

REPORTS FROM LABOR
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Speaker: Jerry Tyler (TAPE TRANSCRIPTION)

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Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Last night we had one of the most interesting experiences we've ever had. All day long, between yawns, we've been thinking about. In fact, it was so interesting that we'd like to share it with you. So, pull up a seat and listen.....and we'll take you gill netting on the Columbia River.

You'll recall that on/ our last broadcast we told you about a big fisherman who got such a tremendous boot out of our "fox pass"...that's the Iowa version of faux pas meaning we pulled a boner.....regarding the term "boat puller." We discovered it wasn't a piece of gear, but was a helper on a fishing boat. Well, as we told you, this fisherman, who's name is Phil Lasich, invited us to go fishing some night. And last night we went.

The big salmon run hasn't started down here yet, but the real fishermen along the river, guys who make their living at the trade, have been picking up a sort of haphazard living on the few salmon who have been coming in ahead of time, ~~sort of~~ like people looking for good seats at the ball game, maybe.

So, last night at 6:45 Henry Niemela, secretary of the Columbia River Fishermen's Protective Union, drove us down to what they call the net racks. This is a big wide platform like a dock, on high pilings over the water, boats tied in between, long racks on the deck where the fishermen stretch and dry and repair their nets.

It was a nice clear day with a fair breeze. And the first thing that struck us was a sort of lonely, empty feeling. There was a weird, rhythmic chorus of what we first thought might be sea gulls practicing for some new kind of a concert. But we soon discovered it was the squeak of

pulleys thru which the mooring lines of the fishing boats were tied. They have them on a pulley and weight rig which allows the boats to rise and fall with the tide and the wake caused by passing boats and ships.

A guy named Chuck showed us where we would find Phil Lasich and we climbed down a ladder and into the boat. It was a 28 foot fishing boat. There were no mahogany decks nor fancy brass rails, but she had a good sound hull with nice lines and a fine Kermath marine engine. It looked like a very capable boat, built for work. Phil told us he rented the boat from the CRPA cannery outfit. In turn he has to sell all his catch to the CRPA.

We nosed her around the end of the net rack, stopped to fill the water tank and then "crossed the creek" as they say. Actually we went across the Columbia River to the northern channel, swinging way down river to miss the sandbars which come up at low tide. It was a ride of over ~~6~~⁷~~2~~ miles.

We ~~hit~~^{had} a little motor trouble. The temperature gauge suddenly shot up past the 212 mark and Phil had to go inside to work on it. And then.... if you think we didn't feel very very professional and important and all that, standing there at the wheel keeping her nose pointed toward a buoy on the other side ^{of} the river! One of those "thrills of a lifetime" things, you know.

Phil Lasich decided there was an air lock in the water lines, so he bled them. And the old girl cooled down right away. This reoccurred several times during the night, however.

"We're in no hurry anyway," said Phil. He pointed to the water and said: "clear water. No use "laying out" until it gets dark." Later we found that fish can see the net, duck it, and run. So they wait till it's dark or the water is murky enough. Then Mr. Salmon comes along, pokes his head thru one of the openings in the net and his gills get caught and he stays put till you pull him out. Hence the name, gill net.

Getting real smart, aren't we?

Across the sandbar we headed back up river into what Phil called the Blind Channel fishing grounds. About a dozen boats were already there, with another half dozen strung out behind us on their way up. The engine acted up again and Phil ducked inside, showing us a point to aim at. Well, he was in there quite a while and we passed a boat with a line stretched out behind it. Then we saw the floats of his net stretching across our bows. They were pretty close, so we heeled her over to run alongside the line of floats, figuring we might get the screw all fouled up in the net. Phil popped out of the cabin, saw what we'd done and grinned. "Go over 'em," he said. "We've got guard bars on." So, over the net we went.

We passed several other boats who already had their nets in the water before Phil came out of the cabin again. He took the wheel and we kind of prowled thru the fleet of boats with Phil yelling at nearly every one. It was then that we found he had begun fishing when he was 16 years old. This means about 15 years fishing at least. There are five of the Lasich family fishing on the Columbia, his father and uncle have fished for years "bringing the trade over from the old country" as Phil says, and he also has two other brothers in the game.

We pulled along another fisherman named Matt Storey, chatted for awhile and then Phil said "we'll lay out up above you." So off we went again. Suddenly Phil idled the motor and went up to the well deck up forward. He came back with a wooden keg painted a bright orange and with a little light attached to it. He also brought along a piece of line which was attached to the net piled up in the well deck. He hooked the end of the line onto the keg float and dropped it over the side.

Then the fun began. We saw then why the gear shift, a length of lead pipe, stuck up in the middle of the little aft end cockpit. We saw what is called a "lay-out" made by an expert. We've seen people work fast.... but last night we really saw something. This Lasich guy threw that net over

out behind us in a long line as we cruised along. Tossing with both hands, jerking and hauling like a madman sometimes to keep it from fouling up. About half the time he stood on one foot, his other foot kicking the gear shift into forward, hauling it back into neutral or reverse. Coordination? Indeed! He handled that boat as easily as we walk.

