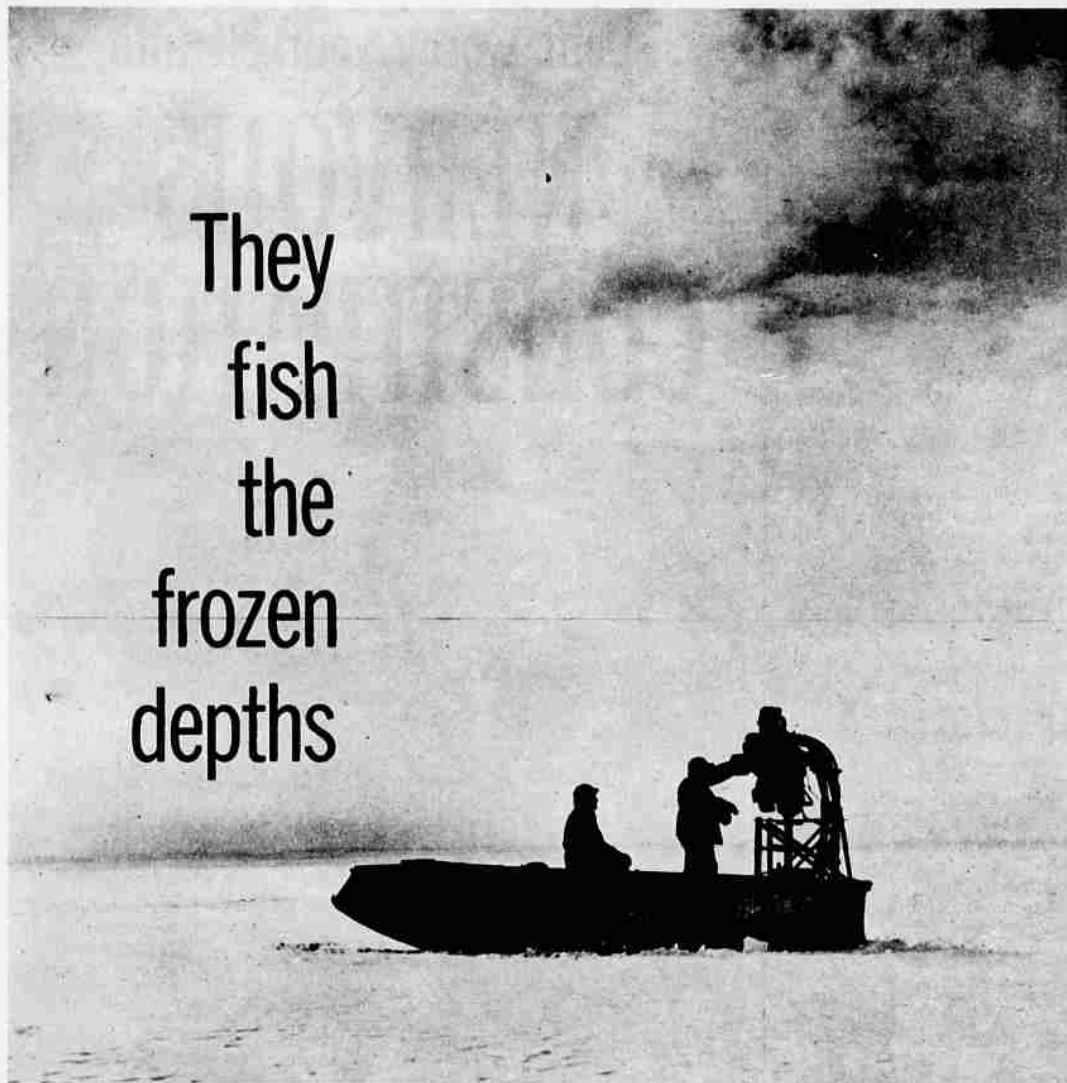


They fish the frozen depths



In below-zero temperatures, two fishermen rev up the airplane engine that will propel them 45 mph down the river.

Photos: Pickow from Three Lions

ON THE FRENCH RIVER near Duluth, Minn., winter temperatures sometimes drop to 20 or 30 below. Winds whip across the snowy desolation, and water freezes two feet or more in depth. But beneath the icy surface are trout and herring, delicacies eagerly awaited in thousands of markets across the country. Fishermen must ignore the elements to satisfy this demand, and the way they do it combines today's machine with methods of fishing as old as man himself.

The most startling innovation is a sled driven by an Army surplus airplane engine. In the icy blue dawn, the fishermen sail to work at 45 miles an hour, hunched low against flesh-numbing cold. The iceboat takes them to 20 pairs of holes in the frozen river, each with a net suspended between them. Long poles are used to slide the nets from one hole to the other; each end is anchored to a wooden crotch inverted over a sturdy crossbar.

Herring nets are emptied daily, sometimes bringing up 300 pounds of fish. Trout, up to 50 pounds a haul, are collected every four or five days.

The work is strenuous, but nobody takes time out for a break. The harder you work, the warmer you feel. And on the French River, nothing is quite as precious as warmth.



Holes freeze over in hours and must be chopped open each morning. Bar and crotch anchor nets.



The 450-foot nets must be returned to the water quickly—the mesh can freeze solid in coldness.



Engines get temperamental in frigid weather, so fishermen turn mechanics.



No refrigerator is needed to preserve a catch. Now it's a fast trip home for some hot coffee.