SUSTENANCE: Walter Drinkwater works the same waters his grandfather, Jasper Drinkwater, fished more than 100 years ago.

STANDING BY TRADITION

Mainer Walter Drinkwater has been catching lobsters his way for half a century, and he's not about to change.

BY BRUCE HALABISKY

At daybreak Walter Drinkwater motors out of the harbor of Spruce Head, Maine, to his lobstering grounds surrounding Graffam Island. To port and starboard bigger boats with powerful diesels steam by to begin fishing. Drinkwater waves to each of them as they pass.

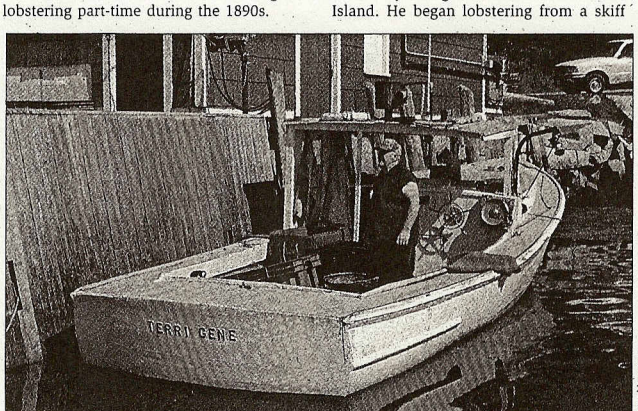
"Those big dogs will sink us," he says with a smile as a large wake slaps the side of the Terri Gene, his 32-foot wooden lobster boat. While under way he kicks off his beat-up tongueless tennis shoes and slips into a pair of brown rubber boots. The boat continues on a steady course as Drinkwater puts on a greasy yellow smock and ties it behind his back. When I offer to steer while he dresses Drinkwater chuckles. "Oh... no thanks, I been doing this by myself all my life."

As we approach Graffam Island, Drinkwater backs down the engine and pauses before beginning the job of hauling his traps. "My grandfather fished around this island as a boy," he says with a sweep of his arm. He squints to see if I've grasped the gravity of that statement. Just to be sure he adds, "'Course that was over a hundred years ago."

Drinkwater himself has been lobstering the waters around Graffam Island, a small chunk of land at the southern end of the Mussel Ridge chain, for more than 60 years. His grandfather, Jasper Drinkwater, was born in 1877 and began lobstering part-time during the 1890s.

Drinkwater is quick to point out that it's only been in his own lifetime that lobstering has been a large enough business to support a man full time.

Drinkwater, 72, was born in 1929 and raised by his grandfather on Graffam Island. He began lobstering from a skiff when he was 10 years old. By the time he was 12 he had acquired a double-end peapod and was fishing 40 or 50 traps during summer. By 18 he was at it full time with his own boat.



BRUCE HALABISKY

***WOODEN BOATS** like the Terri Gene are fast disappearing on the Maine coast. Walter Drinkwater had this cedar-on-oak boat built in 1964 and has fished her ever since.*

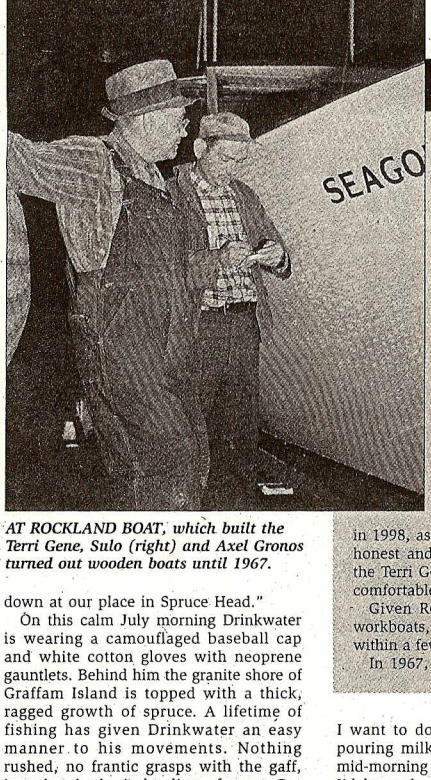
In 1964 he commissioned the construction of the Terri Gene at the Rockland Boat yard. He has lobstered without interruption for almost 60 years, 37 of them aboard the Terri Gene.

The Terri Gene slipped down the ways and into the harbor of Rockland, Maine, on the morning of July 2, 1964. As soon as the boat settled on her lines, the motor was fired up and Drinkwater took the Terri Gene to her mooring, down the coast in Spruce Head.

