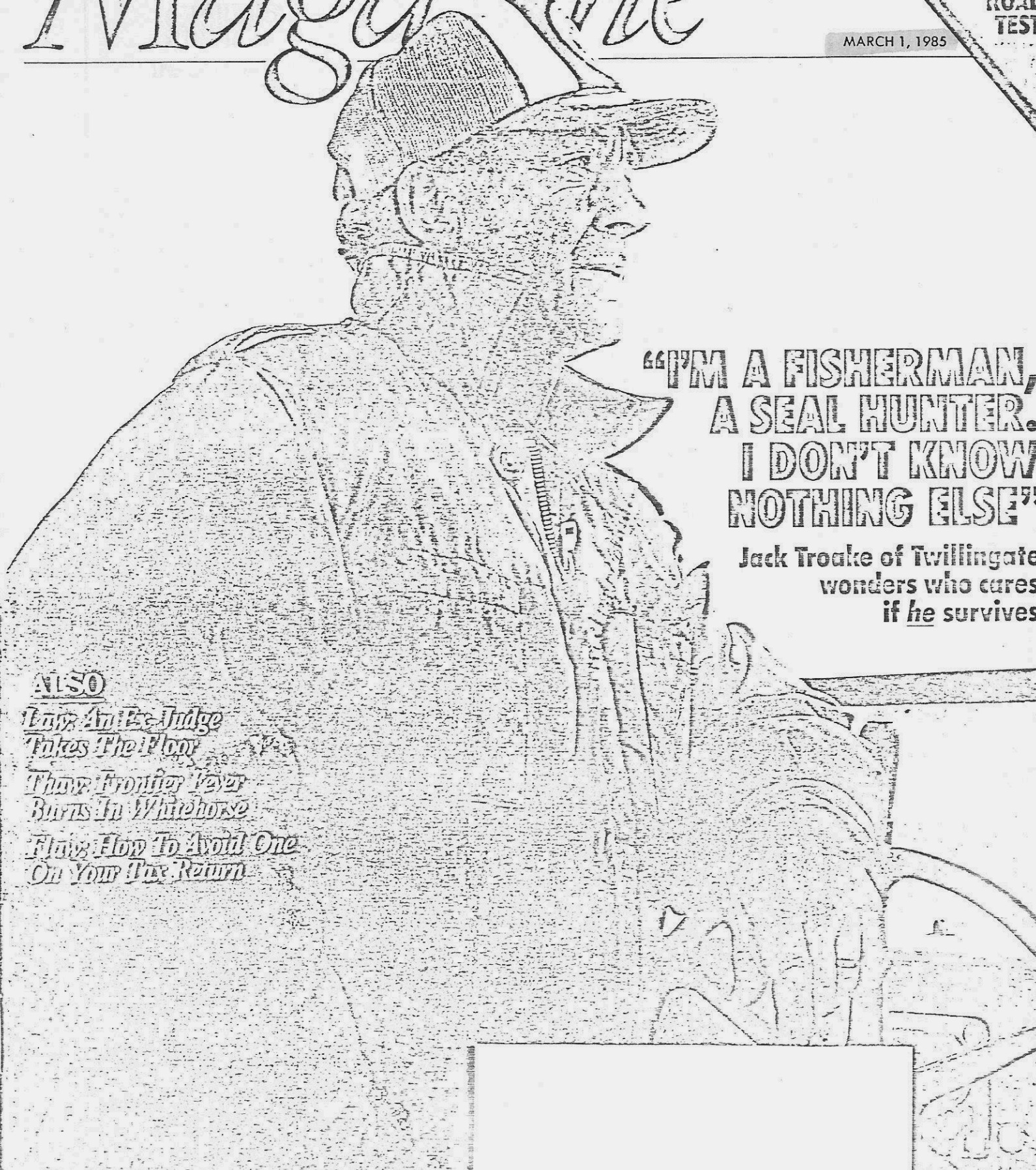


Financial Post

Magazine

In MoneyWise:
A RETIREMENT
CITY
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ROAD
TEST

MARCH 1, 1985



**"I'M A FISHERMAN,
A SEAL HUNTER.
I DON'T KNOW
NOTHING ELSE"**

Jack Troake of Twillingate
wonders who cares
if he survives

ALSO

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ILLUSTRATION BY [unreadable]

WITHOUT THE SEAL FISHERY, WHAT'S A MAN SUPPOSED TO DO?"

