

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

A JOB, A LIFESTYLE AND A REFUGE IN TOUGH TIMES



Lake Macquarie from Rocky Point looking east towards Pulbah Island and to the left Swansea c1955

This section of the book on the Wynn family deals with the most important profession carried out by the Wynns. The importance of fishing to the Wynns can be measured by the number of family members that have worked as fishermen as well as the contribution it has made in keeping the family supplied with the essentials of life in some very difficult times. The following descriptions are not intended to cover all the story of Fishing on Lake Macquarie just the parts that involve the Wynn family members. There is of course a long list of other people both living and dead who have been involved in fishing either part time or as long term professionals. Where possible I have mentioned these. The two main families in the Dora Creek area since the very early days of fishing are the Wynns and the Parkers. This generated a degree of competition between individuals at times as they worked the same Lake for the same fish resources. To my knowledge this has never gone

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

beyond a healthy rivalry. To the credit of all the fishermen, past and present, Lake Macquarie remains to this day a beautiful place in which to spend a day or a lifetime fishing.

HISTORY

The earliest known date for the Wynn family to be involved in fishing was around 1910. Thomas and Annie Wynn moved out to Gradwells Rd, Dora Creek in 1906. They had a family of mostly boys from 14 years old to just an infant. Thomas and his two oldest sons (Will and Thomas) were miners from the coal mines at Newcastle and the others were still at school. Thomas came from a family of coal miners in England, including his father John. Thomas had seen enough of the mines to know that he did not want his sons to live that life. He was also concerned with his sons developing bad habits in the pubs of Newcastle and decided country life would be a better lifestyle.

The first couple of years was a struggle to clear the ground and build a house, fence a yard and just keep up with installments on the loan. To do this Thomas, Will and son Thomas worked at the Pelaw Main Colliery during the week while working on the house and land at the weekend. They walked and later rode pushbikes to and from work the 18-20 miles once each week.



Dora Creek where it enters Lake Macquarie, Lake Eraring (Muddy Lake) to the left and Myuna Bay beyond Rocky Point, Bonnells Bay and Hungary Point to the right

Once he realized what fishing might be able to do for the family he sent Richard to work fishing. Presumably this was by working for the Parkers or someone else already doing fishing at Dora Creek. Richard was to learn how to fish so they could then take it up

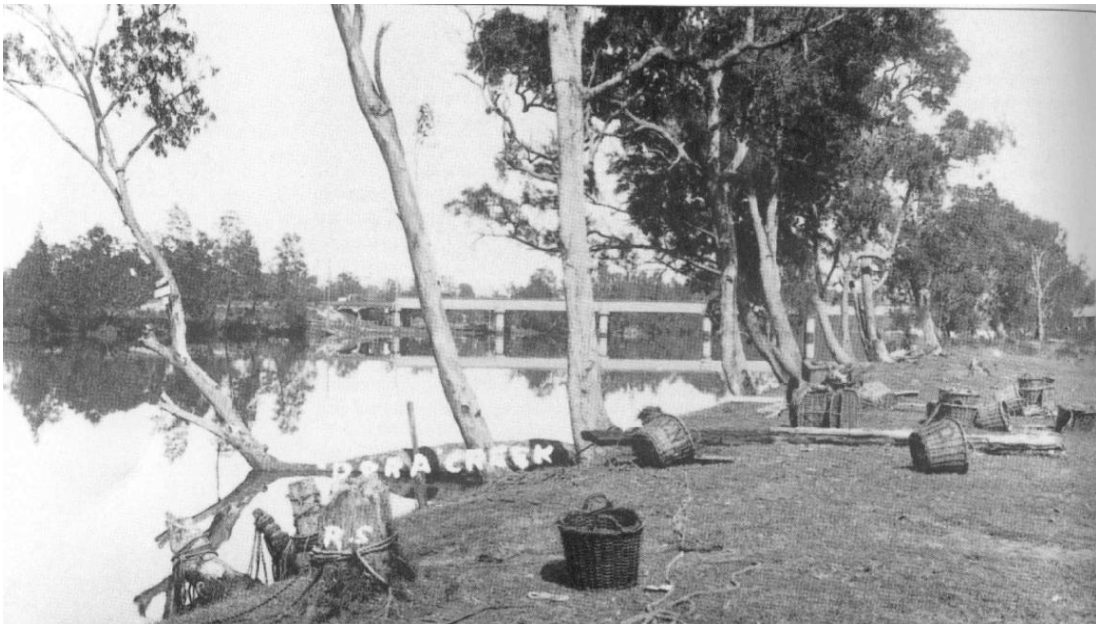
FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

themselves. Even in those days the lot of a fisherman was erratic with prices and catch sizes making it difficult.