Thirty-seven years later, Drinkwater and the Terri Gene are still working the southern-most islands of the Mussel Ridge chain, about a two-hour drive north of Portland, Maine.

"People say I have an uncanny memory," he says, hauling a green wire lobster trap onto the Terri Gene's starboard gunwale. "The day Terri Gene was launched was a beautiful day, a little foggy in the morning but a beautiful day.

"I remember my wife christened her with a full magnum of wine. We held a launching party for the boat's builder



ROCKLAND BOAT ARCHIVES

AT ROCKLAND BOAT, which built the Terri Gene, Sulo (right) and Axel Gronos turned out wooden boats until 1967.

WOOD AT HEART AT ROCKLAND BOAT

Up until the mid-1960s, before the advent of the fiberglass hull, the coast of Maine was rich with hundreds of small yards producing custom wooden fishing boats. Although all but forgotten today, Rockland Boat had a reputation throughout Maine's mid-coast area for well constructed and easily driven, honestly priced lobster boats.

Axel Gronros, a Finnish immigrant, founded the yard in 1928. Born in 1876, he came to the United States as a 20-year-old in pursuit of his future wife, Aina. He set up a shop on the island of Vinalhaven, Maine, but came to Rockland when Aina swore she would not die on an island and demanded to be moved to the mainland.

Gronros was a capable designer and shipwright but he didn't enjoy the management of a small business. His son Sulo, who was good with numbers, took over the business side of Rockland Boat at the age of 16 and management of the entire operation when his father died.

Drinkwater remembers Sulo Gronros, who died in 1998, as a man who appeared gruff but who was extremely honest and kind. Drinkwater went to Rockland Boat to have the Terri Gene built because the yard was known to construct comfortable and durable boats.

Given Rockland Boat's long history of building wooden workboats, it is likely that no one at her launching realized that within a few years fiberglass boats would dominate the market.

In 1967, following a half-hearted attempt at fiberglass construction — Sulo burned two hulls he was so disgusted with them — Rockland Boat closed down and two generations of boatbuilding came to an end.

From 1928 until 1967, Rockland Boat turned out nearly 150 lobster boats between 22 and 44 feet long, of which only a handful remain today. Most were used in the Maine lobster fishery, but some were fitted out as pleasure boats and shipped to New York and Boston.

Today Rockland Boat exists as a marine supply store run by Axel Gronros' grandson Leni, who is in his mid-30s and has a ready smile. Wooden half-models line the walls along with framed photos of his father and some of the boats he built. Although not a boatbuilder himself, Leni Gronros lights up in his eyes as he talks about his father's and grandfather's trade.

"People in this area used to say that if you wanted your boat built right go see the Finnish builders," he says with pride.

He remembers his father had a reputation of being very fair to fishermen. He was also known as being extremely stubborn, a trait Leni Gronros feels still permeates the bloodline. "When I was a boy I wanted my father to teach me how to build boats," he says. "Unfortunately, he wouldn't teach me a thing. My father thought wooden boatbuilding was a dead profession."

Leni Gronros, his brother Teke and his sister Beth have recently bought back the last boat built by Rockland Boat — a 32-foot lobster boat launched on July 12, 1967, and originally named Three Sons.

The boat is now being restored and will be renamed Sisu, a Finnish word meaning "tenacity of purpose."

Leni Gronros prefers the more succinct definition of "stubborn."

— *B.H.*

down at our place in Spruce Head."

On this calm July morning Drinkwater is wearing a camouflaged baseball cap and white cotton gloves with neoprene gauntlets. Behind him the granite shore of Graffam Island is topped with a thick, ragged growth of spruce. A lifetime of fishing has given Drinkwater an easy manner to his movements. Nothing rushed, no frantic grasps with the gaff, just the rhythmic hauling of traps. Pot warp spews from the Hydroslave hauler onto his rubber boots as a trap breaks the surface. Drinkwater swings it aboard; his large body leans back, and he gives the trap a jerk with his beefy right forearm.

The deck of the Terri Gene is crowded with bins of herring, empty bait bags and the dregs of Penobscot Bay's bottom — urchins, crabs and slime. Off on the cabin's port side, crates of freshly caught lobsters are stacked like treasure. Today's price is $2.75 a pound.

Drinkwater has always fished alone. Although having a crew member might allow him to run more gear, the trade-off would be a loss of independence. "Not to knock people who have a stern man, but I want to do things my way," he says, pouring milk from a Thermos during a mid-morning break. "If I had a stern man I'd have the responsibility of making a living for him."

Drinkwater's son, Gene, and grandsons Blair and Westerly also lobster and have inherited Drinkwater's "lobstering privilege" to fish the waters around Graffam Island.