The boycott has dealt a cruel blow to the livelihoods of landsmen like Jack Troake

BY STEPHEN KIMBER

"You look out over the ice. There's half a dozen seals out there. When you're going over that goddamned ice, you're counting your dollars and cents, and you're thinking, . . . 'By Jesus, I'll get this bugger. There's something I'm going to buy with that one' That's the way the system is You either do that or you go sit on your ass and go on the welfare."

—Jack Troake

JACK TROAKE RUNS PRACTISED FISHERMAN'S fingers along the mesh of a green plastic gill net while his visitor attempts to make polite conversation. "Getting ready for the spring season?" he asks idly.

Troake looks up from his work sharply. His sparkling blue-green eyes freeze the visitor with a look that is as icy as a winter wind off the North Atlantic. "Fishing is a year-round job," he says in a flatly unemotional voice that still manages to let one know just how tired Jack Troake has become of the foolish notions outsiders sometimes have about the life of a fisherman.

But today, his heart isn't in his anger or even in the words he speaks. The visitor, in truth, is more right than he knows.

On this clear January afternoon, in the middle of what could have been the best sealing season in anyone's memory, Jack Troake—a 48-year-old professional fisherman and seal hunter—is filling up empty hours with busywork, preparing nets for a fishing season that is five, maybe six, months into the future.

Still, there's nothing he can do about that now. And a visitor might be just the thing to ease the boredom. His weather-wearied face finally eases into a welcoming smile. "Come into the house, old son, and let's have a cup of tea."

JACK TROAKE AND FLORENCE, HIS WIFE of 31 years, live in the same tidy yellow house where Jack's grandfather once lived and where Jack himself was born. Although Troake will tell you proudly that one section of the house is 147 years old, it's been added to and modernized often over the years. It would not look out of place in a working-class suburb of any major Canadian city.

From Troake's window, you can see across the ice-heaved harbor to the little snow-covered village on the south side of Twillingate, an island community of about 5,000 nestled on the northern coast of Newfoundland. Today, Twillingate sits, sun-washed and silent, a still-life canvas waiting for an artist. In other—Jack Troake would tell you, better—Januarys, Twillingate would now be alive with the sights and sounds and smells of the annual seal hunt.

Down at the government wharf, for example, long-liners and speedboats would be hurrying into port to unload their catch and refuel their vessels before heading back to sea for more seals. On the narrow roads leading out of town, big freezer trucks, crammed full of seal meat destined for the canning factory in Notre Dame Bay, would be jockeying for position with tractor trailers loaded down with seal pelts for the buyer in Dildo. In the evening, work-weary sealers would stop in at the Anchor Inn, the local motel, for a quick glass of Black Horse beer and the chance to tell a few good sealing stories one more time.