A fishing crew on Dora Creek c1910

After a number of attempts by Thomas, Will, Thomas and Richard they obtained two boats and the necessary nets, ropes and equipment to be fishermen in their own right. The crew for fishing in those days was at least four and in the earliest recollections of family members Annie was regularly part of the crew. As the younger sons became old enough Annie no longer went fishing but did all the work at the house and looked after the younger children. The earliest form of fishing was very tough physical work. The boats were relatively heavy

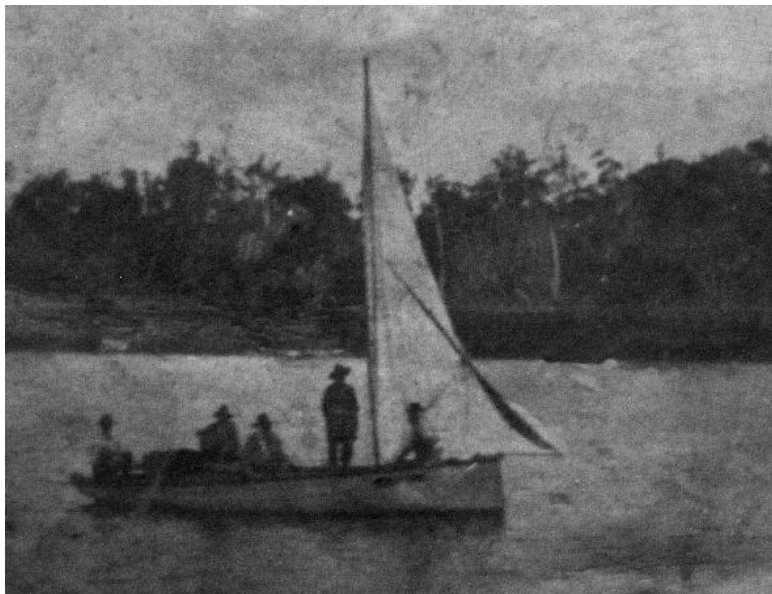


Fishing baskets lie around on the creek bank waiting for the crew's return – east of railway bridge on Dora Creek c1910

timber boats loaded down with nets or fish. They had to be rowed or sailed to and from the

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

fishing spots. If the wind was not favourable then a two man crew had to row the boats



Fishing boat under sail Dora Creek c1914

backwards and forwards from Dora Creek. Large sweeps (oars), one per man, were used to propel the boats along. These were generally hand made from large poles with blades fitted. Most equipment was hand made.

The very nature of fishing was controlled by the speeds and distances possible using sail and oar power. Usually a single dig would take four to six days to complete. The crew would pull the then cotton nets onto the boats from the drying racks. These were very large nets as they had to justify the

travel effort with a catch that would pay them a weeks wage. They had to set a large net area to do this. Then, with enough provisions for several days, they would sail or row to the location of the planned dig. The two boats would then join the centre of the net to make the net in the two boats one long net and mark it with floats. The two boats would then be rowed in a long arc feeding the net over the stern. Once the end of the net had been fed off the rope connected to the end of the net was fed off as they took the boats to the shore. Once at the shore the long task of winching the rope back in began. Hand winches were



Reg Wynn with a load of fish to be packed and shipped to market c1928

used to wind the rope in. Depending on the weight in the net one or two men would operate the hand winch. Both boat crews would be winching their end of the rope. As the diameter of the net reduced the site of the winching was moved closer together. When the net itself

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

was reached a dinghy was used to take a rope further out along the net to keep pulling in the centre of the net. When the centre of the net was approaching the shore large numbers of fish would be concentrated. A proportion of these fish would then be thrown into a dinghy so that they could be delivered to the markets. To do this someone would have to row the catch back to Dora Creek to pack and deliver the fish to the railway. That person would then have to return to the crew with fresh provisions to continue the dig. It could take two or three trips to return the catch.



Allan (Casey) Wynn and Gus Williams c1948 using a two handed winch to haul net. Note winch lashed to tree. Serious injuries from the steel handles were common if they were released, allowing them to spin backwards at great speed.

Once the last of the catch had been made then the nets were picked back up onto the main boats and the crew returned to Dora Creek. Here the nets would have to be taken off the boats onto the net racks to be dried, cleaned and patched. About every three weeks they would also have to be re-tanned. By the time all of this has been done a break of a day or so and they would return to do it all again. Marine engines to run the boats were first installed in 1919. This made a big difference to the life of the fishermen. The uncertainty of the prevailing winds and the alternative hard labour of rowing the boats around the Lake was eliminated. This made it possible to economically do more frequent but smaller digs. This reduced the need for the larger nets.

The use of so called deep nets was eventually banned by the Fisheries Department and this further changed the daily routine of the fishermen. Deep nets were very tall nets which had a lead line that was on the bottom and a cork line that was always at the surface. The net was tall enough to reach from top to bottom anywhere in the lake. The nets effectively caught anything that was surrounded by the net when it was first cast. This included many surface fish and sharks.

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

The marine engines to drive the fishing boats were not adapted to include winching until just after World War II. The winches were available prior to WWII but the fishermen did not install them because of the likely rationing of petrol. After the power winching became



The fish are pulled out of the nets by hand and thrown into a dinghy to be sorted on the way back to Dora Creek for icing and boxing for transport to market



The net is hand hauled to concentrate the fish into a small pocket in shallow water.

available significant changes to the fisherman's life came into effect. The main need for hard labour was eliminated. While the life of a fisherman on Lake Macquarie is still not an easy one it did make it possible for them to be productive well into their 70's and 80's. Several of the Wynn's have and still do work as professional fishermen. At this time Bill Wynn and Clarrie Wynn continue to occasionally fish the Lake.

