

Small Point's **big fish**

A Mainer casts about before returning home to the lure of the bluefin tuna harpoon

By Corky Decker

S ometime around 1900, Orlando Wallace, out of Small Point in Phippsburg, Maine, flipped a trap off his gunwale and looked offshore. Flat greasy calm, a good afternoon to go harpoon a swordfish. He didn't find a sword, so he had a go at another giant off the bow of his lobster boat. The rest is all speculation, but the fish was not. He brought the monster into Small Point, and a new fishery was born. Orlando's grandson Sonny McIntyre lives in Cape Neddick, Maine, and fishes out of Perkins Cove. Sonny followed his father, Carl, who followed in Orlando's footsteps, generation after generation of harpooners, the direct line of the very first one. They are and always have been the very best at putting tuna fish on a deck.

Back in the ol' days, the bluefin would be acres thick outside of Small Point, the fish boiling in amongst the lobster gear, the Gilliams, Wallaces and McIntyres would

Fisherman and writer Corky Decker keeps a lookout for blue giants from his tower on the 36-foot Maggie.



MEGAN TIBBITTS PHOTOS

rig wooden pulpits and rope steering in the masts and harpoon the bejesus out of bluefin tuna. A young Merle Gilliam landed 500 fish before his 20th birthday. Bluefin tuna are really smart (the brain of a grander you'll need two hands to hold). After so many of them were getting hoisted onto the dock in this little village, they had enough and moved. To Boon Island off of Cape Neddick.

The guys just followed them. Carl found out about Perkins Cove; it was a close, safe harbor. He liked the place so much that he moved his family to Ogunquit. Spanning the late 1950s, '60s and into the '70s, Perkins Cove was the Tuna Capital. All the lobster boats had stands; the McIntyres were teaching a whole new generation the art of harpooning. I was one of the new generation. When I was 8 to 10 years old, I'd throw a wooden pole off our back

porch, putting thousands of divots in my father's lawn, pretending I was Sonny McIntyre. He was my childhood hero. Today Sonny is in his late 70s; he still hauls 300 traps a day or more. But sadly he has taken a step back from tuna fishing the last couple of years after his son Billy passed away. What Sonny and his father have passed on to many of us is a gift, and any of us who chase these great fish can trace our roots back to these legendary fishermen.

The bluefin harpoon fishery exists only in New England and in the Mediterranean Sea. I guess that would make it a microfishery, but what an honorable way to harvest a fish. Today, the concept is the same as when Orlando ironed that first one so long ago, throwing a pole at a fish. It is the purest commercial



I'm back doing what I have spent my whole life dreaming about, the first love of my life. I am a commercial fisherman and proud as hell of it.

fishery there is: zero bycatch; we throw at the big ones, only throw at bluefin or swords; the fish is killed instantly with an electric shock, the best bluefin product to go to market. Whole Foods will only sell harpoon caught swordfish, proof that the fishery is looked upon favorably among the NGO crowd.

Harpooning is also a lot of fun. It is hunting: You need to see the fish to catch the fish; planes help a lot, but also cost a bunch, and good pilots are hard to come by. So most of us make do with our own sets of eyes and live in our towers.

The bluefin is a very hard fish to manage, a fish that knows no boundaries. Whose fish is it when the creature can be in the Bahamas one week, the United States the following, and Canada the next? NMFS, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, the International Gamefish Association, the American Bluefin Tuna Association ... everyone cares about the fish, everyone wants a

◀ **Sonny McIntyre has retired from tuna into Maine lobster, here fishing with his mate, Tommy Merritt.**

▶ **Merle Gilliam landed 500 bluefin tunas before his 20th birthday and now builds models of the Maine boats.**

say or even control of the fish, and I really believe we all have the best interest of the bluefin in mind in the way the fishery is managed. One thing I know is that the bluefin stocks in the North Atlantic are as healthy as they were back in the days of Carl McIntyre. Don't believe me? Take a trip to Antigonish, Nova Scotia, in September. The Small Point fish are now in Canada!

Off Antigonish, three miles outside the breakwater of Ballantynes Cove, we are chumming hundreds of monster bluefin to the surface on the 45-foot Novi Rough Rider. More than 20 miles away at the same time, Cookie

Murray is doing the same thing on Fisherman's Bank. Forty miles from him, Ali Hussainy is doing the same thing in Prince Edward Island. The whole bay is full of giants, not thousands but tens maybe even hundreds of thou-

sands of giants. Those Small Point fish just summer up north now.

I'm writing this from the bunk of my new harpoon boat; those damn fish gotta go by us here in Maine! I attended my first ABTA meeting in Cape Cod in mid-May. What I saw were about a hundred fishermen who have the same passion I remember as a teenager in the Tri Coastal Seafood Co-op meetings, bluefin tuna bring a fever to the brow of all who chase them.