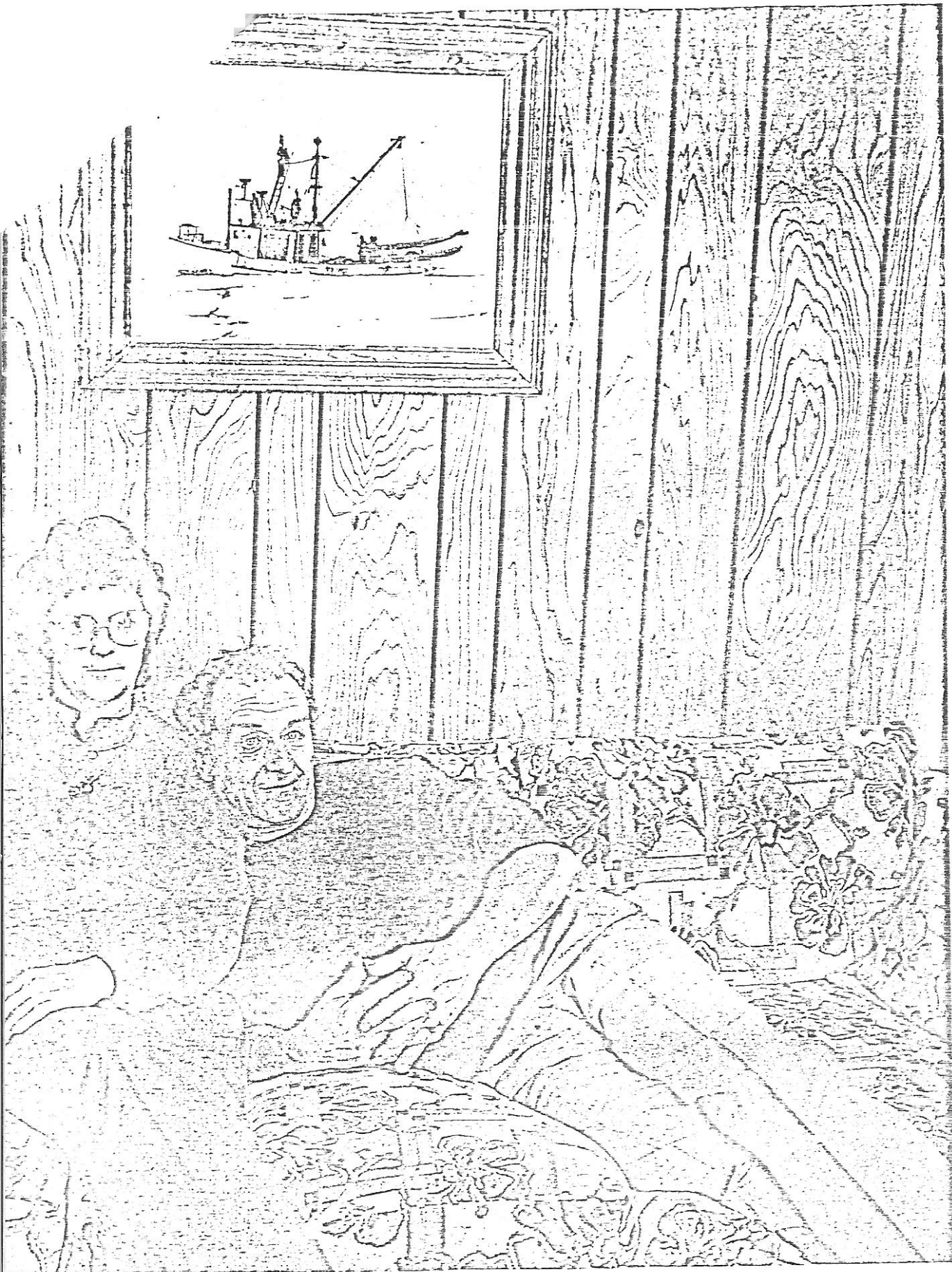
Today, however, there isn't a boat on the water; the only trucks on the road are pickups loaded with firewood scavenged from the local wind-stunted forests; and the desultory knot of men drinking in the Anchor aren't drinking to celebrate an honest day's work—they're drinking to forget that there is no work for them to do.

"Twillingate doesn't exist because of the cod," says Garry Troake. "It exists because of the seals." Garry, 24, is Jack's younger son; he and his brother, Hardy, 30, are fishermen and seal hunters too. "If you just wanted to fish," he adds, "you could go further up the bay and have some comfort."

The first seal oil ever shipped back to Europe by the early fishermen and fur traders, he explains proudly, came from right here in Twillingate. And the bell at the Anglican church, which was specially cast in England more than 100 years ago, was bought for the church by local sealers after a particularly good season. "Even the Beothuk Indians," Garry offers, to buttress the point he is making, "came out to Twillingate during the winter for seals."

