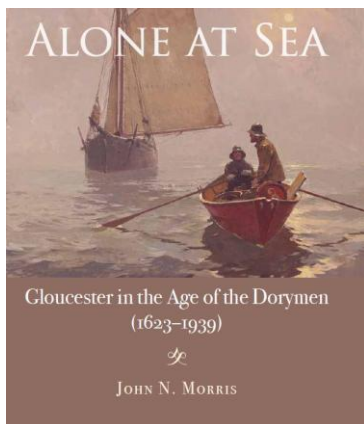


# ALONE AT SEA

## *Gloucester in the Age of the Dorymen (1623-1939)*

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### About John N. Morris Author of ALONE AT SEA



A native of Gloucester, John N. Morris, PhD, is Director Emeritus of the Institute for Aging Research at Hebrew Senior Life in Boston, a Harvard-affiliated aging research program. He has published widely in his field. Dr. Morris's ancestors have been fishermen going back to the seventeenth century. His Portuguese father was a Gloucester fish cutter and his Swedish mother a Gloucester fish packer. His grandfather, Stephen Olsson, spent more than four decades as a Gloucester doryman and was lost at sea in 1935. Dr. Morris is a board member of the group preserving one of the last of the surviving Gloucester schooners, the Adventure. He lives in Tyngsboro, Massachusetts.

### An Interview with Dr. Morris

Q: *How did you come to write Alone at Sea?*

A: For 42 years, my grandfather, Steve Olsson, went to sea as a doryman – a halibut fisherman – sailing with some of Gloucester's greatest skippers. But on March 7, 1935, for reasons never fully explained, my grandfather and his fishing partner Charles Daley of St. Joseph's Newfoundland, while fishing from the schooner *Oretha F. Spinney*, disappeared from their dory – never to be seen again. Their loss came at a time when the dory fishery was drawing to a close. Six years later, I was born. During my childhood, my mother Olive told loving stories of her Papa.

In 1999, I discovered via a web site that the grandson of the captain of the *Spinney* not only knew about my grandfather, but was named Stephen after him. He even had a photo of my grandfather on board the *Spinney*, taken the summer before his drowning. I found out that the *Spinney* was sold to MGM, in 1936, for the making of the movie "Captain's Courageous." I was stunned by the information, which brought a lifetime of stories into focus. I wanted to know more about my grandfather, his way of life and his fishing companions. The more I researched, the more fascinated I became. Ten years later, I had written a book which I hope is the most definitive account of dorymen and Gloucester, the premier North American fishing port of the era.

*Q: What does the history of Gloucester fishing tell us about its future?*

A: Gloucester emerged as America's premier fishing port at a time when the fisheries played a major role in the economy of the region and of the country. The story of the dorymen is the story of immigrants who succeeded, of an industry that blossomed, and of economic and political forces that affected the rest of the United States as well as Canada. It is also the story of the dual forces of ecological and economic responsibility. Gloucester fishermen watched as fishing stocks were depleted, as cyclical forces affected the presence of fish on the grounds. Even in good years, they were always worried about what the future might bring.

The battles fought by Gloucestermen of the last century are still being fought in this century. When Boston firms introduced powered otter-trawlers to the grounds in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gloucester fishermen raised their voice in protest. They charged that indiscriminate fishing was destroying the bottom areas on which the fish depended, unwanted fish were being destroyed, and they could see a day when the great capacity of these new types of vessels would deplete the stocks. They called for moratoriums on vessel construction, limits on vessel size, and restrictions as to when the vessels could be at sea – but no one listened.

Similarly in the 1930s, in the midst of the great depression, Gloucester's mackerel fishermen came together to try to insure that the supply they brought in did not exceed the demand for their product. They tried one experiment after another – limiting the catch, setting price quotas, and pooling the catch. None of these strategies really worked, but they were willing to try collective action in the hope that none would fail.

The fishermen of the past were at their best when they acted together and at their worst when they acted alone. It makes me wonder what the fishermen of 100 to 150 years ago would say about the new catch-share and hard-limit rules now facing the modern Gloucester fishermen.

*Q: What is a "dory" and why is it important in fishing history?*

A: By the mid-1860s Gloucester had a vast fleet of large clipper schooners, and thousands of fishermen spent their time at sea dropping baited handlines over the sides to catch the bottom-feeding fish. To bring in more fish (and maximized profits) innovations were made: first using handline fishing out of smaller boats or dories, then employing trawl fishing – laying long, baited lines across the seafloor. By bringing together the two-man dory and the ground-trawl, vessel owners were able to maximize their return – larger catches on shorter trips became the standard for the next 70 years.

The men rowed away from the schooner in these small, 13- to 20-foot, two-man dories. A schooner scattered from 6 to as many as 14 – over many miles of open ocean. The two men in each dory laid long ground lines containing hundreds of baited hooks on the seabed below. Connected by lines and buoys, the ground line of the trawl rested on the bottom with its baited hooks. Assuming the dory set four barrels of trawl, with 500 hooks for each barrel, the trawl line extended over a mile with 2,000 hooks. Once set, the men waited for the skipper's command to retrieve the trawl.

When the storage area in the middle of the dory was filled with fish, the men headed back to the schooner. On a good day, a dory could land upwards of 1,000 to 2,000 pounds of cod, haddock, hake, or halibut. It was a labor-intensive, exhausting way of life, but it was at the heart of Gloucester's prosperity during these years.