I have tried so hard to live a non-tuna life. I moved to Alaska in my early 20s and operated joint-venture trawlers, then factory trawlers. I dreamed about tuna in the Bering Sea, even wrote two books about tuna while I was there. I moved to the South Pacific and chased billfish for a living. I still dreamed about



bluefin. I wrote about them with my feet in the sand. I have now come full circle. They say you can't go home again. Well I'm home again. These damn fish have sucked me right back in.

While it is still throwing a pole at a tuna or sword, harpooning has come a long way. Today, our pulpits are stupid long, the darts carry an electrical charge that kills the fish instantly (when it works right), and we have spotter planes (well some of us do). The best harpooner today just so happens to have the best pilot in the business, Sean Sullivan and Norman St. Pierre have been working together for more than 20 years. They are today's Sonny and Carl.

A spotter plane in the harpoon fishery, be it tuna or swords, just gives the boat that many more chances. A good pilot with a world-class harpooner is the Patriots with Tom and Bill. If Carl McIntyre had Norman flying for him back in the 1960s, he would have had to tow a barge behind him. Planes alone modernize the fishery. Then you add the high-horsepower diesels in these harpoon boats and the fast, stable platforms that let us range 100 miles offshore. Today it is different, and the fish know it.

The bluefin know we are chasing them; the fish adapt to us. We group up in an area, numerous boats chasing



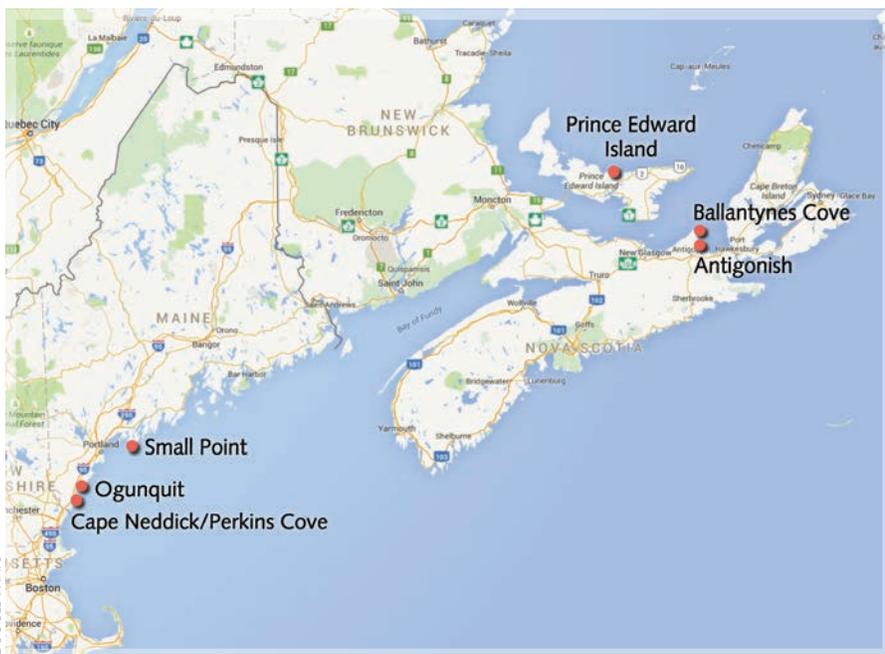
Decker's 36-footer Maggie docked in Maine's Boothbay Harbor.

the same bunches every time they pop up, they may just stop popping up and leave. Or they might run like crazed wild horses and not let you get within five boat lengths of them. Either way, you're not catching them. So getting off by yourself or with one or two other boats to work with and finding fish to work on is critical. This was true in the factory trawler fleet in Alaska, chasing blue marlin in Vanuatu, and har-

pooning bluefin on Platts. An old guy in Alaska told me to turn my radios off. You can't catch someone else's fish; find your own fish. I don't even have a VHF in my tower, I will not chase radio fish. What I will do is use a bit of science this summer.

I had a transition period when I moved from a tropical island in the South Pacific to Florida (I know, I know). I worked in the oil industry in West Africa. I got to fish over there some, but more important I'd work two months and take two off to bill fish the Gulf of Mexico. This is where I learned about a Roffer's Ocean Fishing Forecasting Service report, better known as a ROFFS Fishing Oceanographic Analysis (see sidebar). Blue marlin love 80-degree blue water; you won't find them in green water. A ROFFS report before I leave the dock tells me right where the blue water is. These guys even put a big black dot on their report where you should be looking. We won the Sandestin Celebration tournament and placed in a few others on some of those black dots. I'm going to find out how many bluefin I can harpoon this summer on one.

