

A Salmon Troller Rides It Out

BY WOOD FREEMAN

President Trolling Vessel Owner's Association
1928

I don't think that I shall ever forget that day, although my memory may have become a bit waterlogged during the experience and since. It was late in October about seven years ago that I had the fastest ride that I have ever taken in a trolling boat, or for that matter in any boat, in the fourteen years that I have been fishing. But to begin at the beginning----

The *Seapp*, my 50-foot troller, and the *Umatilla* were running partners, and Saturday morning after having been in the Grays Harbor for about three days together with eleven lumber schooners, all of barbound, we decided to make it out over the Grays Harbor bar if possible.

The weather wasn't any too promising as the glass had been standing about 29.90 for the past 24 hours and it had been thick to the southeast for some time. About the same time that we started for the bar the other boats in the harbor did likewise including the eleven lumber schooners which were anchored just inside the harbor. However, long before we reached the inside whistler which marks the inward end of the channel over the bar, conditions outside became obvious and all the other fishing boats turned about and only the *Umatilla* and the lumber schooners remained with me.

As we entered the channel we saw the big combers smashing on the bar ahead and I soon heard a shrill whistle from the *Umatilla* and saw her signal that she had enough and was turning back. I would gladly have done the same had it been possible, for I must confess that it still make the shivers run to the tips of my toes when I see one of those breakers headed my way, but unfortunately the *Seapp* was pocketed in between two big lumber schooners, and hadn't seaway to turn, so out over the bar we went.

Once safely outside, I decided to make the best of it and I began fishing and took about thirty dollars worth of fish up to about 3 p. m., then as no other boats had ventured out later in the day and the weather didn't look good, I decided it was better to head for the Columbia River. The weather was gradually getting worse and I had hard going. I reached the Columbia about 9:30 p. m., but as it was very dark and stormy I did not wish to risk the bar so I anchored and waited for daylight. When morning came the weather was much worse than it had been the night before, and I saw that I was still about five miles north of the buoy at the north side of the river's mouth, with a heavy wind and sea against me.

I hove up at 7 a. m. and headed for the buoy, but after bucking it for four hours and not being able to make over three miles I became truly alarmed for fear that the pilot house would be swept away by the heavy seas. For the three hours past the barometer had moved a total of thirty points, falling off twenty points and going back up ten points, and then starting to go down again. I could see the

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clouds scudding over the trees at North Head, and the salt water was being blown in sheets like drifting snow. I have been told that North Head recorded 85 miles for that blow, but I have never gone there to verify the record.

I remembered something that an old whaling captain had told me about storms when I was but a very small boy, and that was when the sea get too rough, just turn about and go before it as slowly as possible. I thought it was about time to try that advice, so I put about and throttled my engine down to trolling speed. The seas were by this time very nasty. The wind was S. E. and the swell was S. W. and that contrived to make a straight and cross swell of mountainous peaks which persisted in piling up to enormous heights and falling over, one of the worst combinations I have ever been out in.

This was the same storm which old-timers will recall gave the *H. F. Alexander* such a terrific beating on her trip to California, and which caused a considerable amount of grief among the lumber schooners on the coast. As I recall it, one lost her rudder, one her deck load and one was wrecked. During this same storm – a day or two later – several seas broke entirely over the rock on which Tillamook light is situated and solid water hurtling up broke the glass in the light 133 ft. above the water.

I had plenty of troubles of my own too – I couldn't leave the wheel to get anything to eat, and as I hadn't eaten anything before I hove up I was good and hungry. I might add that the roughness of the sea only accentuated my appetite. Things were in one unholy mess in the cabin. Anything that wasn't securely fastened down was moving about like a bunch of herring in a seine.

I ran with it for a while, the sea growing higher and higher, and the boat in danger of broaching at any minute. I couldn't dodge all the combers, and finally one of those mountain peaks caught the *Seapp* on its crest just as it broke and threw her on her starboard beam. The tops of the masts as she went over were actually below the hull and in that position she slid down the slope for a hundred fathoms or more, but finally righted.

Possibly it was only a baptism of what she was to receive a little later, but at that time I did not believe that such a thing was possible. I actually threw a kettle in the galley that was on a bracket on the port side to a higher bracket on the starboard side, believe it or not.

It was 11 a. m. when I had put about and at 3 p. m. I was at the outside whistle buoy at Grays Harbor. With the aid of wind and sea and under trolling-speed throttling I had made the 40 nautical miles in 4 hours and my normal speed would have been about 5 knots. The tide was ebbing and I knew that the bar was breaking but I though that it would be better to take a chance on that short bar than to risk the night on that equally bad sea outside. The barometer had by this

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time fallen to 29.40 and was still falling, and though the wind had moderated slightly I knew from all the indications that things were going to get worse before long, so I made up my mind to chance it rather than stay outside. I can say now, however, that if I had it to do over again I would beat to sea and make my way northward rather than take such a hazard.

The channel at the time ran in a northeast by southwest direction and there was a spit on the northwest side of the channel where the breakers started to curl before they reached the channel.

You have no doubt seen the way a breaker will spill on a beach, how it will start to break in one spot and with what rapidity it will shoot along the beach. Well, I had just passed the outer black can buoy and the ebbing tide was pushing me hard over toward the N. W. spit when I felt the stern of *Seapp* raise for a break. I closed the throttle to slow the wheel down, an action which usually keeps her from broaching, but just as I did the *Seapp* suddenly went over on her port beam, and once again that day the masts were pointing downhill, with the hull higher than their tops. She lifted mightily, then like a Hawaiian surfboard, she raced forward, quartering with such increasing speed that I was violently held in the pilot seat, unable to rise, and there I remained for the remainder of my breath-taking ride. I recall glancing aft through the rear pilot house windows and seeing the breaker falling like Niagara on the *Seapp's* starboard quarter and then it dawned on me that I had been caught in the end curl of one of those fast moving breakers and the *Seapp* was doing the surfboard trick, only she was in the front of the breaker instead of behind it.

It was all over, I think, in less than a minute. I did not have a stop watch, and the way I felt then I don't think I should have used it if I had, but when the *Seapp* finally righted herself, I was abreast of the inside whistler just three quarters of a mile from where I started and still going. I reached for the throttle and the instant I gave my trusty Miller engine a little gas she nearly jumped out of her bed. I thought I had lost my wheel and that now I would be swept back over the bar again to sea. Cautiously I opened the throttle once more. This time the racing wasn't quite so violent. After a short while I tried it again and this time the faithful engine took firm hold. Then it came to me that the first time I tried it the speed of the boat riding the wave was so great that the wheel was spinning the engine even against the reduced compression.

Why am I alive to tell the story? Well, if the *Seapp* had been differently constructed and had she not had all her ballast well down in the bilge and had there not normally been two-thirds of her weight under water, I'll admit this might have been "In memoriam", instead of first person singular narrative. The *Seapp* has a ton and a half of engine, a ton and a half of concrete and a ton and a half of scrap iron and that coupled with the fact that she has about 11 inches of deadrise with a concave bilge makes her about as hard to turn over as a whistling buoy.

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I ran up to Hoquiam and when I came to harbor among the other boats they all wanted to know how in the name of creation I had been able to cross the bar in that storm. I said I would tell them all about it but that I first wanted something to eat as I hadn't had anything to eat all day. Andy on the *Friea* said I had done enough for one day and that he would cook me a huge beefsteak if I would come over on his boat and tell them what it was like to have such a close call and get by with it, and I can say that I don't think that I ever ate a better tasting steak than that was, but I don't know to this day if they believed all my story.