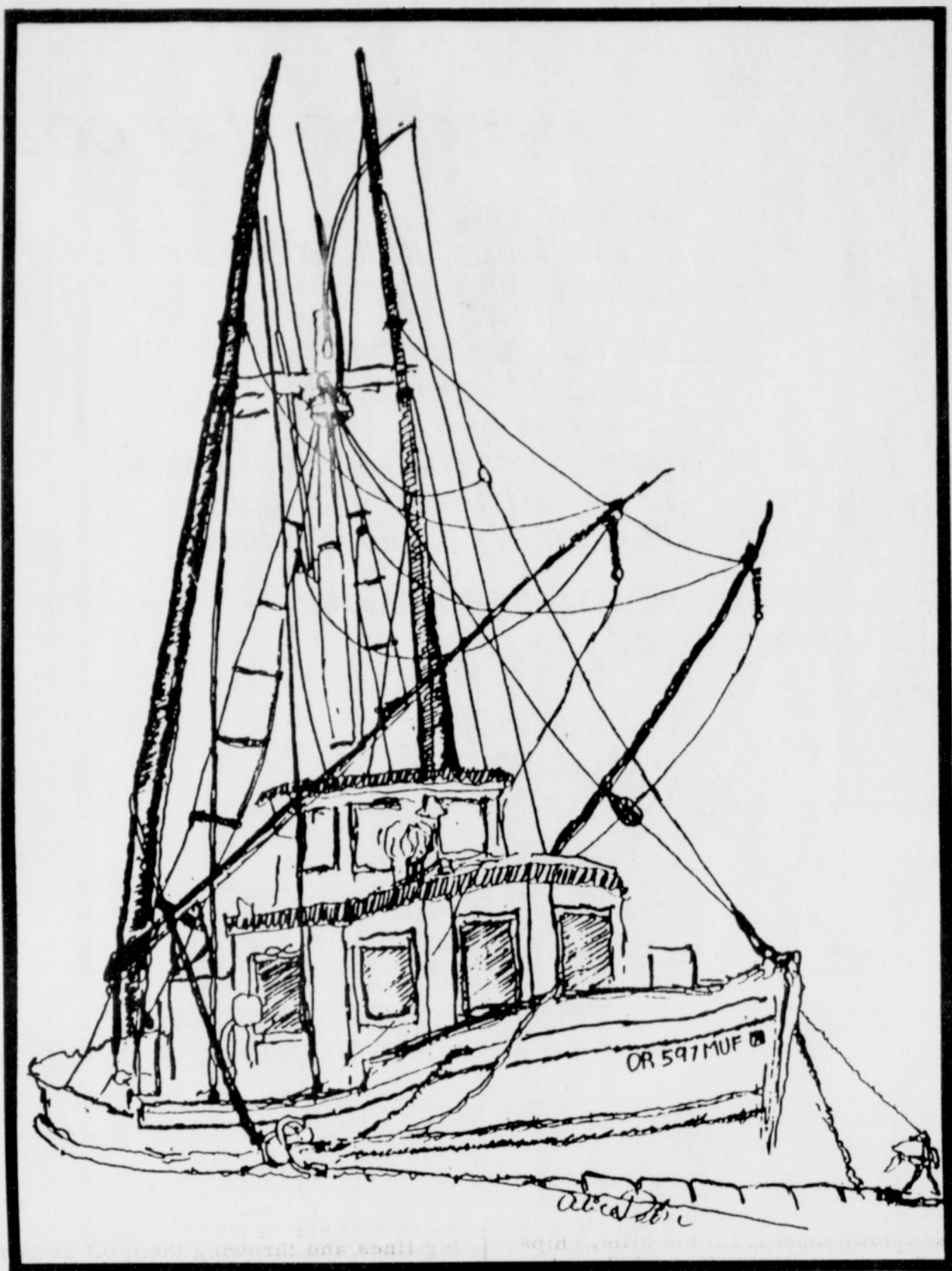


SCHOONERS ACROSS THE BAR



DRAWING BY ALICE ANN PETRIE

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

Twenty years ago, in late August 1972, a small fishing boat capsized in the Columbia River bar. The following is an account of that incident and is dedicated to all mariners and anyone else who has been aboard a sinking vessel, those who survived and those who died.

When a woman I loved left me in fear that I would leave her and run off to sea, I ran off to sea because my woman left me. My new love was a fishing boat. Her name was Falling Star, and she had fallen far, skinny and hoary with rotting wood and flaking paint and a perpetual starboard list that the skipper set me to correct with heavy bags of salt I wrestled from the dock into the dark hold that smelled of fish and diesel and wedged against the portside timbers. The skipper was a few years older than me, in his late thirties. His were fishing stock and he had worked decks since his baby fingers could tie a knot. He was bearded and his long hair was matted and twisted from wind and neglect. His clothes were oily and smelled of fish and sweat. He looked me over illhumoredly the day I asked for a fishpuller's job. "You ever fished?" he questioned. I nodded. Two seasons, I said, and named the boats, skippers and home ports. He raised a one-fingered hand to his pale freckled face and scratched beard hair that straggled up his cheeks toward his eyes which burned harshly out of the mass of hair, and from somewhere in the tangle his teeth flashed like hungry sharks as I heard terse instructions to get my seabag on board and be ready to throw off mooring lines before first light in the morning.