DeLorme's InReach is a satellite communication device that sends and receives messages anywhere in the

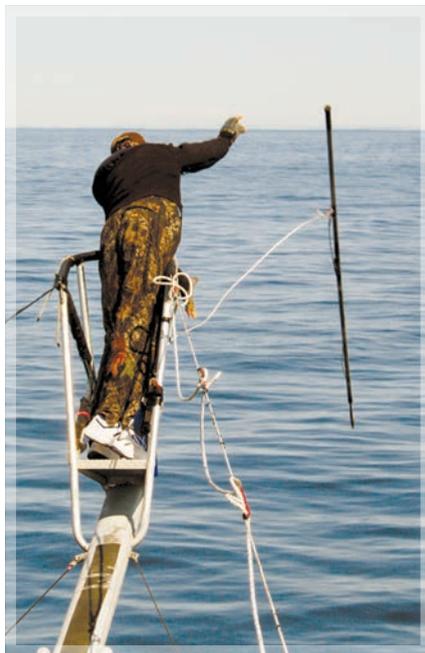


GOOGLE MAPS

world. I can text any phone or another InReach, receive downloads (ROFFS texts offshore!), text a buddy on another harpoon boat (who happens to also have a InReach, still no radio upstairs), the fish truck where to meet us, and my wife for updates, all for about \$70 a month (on a per-month plan). The thing even has an SOS button that sends a map to your location. I showed this to the Coast Guard when I got my fishing vessel safety dock visit. The guy was asking about my EPIRB. I showed him where it was mounted on the tower, then handed him the InReach. I told the guy, "Screw that thing. I'm sending you a personal text before I hit the SOS button, and I'll be able to update you every three minutes as I repeatedly mash the help button. And you can talk to me on my handheld aviation radio when you get close in the chopper."

I have two 100-gallon fuel cells from Aero Tec Laboratories. They fold up and go in my fish hold. The boat only holds 200 gallons. I just doubled her range for around 1,500 bucks. I did not have to rip up the decks, spend a bunch of money I do not have. The bladders are bulletproof. The manufacturer builds stuff for Uncle Sam, and they even toss fuel stuffed in bladders out of airplanes and throw them overboard. If the military can't break ATL stuff, it will hold up offshore. I now have the range to fish Georges. If I find cheap fuel, the bladders come out; traveling up and down the coast with a two-week supply of fuel saves me huge.

We have so much available to us today, electronics and gadgets, that are better than the stuff I had on a 150-foot multimillion-dollar factory trawler in the Bering Sea way back in the old days — 2002. For what I drink in Red Bulls every day, you can order up a report that tells you the water temperature, the color of the water, the current breaks, and even where there is a very good chance the bloody fish are hanging. Can you imagine what the pelagic longline fleet could have done with this information? I will find out what a Maine bluefin tuna harpooner



Decker perches in the pulpit, striking out at a bluefin off the coast of Maine.

and his buddies can do with it this summer. As I write this, it is June 16, 2015. We have around 75 hours of looking time so far and have yet to see a running bunch, just a handful of jumpers. About a dozen fish have been caught so far this season. That bad old New England winter y'all just had has slowed things up a tad. The fish have yet to arrive, I've been to Cashes twice, and they ain't here yet.

Whose fish is it when the creature can be in the Bahamas one week, the United States the following and Canada the next?

But I'm back doing what I have spent my whole life dreaming about, the first love of my life. I have fished around the world, and I'm back in Maine. It is where it all started, it just fits that this is where I should be. I am a commercial fisherman and proud as hell of it. NF

Corky Decker is a lifelong commercial fisherman from Maine, where he spends his summers chasing bluefin before retreating to the Florida Panhandle.

Roff estimates

Roffer's Ocean Fishing Forecasting Service is a scientific consulting company based in West Melbourne, Fla., that is involved with fisheries oceanography and environmental science. We are best known for our tactical and strategic fisheries forecasts that are the result of the integration of satellite and other fisheries oceanographic data. ROFFS is intensively involved a broad range of projects from ship routing, oil and gas drilling operations, seismic and fish surveys, fisheries development, aquaculture, environmental monitoring, and applied scientific research.

All of ROFFS' operational fish forecasting products are designed to allow fishing vessels to concentrate their fishing effort in the most productive waters to increase operational efficiency. The analyses incorporate numerous factors, including water temperature, water color, orientation of local currents, history of ocean fronts, bottom topography, biological quality of the water (chlorophyll, plankton, clarity, colored dissolved organic matter), forage preference of the target species, availability of forage, as well as habitat preference of the forage and target species.

ROFFS analyses have been used successfully by commercial, professional tournament, and recreational fishermen as well as researchers for a variety of fish species, including tuna, marlin, sailfish, swordfish, mahi, wahoo, shark, mackerel, sardine, anchovy, pilchard, herring, bluefish, squid, cod and hake. The ROFFS Fishing Oceanographic Analyses is composed of a text and an oceanographic analysis graphic that is available via email, online and old-style fax. It is easy to download and understand. No complex programs necessary. ROFFS often communicates with our clients via satellite telephone or satellite texting services.

— Mitchell Roffer, founder