

The University of Maine DigitalCommons@UMaine

Maine Sea Grant Publications

Maine Sea Grant

Winter 2012

Long May They Run

Catherine V. Schmitt

Maine Sea Grant, catherine.schmitt@umit.maine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/seagrant_pub



Part of the [Other Business Commons](#), and the [Other History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Schmitt, Catherine V., "Long May They Run" (2012). *Maine Sea Grant Publications*. 13.
https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/seagrant_pub/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine Sea Grant Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

Long May

Artists, poets, connoisseurs, and just

“Red herring! Red herring!”

Poet Karin Spitfire waded through a crowded classroom, waving a red-crayoned paper fish in the air above her head. She was joined at the front of the room by fellow poet Gary Lawless, who told the audience that he and Spitfire were concerned about the loss of herring, the loss of the sardine industry that depended on herring, and the loss of the communities they supported.

The people gathered at the Herring Gut Learning Center in Port Clyde on a summer evening in 2010 were there to learn more about this loss. They were summer people mostly, folks who did not know until that moment that a Maine “sardine” is a “herring”—*Clupea harengus*—a small schooling fish now best known by lobstermen, who use them for bait. “You mean that the reason this road is called Factory Road is because there used to be a fish factory here?”

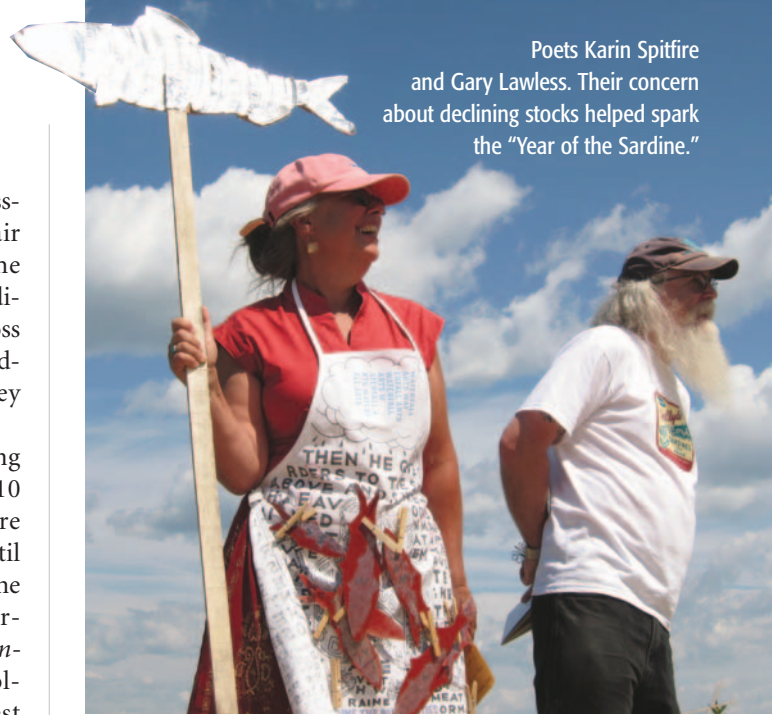
someone asked, as a film of the once-thriving Port Clyde Sardine Cannery flashed on a screen. Others, the locals who worked in the factory and had come to share their stories, smiled and nodded.

“I herring! I herring!” recited Spitfire, launching into her ode to the once-teeming schools of silver.

