

Cut Anchor Line



by Donald Graves

- 1 Not many things irritated Uncle Nelson. He had no edges so to speak. Republican relatives might get a rise out of him and make him spit more emphatically. Cut anchor lines, however, brought more than spit.
- 2 Uncle Nelson ran a boat business renting boats he built himself. They were heavy and durable enough to withstand the ignorance of city people. He never lost a customer to the sea. Occasionally a good blow might come up from the southeast and the inexperienced fisherman couldn't buck the head wind with two men rowing. They'd pull the boat up on the west shore and walk their equipment across land and then tell Uncle Nelson how impossible the conditions were in the face of such a sea.
- 3 Uncle Nelson either waited for the wind to shift, or if he needed the boat sooner, sculled the skiff around the point against the head wind himself. That meant he'd place one oar in a small half-moon cut in the stern and propel the skiff straight into the head wind with the simple back and forth motion of one oar. It took me five years to learn how to scull a boat half the size when the water was flat calm.
- 4 On the planking above the bow of the boat and on signs posted around the boathouse, Uncle Nelson advertised what to do if a fisherman got his anchor stuck on the bottom. Experienced fisherman knew how to row in a circle in order to pull the anchor from different directions. This usually dislodged the anchor, which looked like a large grappling hook.
- 5 The anchors cost seven dollars each, which was big money in the 1940s. Boat rentals were a dollar fifty a day on weekdays and two dollars on weekends. Uncle Nelson purchased his anchors from an old, eighty-seven-year-old blacksmith friend, Mr. Spooner, in the center of Fairhaven. He was the only blacksmith left in the Fairhaven/New Bedford area. Uncle Nelson thought that "any day now that old man will keel over, and I'll be without anchors." Uncle Nelson was eighty-three himself.
- 6 If the anchors wouldn't budge from the bottom, the signs instructed the fishermen to throw out the rest of the anchor line, along with the buoy attached to the end of it. The buoys were painted gray and stamped with Uncle Nelson's initial HNW. When the fisherman returned without his anchor, he told Uncle Nelson where the buoy was located; when the weather calmed, and the buoy could be seen more easily, he sculled out and pulled the anchor himself.
- 7 Uncle Nelson could even forgive men who didn't understand the directions and failed to toss the buoy. They'd arrive at the boathouse and say, "We couldn't pull the anchor, so we cut the line." Usually, they arrived, line in hand, to show Uncle Nelson how much rope they'd saved. "I reached as far down into the water as I could, and then I cut the line,"

the man would report in an air of generosity. Uncle Nelson's response was a grunt and an "alright, put the line over there."

8 Several times each season some slicker from out of state told an outright lie. My brother and I worked for Uncle Nelson, collecting money, cleaning boats, and hauling them up with the old Buick for the night. We checked each boat when it came in to see that oars, anchor, and lines were all present when collecting the money. Most people told us when an anchor was lost, even the ones who errantly cut the line. The worst didn't and had to be taught Uncle Nelson style.

9 "Sir, there doesn't seem to be an anchor here."

10 "Oh that. Uh, the anchor line broke." The man pointed to the severed line, cut cleanly across, a straight end with no dangling fibers.

11 Uncle Nelson looked at the unblinking man who, unfortunately, may have made a habit of telling untruths. "Come with me, my boy," Uncle Nelson gestured with a long finger. "Come up here and I'll show you something."

12 At the top of the boat runway was a post with some old, used line Uncle Nelson kept for such moments. "Watch what I do and what happens." Uncle Nelson threw two half hitches around the post and another two half hitches around the bumper of the old Buick. While the man watched impatiently, wondering what the crazy old man had in mind, Uncle Nelson put the Buick in reverse. The line snapped instantly.

13 Uncle Nelson glided out of the seat and picked up the snapped line and brought it to the man. "You say your line broke. This line just broke off this post here. Now here is yours and here is the one that just snapped when I backed the car up. How are they different?" The man stood staring at the ground, not at the line, and said nothing.

14 "When a line snaps, there are two short and one long strand just like this one." Uncle Nelson then waved the cut line instructor-like and spoke directly at the man. "You cut yours with a knife... only way you can get a clean slice like the one you got. I've lost an anchor, but worse, you've lost your character. I won't be lied to and that'll cost you \$10.00, \$7.00 for the anchor and \$3.00 for the line. And I don't give a damn if you ever come back."

15 The man paid; they always did. Strangely, the ones who lied were usually well-to-do with fancy tackle boxes, poles, and clothes. They didn't think the old man at the shore could understand the ways of the sophisticated. Natives viewed Uncle Nelson differently. When they sensed one of those liars was in trouble with the old man, they'd just gather around and take in the drama.