The major changes to professional fishing within the timeframe of the Wynn family were :-

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

- Introduction of marine engines to replace sails and oars (1919)
- Replacement of cotton nets with synthetic nets not requiring tanning (c1948)
- Introduction of power winches eliminating hand winching (c1946)
- Banning of deep nets and regulation of net types (c1940)



Wynn family fishing c1929 L to R Rusty Martin, Tom Wynn Jnr, Fred Wynn ?, Hilda Wynn, Gwen Wynn, Vene ?, Reg Wynn, 2 children, Tom Wynn Snr, George Wynn, Ken Wynn, Wagga Roberts

Digs

In Lake Macquarie only the southern part of the lake is legally allowed to be fished by professional net fishermen. This is the section south of a line drawn from Wangi Wangi Point to Swansea. All the area north of that line was accessible to recreational fishermen using hand lines. The shoreline for all this southern portion of the lake has been given discrete names by the fishermen over the years to describe where it was that they were fishing. These names appear to have been used by all the professional fishermen not just the ones associated with the Wynn family. These location names are referred to as “digs”. I’m not sure where the name “dig” comes from but it would seem likely that it is either an association to farming in that they had to dig for their food or perhaps to the same concept from coal mining in that they had to dig for a living.

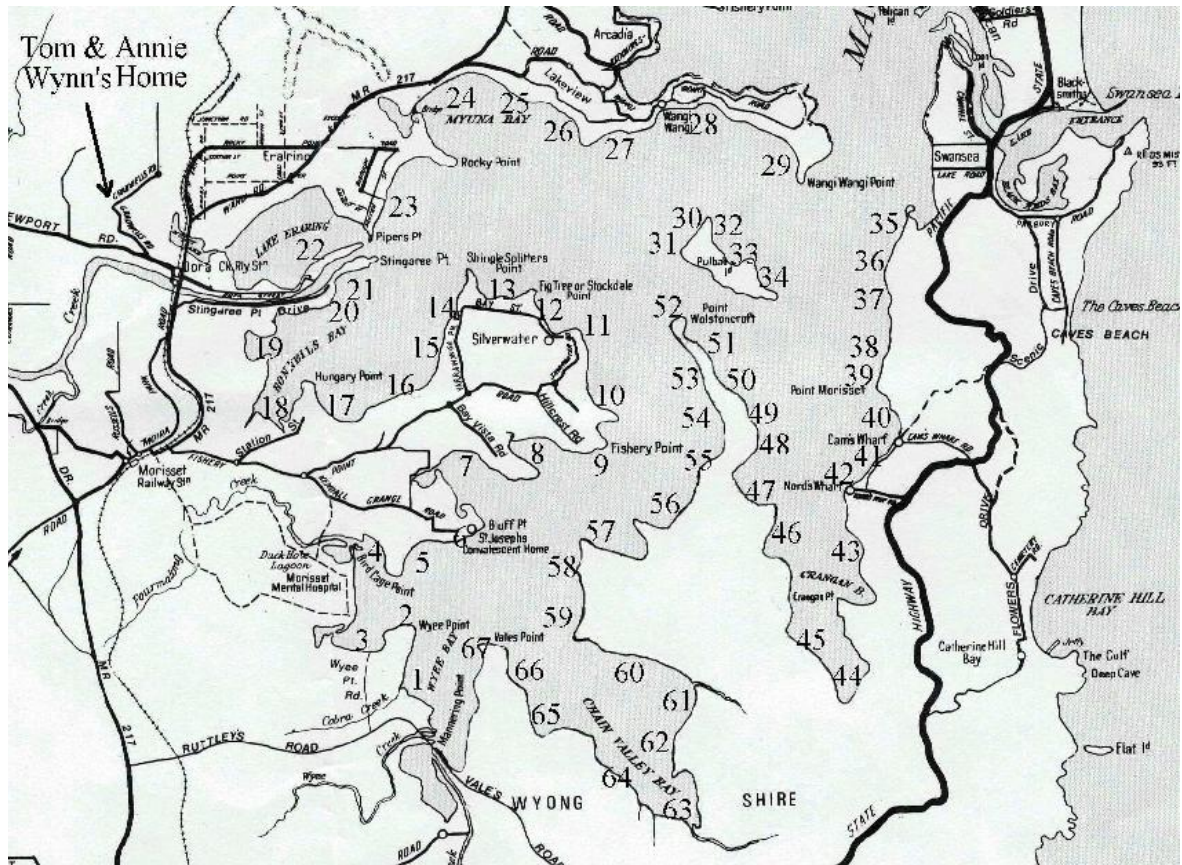
The names listed below correspond to the numbers on the map of Lake Macquarie and are still the commonly used names today. Many of the names originate from landmarks at the spot some of which no longer exist.

1	Quince tree	25	Coal box	49	Bullocks Arse
2	Wyee Point	26	Awkward	50	The Wheel
3	Wyee Bay	27	Gravelly	51	Deep Hole
4	Duckhole	28	Sandy	52	Little Wangi
5	Gravelly	29	Crabby	53	Blackfish or Greasy

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

6	Bailey's bluff	30	Flat end	54	Black woman's
7	Bardens	31	Jim's dig	55	Fitness Camp or Soldiers Corner
8	Sugar Bay	32	Log Wharf	56	Shell Bay
9	Hansens	33	House dig	57	Wallaby
10	Sunshine	34	Deep end	58	Jim's Dig up the lake
11	Johnnies mistake	35	Stoneys	59	Black Neds
12	Wire Fence	36	The Flat	60	Seventy One
13	Farm or Shingle Splitter	37	Slippery	61	Dirty Corner or the Biver
14	Boat Shed	38	Pit dig	62	Frying Pan
15	Rocky	39	Chinamens	63	Head Valley
16	Dark Corner	40	Cams Wharf	64	Foal Point or Swindlehurst
17	Smiths	41	Blueberry Point	65	Foal Bay
18	Bonnells	42	Nords Wharf	66	Charcoal Burner
19	Denny's hole	43	Browns Bay	67	Garth's
20	Goat Island	44	Head Crangan		
21	Roberts	45	Stranger		
22	Muddy lake	46	Dirty bay		
23	Pipe clay	47	Diamond Drill		
24	Pantaloon or Myuna Bay	48	Bullocks Head		