**I Herring,
Atlantic, Alewife, Blueback, Shad
Feed Everybody
Striper, Seal, Shorebird, Cornfields, Croatians**

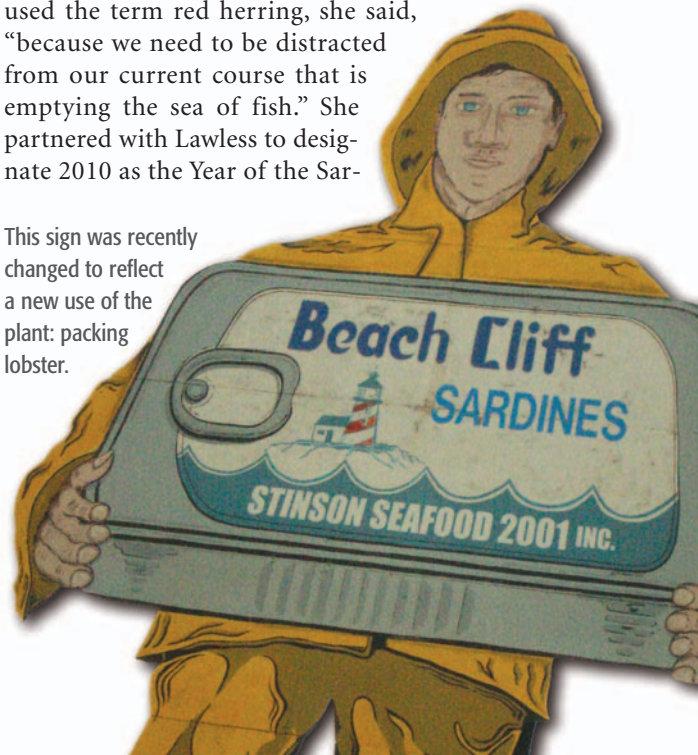
NOT LONG AGO, Karin Spitfire’s concern for the ocean, always strong, intensified when she

Poets Karin Spitfire and Gary Lawless. Their concern about declining stocks helped spark the “Year of the Sardine.”



heard that federal managers planned to restrict the amount of herring fishermen are allowed to catch. She used the term red herring, she said, “because we need to be distracted from our current course that is emptying the sea of fish.” She partnered with Lawless to designate 2010 as the Year of the Sar-

This sign was recently changed to reflect a new use of the plant: packing lobster.



They Run

plain folks celebrate the Maine sardine.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS
BY CATHERINE SCHMITT

dine. As the giant sardine dropped on New Year's Eve in Eastport—an echo of the glittery ball that drops on New York's Times Square—the poets launched a year of herring-themed readings and events.

Gary Lawless, who grew up in Belfast, used to work on a lobster-boat. It was his job to fetch bait from the local sardine factory. He and Spitfire saw an opportunity to remind people of a fish and an industry that had sustained the coast of Maine for a century.

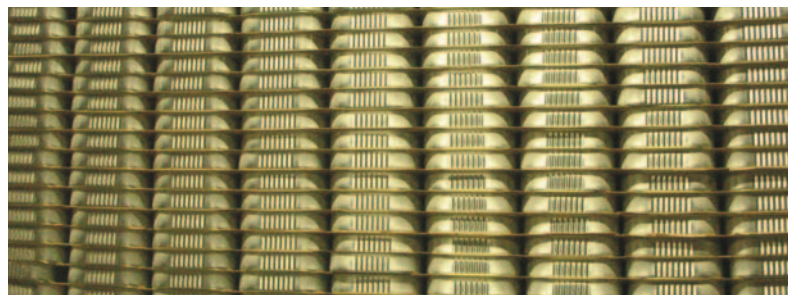
Just a few months into the Year of the Sardine, news came that the Stinson Seafood plant in Prospect Harbor—the last sardine cannery in the United States—was closing. The sardine song became a requiem; the herring hymn an elegy that carried across the continent, across the Atlantic, and even into Penobscot Bay. That's where I heard it.

WHEN THE CLOSURE of Stinson Seafood was announced by Bumble Bee Foods, the owner of the cannery, I knew I would have to write a sardine story. As I dipped into my own files and the records of my predecessors at Maine Sea Grant—a research and education program of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, based at the University of Maine since 1971—I found a wealth of sardine stories and lore. This sardine obsession wasn't new. I found black-and-white photos and graphic art, recipes and promotional material—including a comic book—from the Maine Sardine Council. There were also newspaper clippings, fact sheets, and a reminiscence by Kathleen Lignell Ellis, Maine Sea Grant's first science writer, about her return to Lubec, her one-time home and inspiration for her poem, "In the Sardine Factory."