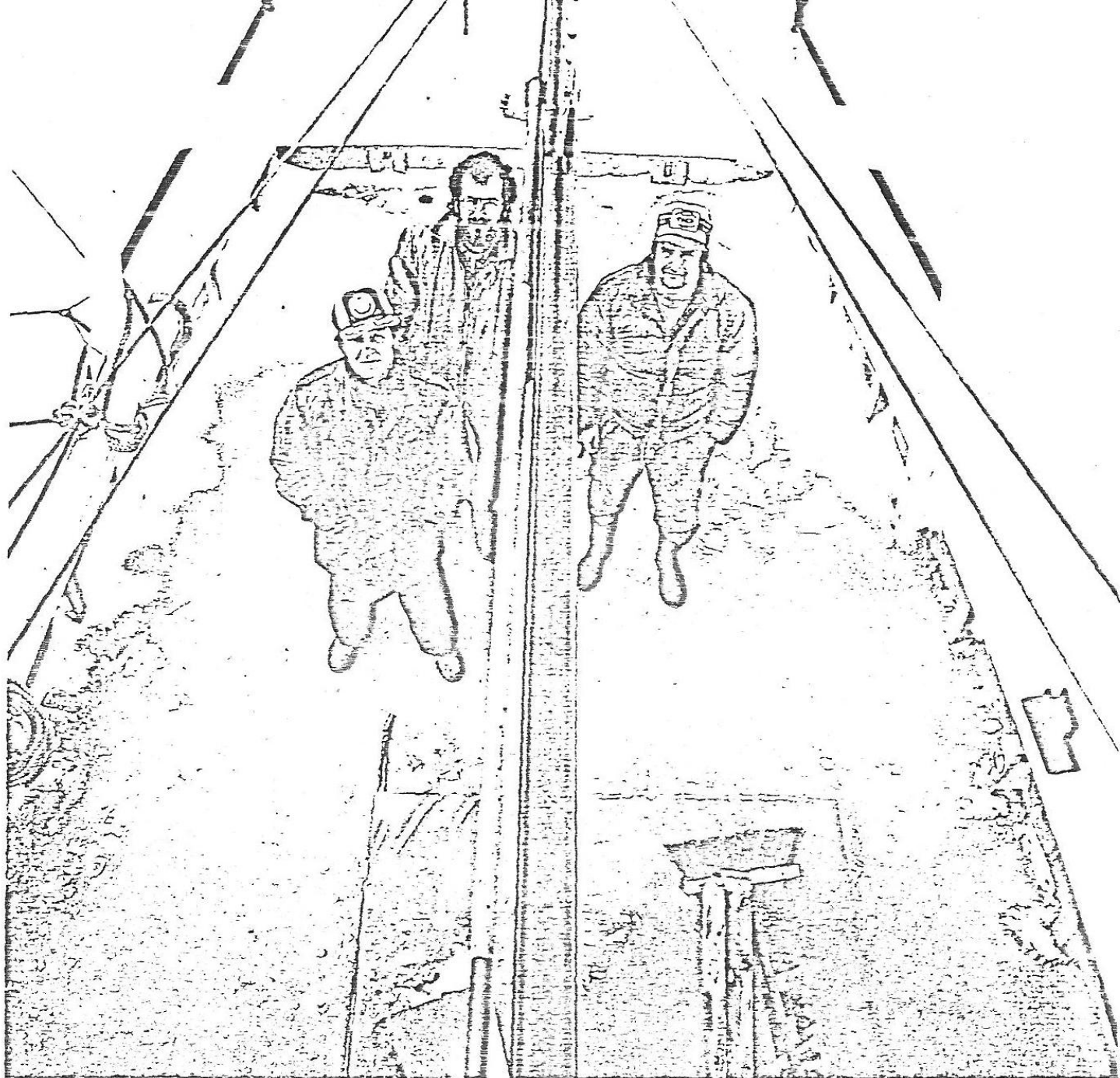
The fact is not lost on Garry or his father





REDUCED TO WELFARE

Self-sufficiency has always been the goal of Jack and Florence Troake. They can't hope for that without the hunt



In good times, Jack and his crew—sons Garry (centre) and Hardy (right) and a few friends—could feed six families with their earnings from the boat

or anyone else in Twillingate, however, that the Beothuk Indians are now extinct.

"Sealing, sir, is rough and tough. It's dirty, it's dangerous. Everything's bad. There's nothing good about sealing. There are a hell of a lot of good men gone from this coast in disasters. . . . Every year, there's a couple of guys leave in the morning and never come back. . . . But that's just the way it is."

LESS THAN A WEEK BEFORE, CARINO CO., the Norwegian-owned firm that had been the last remaining buyer of Canadian seal pelts, called a press conference to announce that it—like all the other middlemen that used to compete to buy seal pelts from poor Newfoundland fishermen, process them and then sell them as coats and gloves to rich European matrons—was no longer in the market for sealskins.

