene of changing light and darkness cut by fire, smoke, men, and fish.

Richard delights in this work, laughing, "I'm the only one who has a trade like this. I'm the only one can go around and light fires and not get arrested. You can call me a legalized arsonist."

He finishes. To extinguish the stick, he pokes it into an unlit pile of sawdust. Bob Case, the other worker, and he step outside, shutting the door behind them.

CARTS OF HERRING greet them on the otherwise deserted open wharf. The fish glitter in the high sun. John McCurdy steps from a building with a visitor. He pauses to take a measured

glance of the scene. "This is lovely right here," he says.

"You take a rainy day it's terrible on us, everything is greasy here and slippery.

"Just the minute the rain hits those fish, the freshwater will weaken the gills again. That's all we worry about is those gills.

"That's, keep 'em dry.

"But right there, that's out here for an hour or two, it's just as good as bein' in the smokehouse, you know, 'n firin' it.

"Just saves you a lot a money, 'cause they'll dry right here and that brine that's on there will just kind of, see that, how that drippin' right off 'em.

"Let them dry out here.

"But you gotta be careful. If it's too hot, you leave 'em there like over noontime, they'll sunburn the gills a those. They'll get too hot, an' they'll burn 'em. Then when they go to hang 'em up after dinner, they'll all fall off the sticks.

"You gotta be very careful."

A SMOKEHOUSE WORKS much like a modern woodstove. Both revolve around a self contained firebox with finely adjusting draft and air controls.

To operate either well demands a certain skill. What type of wood is used to build the fire is important. How it is built is, too. How much and when air and draft vents are opened plays a role. Both smokehouse and woodstove have to be checked and tuned regularly.

The room where Richard and Bob work lighting fires forms only part of each smokehouse. Each is divided into three self contained sections or rooms known as houses. Each house is further split into a series of bays—the black vertical can-

yons the width of a herring stick that descend from the top of the smokehouse to within seven or eight feet above a ground level open area.

One of the smokehouses contains two houses of nine bays each, and one house of eight bays. The second smokehouse contains 22 bays between its three houses.

The ends of the sticks of herring in a smokehouse rest on wooden slats that line the sides of the vertical canyons, each slat separated from one below or above by about a foot, or slightly more than the length of a large stringing herring. Rows of vertically hung herring can then be placed on top of one another within each canyon.

The floor of each house is made up of two parts. On top lies a layer of gravel about a foot thick over a floor of logs and planks. Gravel is there not only for the fires, but also for the falling grease and brine from the herring. After a while the gravel floors get too hard to absorb the grease and must be changed. So every year the gravel in one or two of the houses is shifted. That works out to shifting the gravel in each house about every third year.

The wood used for building the fires is primarily spruce and fir. Driftwood is preferred. It will burn longer and better. On the open area of the wharf are several piles of four foot spruce and fir logs. One pile of driftwood is there, picked from off the beach of nearby Campbell Island. Why the driftwood is better, John McCurdy doesn't really know except to say that it must have something to do with the wood lying in the saltwater for so many years.

The sawdust put on the logs in a fire pile is central to the smoking operation. It is Ralph



SMOKEHOUSE - SIDE VIEW

Sawtelle who provides the clearest explanation.

"Just the clear wood, you'd get quite a fire. Just the wood will burn fast. But ya put the sawdust on there, and it burns slow. You don't get so much heat, not in the summertime, be too much.

"And that's what that does. It smokes 'em in there."

The sawdust is kept under cover in a small building next to the southern smokehouse. You can't smoke fish well with wet sawdust or wet wood. Until recently, the sawdust was hauled in from Ellsworth, some 80 miles to the west. Now it's obtained from a mill in Lubec.

Smoke fires are evenly spaced over the gravel within each house. The smoke rises up through the canyons of herring and out through a narrow covered opening running the length of the roof peak. Along the sides of each smokehouse are a series of other vents the shape and size of windows. They can be partially or totally shut by sliding wooden doors.

For the house where the fires were lit, the window vents are half closed. John McCurdy lends a hand, using the end of a long wooden stick to butt into a notch in the wooden door covering more than 10 feet above him. He has difficulty, hobbling the doors across the vents.

"I'm not like you old pros here," he says, excusing himself.

THE TWO MEN WHO build the fires also hang the herring in the smokehouse bays. Richard is in charge and Bob Case helps him.

Bob is a young native Lubecer with some scruff of

beard on his face. He came back to Lubec about five years ago from Boston where he had worked 12 years at Boston City Hall, including two years as a correction officer. He says that work is as hard as his work at McCurdy's.