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE



The "Digs" used by professional fishermen on Lake Macquarie

EQUIPMENT

Boats

The current design of the fishing boats has changed little since at least the days of sail powered fishing boats on Lake Macquarie. Even before the advent of engines for the fishing boats the style of boat was thought to be very similar. The main difference between the



George Wynn and Don Wynn returning to Dora Creek after a days fishing

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

sailing boats was that they did not have the cabin over what is now the engine area. Up until about 1919 all fishing on Lake Macquarie involved un-powered boats. The traveling to and from the site of the dig was done under sail or using large oars or sweeps. This was slow and forced the style of fishing to conform to the needs of travel.

The boat design was a wide, low shape with a shallow draft. Originally made entirely of timber this has more recently given way to timber with coatings of fibreglass. Aluminium boats have not been used other than as dinghies as the balance of the boat would be too easy to upset with heavy nets and uneven winching. The gunwales are usually topped with a wide board to allow easy entry/exit by sitting on the edge. Rollicks are still provided but the long sweeps originally used by a two man rowing crew are not needed.

The cabin is usually coated in pitch and canvas to waterproof the inside. This was originally done to provide shelter for overnight stays but later helped to keep the engine area dry.

Windows into the cabin area were rarely provided as it was only occupied at night or when starting the engine. The engine housed in the cabin is usually a slow revving marine petrol engine. Diesels are rare and while some converted car engines have been used these tend to cause too many service and life problems and are avoided. Single cylinder engines typically are more reliable and easier to start. Most of these engines have large flywheels and require cranking to start. Since these have relatively high compression they take some skill in starting. Injuries from cranking these engines were common until more modern engines became easier to start.



Manning Park Fishermans Coop packing a catch of mullet – Bill Wynn 2nd from right

The propeller shaft is usually covered by an inverted timber channel which can be quickly removed when required. The stern half of the floor of the boat is covered with a timber floor in sections that can be lifted up for cleaning. The net is stored on this area when not in use. At the stern of the boat a roller is provided to allow the net to run over as it is being fed off the boat. This allows it to clear the rudder. Most of the older boats had a simple wooden

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

rudder which had a timber tiller attached. This tiller was usually operated by a pair of ropes from the front of the boat with the driver either sitting on the edge of the cabin or standing immediately behind the cabin.

Maintenance work on the boats was not a big item as the boats were heavily built.

Occasional removal from the water to scrape down marine growth is the main item. A repaint with anti-fouling paint and it was put back in the water. Most of these boats last for many, many years.

Each of the boats were named and these names included :- Green Bottle, Pharlap, Lavinia and Ethel. Lavinia was bought from a man at Lake Munmorah and had to be pulled overland between the lakes by a bullock team to avoid taking it out to sea. The Lavinia was the only boat ever lost. See story below.



Lake fishermen occasionally fished the ocean beaches – seen here at Blacksmiths Beach are W Wynn, W Kent, Mitchell ?, C Lindsay, Coultar, F Thomas and P Bridge.

Winches

Once the nets have been laid the main job is to pull the nets back in to shore. The nets is laid in an arc by the boat and a trailing rope attached to each end of the net. This rope is then taken to the shore and the net pulled in using this rope. Once the end of the net is reached then a boat is taken out along the line of marker buoys to attach the rope to the net itself further out. This is called tying on a fleet or “fleeting”. This rope is then pulled in by the winchers and this process is continued until only the centre of the net is left. The last hauling is down by hand to pull the net into a tight circle close to shore where the fish can be removed by hand directly into a dinghy.

The main part of the fishing operation then involves pulling the net back into shore. The earliest net fishing was done by hand where the rope was pulled in by hand. A hand powered winch was used for many years. It is not known when hand winching replaced hand hauling.

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

The hand winch was made up of three main components and was largely hand made. The handle and shaft were hand forged by blacksmiths and were a key part of the winch. A winch barrel was made of timber in a concave shape that forced the rope to keep slipping into the middle as it was drawn around the barrel. The legs of the winch were usually timber posts or rails. See photo.

The timber barrel was difficult to make as it had to be very solid with the iron shaft going through its centre. The shaft had to be keyed to the barrel with a square shape so that it could not slip. These winches carried very high loads and it was very important that the barrel did not rotate on the shaft. To make a barrel a hole was first bored through the hardwood timber. Then a square bar with a sharpened point was heated until it was red hot and it was rammed into the hole. This process was repeated many times until the bar produced a square hole in the barrel. This square hole then fitted neatly the iron shaft that passed through the barrel. The iron shaft then supported the two legs and at the end of the shaft was the winching handle. The handle when rotated would turn the barrel. The diameter of the winch barrel and the length of the handles were changed to suit different winching conditions.



A 1930's photo showing types of fish caught – flathead, bream, crabs and a shovel-nosed shark or ray on the right

The winch shaft had an iron loop attached to it which was used to tie the whole winch to a tree on the shore. The two legs of the winch then propped the winch up once the load was applied. The rope attached to the net would be wound around the winch barrel for several turns. Winding the handle would then pull the rope towards the shore. The turns on the rope would prevent the rope from slipping back. Water from the incoming rope would usually be enough to lubricate the winch barrel but under heavy winching loads extra water would sometimes be needed.

