

Free Ports for Fish on the Pacific Coast

Advantages to be Derived from Opening British Columbia Ports to American Fishermen—Great Benefit to Prince Rupert—Different Conditions from Those Obtaining on Atlantic Coast.

H. S. Clements, M. P.

While the whole is greater than its parts, it is also true that all the parts assembled make the whole. I have always maintained that if any part or portion of British Columbia is benefited by increased trade, then some benefit accrues to the whole of British Columbia.

Vancouver has no reason to be jealous of Prince Rupert, nor have I ever heard any expressions of jealousy, but it would not be injurious to the citizens of the great Port of Vancouver to be more fully apprised of the progress and the future of the Northern Port.

For one thing, Prince Rupert today is the geographical centre of the great deep sea fisheries of the Northern Pacific waters. This is more particularly true by reason of the fact that today the Grand Trunk Pacific is a through line, maintaining a regular passenger and freight service. Hence, it is possible for the fishing concerns to send their schooners, out to the halibut banks, 100, 150 or 200 miles from Prince Rupert, make their catches, hurry back to Prince Rupert, and have their fish put upon refrigerator cars and sent to the markets, not only of Canada and the United States, but to the markets of Great Britain. Up to within a few months ago this could not be done, because the railway was not opened for traffic. Henceforth Prince Rupert will be the economic magnet to draw shipments of deep sea fisheries to be distributed to the millions of consumers demanding fresh fish.

In the North Country there has been a keen agitation to make Prince Rupert a free port, or, to put it differently, to relax the regulations which prevent American fishing vessels from buying bait and outfitting at Canadian ports on the Pacific.

Today these firms may, under the regulations, buy bait and outfit if they ship their catches in bond over a Canadian railway. The agitation now is to have this privilege granted without this stipulation of shipping in bond.

There are two main reasons urged for this action on the part of the Dominion Government: First, that it will result in substantial sums being realized immediately by Canadian fishing companies on this Coast, and by merchants in Canadian ports such as Prince Rupert. Second, with an outlet for small, inferior herring, such as are used for bait and not for pickling, an opportunity will be afforded to build up a great herring trade. In this way the waste product comprising five-sixths of the seine-catch herring, may be utilized.

Anything that can be done, in reason and without sadly disturbing conditions, to build up a great herring industry in British Columbia, it seems to me, should be done. At the present moment the product of Scotch herring will have been reduced fifty per cent. in volume by the interruption to fishing caused by the war, and as herring exports from the Continent of Europe have practically ceased, we have an excellent chance here in British Columbia of bidding for not only a share of the British market, but also for a large part of the great American market which exists in the Middle Western States.

It is of interest to note that 162 steamers and power vessels are employed in the South Eastern Alaska halibut fisheries. There are working out of Seattle 93 vessels all engaged in the halibut business. Prince Rupert, the railway terminus nearest to the fishing grounds, would be the only port from which these vessels would operate, if they

could buy bait, outfit their vessels and land their fish in bond for shipment to the American markets in the East.

The outfitting of a four-dory boat, the average size working out of Prince Rupert, means an expenditure of \$1,500 a trip, and two trips are made in a month. In addition, when good catches are made, the fishermen get high wages, ranging from \$180 to \$250 per month. These fishermen like to live on the fat of the land, and they keep considerable money in circulation. By attracting a number of these halibut vessels to Prince Rupert, the merchants and business men there would exchange goods for many thousands of dollars a month, which are now expended in Ketchikan, Alaska and in Seattle.

But, while this is an attraction from the material side, which is not to be disregarded, still I see in the suggested change in the regulations something of larger and more national import, namely, the development of a fishery now dormant, whose possibilities for extension and profit are enormous, almost rivalling those of the canned salmon industry of this Coast. I refer to the trade in salt and pickled herring.

At the present time the American Middle West consumes annually thousands of barrels of pickled herring from Scotland and the European Continent. Actual tests have proven that we can produce as good an article on this Coast, while the supply of raw material is literally inexhaustible.

The only difficulty we would have to overcome is the fact that the herring fishery today has been so little disturbed that the shoals of herring include fishes of all sizes. For one of the herring suitable for pickling there are half a dozen measuring from four to eight inches, poor sized and thin. It is impossible to catch the one without the other in any economical method of fishing on a big scale. The smaller fish are only suitable for bait, while the other fish, which run from about six hundred to eight hundred to the barrel, are the perfect pickling kind. Today, unless a market is opened for the smaller herring, our herring salter must discard five-fifths of his catch, or, in other words, five-fifths of his catch is a total waste, and a total waste of a valuable product. A market for the small herring would be afforded by opening the sale of bait to American halibut vessels. These small fish could then be sold either fresh or frozen.

The main objection to the relaxation of the regulations now in force is made on a mistaken analogy between conditions on the Atlantic Coast and on the Pacific. Those who argue thus wrongly think that by making Prince Rupert a free port we would be relinquishing certain advantages possessed by our native-born fishermen due to our geographical position, in favor of competitors in the United States. The true fact is, however, we have not on this Coast, as on the Atlantic, two rival populations engaged in halibut fishing. Our halibut fishing industry is not large compared with that of the United States. For the past twenty years many efforts have been made by British Columbians to engage in this industry, but, while they have all found it comparatively easy to catch the fish, the great difficulty has arisen when they tried to market them. This difficulty has been attributed to the manipulation of the Eastern markets by American competitors, whose business ramifications cover the thickly populated States in the East, permitting them to supply all varieties of fish marketed, from the Atlantic fisheries, from the Great Lakes, as well as from the Pacific, and enabling them to undersell the small, independent halibut producer of British Columbia, or keep him out of the market altogether.

Then, there is the other fact that Canadians are not fish eaters. They are becoming more so every year, but the great market is in the United States, and this market