Besides hanging sticks of herring and tending fires, he helps split the wood logs, using a four foot wood splitter. This afternoon, he'll get 200 bags of salt. He also gets sawdust for McCurdy's.

He, Richard, and Leeman Wilcox made the boxes used to pack the smoked herring. The box shooks come pre-cut and they make them in the spring of the year. It takes about a month to make enough boxes for the year.

Richard Munson, is a master of the dead and dumb voice brand of humor. He looks the part. He appears to be in his late thirties with a balding head and several missing teeth on a roundish face, and clothes both old and plain.

An example of him at work:

Richard to John P. McCurdy: "Can you lay me off so I can draw unemployment?"

John: "Yea."

Richard: "Good."

John: "Yea."

Richard: "They got a good deal goin'. They serve drinks now."

John: "Where?"

Richard "[I was] up to the unemployment line, look come a Bert. Bert left 10 o'clock ta go sign up. Noontime he was down there with a drink in his hand." Richard laughs. "So I think I wanta sign up."

John: "He didn't look too good this morning ta start with." Richard laughs again. "His eyes 'bout the color a one a those [red] carts."

Richard has his job because of the problem of herring drop-

ping off their sticks inside the smokehouse. As he tells it:

"There was one year, fella that was firin' before me, he went in that smokehouse there and he picked up 16 a those baskets a fish and never got 'em all. He just said, 'Hell with it.' It was on a weekend. He closed the door and walked off."

Not that Richard hasn't seen plenty of fish drop himself. He has. "I've seen 'em [herring] sa feedy before that when you hung 'em up, you'd have drops for a week."

Richard and Bob break from their talk to begin hanging sticks of herring in the house to the east of where they lit the fires. Richard grabs one of the filled herring carts on the open wharf and wheels it in through the door of the house. There are no fish yet in this house and no fires lit.

Bob, in the meantime, has climbed a side wall inside and stands straddling the center bay, his feet resting on the lowest slat on either side of the canyon. Richard passes strung sticks up to him three at a time and Bob places them in a row four slats from the bottom beginning from the far wall and working back.

Watching the two work from the outside on the wharf, John McCurdy tells his visitor what goes on inside. "Now our year's process, to put enough herrin' through this thing between now and say November when the fish run will stop in November, we'll fill that [smoke] house full, along both sides over there, and then empty it, and in the meantime while we're emptyin' that, we're gonna fill this [smokehouse] up full, then try ta go back and fill that one up again.

"Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't."

"IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN to people how this works, because everybody wants to know, you know, how long's it take to smoke a herring, see," says John McCurdy running his eyes over the smokehouse building.

"Well, it isn't that simple.

"If you had 'em right here on the bottom [slats] here, take ya about a month, see, maybe month or six weeks, in ideal weather, you know, it wasn't wet.

"Well, what we do, we just start 'em out here, up on this [bottom] slat here ta keep 'em up off the fire you know, so they don't get too hot.

"That's one a the big worries, especially in the summertime is gettin' 'em too hot 'n burnin' 'em. Once you burn 'em, you got ta throw 'em away. They're just no good. They're just ruined.

"They'll come in here like these fellas are today and they'll hang 'em, say, one, two, three, four in here, four [bottom] slats. And we'll leave 'em there a week or ten days until they dry on the, the gill will dry right on that stick, make 'em hard, so they won't fall off.

"Then after that, we'll put three or four men in here and they'll stand up in there, then they'll just pass 'em up into the peaks here. Then the next week, what we're doin' right now, again, we'll come right in here and do the same thing all over again. Put 'em down here, then fire 'em for a week, then put them up.

"Even when we're smokin' 'em, we don't wanta dry 'em out. That's the thing we gotta be careful of.

"Oil content is in 'em. But you got ta have that in 'em, as I say ta, that's all has ta do with the makeup, the consistency of 'em, that's all.

"If you don't they'd dry right out just like a piece a wood.

"As they keep goin' up [in the smokehouse], see they're gettin' a little bit different consistency, see. Ya have ta keep checkin' 'em all.

"After a while a 'course the texture will be just right, then you can hear 'em rattle in here, you take a stick, you can hear it, when you touch it, it'll all kind a rattle. Then ya take 'em down and bone 'em.

"And that's the end a the process.

"Ya can either under smoke 'em or then the other way, you can over smoke 'em.

"Under smokin' I think is the lesser a two evils.

"Over smoking, ya just ruin the fish. Oh, it looks like the devil, they go ta take the skin off.

