

Down East
October 1965



TORCHING HERRING BY THE

DOWN at Eastport near where the Maine coast ends they still tell the story of the fisherman, sailing home in the gathering darkness, who wanted a fire to cheer himself. He had no galley stove in the open boat, so he placed some hardwood chips and coals in an iron skillet, kindled them into a blaze and set the skillet in a box of sand on the deck near the helm. All the way home, the skillet flared into the night, and the fisherman was so amazed at the number of herring which surrounded the boat and flashed in the orange light from the fire that he decided to try to catch some. He slacked the main sheet, and as the boat slowed down and came into the wind, he leaned

over the side, and with a bit of net scooped dozens of tiny fish into the boat.

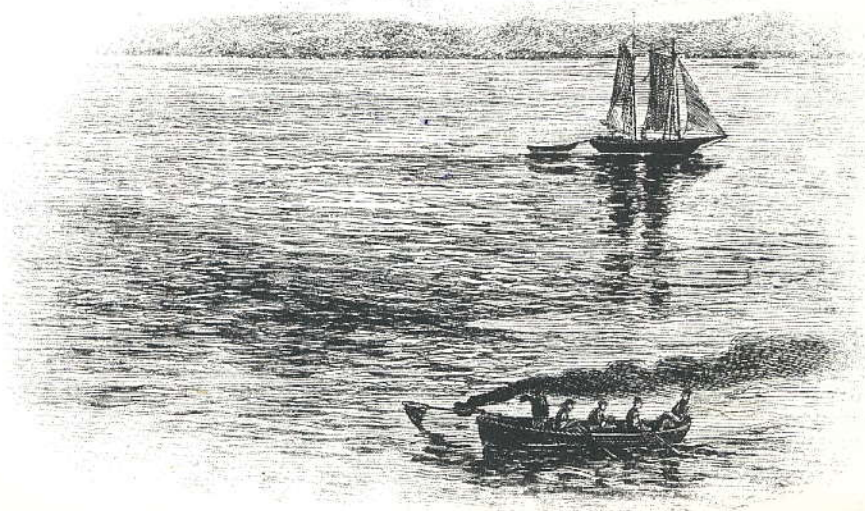
In this manner, the story concludes, Maine fishermen learned how to catch herring by "torching." It was one of the first ways of taking these fish, and for a period following the early days of the last century was a common method of fishing. Torching is carried on from a dory with a light affixed to the bow. One man plies the oars, and another stands in the stern with a cone-shaped net on a long pole called a dip net. As the boat passes over a school of fish the herring are attracted by the light and rise to the surface. Then the second man plunges the net into