After more than a decade of international protest, the Council of the European Economic Community had voted two years ago to recommend that member countries ban imports of Canadian harp and hooded seal pelts, and today, the simple fact is that no one is buying sealskins anymore.

Between the day that French explorer Jacques Cartier first saw Labrador Indians taking seals in the Strait of Belle Isle in 1534 and the day that Brian Davies—then a young, Welsh-born student teacher and part-time worker for the New Brunswick Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals—caught his first glimpse of the hunt off Labrador in 1965, the seal fishery had been accepted, when anyone paid attention to it at all, as just one more piece in the eternal jigsaw puzzle of Atlantic Canada's seasonal survival.

Brian Davies not only changed that perception. He also changed, perhaps forever, Jack Troake's world.

"Even if there was a factory set up right here, just five minutes' walk from this place, how in the Lord Jesus can I go work in a factory? I'm a fisherman, a seal hunter. That's all I know. I don't know nothing else."

THERE WERE ALWAYS TWO VERY DISTINCT seal hunts. The first—and best known—was the offshore hunt, which took place in early March each year on the massive, moving ice floes off the south coast of Labrador. It was a "corporate" hunt, involving a few hundred men on a dozen or so large ships from Canada and Norway. These reinforced vessels, which each weighed 150 tons or more, would smash



Tradition dies hard. Troakes have been in Newfoundland since there was a Newfoundland and probably been sealing at least as long

their way through the pack ice to get as close as possible to the area where the seal herds gathered to whelp a new generation of baby seals. Because demand was greatest for the pups' distinctive white coats, which they shed within a few weeks of their birth, there was a frenetic energy to the hunt as crews of hunters fanned out across the ice with clubs and knives to bludgeon and skin the newborn seal pups.

In the mid-'60s, when Brian Davies' International Fund for Animal Welfare and other protest groups first began filming this annual slaughter—showing soft, cuddly seal pups with beseeching eyes being clubbed to death by hulking sealers on the blood-stained ice—animal lovers around the world were outraged at the seemingly senseless barbarism of it all.

Even though proponents of the hunt such

as Captain Morrissey Johnson, a former offshore sealer who is now a member of Parliament from Newfoundland, quite rightly argued that the protesters "would do well to think about where their pork chop or hamburger meat comes from," the hunt quickly became an emotional international rallying point, and the clamor against it grew to such a level that the protesters eventually managed to persuade the governments of most European countries, which had always been the main market, to ban the importation of seal fur.

But that not only meant the end of the big corporate offshore seal hunt, it also—and more significant in terms of the economy of Newfoundland—meant the end of Jack Troake's seal hunt too.

Troake's seal hunt was very different from the one that was the focus of all the

international protest. Troake was one of about 5,000 licensed independent seal hunters known in the industry as landsmen. The landsmen were fishermen from small coastal communities in Newfoundland and Quebec who hunted with rifles from small boats or on foot. Their prey were the adult seal and the six-week-old "beaters." For them, the seal hunt was part of a tradition of self-reliance and survival that had been passed down through the generations. "Troakes have been in Newfoundland since there was a Newfoundland, sir," Jack Troake tells his visitor, then adds, "and they've probably been sealing at least as long." His father and grandfather were sealing masters; Jack himself began hunting seals when he was just 14.

Though he's hunted them on foot on the shifting inshore ice packs and even spent

several seasons working on the offshore Front, Troake has done most of his sealing from the bow of his own 50-foot long-liner, *Lone Fisher*. Between early January and mid-April each year, depending on weather and ice conditions, Troake and his crew—his two sons and two or three close family friends—relentlessly pursued their quarry in the icy waters off northern Newfoundland with high-powered rifles and telescopic sights from gun positions mounted on the bow of the long-liner and its motor launch.