"When the skin comes off that, it all comes off nice and smooth. And then the piece a fillet that you have there, got a nice piece a flesh on it, there's silver along, you know, on the back.

"Where if they're over done, then when you go ta take and skin 'em, an' take that skin off, they'll pick off, you know, sa rough, that's all, it just doesn't look good at all.

"That's what we worry about more than anything. They're all ragged, they just don't, I mean the fish is there, and I say, the texture and everything, but it just doesn't, you know, the looks part of it is what, that has a lot ta do with [marketing]—"

John looks back inside to Richard and Bob at work. "How come yer puttin' 'em up three at a time?"

"Quicker," Bob replies.

"Huh?"

"Quicker."

"Those fish, I figured they'd drop there pushin' 'em up."

"No, they're holdin' good,"

reassures Bob.

"No, they're holdin' good," Richard echoes. "Normally we wouldn't do it."

"But they're light, too," adds Bob.

John McCurdy moves on. He opens the door to another house to check the fires. Turning to his visitor, he continues his explanation.

"All we wanta do right now, this time a year particularly, just keep a little heat in here, not too much, just very, very slow, you gotta have heat to cook 'em, that's the main thing, you gotta give it to 'em very slowly.

"See they [the smokehouses] just have ta be opened up here during the day, like I say, when he's firin' here, just a little bit, 'nough ta keep the air going through 'em.

"If you buttoned this baby right up, put those fires in there, they'd burn 'em up.

"And you can't have 'em open like this," he points to several open window vents, "a 'course when the winds a blowin' and fan those fires down and then you have ones on the ground.

"This house is filled right full now, right from the top to the bottom, this one. Every day they'll just keep right at this, that's the one we'll work on first, see, we keep a firin' that, like it is today, the whole month of August, prob'ly by the last week, maybe, prob'ly first week a September we'll be able ta start workin' on 'em ya know, start process 'em.

"You get everyone a these houses all full, you have quite a lot a work ta do just in the mornin', start all these fires up. I mean, ya got every house here, and they'll burn what, prob'ly two or three cord, well, take a cord, prob'ly two cord just ta fire 'em in the mornin'.

"How'd you like ta be my fire

insurer, huh?

"They come down here, look in the door, huh? No wonder the rates are high, huh?"

JOHN McCURDY LEAVES the smokehouses and walks up to the empty boning room. He has been in the smoked herring business about 20 years. He has been the driving force that has kept his firm continuing while other smoked herring businesses failed. His grandfather, John McCurdy, was in the smoked herring business in the early 1900s. His smokehouse was in Lubec, but not at the present site.

In between the two John McCurdys was the father of John P., Arthur McCurdy. He, too, was involved in the smoked herring business. "He was the one, he had two or three a these places around," says John P.

"He really built this up, I mean, the rest a 'em [smokehouses] were all goin' down, see, years ago, he just kept pushin' away at it there. We've had this one here, one out the road, one up North Lubec.

"At one time I can remember several of 'em bein' around Lubec. But I think prob'ly the height of the smoke fish season business prob'ly back in the late 30s and 40s prob'ly. There were about 30 a these stands around you know, some smaller.

"We had one that burned here back 'bout eight, ten years ago, another one just like this and some kid set off one.

"Well, that kinda put us right back down here ta one shop again. The way the market's been, this is plenty. This all ya need really."

John P. doesn't know how long the present McCurdy



Heather Coryell

John P. McCurdy

smokehouse has been in existence, but it has been a considerable time. A Kelley family owned the plant years ago.

"When I was young, I use ta go down here, oh, goin' ta high school or somethin', you know, come down here, doin' what these fellas are doin', worked in the bays. Fact I still do when we get shorthanded.

"There's nothin' here that I haven't done anyway.

"I say, there's a lot a things here that, you know, work well.

I say, I got three or four fellows worked for me for a good number a years. I've got ladies here that worked here for, Christ, for years and years and years, lots of 'em."

He looks out a window. There are his smokehouses and wharf. "Maybe that's the only reason there's one left in the country here, prob'ly." He laughs. "Just too much handling." He laughs again.

He looks to his wharf again. "This wharf here, just a terri-

Lynn Kippax, Jr.



ble expense really, this day an' age. This thing [would be built today] up on dry land somewhere. But years ago, everything was outa here by boat. Nobody ever thought about building anything like this on land and then just havin' a little small dock come out, you know, to land a boat to which they do today."

John McCurdy looks beyond the wharf to the Narrows.