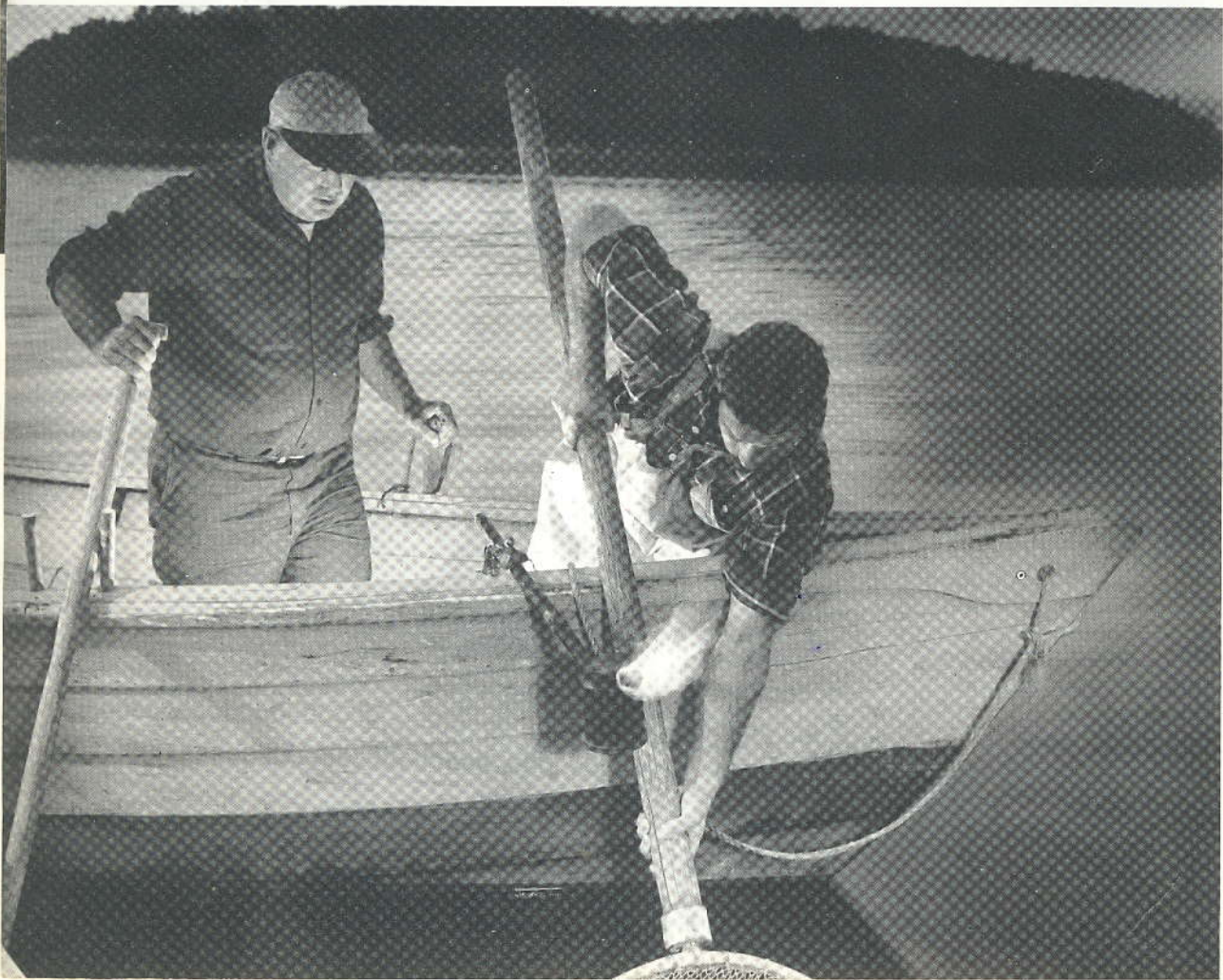
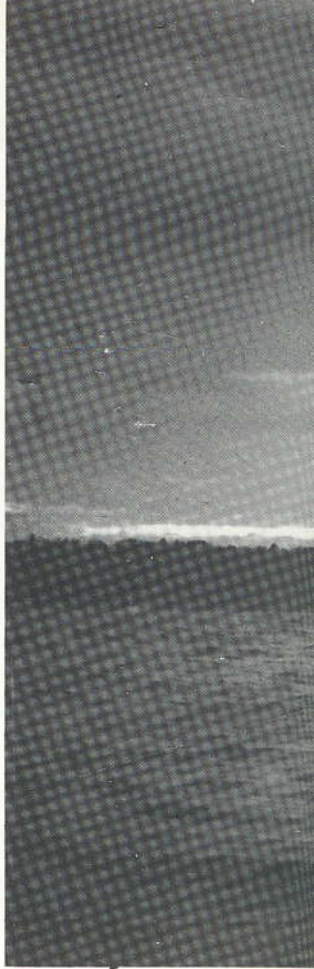
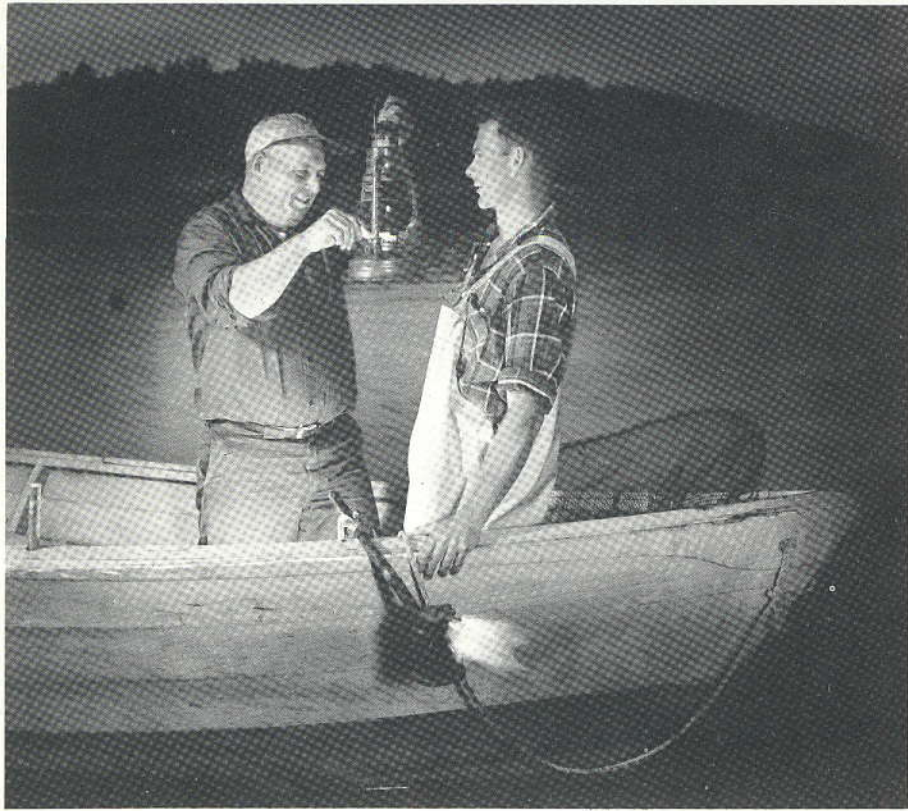