There can be no other labor like the slitting of dead fish into fillets, no scissors so sharp they miss and cut off chunks of fingers and sometimes missing altogether you gash your partner at the bloody table, missing pieces of flesh with scales and fins....

I wasn't the only one who would be writing the obituary of an industry and a way of life. Reporters from *The New York Times* and the Associated Press found their way to the Schoodic Peninsula to document the fishy smell and conveyor-belt maze of a real-life American factory with real-life American workers. They discovered, among others, 78-year-old Lela Anderson, who started working at the factory in the 1940s.



There is a certain industrial beauty in stacks of sardine tins.

Could I possibly find anything new to say about sardines, the "Flavor of Maine"? And what would be the point? After all, the fish were gone and the last sardine cannery had shuttered. What's a poet to do when there's nothing left but antique boats and sardine tin labels glued to a poster on a classroom wall? Keep writing, keep singing.

Long May They Run...

SOON AFTER THE YEAR of the Sardine project began, poems began streaming in from all over the world to sardinesong.blogspot.com, a website which became a kind of meeting place for sardine-inspired artists. Kendall Morse of Rockland wrote a sardine play. Doug Brown of Belfast wrote sardine limericks. To the tune of Gordon Bok's "Herring Croon," these works joined a legacy of sardine-themed art from the past by photographers Tammy Packie of Halls Cove and Kosti Ruohomaa of Rockland, engraver Carroll Thayer Berry of Rockport, and painters Loretta Krupinski and Michael Goldberg, whose painting, "Sardines," inspired Frank O'Hara's poem, "Why I am not a painter."

The sardine-packing jobs in Prospect Harbor represented employment in a land where opportunity is scarce. But more importantly, they were the last chapter in a story familiar to many of Maine's coastal communities.

Why are people so drawn to these little fish, the humble tins they're packed in? I hungered for answers. I wanted to be inspired. I was, when Sea Grant provided funding for a documentary of the Stinson Seafood plant to Ben Fuller of Penobscot Marine Museum. The museum contains the archives of the Maine Sardine Council and has worked to restore the sardine carrier *Jacob Pike*. Working with the University of Maine New Media Department, the Maine Folklife Center, the SALT Institute for Documentary Studies, Compass Light Productions, and the Historic American Engineering Record of the Library of Congress, Fuller

pulled together a film crew. On the heels of the documentarians, I had my own tour of the plant, two weeks before it closed in April 2010.

I arrived at the 83-year-old cannery on a foggy spring morning and parked beneath the giant silhouette of a fisherman in a yellow sou'wester holding a tin of Beech Cliff



sardines. I put on a hair net and earplugs and, guided by plant manager Peter Colson, toured the cavernous concrete and stainless-steel maze. I smelled the fishy smell and heard the clicking of the conveyor belts and saw the

A SARDINE IS A SARDINE IS A...

Any of 21 species of small herring-like fish can be put in a can and be called a "sardine."

The original sardine, *Sardina pilchardus*, the species first canned by the French in the early 19th century, was named after the island of Sardinia in the Mediterranean Sea. All other canned "sardines" have some kind of qualifier (country, other place name, or common name of the species) on the label.

"Maine sardines" are Atlantic herring, *Clupea harengus*. They are schooling fish in the same family as shad, alewives, and menhaden. According to the Maine Department of Marine Resources, the Atlantic herring is the most important pelagic (surface) fishery resource in the state of Maine. Herring are also an important food source for seabirds, marine mammals, and a variety of larger fish species.

"Brisling sardines" are usually the European sprat, *Sprattus sprattus*.

FINNY TIDBITS

John Steinbeck's Cannery Row in Monterey, California, was founded by Maine sardine industrialists.

Maine sardines fed the troops during World War II, which fueled excessive development of the industry that couldn't be sustained in peace time. The fishery began to decline after a peak harvest of 185 million pounds in 1950. The boats got bigger, and the fishery moved offshore. In 2009, Maine fishermen harvested 28 million pounds of Atlantic herring, most of which was used for lobster bait.

