

Collections: Turn of the Tide

"Cooperation, that's what we need on the coast. But we've got to learn to pull together."

Those words from a film in the Vinalhaven Historical Society Collection at NHF ring as true today as they did in 1943, when *Turn of the Tide* was released.

Back then, the problem was artificially low prices at the dock for lobster. Today, it's the complex issue of fisheries management—not only for lobster, whose current population boom seems to belie warnings of a crash, but for species like haddock and cod, where the crash has come.

Then and now, cooperation among people who fish is a huge first step. In the 1990s, the creation of lobster councils under Maine law is giving meaningful representation in the management of the resource. In the 1940s, as *Turn of the Tide* illustrates, lobstermen gained financial stability and new clout in the marketplace by forming credit unions and other cooperative associations.

Fascinating Continuity

"I think people in the industry would be fascinated by it," says Robin Alden, of Stonington, Maine. Alden was commissioner of the Maine Department of Marine Resources in the King administration until last November, and was founding editor of *Commercial Fisheries News*.

"My husband Ted and I watched it, and we loved it," Alden says. Ted Ames, a Vinalhaven native, is a lifelong fisherman. "It amazed us how similar so many of the expressions and ways people operated are to [those] now," she adds.

Shooting in Port Clyde, producer James McPherson and writer Mary Ellicott Arnold cast Maine lobstermen and their families in all the roles. They were instructed to act for the camera with dialogue to be dubbed in later. If the plot is melodramatic and the acting self-conscious, the images of the coast and its people are pure gold.

Harmon Foundation Work

The film was created under the auspices



Ernest Maloney, Roger Magnuson, and other participants in *Turn of the Tide*, from the publication *Maine Cooperatives Along the Coast*, January 1943. Courtesy Vinalhaven Historical Society

of the Harmon Foundation, a socially progressive organization founded in the 1920s and perhaps best known for creating the Harmon Collection of African-American art at the National Portrait Gallery. Another funder was the Cooperative League of the U.S.A., forerunner to today's National Cooperative Business Association.

The film depicts a lobstering culture brought to the brink by dealer pricing that doesn't even meet the workers' expenses. The central character, Herm, is the stereotypical stubborn Mainer, who holds hard grudges and rejects any notion of cooperative effort.

Co-ops Continue

The community's precarious existence is exemplified by one character, Milt, who tries to solve his financial problems with one desperate trap-setting run. Milt's tragic end and the collapse of lobster prices galvanize the community into forming a credit union.

Finally—just before a parade of vignettes representing the real-life success stories of the cooperative movement—Herm sees the folly of his ways and plunks his quarter down with the other founding depositors.

"Many of those co-ops survive to this day," says Alden.

The film's message has particular resonance now, "as we change the governance structure in lobster and form these lobster councils," Alden explains. "It's a pioneering new type of management, and the

whole issue of whether fishermen can have the group work together for the benefit of their fishery is what people are thinking about right now."

If pricing is no longer a front-burner issue—thanks in part to the cooperative movement—it's an issue still. In part because lobster populations are so high that a lot of new dealers have pumped a lot of new money into the business, "lobstermen aren't at the mercy of dealers the way they were back then," Alden says.

But a handful of big dealers can continue to set basic prices, because of the perishable nature of the product. Lobsters are hungry—that is, most catchable—after they molt, and so the summer molting season creates "this huge pulse of lobsters that starts in the south and moves east along the coast," Alden explains.

"Those lobsters are weak, they're relatively soft-shelled and they don't keep well, and lobstermen have to get rid of them. And so they're really captive at that point. There are some very large players in the lobster market that pretty much dictate what the price is. You can watch the lobster prices along the coast move in unison up and down."

Lobster catchers and dealers remain locked in an embrace of mutual dependence and dislike, Alden says. If, as *Turn of the Tide* tells us, the value of cooperation is timeless, so is something a fisherman once said. "Every time a dollar changes hands, you've got different interests," he told her. "And that's absolutely true." ■