Many of the terms and fishing methods that were once common have been largely lost to history – and for this reason, the book includes an extensive glossary.

*Q: We've all heard about "the perfect storm" but there have been many New England sea tragedies. What are some of them?*

A: There was the "Great Yankee Gale." On October 15, 1851, almost three-quarters of Gloucester's offshore fleet, 112 vessels, sat quietly off Prince Edward Island. As darkness crept over the fleet, the winds rose, the seas stirred, and skippers readied their craft to ride out the storm. Torches went high in the rigging. Double watches patrolled the decks. Helms were lashed in place and skippers dropped giant banks' anchors to the seabed below. When the storm hit, all they could do was sit it out and wait.

Through the long night the winds howled and at the half-light hour of dawn, still tore through the rigging and masts. Many a sail had been torn apart, spars were gone, and vessels were in danger. The storm continued much of the day, and before long some schooners hove over, filled with water, and disappeared below the churning waves. Others smashed together and disappeared. The dead and dying littered the waters. The howling winds and the storm-driven flood tide had carried many vessels high into the sands of PEI's northern beaches. The land was littered with vessels, masts, barrels, clothing, and the bodies of dead fishermen. One lifeless fisherman had a young boy lashed to his back. Others had tied themselves in the rigging only to die as their craft smashed onto the rocks.

Of the 112 Gloucester vessels in the bay, 110 made it through what became known as the "Great Yankee Gale." Of those that survived, 36 went ashore, many to be quickly sold.

*Q: Hollywood helped make the lives of Gloucester fishermen famous in the 1930s. Tell us about that.*

A: In the mid-1930s, at a time when dory fishing had been largely replaced by motorized "dragging," where a few men worked giant nets from the deck as the dragger pulled the net across the seafloor below, the romance of the old days was brought back to America with the release of the 1937 movie "Captains Courageous," based on the 1897 novel by Rudyard Kipling. It paints a romantic picture of the coming of age of a spoiled boy who fell from an ocean liner and was then put in the hands of a crew of Gloucester fishermen. The great American actor, Spencer Tracy, won an Academy Award for his lead in the film; while a great Gloucester schooner, the *Orethea F. Spinney*, took center stage as the fictional vessel *We're Here* in the film. The *Spinney* was one of Gloucester's last great schooners, known and loved by all. It was also the vessel from which my grandfather Steve Olsson and Charles Daley were lost. Captain Carl Olsen sold his vessel to the MGM film studio only nine months after they disappeared.

*Q: What role did immigration play in the Gloucester fishing industry?*

A: As the Gloucester fisheries grew in the 1840s and beyond, young immigrant fishermen from North America and Europe poured into the community. By the late 1860s, with over 500 craft in the fleet, Gloucester threw open its arms to the immigrants arriving daily on the Boston trains. They came from the northern Provinces of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, as well as the more distant countries of Norway, Sweden, and the Azores. Fifty years later the last group of immigrants would arrive from Sicily. The men were young and eager to work, and after dropping off their meager belongings at one of the town's small,

ethnic boardinghouses, they walked to the nearby wharves in search of a berth. For some, it was the beginning of a new way of life – a new home, new friends, new opportunities. For others, it was but a seasonal occupation, the men returning later in the year to their homes in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.

*Q: Were you able to interview any Gloucester dory fishermen for your book?*

A: When I began this work, I wanted to come as close as possible to sitting with these men in their dories as they dropped trawl lines to the seabed below, or joining them at home in their parlors as they spoke quietly with their wives and children. Thankfully, the people of Gloucester have preserved much of their heritage, and I was able to draw on a wide array of resources, including extensive newspaper articles, journals, letters, taped oral histories and business records. I was also able to interview the children and grandchildren of the Gloucester dorymen with names such as Olson, Daley, Lee, Thomas, Arnorsson, Olsen, Lund, Files, Cluett, Rutchick, and Shields. And finally, I was able to extensively interview Gloucester's last two dorymen – Brendan Daley and Billy Shields.

*Q: How did it affect you to talk to the dorymen directly?*

A: The words of the Newfoundland doryman Brendan Daley were particularly enlightening. He spoke of growing up on the sea. He told me of learning about dory fishing at his father's knee, and of making the trek south to go out on a Gloucester schooner. This was a hard life and the words of his father rang true throughout his life – one had to find a good, trustworthy skipper, one who was prepared to stay days on the grounds looking for men who became separated from the schooner in a dense fog. The skipper may not be your father, but you would want him to look out for you like a son.

*Q: What was the most unusual interview?*

A: Of all the people I met, my first contact with the kin of Charles Daley, the doryman who drowned with my grandfather, was the most unusual. I knew I had to track down the Daley family, and the web came into play. The Canadian web site "Fishing? – It Was a Way of Life" had a listing on Charles Daley posted by a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman. He had gathered the information from Gary Daley, grandson of the Gloucester doryman. Reading this, I contacted the web site and they put me in contact with the moutny, who contacted the Daley family on his next visit to the small village of St. Joseph's. Gary was at sea, fishing on the very banks on which our ancestors had drowned. But his wife Mercedes was home and she radioed her husband saying I wished to speak with him. It was after nine at night when Gary called me from the sea while I was sitting in my living room. The link had been made between the grandsons of Charles Daley and Steve Olsson – a truly magical moment.

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Published by Commonwealth Editions

266 Cabot Street, Beverly, MA 01915, 978-921-0747, fax: 978-927-8195

ISBN-13: 978-0-9819430-7-7