This form of hand winching was used up until just after World War II when it was quickly replaced by power winches connected to the motors in the fishing boats. Hand winching was extremely hard labour. It was common to use two man teams to winch each end of the net. This meant a minimum of four men on the job and usually extra men were required to take the rope out to the net in the dinghy as well as rest the men winching. The work involved rose rapidly if there was extra weight in the net caused by seaweed, blubber (jellyfish) or

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

snags. These could cause it to be impossible to winch in the nets and the fishermen might have to go out to the nets to try and clear some or all of the extra weight. In any event it made fishing up to the late 1940's a very labour intensive occupation.



Typical boat winch with rope coiler

Hand winching was also quite dangerous and many accidents are remembered by fishermen of the times. The problem was that there was a direct drive between the winch handle and the rope. If the rope was under great strain and the winch handle was released for any reason it would spin at high speed as the rope pulled the barrel backwards. The handle was usually made of forged iron about three quarters of an inch in diameter. There was no clutch or any way of stopping it. Many serious injuries were caused by being hit by the winch handle. As a two man operation it required a degree of coordination between the two men to take the load in the correct part of the stroke. If they got out of tune when one man eased up on his pushing before the other took the load the winch could begin to go backwards too fast for the man to hold it.

Just prior to World War II power winches became available. These were not installed during the war as it was thought that the fishermen would not be allowed enough petrol in their ration to run the boat engines that powered them. After the war the first powered winches were fitted.

To run a winch off the boat engine the main propeller shaft had to have a join in it that could be disconnected while winching was underway. A drive belt was then connected to the driven part of the propeller shaft which then drove a capstan sitting on the gunwale of the boat. The capstan was originally joined with a chain drive to a pair of rope outfeed rollers but this proved to be too dangerous and the drive was changed to vee belts. The capstan was again a simple wooden roller with the outfeed rollers being wood with rubber strips to position the rope. See photo.

Winch capstan powered from the boat's engine with the propeller shaft disconnected. A further refinement was the set of rope pullers which enabled hands free operation. The rope curled up into a pile in the floor of the boat without continual assistance.

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

The introduction of power winches dramatically changed to nature of net fishing. It was now possible for a crew as small as two men to do the work previously done by four or five men. The difficulty of the work was dramatically reduced. This system of work has remained since that time and to this day it is possible for fishermen in there 70's and 80's to work the lake as fishermen without serious physical strength limitations.

Nets

The earliest nets that were used were made of cotton. These were bought from agents but were imported from either England or Japan. The were bought in bundles of 50 yards. These were then joined to make the length required. The net had to be tanned before use to increase their life. The cotton would rot very quickly if not treated. The process of tarring put a hard surface on the cotton but it had to be renewed regularly, usually every three weeks depending on use. The fish rubbing on the nets during the catch would take off some of the tar coating and allow the water into the cotton.

To prepare the new net it was boiled in a large copper tank filled with salt water and ironbark chips. Tarring nets was a major undertaking requiring large quantities of firewood to keep the boiler going and a regular supply of fresh ironbark. The nets were fed into the tank and boiled for several hours before being pulled out through a ringer to remove the bulk of the water. It was then spread out on the net racks to dry in the sun. The ringer was made from a washing machine ringer that was in common use in those days. The net racks were made from timber rails cut directly from local trees secured to short upright timber posts. Two rails made up a rack and were positioned about 8-10 feet apart so that the net was suspended horizontally with the edges hanging over each rail.



A tanning pot used to coat cotton nets with tannins from boiled ironbark so that they would not rot

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE



c1928 Tom Wynn (2nd) at the net racks adjacent to his house block on Dora Creek – dinghy positioned to take nets off the net racks on the bank. Tanning pot in the foreground.

The racks were positioned next to the creek bank and 90 degrees to the creek. This allowed the net to be pulled off a boat over a rail and onto the net rack by two men. Each man would haul either the cork line or the lead line and hang it over the rails spreading the net as they went. This drying had to be done very often as continued exposure to water would rot the net quickly and it was one of the main costs in the fishing business. The useful life of a section of net was between 9 and 18 months.

Synthetic materials for nets made a big change to the work load of fishermen. Nylon is the most common material used and has very few of the life problems of cotton. It is much stronger and could catch large fish such as sharks where cotton nets would be easily ripped and the fish escape. The need for drying was largely removed although nets still have to be laid out sometimes to check for damage and make repairs. Also some forms of weed from the lake is best removed by allowing to dry and shaking out. The main precaution for use of nylon nets is that they are damaged by



Bill Wynn at Mannering Park Coop c1990 repairing nets by hand with twine needle

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

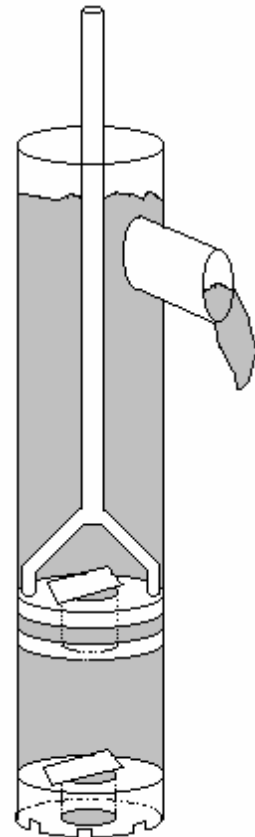
sunlight. Nets in the back of the boat when not in use must be covered to protect them from ultraviolet from the sun.