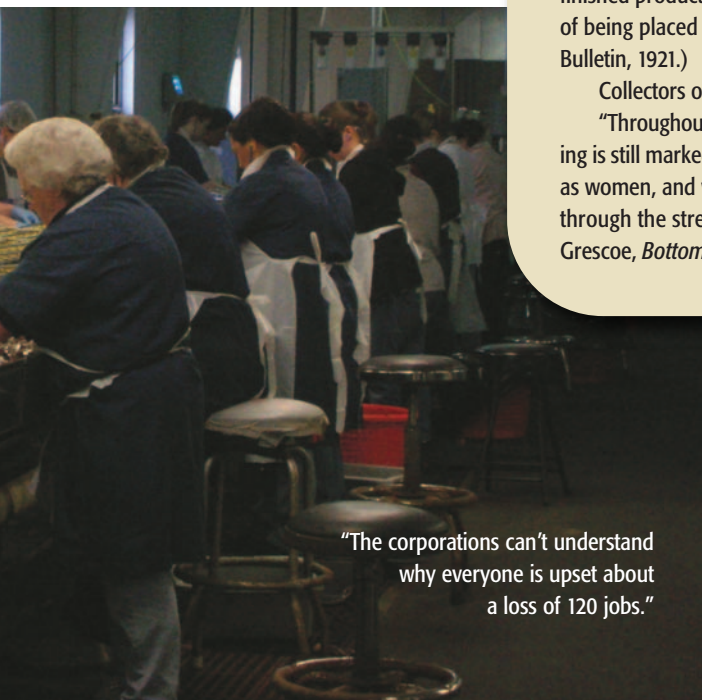
"The packing of sardines differs from that of most food products put up in cans, in that it is necessary to arrange the small fish carefully to insure an attractive looking finished product. No other foodstuff requires the same skill or technique in the matter of being placed in their containers. (F.C. Weber, "The Maine Sardine Industry" USDA Bulletin, 1921.)

Collectors of sardine tins are known as sardinopuxiphiliacs.

"Throughout Spain and as far away as Cuba, the end of Lenten fasting and fish eating is still marked by the Ash Wednesday 'Burial of the Sardine,' in which men dressed as women, and women dressed as men, carry huge *papier-mache* sardines on a bier through the streets, wailing '¡Por que!' ["why?"] with much sardonic sobbing." Taras Grescoe, *Bottomfeeder*, 2008.

women standing in the production line, packing pieces of fish into tins. I waved to Lela Anderson, still packing sardines after all those years.

The storage warehouse was mostly empty except for a few pallets of



"The corporations can't understand why everyone is upset about a loss of 120 jobs."

sardine cans ready for shipping. A lone cube of herring shipped in from New Jersey thawed in the refrigeration building. With Maine herring supplies tight, the plant had to look farther away to find the steady supply of fish needed to keep the plant running efficiently. Although the federal government considered the Atlantic herring fishery sustainable, the New England Fisheries Management Council had cut the Gulf of Maine herring quota for 2010, prompting Bumble Bee Foods to close the plant.

"The corporations can't understand why everyone is so upset about a loss of 120 jobs," said manager Peter Colson, whose father spent 46 years in the sardine business. The jobs in Prospect Harbor represented employment in a land where such opportunity is scarce. But more impor-

tantly, they were the last chapter in a story familiar to many of Maine's coastal communities.

Since the first sardine cannery in Eastport in 1875, Atlantic herring have sustained a way of life in Maine. Many a Maine kid made a few dollars a day snipping heads and tails in the cutting room. Women mostly worked the packing line; men moved the blocks of tins through the cooking and sealing machines.

By 1900, 75 canneries were packing 345,000,000 tins of sardines per year, equal to about 70 million pounds of juvenile herring, according to Dr. Jason Stockwell, an ecologist at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute. "These numbers are one-third of the weight of recent harvests," said Stockwell, "but five times the number of fish." That's because back then small, one-year-old herring were harvested.

