

Remembering Jack K. Homer

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The sea was his life: Jack Homer 1911-2011

For almost 100 years, Jack Homer and the sea were inseparable.

His British immigrant parents had come out and settled at Albert Head, but when Emily Homer was expecting, she sailed back to England to be with her mother, and Jack was born a Brit.

Though her return ticket had been booked with the Cunard line on the *Titanic's* doomed maiden voyage, the young mother decided to stay another month, cashed the ticket in, and later sailed back to Canada on the *Carthagenia* in May of 1912. It was the first signal of the charmed life that Jack would live on the sea.

The ocean was his home, his livelihood and his recreation. Jack grew up at Albert Head on a small farm with sister Joan (later Mrs. Milward-Yates) and older brother Fred Homer, where the youngsters each had their own putter boats, handy at the shoreline. One of Jack's vivid memories was of getting out of bed in October 1929, to a startling sight. Shrouded in the early morning fog, the *Empress of Canada* was aground at their doorstep, pancaking the farm's cows.

He got his first 10-ft putter boat at age 10, and went on to a series of fishing vessels over the next three-quarters of a century. The Homers are a family with British maritime traditions, so Jack was sent back to the old country in his teens to take



Jack Homer is at the aft-control station of the *Rocha Cove*, 1978.

training at the Portsmouth Naval Academy, training on HMS *Conway*, a brigantine on the Mersey River.

Just after the Great Depression struck, Jack and brother Fred bought a fishing boat from their dad, and set out in 1930 to make their own way. His next investment was a 40-ft trawler he called *Fisher Boy*, which had cost \$1,200 to build. Fish prices were low, but by dint of long hours and a dauntless spirit, Jack managed to wrest a living from the sea. *Fisher Boy* was followed by *Fisher Boy II* and *III*.

He recalled a time in 1932 when he went in to Bull Harbour, the fuel in his tank down to 50 gallons, and his pocket boasting only 50 cents.

He knew he must find fish or starve – and find fish he did! He came back with 21 spring salmon, each over 20 pounds, and got 5 cents a pound for them.

The woman who married Jack would need to understand that to share her life with this man, she would also be sharing him with the sea. At 21, he married Meneen Dixon, also of British background, and the couple rented a small cottage at Portage Inlet.

Jack's fishing grounds ranged from the Queen Charlottes and from the rough waters off Cape Scott, to Triangle Island, to almost as far south as San Francisco. He recalled catching tuna 30 miles out from Ucluelet, and off

the Queen Charlottes. While he fished predominantly for spring, coho or sockeye salmon, he also caught tuna, halibut and ling cod. Most of his catch was bought by fish buyers such as BC Packers or Canadian Fishing Company. He described salmon canneries at Rivers Inlet, Namu and Walker Bay, and a fish buying plant at Bamfield.

By 1942 Jack's hard work and the bounty of the sea had provided sufficient income to purchase a lovely, substantial waterfront home in Sooke, where he and Meneen raised their two sons, John and David. A gentle British lady, Meneen kept the home fires burning steadfastly for Jack.

Jack's standards were exacting; he tried to handle the fish gently and cover them with brown kelp to keep them fresh and bring a top dollar from the fish-buyer. During the 1940s and 50s when salmon were abundant, he once caught 420 coho in a single day, dressing and icing them himself. While typically the halibut he caught averaged 30 to 50 pounds, his largest weighed in at 210 pounds.

Fellow mariner Doug MacFarlane describes Jack Homer as remarkable in his skill as a seaman. He recalls that Jack told him of a trip down the coast from the North Island where Jack was exhausted from many hours without rest but needed to bring his catch down to market as quickly as

possible. Jack's solution was to stand outside the wheelhouse in the cold, to keep himself awake, and reach inside to steer the vessel. One of the first on the coast to install radar, Jack got frequent calls from fellow fishermen to locate a fix.

The *Nip N Tuck* was Jack's next purchase, and was used for log salvage along the coast. In addition to fishing, by the late 1970s Jack had re-structured his fishing style from the arduous routines and long hours of commercial fishing. Besides log salvaging he also assisted Doug MacFarlane with the big log booms being towed up to the mill in Sooke basin. He began operating a charter boat business in the burgeoning local sports fishing industry; the two boats he operated with his son David were the 40-ft *Rocha Cove* and the 44-ft *Secretary Isle*.

Phoebe Dunbar points out how generous Jack was with the maritime events of Sooke Festival Society, and the annual long-boat challenges. A little piece of the history of Edward Milne Community School belongs to Jack, as it was he and the *Secretary Isle* that carried the newly-flensed whale skeleton to the deepest part of Sooke Basin in 1989, dropping it submerged in a cage for the crabs to clean up. When the crabs' work was done, it was raised again, and

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Jack Homer

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today the re-assembled whale proudly graces the commons of EMCS.

Jack continued running the *Secretary Isle* for charter fishing even up to the age of 90. As his wife grew frail and lost her eyesight, Jack cared for her solicitously. After she passed away in 1996 he sold his waterfront home and moved to a cottage in the Whiffin Spit area.

His enormous knowledge of the sea, amassed through nine decades of experience, meant that he was still sought after, asked to share his wealth of maritime and fishing history.

In recent years his son David helped his dad remain in his own home. Had he lived to December, he would have celebrated his 100 birthday. An era of our history is now gone.

Jack leaves his sons John and David, grandson Paul, and their families.

A service will be held at Sands in Colwood at 1:00 pm on February 9.

Elda Peers,
Historian
Sooke Region
Museum