The nets had two ropes attached along the length of the net, one at the top to hold the corks and one along the bottom to hold the lead. Corks and leads were bought separately and fitted to the net sections as they were replaced. Originally corks were made from true tree bark cork but these were eventually replaced by synthetic floats. The net shapes were copied from the designs from the net suppliers. The main net type used today is a Diving net which is only 7 foot high while early on Deep nets were used which were up to 23 feet high. For specialised fishing “beakie” nets (1 1/4" mesh) or prawn nets were used. Mash nets were different again and are now legal again. Cotton nets were 3 1/4" - 4" mesh made from 12 ply twine while mash nets were of the same mesh size but of finer 9 ply twine to reduce their visibility. The size of the net openings were controlled by regulations from the Fisheries Department and the type of fish being caught. In the days of cotton nets a lot of time was spent repairing nets and putting in new sections. This was usually done by stretching the net out between two poles and holding it up in the air so it could be worked at in a standing position. The old style clothes line strung between two cross arms on poles was commonly used for this repair work. A yarn “needle” was then used to patch holes and reform the mesh or connect up new sections of net. Old sections of net had to have the rope, corks and leads recovered for re-use.

Pumps

The boats in use for fishing are all open to the sky and catch all rainfall. In addition the nets would drag large amounts of water into the boat every time they were brought aboard. So right from the start removing water from the boat was a regular essential part of the workload. The original design of pump is still in use today and is very effective in removing large amounts of water with a minimum of effort. More modern pumps and in particular 12v electric pumps have not totally superseded the hand pump mainly due to the problems caused by fish, weed, net material and many other bits of rubbish that find themselves into the bilges of the boats. The electric pumps are prone to burning out as a result of overloads from clogging.

The original pump was entirely hand made but over time some of the components can now be obtained in more durable materials. The pump is made up of two main parts. The body of the pump is a tube about four feet long and about five inches in diameter. It is open at the top with an opening the side about a foot down from the top. This usually had a short spout on it to help direct the outgoing water away from the pump. A chute or tube could be attached to the spout to direct the water over the side of the boat. At the base of the pump body was a timber plug sealing the end of the tube. The timber plug was usually hand carved and secured to the pump body with straps and or nails. The underside of the plug had slots cut into it so that even if it sat down directly onto a flat surface the water being sucked in could be drawn into the underside of the plug. This also ensured the pump would suck down to the very bottom of the bilge. It also helped filter out some of the larger pieces of rubbish in the bilge. The timber plug had a hole in the middle and on the top of the plug (inside the pump body) it had a rubber flap nailed into the wood. The flap could lift upwards to allow the water to be sucked in but could not move downwards past the hole.



Schematic of hand pump

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

The second part of the pump was the piston. This was usually made from wood again. The handle was about six feet long. It was usually made from a forked stick so that the fork could be used to attach the piston but leave a gap in the middle for the second pump valve. A second wooden plug was then attached to the forked handle. The plug was smaller in diameter than the body tube and strips of rubber were wound around the plug and nailed in place to effect a seal on the pump tube. Vee belt rubber was commonly used. Hand carving of the timber plug was used to get the right sizes and sometimes to recess the rubber seal strips. The plug also had a hole through the middle with a flap on the top. This flap allowed the water to pass through the hole as the piston was pushed downwards but closed and allowed the water to be pulled upwards as the piston was pulled up. The flap in the body tube allowed water to be drawn into the pump as the piston was pulled up but sealed it from going back out as the piston was pushed downwards.



Another generation of Wynn descendants is shown the pleasure of hand pumping bilge water. Neville Mitchell shows grandson Allan how it works

THE PROFESSION

A large number of the Wynn family have made fishing a profession for at least a part of their working lives. Some have worked as fisherman for 45 years or so. Others have worked at the job with or for other family members on several occasions as circumstances changed. It has been necessary to have a licence issued by the Department of Fisheries to operate as a professional fisherman on Lake Macquarie for many years. These licences are restricted and they are likely to be phased out over a period of time as community attitudes to the harvesting of the fish resources change.

In the years from around 1906 when the Wynn family first became involved in fishing almost every male member of the family for the next two generations has spent some time working on the lake. About half of them have spent between 10 and 20 years fishing the lake. Bill Wynn and Clarrie Wynn have spent over fifty years each fishing. For the Wynn's who spent a large part of their life working the lake it has been shown to be a rewarding experience. As a business it has its significant ups and downs but it has been able to sustain whole families.

The biggest influence of fishing however has been its ability to sustain a large part of the family in the tough economic times such as the depression of the thirties when no work was available. Fishing was a tough business to make money in as were most other businesses but it would at least allow the families to survive by their own efforts. As you read the descriptive histories of the children and grandchildren of Thomas Wynn you will see over and over again where because of various situations or lack of work a family would return to Dora Creek and go fishing. They would get themselves on their feet and then move on to try something else.

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

The commercial fish species caught are :- mullet, bream, Tarwine, leatherjacket, flathead, whiting, squid, blackfish, crabs, prawns, jewfish, flounder, beakies and tailor. Other species seen regularly in the lake but not caught in commercial quantities or having a commercial use include :- stingrays, toads or porcupines, catfish, eels, shovelnose sharks, trumpeter, silver biddies, garfish and Old Maids.

The lifestyle and anecdotes on fishing.

A rugged, physical outdoor life exposed to sun, wind, rain and seawater is the lot of the fisherman. This is just as true here as anywhere in the world. The dangers of life at sea in oceangoing fishing fleets are not present on Lake Macquarie but most of the other elements are there. Very few worked for wages on the Lake but were paid a portion of the catch or a small wage plus part of the catch. They were all self motivated but at the same time lived and worked at a pace set by themselves.