It was these tiny fish I wondered about. The herring packed as sardines today are much larger. I followed Peter Colson up to his office after my tour of the Stinson Seafood factory floor and asked him about that.

"When I think about eating sardines when I was young," I said, "I seem to remember that they were smaller, that there were more of them in a can. Is that just my imagination or were the fish smaller then?"

"You're right," he said. "Atlantic herring used to come much closer to shore, where they

continued on page 80 ►

"When I think about eating sardines when I was young," I said, "I seem to remember that they were smaller, that there were more of them in a can. Is that just my imagination or were the fish smaller then?"



Demand for tinned sardines was actually up in recent years and sardines were showing up on four-star restaurant menus.

continued from page 77 ►

were netted with weirs and stop-seines in the coves. Now, the fish are caught as adults and they are bigger, which means less pieces in a can.”

I left the plant with a craving for sardines, the small ones I remembered from childhood, 10 or 12 in a can, with bones and tails.

ACCORDING TO COLSON, demand for tinned sardines was actually up in recent years. And fresh sardines were once again available on the Pacific Coast, where the comeback of *Sardinops sagax caerulea* led the Monterey Bay Aquarium to recommend sardines as a sustainable and healthy seafood choice. Sardines were showing up on four-star restaurant menus. Food writers encouraged Americans to “take a fresh look” at sardines. Taras Grescoe, author of *Bottomfeeder*, advised consumers to eat fish that are low on the food chain. Mark Bittman instructed *New York Times* readers how to make restaurant-style “grilled sardines” at home.

Meanwhile, most of Maine’s herring weirs disappeared as coastal runs of juvenile fish declined and fishermen moved off-

shore in the 1980s. Allowable harvest in the inshore or coastal region of the Gulf of Maine (known as Area 1A to herring fishermen) has been cut by more than half since 2006.

“The biggest issue facing herring in Maine’s coastal waters is not knowing how many fish are out there,” said Jason Stockwell, citing the models used by fishery managers for Area 1A that are based on scarce and old data. “We need to study the inshore population, but it doesn’t seem to be a priority.”

WHEN WAVES of fish rippled along the shoreline, and the weir fishermen set their nets in circles fenced with sticks and brush, people would go down to the water’s edge to watch the fish run.

“It was exciting,” poet Kathleen Ellis remembered. “No one got excited about seeing lobsters, but these little fish...it was a community thing. It meant whales were nearby. It meant work.”

Work, at one time, for thousands of people. There were so many factories that anyone who grew up in Maine likely knew someone who worked in a cannery.

“A lot of people lived this business,” said Ben Fuller, of Penobscot Marine Museum. “It was one of the few relatively industrial fisheries in Maine.”

American culture tends to celebrate the final few, the last, the end of an era, but rarely the beginning. As keepers of

artists celebrate the past to inspire the future.

Later in the summer of 2010, at the Belfast Sardine Extravaganza, foil-covered cutouts of sardines on sticks lay in the grass awaiting the parade. The stage was empty before the invocation. Karin Spitfire’s sardine skirt sparkled green in the sun, like so many pearlescent herring scales cast upon the shores of Belfast Bay. Gary Lawless approached the microphone.

“I grew up here and used to hear the sardine whistle blow,” he said. He spoke

of the “wonderful postmodern relic” of the defunct Belfast sardine cannery. Children ran in circles on the sloping hillside. Out on the bay the boats were still.

Singers stepped to the stage and sang songs about the earth, the sun, the stars, the schools of fish that may forever run. The people clapped, the people sang, and the people began to remember. ★

Catherine Schmitt writes for the Maine Sea Grant College Program at the University of Maine. She lives in Bangor.

I left the about-to-be-closed plant with a craving for sardines, the small ones I remembered from childhood, 10 or 12 in a can, with bones and tails.

culture, artists retain the social memory that reminds us all where we have been, so that we might imagine new futures for ourselves and our communities. Poets like Gary Lawless, Karin Spitfire, and Kathleen Ellis remind newcomers and young people just how much Maine communities once depended on sardines and other fishes. In words, music, and public display,