In a good 18-hour day that would start a few hours before dawn and probably not end until darkness closed in on them, Troake and his crew would often kill, skin

and cut up 100 or more seals, some weighing more than 500 pounds. As well as the pelts, which used to fetch as much as \$35 each, depending on condition, Troake had a market for virtually every other part of the animal too: He sold the seal flippers as a delicacy in St. John's for \$36 a dozen, the meat went to a nearby cannery for 25 cents a pound and the jawbone and stomach were bought up by federal fisheries department researchers for \$3.50 and \$5 each respectively. Even the male seal's penis and testicles, used as an aphrodisiac in the Far East, were worth \$11.50.

"In the good times," Troake says proudly, "six families would eat out of my boat. That was because of the seal fishery."

ALTHOUGH TROAKE AND HIS FELLOW landmen accounted for about half of the total yearly seal quota, the landmen's hunt was more critical than simple arithmetic might indicate to the survival of dozens of small, marginal Newfoundland fishing communities, such as Twillingate, where residents only barely manage to get by, thanks to a combination of fishing for whatever was running—groundfish in summer, mackerel in fall and seals in late winter and early spring—and filling in the in-between times, when *nothing* was running, with unemployment insurance benefits.

Almost all of Twillingate's 1,000 licensed full-time fishermen took part in the seal hunt, many of them earning as much as one-third of their average \$9,000 annual net income from it. But the economic benefits of the seal hunt washed over virtually everyone else in the community as well—from the general stores that provided provisions for the sealers to the gasoline dealers that kept boat gas tanks filled with diesel fuel during seal season—like a welcome wave on a hot summer day.

"During sealing season," says Garry Troake, "there'd always be more money in the collection plate on Sunday mornings and more money over at the Anchor In on Saturday nights."

When Jack Troake talks about the seal hunt, he speaks of it simply in terms of mortgages paid, expenses made and another year's survival assured. "Up until the past few years, you could figure on a couple of trips to the seal fishery and that would pay the mortgage [on your boat] and insurance for the year, just like that . . . All you had to do for the rest of the year was worry about your operating costs."

Troake and his crew were more successful than most small fishermen. Prior to 1984, they grossed an average of \$22,000 a year from the seal hunt; once they took in \$66,000 in a single season. After operating expenses, each crew member might take home between \$3,000 and \$4,000 a year from sealing. When you realize that their average income from every source for the entire year is just \$12,000 to \$15,000, you begin to understand why Jack Troake is so frustrated today.

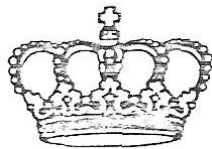
Thanks to the seal hunt, he has now finally finished paying for the 13-year-old *Lone Fisher*, which he had specially constructed with a South American hardwood that "you can hardly drill a hole in" and then reinforced with stainless steel along the bow. "I don't owe no man a cent on this earth, not a jingle," he says proudly, then adds sadly, "A man with a long-liner today who's got a mortgage on his boat of \$60- to \$70,000 just couldn't afford to run it without the seal fishery." Garry agrees. He'd like to own a boat someday, but there's no way he'd take the risk now.

After leaving school at the end of Grade 11, Garry tried out factory work in Toronto before quickly deciding it wasn't for him.