1200 feet of good net went over the side. The floats made a long dotted line back to the keg float which soon lay about a quarter mile behind us. The lead on the bottom pulled the net down. And there it hung, 1200 feet long and 30 feet deep. Everynow and then Phil, without stopping hardly, grabbed a sounding line to measure the distance to the bottom. We stood back to one side out of the way with our mouths hanging open.

When the net was all paid out, Phil kicked the engine into neutral. He bent the trailing end of the net line around a cleat and looked back along the line of bobbers. "Got some new net on there," he said. "First time it's ever been in the water." We asked him what it cost, because a fisherman's gear is his working capital you know, and he said casually "I got 1200 bucks sunk right there."

Well, he fastened the net line onto another float. Then he nearly made us jump out of the boat. There was 1200 bucks floating in that water. We thought he'd gone nuts, because he calmly flipped the other float over the side, threw the engine into forward gear, slapped the throttle.... and away we roared! Leaving 1200 dollars floating in the water behind us.

We commented on this and Phil had another good laugh for himself. Seems that is a common practice. Make your lay out, then go visiting.

We tied up to Matt Storey's boat. He had a little gasoline stove going and the coffee pot was boiling. So, we went aboard. "We hit it just right, said Matt. Good low tide, plenty of show. We oughta have a real good drift."

We finally got that language interpreted. By "plenty of show" he meant plenty of room between the nets in the river. Many times during the

big run, these men told me, so many boats were on the river that sometimes you had a tough time finding room to make a lay-out, then nets got tangled and a good time is had by all. By a good "drift", Matt meant that these nets, hanging down like a screen 1200 feet long and 30 feet deep, floated, or drifted, down the river with the current. Then you "pick-up" and go back up river for another lay-out and drift.

Well, we sat there drinking coffee black enough to float a silver dollar, with the sun sinking. Across the river and down a little were the lights of Astoria. Up river just a ways we could see that grim sight....the bone yard.....where hundreds of good merchant ships lay dead, covered with red lead.....Then suddenly the biggest, roundest, brilliant orange colored moon we've ever seen jumped into the sky. The wind fell, the water gurgled under the hull, glistening as the orange moon rose. Just chewing the fat, the world at peace. It was a really wonderful feeling.

Pretty soon Phil said: Well, if there's any fish in the river we should make a haul tonight. And Matt replied: Right. But you can't catch what's not there to be caught.

Then we climbed back aboard our boat to "run the net." Phil picked up our keg float, which we'd have never found, put a spot light on the row of floats and we cruised down the length of our net. We found the far end had turned, so we hooked onto ~~it~~ and towed it cross river to straighten it out. It reminded us of a farmer going down a row of his corn looking it over to see how it was growing.

We sat around and talked for awhile, then Phil said, well it's flood now, we might as well pick-up. And then ^{we} saw how fishermen get that way....tough ^{we} mean.....He pulled on hip boots, then a wide, all-the-way round apron made of rubber and went up forward. Up in the bow there's another set of controls and a deal called a live drum. This drum revolves something like a winch drum, driven by the engine. However you only slide the net over this drum, it helps a little, but it's muscles that pulls in that wet, heavy net.

We sat around in the little cabin till about 2 in the morning, then went up river a ways and made another lay-out.

Now we weren't going to tell this part, but we might as well. We conked out. We didn't mean to, we just laid down on the little bunk in the nice warm cabin to rest a minute or two. The next thing we knew the roar of the engine woke us up. Phil had made the drift and the pick-up while we were asleep! When he opened her up to head for home the roar brought us back to life. After all, that big engine was practically in our laps!

He'd pulled two more fish out of the net. One about 25 pounds the other he thought might hit 35.

A hard nights work and 85 pounds of fish to show for it. At 20 cents a pound.....seventeen dollars. He'd worked part of the day getting his gear in shape. We'd boarded the boat at 6:45 that night and it was six that morning when we climbed the ladder at the net rack. Easily a 14 hour day. Risking 1200 dollars worth of net. Paying out boat rent and gas money.

We figured it out, standing there in the cockpit roaring for home. And we made a comment on the fact that to us that didn't look like very good wages.

Phil shrugged and said: We get seven months fishing a year. One month, August, is a good month. That's when the salmon run. The rest of the months are what we call hit or miss months. On the average, we make maybe about as much as the average unskilled worker makes on the beach.

So we asked him: This racket looks too tough for us. Why do you stay?

He thought it over for awhile. Then he squared his shoulders and threw his head back and grinned a grin that spoke volumes. Phil Lasich, fisherman, said: "I got in because I grew up in it. I stay in...well..... No boss....No time-clock."

That's our story. We wish you could have been along.