

Magic and Old Milwaukee

by Timothy J. Muise

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In high school I built dories! That's right, I was in a class for what they called "behavioral problems" and we built 19', lap streak, Cape Banks dories. It was a wonderful class and I learned there about pride and accomplishment; I learned about the soul of a Gloucesterman. Project Adventure did more than limit the trouble I got into, but it afforded me the life skills I would need to survive a very tumultuous life that was ahead for me.

Red gunnels and a green keel were the colors of these historic Gloucester fishing champions. The schooners of old nested dozens of these mad beasts on their decks and when they reached George's or The Grand Banks they were lowered into the vast Atlantic with two man crews. Cod and giant halibut made New England and these solid fishing dories made that possible. The legend of Howard Blackburn still is told in the taverns of new Gloucester. Lost on The Grand Banks in a Nor'Easter he rowed to the coast of Newfoundland with the body of his dory mate in the bow. It took days and in Gloucester they had an "absentee" funeral for him. They thought they saw a ghost those months later when he came walking down the hill to the West End of Main Street. Gloucestermen never die; they just move on to better fishing grounds.

After I graduated, well not quite graduated - but close, from Gloucester High School, I was blessed to be able to stay in touch with my Project Adventure teacher and mentor Jim Schoel. Jim allowed me to use the dories we built anytime I felt compelled. These boats had a grip on me, some sort of magic, and I felt master of my own destiny with oar scraping against thole pin, pulling hard against the green-blue sea, as the vessel of fishing legends glided through the water with purpose and direction; qualities other aspects of my life were lacking. Bow toward horizon I feared nothing and knew from salty dust I had come and toward salty dust I would go: a Gloucesterman.

With the wind light and the sea calm I could hear the Mermaid's call. The dories would be my chariot toward seeking her out. With my father's old brownell handlines and a peck of hen clams I make my way down to Pirate's Cove where the dories are moored. I pick up a case of Old

Milwaukee beer, toss it in an old fish box shoveling three big scoops of Cape Pond ice on top, and cast off from the mouth of Smith's Cove. Back to the Outer Harbor I begin that steady stroke of the oars that I learned and honed on the Annisquam River. I glide past the old Ida & Joseph as she returns to port full to the scuppers with pogies. As I pass West Wharf on Rocky Neck I watch a seagull drop mussels on a rock from 30 feet high to reveal their orange reward awaiting inside. Young kids drink Boones Farm wine at the Paint Factory as I recognize the bottles and commorants dive for small cunnas off the Ten Pound Island lighthouse. I row through a group of young sailors from the Eastern Point Yacht Club as I head toward the tip of the Dog Bar Breakwater. God's country was never more vivid and I was never more grateful to live under His rule.

Navigating through the lobster pot bouys that pepper the 90' ledge outside the mouth of the Outer Harbor I make headway toward the hard bottom my grandfather had told us about many years ago. Using landmarks, like they did before electronics, I place myself between Lands End in Rockport and the Whiskey House on Kettle Cove in Magnolia. I use the shucking knife I purloined from my father's shucking house in Essex and open one of the hen clams I dug on Brace's Cove at daybreak. I place the sinew-fiber neck on the hook of the handline, affix the four ounce sinker three feet from the hook, and lower line one to the bottom. I feel the sinker clink against rock and I know I am squarely on the chunk of bottom that my grandfather called his cod "hole". I bait line two in a similar fashion and lower it down. Digging through the ice I find a frigid Old Milwaukee can, pull the tab off, and light a filtered Winston. The first sip of my beer is like a rare nector, pungent and invigorating. It has never tasted like this ashore.

Drifting across the choice piece of bottom I check the lines, by bouncing the sinker off the bottom, several times. Soon I am off the rocky bottom and have moved on to mud and sand. I wind the lines up, row back to where I started, and begin the drift again. About a third of the way across line one jerks out of my hand. I place it under foot and can feel

the telltale head-knocking of a large codfish. I pull line two up as fast as I can, keeping it free of line one, and toss it up to the bow out of my way. I reach down and grab line one, yank it sharply to better set the hook, and begin the hand over hand retrieval of my prize. The water here is about 120 feet deep and I get the fish up quickly. When it is about 25 feet under the boat I see the white of its belly as it makes respectable efforts toward freedom, but it is near impossible to escape the spell of the dory and the mojo of a Gloucesterman.

The fish weighs in at about 16 pounds; a good size cod. I clean this fine specimen and ice him down with the beer. The next can of Old Milwaukee I crack tastes even better than the last. Today Germany has nothing on this cheap American brew; that is the magic of the dory - it transforms. I keep both lines in the boat as I have all the fish I need for my family's supper. Making myself comfortable I drift for the next three hours, sipping beer, smoking cigarettes, and watching my Gloucester from a distance. She is the most beautiful port in the world. Lobsterman haul pots, dragners clean their catch, and pleasure boaters risk folly all about me. I know not what Heaven looks like but it is certainly possible it has an area like that just off the coast of Gloucester, Massachusetts. May I drift in eternity relaxed in my dory with my lost loved ones drifting alongside in theirs.

Dedicated to The
Muise Family
"Gloucestermen"
Who Have Passed On

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Authored By:
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