"I like that, really of all the things here, the fish are in the bay. I know they're mine when they go in the tank. When they call ya on the phone, say they've almost got 'em," he laughs, "that doesn't mean much. It doesn't mean much if they're just tied up out there, 'cause the pump might break down.

"When they're goin' in the tank, they're mine, huh. I kinda light up wheres they make me feel good, you know. I say, least ya get the dust outa those tanks.

"And it is, say you watch 'em just kind a flutter in down there in those tanks, it's kind of, think that they were just out there just a short time ago, they were just swimmin' around."

CLICK, CLICK, CLICK. Scissors slice through smoked fish bodies. Short metallic clicks. Like the snips of scissors in a barber shop. The "boning" operation has begun.

Boning usually starts each year the last of August, first of September. In the case of the 1983-1984 season, it ran through to January and then finished up beginning in April.

The third of October, 1984 finds the boning room full of men and women. There are 14 who work directly with the

fish, five others who either move the fish or skins from place to place or cover and strap the filled boxes.

Tin covered benches line the walls on two sides of the rooms. Tin also covers a swath of the wall in front of the benches. Fluorescent lights flare from the white ceiling.

Four who were stringers are at work boning. There is no stringing today. Angie Sawtelle works in the middle of one side of the room, separated on her left from Harold Moores and his wife. To her right are six women. On the opposite side of the room, are Bill Wallace and Debbie Moores. Then comes another woman. Last is Charlie Holmes and his wife.

In the middle of this group is the scale where filled boxes are weighed. On one end, the covers are nailed shut and box lots of four are strapped.

All but two of the workers stand. They work in set patterns. To use Angie as an example, on the bench in front of her, left to right, are a pile of smoked herring, a space to cut fish, then a pile of waste.

Behind the cut fish, towards the wall, is a wood shook box in which the herring are placed. Several workers, including Angie, have raised the rear end of the box up a few inches to keep it off of the uncut fish and the tin. The box is lined with a paper to keep it clean and free of grease.

Angie uses a big pair of scissors to cut her fish. She wears the end of gloves on her fingers: on her right thumb and the next three fingers, on her left thumb and the next finger. Rubber bands keep them in place.

She moves quickly. She picks up a herring in her right hand and cuts it with her left. The fish is held in the middle

of its back by the right thumb and first finger.

Then, twirling the fish toward the scissor blades, Angie cuts the head, the belly, then the tail off. It's done in one motion, usually one cut of the scissors for the head, a slide of small cuts up the belly, then a quick cut for the tail, and then the click of the scissors closing.

To split the remaining fish, Angie twists and bends it while holding one end in each hand. While twisting it, she slides her thumb down and up the belly of the fish, ripping it open.

Flattening the fish, she takes the skin off the back with her hand. If the skin is too tough, she uses a knife that looks like a paring knife, resting the fish in the space between her and the wood box.

The fish is flipped over, its bone and insides scraped out with a knife or picked out with a finger. The fillet is separated in two, the sides scraped free of skin.

Angie fills her box and goes to weigh it on the scale across the room. There are enough fillets for almost two 10-pound boxes.

By nine o'clock, the crew has filled 20 boxes. In a corner of the room, Leeman Wilcox cranks thin metal strips around four of the boxes at a time. He also dumps baskets of smoked herring from the smokehouses on the workers' benches.

Workers are paid \$3.00 for each filled 10-pound box. By 11:30 in the morning, Angie is on her ninth box. She started five hours earlier at 6:30. With good smoked fish, Angie says she can fill 13 boxes on average during a day's work.

She says she can't with the fish today. Their skin is too tough.



Gossip rises and falls across the room. Bob Case and Richard Munson come in and take away the baskets of herring skins. Richard kids and taunts the women. He puts his greased black hands around and in front of one woman's face. People laugh. But they're also annoyed.

Later, in a smokehouse, Bob and Richard stand high within a bay. They hand herring sticks two or three at a time to Dave Marston who stands on the floor below. Richard works with a swaying motion and sings,

*This is the way
we take them down,
take them down,
take them down.
This is the way
we take them down,
so early*

in the morning.

A set of sticks is passed downward. Then three more are picked off from the slats.

Dave fills a cart, the same kind used to bring freshly strung herring from the stringing room. He hangs the sticks first on the frame, then lays them in stacks of about six sticks deep on top, in one direction and then in the opposite direction.

Still later in the day, two teams (Richard and Bob, Dave and Leeman) put sticks up higher in a smokehouse bay. The two men of each team work facing each other. They move the top four rungs of the lower hung fish up by four rungs or more, up to the fish in the peaks of the house.