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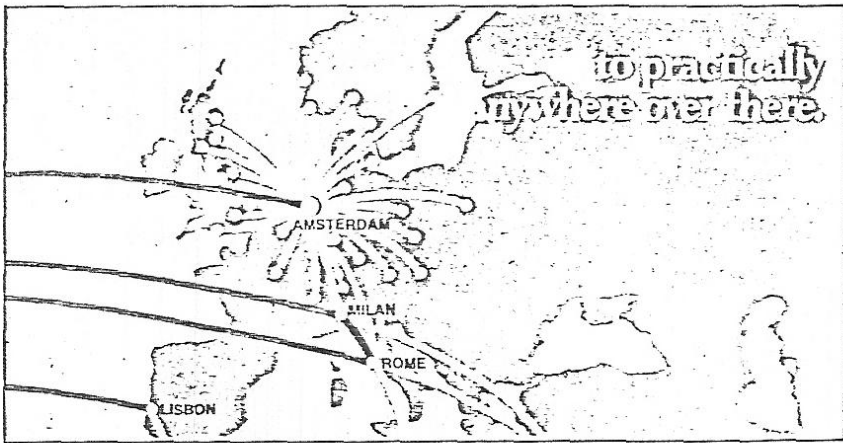
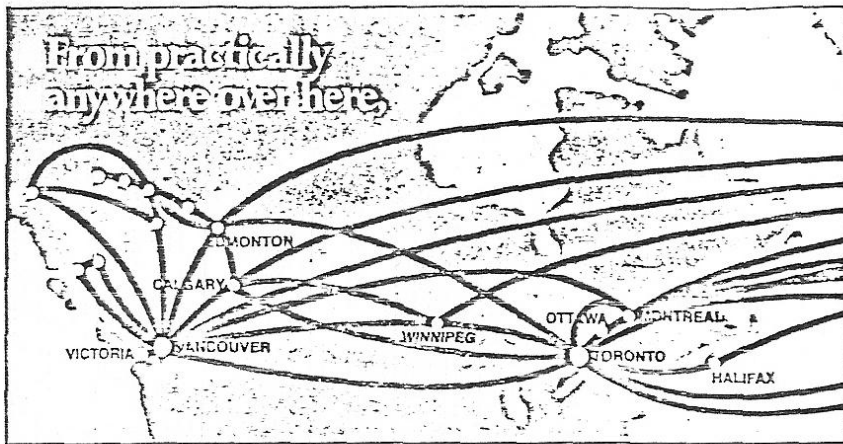
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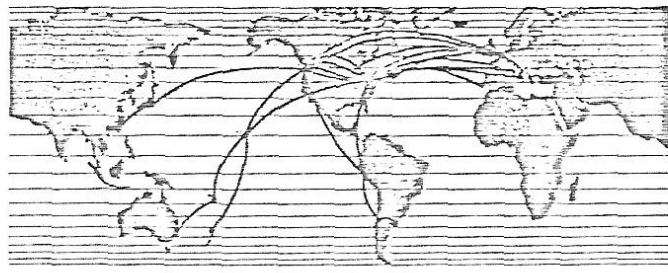
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He likes the fact he can be close to his family here—he and his wife and their two children, his brother and his wife and their two children, his father and mother and even his grandfather all live in houses that are within shouting distance of one another—and still be as independent as a man can be. "Here," he says, "you can eat a different dish every day—seal, rabbit, moose, caribou—and get it yourself for free. Here," he adds, "you can make \$8- to \$10,000 a year, and it's the same as \$18- or \$19,000 in Toronto." But the question Garry must ask himself now is whether he can make even that much money without the cushion of the seal fishery.

"Life here goes in circles," his father says. "Some years because of the weather, you won't be able to start groundfishing before July month and the weather will get bad and you'll be finished again in September. But that year you might have a real good sealing season and make up for it." He pauses. "But when they start taking away parts of the circle, like stopping the seal hunt, well, by and by, the whole circle's gone and that's the end of it."

Even today, the whole fishing industry is in desperate trouble, he says. "The bottom has fallen out, and not just from the seal fishery. It's the whole goddamn shebang and I don't know why," he complains. "We got fish stocks and the world wants it, I know that, but I'm selling my groundfish today for 1976 prices. That's what I'm doing, sir. While the cost of my fuel has gone up 250 percent. From 33 cents a gallon 12 years ago to \$2.66 today. There's no way in the world a person can survive much longer at those prices . . . and without the seal fishery, what's a man supposed to do?"

Troake, like many landmen, would like to see the offshore hunt abandoned and have the federal government instead develop a Canadian market for the 60,000 seal pelts the landmen traditionally take each year. "They could use 50- or 60,000 seal pelts in the Armed Forces alone, just for leather," he suggests.

None of that, of course, will solve the problem of what to do today. This is the second winter Jack Troake hasn't gone seal hunting, the second winter he's been forced to depend on unemployment insurance for six months instead of the usual two. And he's frustrated.

"All these people say that you shouldn't kill seals," he tells the visitor urgently. "Well, what should you do? What in the hell can you do? You know, boys, I don't want to be out there, blood up to my god-damned armpits, and gone for two or three weeks, and coming home smelling like a Jesus skunk. I don't want to do that, no. There's no enjoyment, there's no fun in the seal fishery, I'll tell you that. But it's part of your livelihood, part of your bread and butter. That's all it means."

But for Jack Troake, *that* still means a lot.