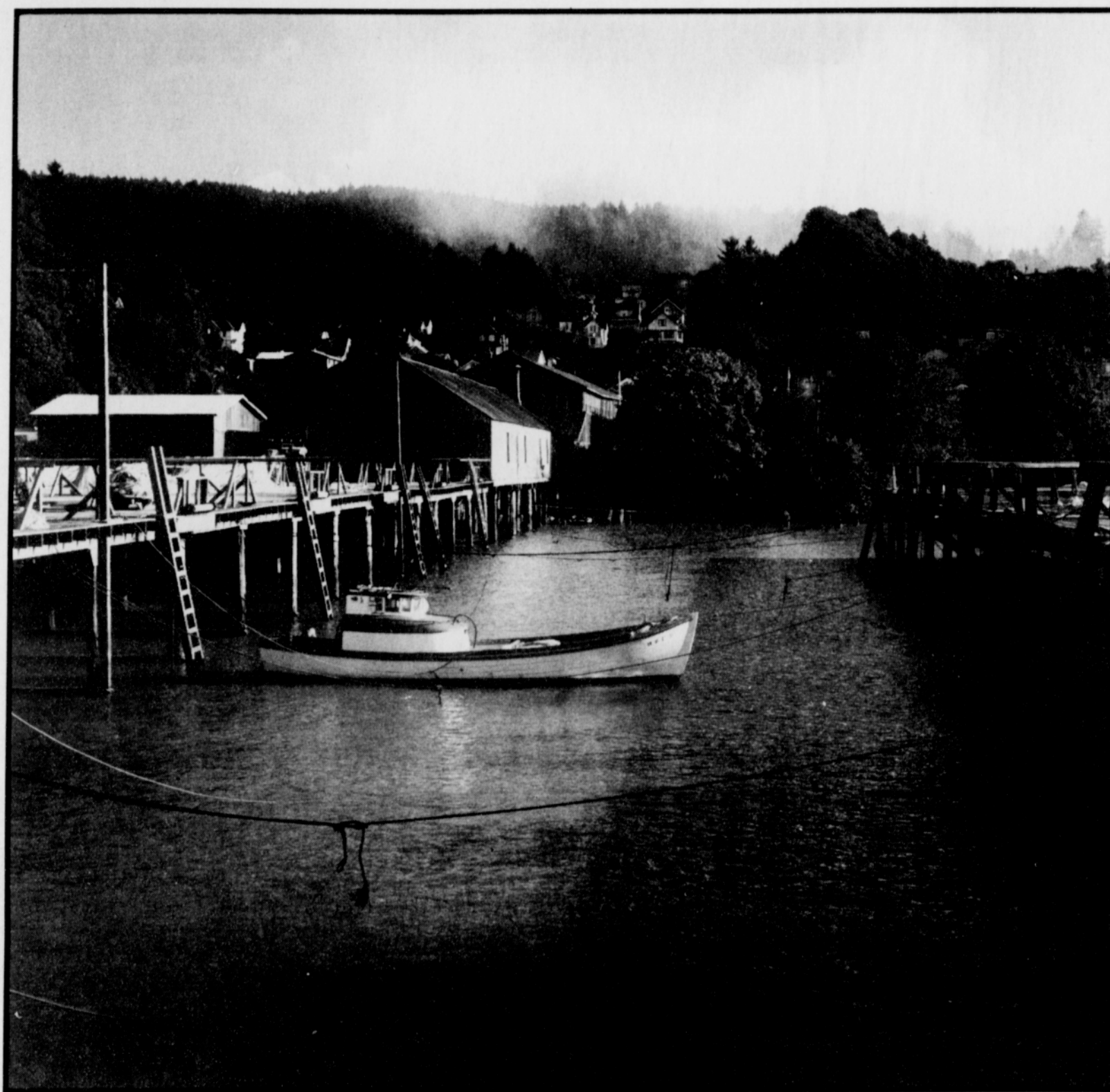
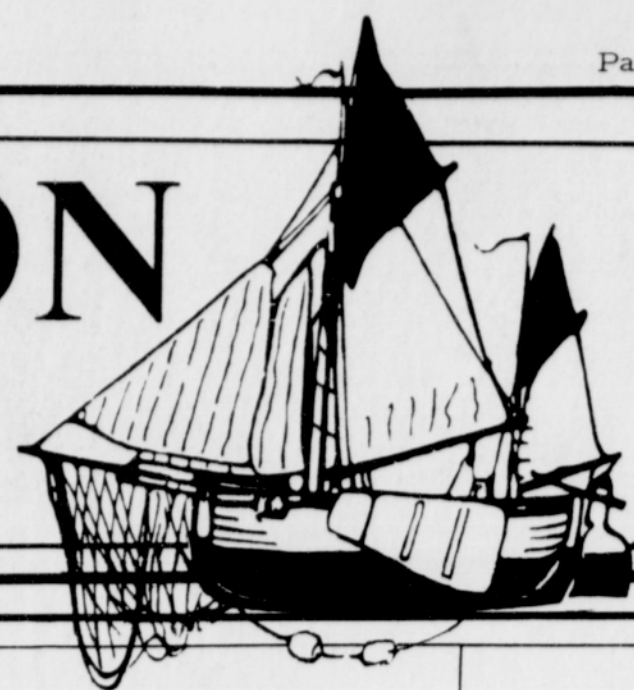




THE OREGON STORY



LOWER COLUMBIA RIVER BOWPICKERS

Written & Photographed by James Stoffer

Gillnetting is a style of fishing in which the fisherman lets out several hundred fathoms of net constructed of a float line made of corks slipped onto a nylon rope. Tied to this line at intervals of several feet is the net with a mesh of four to six inches. A line weighted with lead tied to the bottom of the mesh spreads it open, thus forming a wall from the surface of the river usually to the bottom. The fish swim into the transparent mesh and get caught by their gills. Unless the net is snagged or damaged, the fish remain ensnared until the net is hauled in and the fish are picked. The end of the net is marked by an orange ball by day and a white light by night. It is often impossible to tell one end of a net from several others.

Bowpickers is a nickname given to describe the style of Columbia River salmon fishing boats with the work area forward. "Picking" is the task of removing fish from the gillnet as the nets are hauled aboard. Unlike other types of gillnet boats, this job of picking is done from the bow of the boat rather than the stern. The cabin is placed in the stern and from mid-boat forward is open for fish, net storage and work area.

This basic design has changed little since the lower Columbia River salmon fishery was developed during the 1880s. Originally the entire boat was open and powered by sail, but with the advent of gasoline engines a cowling of some sort was needed. This

cowling quickly developed into a small cabin or "dog house," just big enough to be occupied by a couple of men and some gear. Most of the inside space is typically occupied by a Chrysler Crown straight-six engine, the standard power unit for the fleet.

The lower Columbia River is the stretch from the mouth of the river to Bonneville Dam. Above the dam is treaty fishing and, though there is no fleet of bowpickers, some are used. The lower Columbia salmon fishery has been responsible for establishing and nurturing numerous towns and communities along the banks of the river, although several vanished or started declining years ago.

In 1980 I received a commission to create a photographic documentary of what remained of the bowpicker fleet and some of their activities. When I started photographing the fleet there was still a semblance of the old fishery. That heritage perhaps was embodied best of all by life-long Astoria fisherman, the late Helmer Lindstrom. He had lived and worked out of the old Alderbrook Station boat house near Tongue Point for most of his adult life. Up until the day he died he worked in the boat house and net sheds on a daily basis. Although in his later years he would not go out in the boats, he still helped repair

CONTINUED ON PAGE FOUR