The four rows of fish at the very bottom of the bay are left

for a week, when they, too, will be moved up.

AS IF THE STEPS OF producing a smoked herring were not enough to manage, later come the equally demanding steps of producing and marketing the product at a profit.

While McCurdy's may be the only smoked herring operation in the United States, it is not alone in the world. There are several in neighboring New Brunswick, Canada.

John McCurdy estimates that about 400,000 pounds of smoked herring are produced each year, his production of 160,000 making less than half.

Marketing is not a simple matter.

First, there is the problem of a shrinking market. John

McCurdy thinks there are simply fewer people eating smoked herring than there used to be.

"People are goin' inta fast food. I think prob'ly people's eatin' habits have changed a lot.

"One time, like I say, this was big seller in the South 'cause what it is, just a low cost protein that was all. 'Course now, almost becomin' like a deli food. She's expensive now, people go out an' buy it.

"So they don't buy it, I don't think, for the same reason that they use ta, say years ago."

Then there is the problem of being at the beck and call of that market. Until very recently, there was no holding of the supply, until demand strengthened. There still is little.

"The thing that's bothersome, marketwise, is that no one has any carryover from one year ta next.

"Like the sardine people, they're carryin' over stock which, that's just in the nature a the business.

"But in this business here, for years and years and years, we just sold from hand ta mouth. Just the minute they got 'em down in here, which was wonderful, you know, we sold 'em right out the door. Had trucks here that was takin' 'em 200, 300 boxes to a lot, all the time.

"But now, I say the last few years it hasn't worked that way. I mean, now we're holdin' on ta some product all the time, you know, buildin' up, put it in the cooler." McCurdy recently converted a room next to the boning room into a cooler.

"I called New York. They called me and Christ they wanta sell 'em for, like I say, what, we were gettin' 17

dollars once, then they went down to 16, then they went to 15—this is the last four or five years—then it went to 14, last year it went down to 13, and I sold some for 12, I think I realized about 12.50.

"Taday I called New York and the guy's gettin' 'em down there for 11 dollars and 10 cents outa Canada.

"There's no reason at all. If everybody was putting a lot a stock away every year an' inventoryin' this and buildin' it up—course everybody's clean, after every year we're clean, the whole industry practically.

"We should somewhere you know level off on a price that's realistic, that's profitable. I don't say exorbitant. But I mean something that makes it worth while to work for.

"But that's never going ta happen."

A third problem lies in the buildup of the Canadian supply. John McCurdy questioned whether the demand justified the expansion of supply.

"The Canadian government built the smokehouses up on the north shore [New Brunswick] and, I mean, in other areas. It was just for the U.S. market, that's all, I mean, they just built 'em up, they didn't have any market in Canada."

And the fourth problem is the money exchange rate. In the summer of 1984, the Canadian dollar is worth 85 cents of the American. That, to John McCurdy, means that he has to compete with Canadian processed herring in the American market at a 15 percent disadvantage. Today, with the Canadian dollar worth only about 70 cents American the disadvantage has doubled.

That disadvantage, though, turns into an advantage for John McCurdy, just like it does for other Americans, if he buys

Canadian. He buys a lot of Canadian raw fish.

"Last year we got every fish we had outa Canadian waters. That's why I can't make too much noise. I mean," he laughs, "they're keepin' ya alive in one side [supply], then they're killin' yer over here [selling]."

John P. McCurdy's business philosophy is a fifth problem. For all his belaboring of the market demand, the exchange rate, the oversupply of product, he is going to put up as much smoked herring as he can. Regardless. He is in the business of putting up smoked herring. And that's what he intends to do.

He doesn't view his attitude as a problem, instead he thinks he has little choice.

"You can't not take the fish. I'm gonna take just as many this year, pack, like I say, when you see things goin' kind a haywire, I think lot a times better, instead of kind a go at it kind a cowardly, you know, and kind a sit back hopin' this thing—I think the first, the more you drive at somethin', jesuss, then, huh?

"That's the way I am anyway. I'm gonna put up more fish this year I hope than I ever did. Huh?

"Now if exchange rate or what, I don't know what the hell's gonna happen, but I don't wanta sit back and just say well, I didn't [buy fish] somethin' happened because I didn't take the fish.

"'Cause ya gotta have the fish regardless, if you're gonna be in the fish business."

HUGH T. FRENCH is an editor of Salt Magazine. He is a native of Eastport, Maine, which is a few miles from the McCurdy Smokehouse in Lubec.