DARK OF THE MOON

*Text by A. E. McInnis
Photos by William L. Searle*

*With a light flaring at
the bow of their dory
and with dip net ready,
fishermen set forth
to torch herring.*







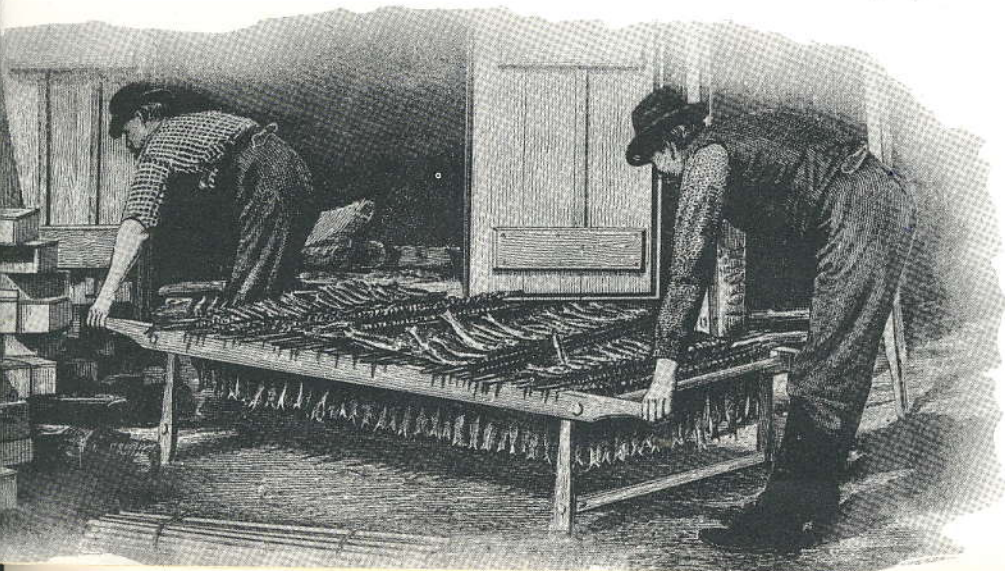
the water and dips the fish aboard. Sometimes there are four men in a dory; two rowing, one steering and the fourth dipping from the bow.

The orange flare of the torches, darting and swaying as the torch boats maneuver on the bay, makes a picturesque sight on a summer's night. Best torching often takes place on the dark of the moon as the schools of herring move inshore and feed in coves and inlets.

The first torches were made from a tightly rolled strip of birchbark which was ignited and stuck firmly in a hook called a "dragon." Later rags soaked with oil were used, and in more recent years kerosene lanterns and even dry cell flashlights have been employed.

Torching herring is a man's work. It requires a great deal of physical effort, whether rowing or dipping, and for the amount of effort expended, the quantities of herring caught are relatively small compared with the sizable catches that can be taken by seining and weir fishing. As a general method of fishing, torching flourished up until about one hundred years ago, and since then has been generally employed only by lobstermen and fishermen seeking to obtain small amounts of herring for bait.

Maine state law now forbids torching of herring along the coast except in York County and part of Sheepscot Bay. In an effort to recapture the romance of a by-gone custom, we recently went torching for herring by the dark of the moon.



Smoking herring on racks. Today the silvery fish caught by torching are used mostly by fishermen to bait lobster traps.