Phil Wynn c1975 with a crew supplemented by volunteers at Wangi. Family or locals at the dig regularly helped out.

Most of the fishermen could easily be described as weather-beaten but few that I know of had problems in later life with skin cancers from the exposure. The salt from the water spray drying on the skin and not being able to be washed off for days at a time caused a burn like effect on the skin which was worsened by the sun. Some had problems with eyes having watched the glare off water for many years but most did not seem to need glasses.

Overweight fishermen are almost unknown either from the physical work and activity involved or from the diet that seems to go with the daily life. Drinking and smoking seem to be the main areas where fishermen develop consistent habits. Long hours working alone on the boat makes smoking a habit hard to break once started. Drinking is also common but very rarely is this done on the job as the risk to everyone involved are not tolerated.

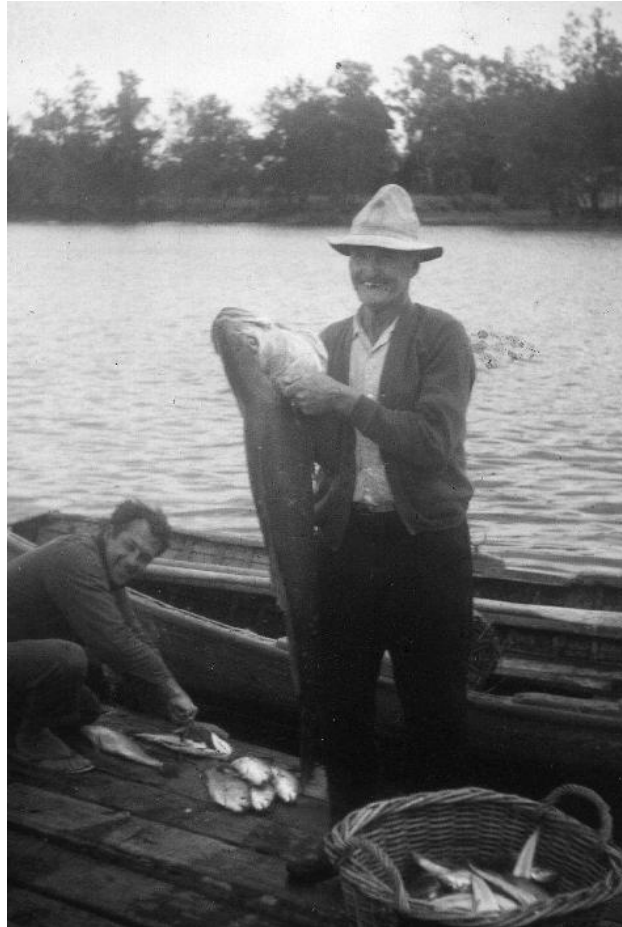
The only known death in the Wynn family attributed to the Lake was Will (John) Wynn who drowned in December 1947. He slipped while boarding his boat at night to return home from Morisset across the Lake to Mannering Park.

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

A typical day in the life of a fisherman these days involves a breakfast start at around 3am-4am. Most live close to the Lake or on the Lake shore and therefore do not spend much time getting to work. Travel to the area of the dig varies from half hour upwards and the casting of the net is usually done close to dawn. Winching the net in takes several hours and the position of the boat has to be shifted a number of times. Once the net has been reached a dinghy is used to take the rope further out on the net and continue to pull the centre in. At the last the net is pulled in by hand from the shore until only a small pocket of net holds all the fish. This pocket is pulled up alongside a dinghy and the fish are taken out of the water by hand in water about thigh deep.

Once all the fish have been put into the dinghy the nets and ropes are recovered onto the main boats and the fishermen can return home. The fish are sorted and depending on the type of fish may also be cleaned. They are then placed in 60lb boxes and packed with ice. Ice has always been used for this purpose and sometimes came mixed with sawdust to help insulate it and make it last longer. These are then delivered to the railway and taken directly to the fish markets either in Sydney or Newcastle. The crew only have to do minor day to day clean up and maintenance before they go home in the early afternoon. Tomorrow they will do it all over again.

Accidents and injuries have been a constant part of fishing. Cuts from sharp stones, sticks, oyster shell, fish bones are always a risk. Most of the men have received cuts at one stage or another. Serious injuries present a problem in that travel to get medical help can be slow. Bill Wynn had his arm broken in three places as a result of his jumper getting caught in the rope winch. This put him off work for some time. A girl also had her scalp peeled off by the rope winch when her hair got caught. Allan (Casey) Wynn received some nasty head cuts from being hit several times by the handle of a hand winch spinning out of control. Gunner Fitzsimmons is another that would remember the hazard in using hand winches. Cuts or stab wounds from the fish is also common. The worst cases involved spines from stingrays, puffer fish or toads and fish like Old Maids or flathead can deliver nasty wounds. Stonefish have been seen in the Lake but no-one seems to have trodden on one. A lot of these wounds take a long time to heal and are continually re-opened by the sun and water.



George Wynn holds a large Jewfish caught in the lake while Phil Wynn cleans fish for dinner

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

Sea lice and jellyfish stingers are another annoying fact of life from time to time in the lake. When conditions are right large amounts of these are in the water and cannot be avoided by the fishermen as they go about their job. Skin rashes and inflammation can be painful but have to be put up with. The blubber would dry on the nets and form a powder which gets into the eyes and caused nasty irritation.