Gene's boat, the Miss Courtie, is off to the eastward, circling and backing, hauling traps. Blair and his brother have yet to appear this morning, although Drinkwater has already been out hauling for over an hour.

"You might be asking 'Where's Blair?'" Drinkwater says with a wink. "But you've got to remember he's got a more active nightlife than me." Blair is 19 years old and just graduated from Rockland High School. He skippers a 25-foot fiberglass boat named Maggie Gene, after his 4-year-old sister. His younger brother, Westerly, is his stern man. "Blair's got a lot to learn," says Drinkwater. "But he's got time to learn it."

Eventually Blair and Westerly come steaming out of Spruce Head harbor and begin hauling traps next to us. Blair is wearing green wraparound sunglasses; rock music blasts from the boat's console. "Pretty cool isn't he?" Drinkwater says slyly as we pass Maggie Gene's stern.

Aside from a VHF radio which he keeps turned off and an old wristwatch nailed to the cabin frame, Drinkwater carries no electronics aboard the Terri Gene. The Maine coast's frequent dense fog and the challenges of big tides and a rocky bottom have done nothing to change Drinkwater's opinion that radar, GPS — even running lights — are more trouble than they're worth.

Although Drinkwater may seem out of place fishing next to modern boats top-heavy with electronics, he is revered by younger fishermen. His reluctance to invest in fancy electronics and a high-speed boat is respected because his old methods still work. More important than any technological upgrade is Drinkwater's keen ability to find lobsters.

"Where else could you be in an industry that has gone all modern and still say what you want to say and do it your way," says Drinkwater reflecting on his reluctance to change.

During his career as a lobsterman, Drinkwater has seen a lot of new technology transform the industry. But the biggest difference, he says, is how lucrative the business has become in the last 10 years. In 1940, he points out, lobsters were selling for 24 cents a pound. Today's price is $2.75 a pound.

Maine lobstermen are landing more lobsters than ever for prices that justify the bells and whistles on the typical modern lobster boat. Things are as they were when Drinkwater started out. "It used to be if a bank up in Rockland saw a lobsterman coming they would lock the doors," he jokes. "Now they send out brochures to attract our business."

Still, his sense of history tempers these boom times with a feeling of caution. He worries about the trend of taking out large loans to buy trucks and boats. "If we had a bad season a lot of people would lose everything," he says.

Gene Drinkwater sometimes teases his father about hanging onto his old wooden boat. Drinkwater admits he could afford a new one, but at his age he doesn't think the investment would be worth it. "Besides," says Drinkwater, "that damn fiberglass feels like a piece of iron underneath you."

Such concessions to technology as Drinkwater has allowed — wire traps, polypropylene line and foam buoys — have made his job easier and allow him to haul more gear in a day. But he sees a down-side to increased productivity: "There's so many damn people in the business now and everyone is doing it for the dollar," he says. "No one goes for the sake of lobstering."

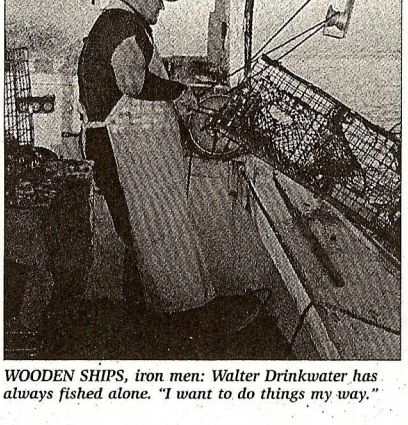
> "It used to be if a bank saw a lobsterman coming they would lock the doors. Now they send brochures to attract our business."
>
> —*Walter Drinkwater*
>
> SPRUCE HEAD, MAINE

Although lobstering has always been the focus of Drinkwater's life, his other passion (besides the music of the country-western yodeler Jimmy Rodgers) is baseball. Before the prevalence of television there was a proliferation of minor leagues in America. As a young man, Drinkwater played semi-professional ball in the Knox/Lincoln County Twilight League. "I actually had fans that came to my games to see me play," says Drinkwater in a rare show of self-promotion.

After landing 153 pounds of lobster — this is just a short "fun" day — he takes the Terri Gene back to the Spruce Head bait dock. "This is the original bronze wheel," he says, spinning the helm over to come alongside the dock. "Thirty-seven years old and she still polishes up real nice."

Does he ever think about retiring? "I won't quit unless my health forces me to," he answers. "What the hell else would I do? I've been doing this since I was a little boy.

"Way down deep it's a way of life." NF



BRUCE HALABISKY

WOODEN SHIPS, iron men: Walter Drinkwater has always fished alone. "I want to do things my way."