

Historical photos in a heritage video give a window into what life used to be like for commercial fishermen.

Fishing heritage video honours those who shaped B.C. fishing industry

By Susan Kerschbaumer

A new video by WorkSafeBC in partnership with the BC Labour Heritage Centre tells the health and safety story of B.C.'s commercial fishing industry, from its beginnings more than a century ago to today. The 13-minute video is the eighth in a series that tells the stories of the working men and women who shaped B.C. industry.

"We took a chance to cross Hecate Strait," remembers former commercial fisherman Nick Carr, of a stormy day in 1975. "By the time you got halfway across, you took a hell of a beating. There was another boat behind us and they were buried under a swell," he says. "Seven men got lost ... there's nothing you can do about it."

Carr was drawn into life as a commercial fisherman early on. "I took a week off from school," he says of his first enticing days at sea in 1946. "We had a good catch. I got \$350 for the five days." He continued in the career until 2000, but he admits that it wasn't

an easy life: "It was risky all the time — and anything could happen."

Recognizing the sacrifice

In honour of fishermen like Carr, the new video points to the importance of recognizing the history of these pioneers. "Commercial fishing, along with forestry and agriculture, has been the historic heart and soul of B.C. industry," says Scott McCloy, WorkSafeBC's director of government, community, and media relations. "It's important that the sacrifice of these men and women is recognized and honoured."

For many years, "safety was not really on the radar," says Bruce Logan, a 35-year veteran of the commercial fishing industry and now an occupational safety officer for WorkSafeBC. "You went out there and you hoped that you'd come back with some money in your pocket. And you learned the hazards one by one." Despite the risk, he loved his work. "I used to think when I was out on the boat on a good day and we were making money that we had the best job that you could ever possibly imagine in British Columbia. It was that good then."

**“It was risky all the time —
and anything could happen.”**

— **Nick Carr**, commercial fisherman,
active 1946–2000

Gina McKay, retired program manager of Fish Safe, grew up in a fishing family and was herself a commercial fisherman for 30 years. She describes the history of fishing safety in B.C. as “reactionary.” “We would suffer a loss or bad accident; regulators would regulate, fishermen would mourn and, for the most part, they would accept that accidents and loss were a part of fishing life.” McKay lost her own father in a fishing expedition in 1975.

Fourteen deaths in 2 months

McKay’s father was not the only casualty that year. In 1972, a new and lucrative roe herring fishery had opened, making things more competitive — and more hazardous. By 1975, the issue had come to a head, and the deaths of 14 fishermen in just two months that year led to a push to enact legislation and other changes, that since that time have led to major improvements

in health and safety for B.C.’s fishermen. Over time, independent fishermen also became recognized under B.C.’s *Workers Compensation Act* as a result of ongoing activism from B.C.’s labour movement, most specifically the United Fishermen and Allied Workers’ Union.

Working people, acting together

The fishing safety video “demonstrates how the determination of working people acting together can lead to safer, healthier working conditions,” says Kenneth Novakowski, chair of the BC Labour Heritage Centre. In 2004, fishermen further exemplified this determination with the creation of the FishSafe program. Created by fishermen for fishermen, Fish Safe provides a host of resources and training on what it means to fish safely today.

Thankfully and with the hard work of many people and organizations, says McCloy, “the industry today is far safer than it was 20, 30, 40 years ago, but we must all remain focused. Safety is a journey that never ends.”

In terms of fishing safety today, we’ve just “scratched the surface,” says McKay. “Hopefully one day everyone will come home safely.” ☺



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