Another hazard in the earlier days but still potentially present today are sharks. When deep nets were used sharks were commonly encountered. The early cotton nets could not hold them and they caused significant damage to the nets if the got caught up in the shallow water. The shallower nets and the use of nylon now reduce the risk of catching sharks in the nets and the nets are strong enough to handle all but the largest sharks. When they are caught the fishermen do everything they can to free the sharks and let them pass over the net back to the lake. If this does not work there are only two alternatives. Rifles have been used to try to shoot the sharks but rifles are rarely carried. The alternative used on a number of occasions remembered by current Wynns was to get into the thigh deep water inside the net where the shark was encircled or trapped by the net and stun the shark with a blow with the back of an axe to the area between the eyes. This is as dangerous as it sounds. Sharks up to about twelve feet have been caught in the lake. Several sharks have been caught at a time. In addition sharks have been regularly sighted both in the lake and in Dora Creek. Mostly they appear to follow schooling fish such as mullet and have been seen to chase these fish into water so shallow that the shark can no longer swim.

Despite a few close calls only one boat was ever written off by the Dora Creek Wynns. It was the middle of winter and the lake was full of slime. After hauling the net in on Gravelly beach at Wangi it was decided about 8pm to go home. It was pitch black. The boats were hooked together end to end. "Greenbottle" in front driven by Allan Wynn and Reg Fitzsimmons, then "Ethel" drive by George Wynn and Dave Jenkins. These two boats were towing "Lavinia", the net boat crewed by Gus Williams. They had only gone about a quarter of a mile towards Dora Creek when a fierce storm hit. Within a few minutes "Greenbottles" engine stopped forcing George to also stop. The net boat already low in the water from the net drifted around stern first to the waves. The water coming over the stern couldn't run off through the net as it was all gummed up with slime and the boat began to fill stern first. It capsized and Gus scrambled onto George's boat. It was feared that the half sunken net boat would smash into the others so it was cut loose. The net and the rope that sank off the boat was pulled aboard the other boats. All the blankets and other gear was lost. Allan Wynn recalls that they went around to Log Wharf on the Island and a fire was lit and he slept in an overcoat and his feet in a dry ice bag. They went home the next morning and pulled the net off and went back out to find the Lavinia upside down in Boiling Bay. The cabin had been ripped off. They righted the boat and towed it to Bill Micallef's at Nords Wharf but it was to



2 metre hammerhead shark taken near Eraring Power Station outlet Myuna Bay 1993

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

badly damaged to be repaired. There was no insurance in those days and it was quite a blow to the crew.

Conditions on the lake and in Dora Creek can be extremely varied. Neville Mitchell, Casey and Bill Wynn all recall the time that Dora Creek was frozen over from one side to the other. Apart from being a very cold night this was put down to a large amount of fresh water being in the creek at the time. Ice about an inch thick coated the creek at dawn down as far as the railway bridge. This occurred in 1967.



Cleaning and washing the fish catch always attracts a crowd – Ken Harrison and David Micallef at Mannering Park Coop wharf c1995

A beautiful view of the lake occurs at dawn when the crews are travelling out to the dig. The lake is usually very quiet and still. The surface is like a mirror as the boats cruise along breaking through the surface. The water is warm compared to the chill in the air. If the boat is stopped in the predawn and a light is held to the water squid and prawns can be enticed to the light.

Less common now due to the shorter digs and greater population of the shoreline, having an open fire to keep warm or cook meals was once a pleasure in itself. Rainy weather where you could not return home for dry clothes made a fire essential at times. Meals cooked on the shore were usually very basic and usually without any cooking utensils other than a billy to heat water for tea. Fish and crabs were cooked directly in the fire or boiled. George Wynn was known to favour boiled fish taking great pleasure in sucking out the eyes. They were usually boiled with an onion and a potato for flavour. Mullet cooked directly in the fire without prior cleaning enabled the whole skin, gut and scales to be peeled away once taken out of the fire. The oily character of the fish was eliminated when cooked this way. Crabs likewise were just thrown into the hot embers until the shell was blackened and charred. Others preferred fish impaled on a green stick and barbecued.

The largest fish ever known to be taken in the lake was a sunfish estimated at two to three tonnes caught by Rupert Vale and his crew. It was put on exhibition at Swansea to raise

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE

funds for the war effort. Other unusual catches or sightings include seals, penguins, dolphins, crayfish, stonefish and turtles.

Snags in the lake are mostly the result of man's efforts and the sort of things dragged out of the lake include truck tyres, fridges, boat anchors, practice bombs from the war, fish traps and many other strange items.

People who have at time fished on the Lake with the Wynns include :-

Neville Ayre

Pat and Ainsley Bridge

Allan (Bub) Burley

Owen, Bill, Albert and Lesley Cartwright

Joyce Fennel

Gunner (Reg) Fitzsimmons

Charlie and Fred Fitzsimmons

Martin Fullick

John Hepburn

Bill Hunter Snr

Ron Jacobsen

Dave Jenkins

Ron, Les, David, Andrew and Wally Kent

Gordon Lily

James Lindsley

David Micallef

Neville Mitchell

Paul Noble

David and Peter Philbrook

Henry, John and Jim Roberts

Don Robinson

Ricky Sharp

Edward, Tommy and Robbie Smith

Ray Smith

Jim Stevenson

Brian and Graham Sutton

Rupert Vale

Jim Stephenson

Frank Whitten

Gus Williams

Fred and Roy Wright

FISHING ON LAKE MACQUARIE