My new love was topheavy and continued to list despite the salt bags, and slouched against its lines. The topside bridge was cluttered with boxes filled with lines, nets and crab pots. Its tuna poles rose worn and warped like arms in surrender. A splintered mast made my love a hermaphrodite, and although I was suppressing sexuality because I missed the woman who took a new lover, this aging hag at sea would be a newer kind of love.

Fog was thick on the river when we crossed the sullen gray Columbia River bar early the next morning. We tied up first at a cannery wharf at Point Adams then ran in the river channel awhile and frivolously bounced behind an outgoing freighter. Plush and gleaming charter fishing boats poured into the river from a side channel almost on battleline and flashed arrogantly past, showing no respect for their ugly

spinster aunt the Falling Star, and lifted their skirts flirtily to a ponderous steamer as they skipped into the Pacific Ocean beyond Cape Disappointment. We turned from the buoyline and shuffled across turbulent shallows along the south jetty. The ocean was at flood tide and rammed into the river. A crowd of seagulls watched us from the jetty's rocks as we plowed head on into roller coaster swells and into the open ocean.

I crossed the bar the first time two years before, coming up from the south on another old fishing boat with a load of albacore tuna for the Astoria canneries. Just before crossing from the ocean into the river we sat outside while my skipper of that season, an old man named George who had fished for fifty years, studied the bar. A unlit cigar poked out of his ruddy face and his eyes were almost covered by a black knit cap that stretched tightly over his beachball head. He told the two of us who were his crew about the hundreds of ships and boats sunk or scattered on sandbars and beaches for miles on either side of the bar, the graveyard of the Pacific he said seadogs called it,

justly so, he assured us, speaking the names of friends and boats that had died during his half century on the ocean. George turned around from the wheel topside and looked back over the stern while he chewed on his cold cigar and jabbered his salty palaver. Then he turned back and hunched over the wheel. He kicked the motor into gear and we crossed the bar, which threw us around like a dog with a sock.

I stayed ashore after that season ended. I settled my wages with George and got off the boat in Astoria. I took a bus upriver to Portland, found a job and got to know a woman whose smile was like all of the candles in a church lit at once. She and I shared an apartment but after awhile I started feeling smothered. I thought I needed salt air to put grit back into my blood. She knew my thoughts. I thoughtlessly whipped her with them. So she finally told me to go to hell and found a new boyfriend.

As the Falling Star came out of the river past a huge black gullstained and spraylashed rock into the open ocean, the fog unclenched its wet stringy fingers and gave us to the rising sun, a bright wrinkled fire that etched the forested mountains against the salmon colored sky as if they were pasted there. The water was crystalline blue and gentle away from the heaving surge of the bar, and it walked with us while we chugged a few miles just beyond surf that broke on a reef. We passed the shining charter boats which sniffed like hounds for fish, and we saw the rusted and half-buried bones of the Peter Iredale, a fourmasted square-rigger that was driven ashore and stranded on the beach while navigating toward the Columbia River bar one October night in 1906. Nothing but its skull and ribs stuck out of the tidewater sand, which made it resemble a desert skeleton. Its steel plates had been stripped away by storms and tides and perhaps by human carrion, and its bowsprit had fallen off and was buried in the sand. We turned toward the north within sight of the town of Seaside, into the wind, and the pungent smells of squid and clams I had cut up for bait slapped me in the face.

We were fishing for dungeness crabs that day. The skipper pointed his one-fingered hand at a long string of bobbing red bullet-shaped buoys that were hardly more than a few yards off the reef that paralleled the beach. Underneath each buoy was a crab pot. That was our line, he said.

I had never fished crabs. I was an albacore tuna man, but I wanted to think I was willing to try anything. We worked the line for almost twelve hours without a break, moving from buoy to buoy, more than three hundred of them, myself in command of a long wood handled boathook which I used to reach out over the side to snag the buoys. If I missed one the skipper shouted at me from the wheel aft of the house and spun the boat in a tight rocking circle for another pass. I pulled each buoy aboard with enough sodden slippery rope to throw around a hydraulic block which was operated by the skipper and grindingly pulled crab pots from the ocean bottom several fathoms below. The skipper quickly emptied the pots, which were actually wire meshed baskets that were rounded like large cheeses. He flung male crabs into a big wooden box, the females back into the water to breed and the young ones to grow. I emptied the bait bottles I took from each pot and replaced them with two others I had already filled with squid and clams. When the skipper was finished with a pot I pulled the rope off the block and pushed the pot overboard. I baited the empty bottles. Then I grabbed the boathook as the skipper splashed the boat alongside another crimson buoy. It was an exhausting and backstraining rhythm that reprieved my brain from the continuing sting of my former girlfriend's departure. In the afternoon I reached too far for a buoy and a choppy wave heaved me into the water. A rope flew after me and the skipper hauled me aboard. He looked at me with disgust.

That evening we unloaded almost a thousand pounds of angry snapping crabs at an ancient cannery on the Astoria riverfront. We tied up alongside a grease-blackened wharf and I started pitching crabs into a steel bin mounted on cannisters. Each bin that was filled was wheeled through an open door into a vast enclosed space that was shot through with sunbeams from western windows. I caught the smells of rendered and steamed fish. Gulls weaved and shrieked around my head. The skipper taunted my wariness of pincers. They don't hurt much, he said, and almost instantly a crab clamped onto my arm which hurt very much. I pulled it loose and hurled it past the skipper's suddenly surprised face. Then finally home to



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