

The Neighborhood of the Mind: Lake Erie Commercial Fishermen

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Commercial fishermen on Lake Erie have a strong occupational identity which transcends geographical boundaries. Their "neighborhood" extends from Toledo in the West to Conneaut in the East, the entire Ohio shoreline of Lake Erie. They live in cities, small towns, suburbs, and in rural areas, but no matter where they live, they know other fishermen up and down the coast. They identify themselves first as being commercial fishermen rather than being from Vermilion, Crystal Rock, Port Clinton, or Fairport Harbor. One of the traditional means of maintaining and projecting this sense of identity is through the telling of occupational personal experience narratives. Their stories about hazards on the lake, the golden age of fishing, characters and heroes, conflict with game wardens and sport fishermen, and the reasons why fishing "gets in your blood" are not restricted to their own locales; they all tell stories about Martin Hosko of Toledo, Jib Snyder of Vermilion, and of incidents that happened at various places on the lake and the shore.

Having established the primacy of occupational over neighborhood identity for commercial fishermen, I still see elements of local identity in their worldview. This is not associated with the houses they live in, but with the fish house, which is the land center of their occupational lives. This is where they tie up their boats, start trips, and deliver their catch. The fish house is also the scene of informal workplace activities, talking and telling stories. In some sense, their neighborhoods are located on the fishing boats and in the fish houses. Each fisherman may also have an identity with a local neighborhood; identity itself is multiple, and any one person may have occupational, family, religious and ethnic components as part of their overall self-image.