

Inside lobster pots

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ABSTRACT

Tourists have paid good money for "retired" Maine lobster traps with the ripe tang of experience, and have tied them to their automobiles and taken them off down the pike to adorn, and to remind of happy seaside vacations.\n

FULL TEXT

Writing lately about my lobsterman neighbor, I suggested the wooden lobster trap may soon be a museum piece, superseded by the wire trap. Taking myself seriously, I have accordingly set in motion a project to put a slatted oaken trap into the Friendship Museum, there to be available to future ages. I have never nailed up a trap, but I am surrounded by hundreds who have, and I expect my shop stove will entice on the coolish winter days until I am sufficiently advised by experts

There is no one style for a lobster trap. Here in Muscongus Bay the usual kind has a flat bottom, arched top, and one bedroom - the bedroom being the chamber with the bait, into which the lobster is led by the "pot-heads," and from which escape is unlikely. To the east'ard, a flat topped style is favored, and far-down, for deeper waters off Nova Scotia, they use a two-bedroom model that is as long again as one of our traps. I'm making a Muscongus trap, and Tom Delano, a veteran lobster-catcher, has agreed to mash the pot-heads for me. Mashin' is the right word for the tedious job of tying off the many knots in the twine netting - it's Maine for meshin'

Almost all lobstermen can mash, but it's idiot work and many of them are willing to buy their heads. Most mashin' is done by a kitchen window, with a cuphook screwed into the sill. Making a knot on the cuphook is the start, and the two tools used are the "mashin'-needle" and the "mash-board." The needle is a shuttle, carrying the twine in and out for the knots, and the mash-board is a stick of the right size to keep the openings in the net, or mash, all alike. One gets so he can mash in his sleep, hence the kitchen window location is acceptable, since there is something to look at while engaged. Tom and I haven't made a decision yet about a hakemouth

Well, when the netting is tied to the trap, the apertures through which the lobster will be conducted is called a funny-eye. That is, the funnel eye. In bygone times, supple withes were shaped into a circle, but today metal hoops of the right size can be bought. Some lobstermen, and I think the original reasoning has been lost, liked to flatten these funny-eyes at the bottom, and the shape suggested the mouth of a hake - a foodfish related to the cod and a favorite Maine dish when corned. Fishing with hakemouth funny-eyes was now and then regarded as an oddity, and here and there a lobsterman would have the nickname of Hakemouth. So Tom and I have this decision to make, and for a museum trap we may put in one of each

But the mashin' used in a wire trap is exactly the same as that in the wooden, so there is nothing critical about that. What is bothering me most is the flavor. My museum trap will never go to sea, and varnished, all parts plainly labeled, it will repose like the glass flowers at Harvard, beautiful to behold, but lacking olfactory verisimilitude. The wire trap, you see, is nonporous and hence absorbs none of the rich and persistent nuances associated so long with the wooden. Tourists have paid good money for "retired" Maine lobster traps with the ripe tang of experience,

and have tied them to their automobiles and taken them off down the pike to adorn, and to remind of happy seaside vacations. Soon, they find that a warm room in a city dwelling is quite something else, and the wooden trap that seemed so docile on the wharf at New Harbor is now overpowering, to say the very least. It has always been the custom of Maine lobstermen with retired traps for sale to conduct the dickering to wind'ard, and to disappear as soon as the money is passed. This is something not to be entered in the record, but no lobster trap that can stand innocently in a museum without driving people out will ever be an honest exhibit

But the project is afoot, and sometime before spring I hope to have my museum trap finished. As I go to the shore from day to day, and the piles of wooden traps give way to piles of wire traps, I notice a definite environmental improvement, and am aware of the need for my museum trap. Spring will be soon enough, since the Friendship Museum is open only in the summer.

Credit: John Gould

Illustration

Caption: Picture, Maine Lobster Pots, Photograph by Linda Payne

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