

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE PACIFIC ALBACORE TUNA INDUSTRY©

Compiled by American Fishermen's Research Foundation, 2005

Albacore tuna the American Fishermen's Research Foundation is primarily involved with are from Troll and Pole & Line fishermen from the West Coast of the United States and Canada and New Zealand¹. These particular albacore tuna (typically weighing less than 20 lbs.) are caught by towing jig lines of graduated length behind their slow moving fishing vessels, or with poles and lines, and are pursued at or near the ocean's surface.

The birth of the United States Pacific Albacore Tuna Industry really started in 1903 because there were not enough sardines in San Pedro Bay to keep A.P. Halfhill's packing plant operating. As a result, he began experimenting by packing other fish; such as albacore tuna, halibut, and rock cod. Mr. Halfhill discovered that "albacore tuna turned white and tasted delicious when steam cooked" (Halfhill, 1951). In those early days, albacore tuna was often called, "Long Fin Tuna." Today, albacore tuna is the only kind of tuna allowed to be canned as "white-meat tuna" in the United States. That first year, Mr. Halfhill's plant processed and sold 700 cases of albacore tuna. He cleverly labeled the cases of "tuna" for sale because albacore tuna, at that time, was considered undesirable. By 1914, production reached 400,000 cases. This was the birth of the United States tuna-canning industry and now, is one of the largest seafood businesses in the world.

The commercial albacore tuna fishery expanded quickly in response to the growing demand for albacore tuna's choice white, tasty meat. "Early records show an average of 20 million pounds of albacore tuna were processed annually prior to 1925" (Halfhill, 1951). The albacore tuna catch in 1925 was more than 22 million pounds, but in 1926, albacore tuna caught off the California coast dwindled to a little less than two and a half million pounds. The total rose slightly in 1927, but 1928 was the poorest on record, with less than 300,000 pounds taken in coastal waters.²

The pursuit for the elusive albacore tuna led commercial fishermen into warmer waters, further away from protected coastal areas. In fact, while some fishermen persisted in hoping that the albacore tuna would return to Southern California, other captains began widening their cruises far out to sea. In 1929, Manuel O. Medina of San Diego, California built the first tuna boat over 100 feet in length. By 1930, Medina skippered the *112' Atlantic* more than 3000 miles from home, to 500 miles off the coast of Equador in South America,³ hoping for abundant catches of

¹This paper is not meant as a comprehensive report on the history of the industry, it is meant as a brief history for those not extensively familiar with the Pacific Albacore Tuna industry.

²Richard F. Pourade, The History of San Diego, The Rising Tide, Chapter 5: The Long Chase (San Diego: Copley Press, 1967).

³"Early Cruises to Distant Waters," West Coast Fisheries 1931.

albacore tuna. Medina's endeavor proved successful and for the first time, the total catch of tuna exceeded 100 million pounds.

Medina's success enticed others to venture to distant waters in search of albacore tuna. In a short time, repeated tragedies struck the distant water albacore tuna fleet, and nearly half of the first fifty clippers to be built, had been lost. About the same time as the tragedies occurred, for unknown reasons, albacore tuna suddenly began to reappear in their coastal waters of Southern California, after an absence of nearly a decade. The 1940s, 50s, and 60s saw steady increase in production by the expanding albacore tuna fleet. As commercial fishermen learned more about the migratory patterns of these mysterious fish, they ventured to other areas of the ocean in pursuit. Fishermen are notorious for modifying their methods and gear if they believed an improved catch would result, and this period in history showed that to be the case. Some innovations were effective while others had varying success. Commercial canneries popped up from San Diego, California to the Columbia River to process tuna; albacore, yellowfin and skipjack. This was considered by many as the "boom years" for canneries along the west coast.

The albacore tuna fleet endured many difficulties in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, with some good years in between. Many of these events were beyond their control and many vessels had to leave the fishery.⁴ Some that stayed in the industry responded by diversifying their area of operations, desiring to compete globally with the Japanese, Taiwanese, and Koreans. Larger, distant water trollers developed into an albacore tuna troll fishery in the South Pacific in 1981. About 40 United States trollers consistently work in the South Pacific annually (West Coast Spotlight 1996).

Many market forces plagued the Pacific Albacore Tuna Industry in the late 1980s, 90s and early 21st century. In addition, the fleet experienced major anomaly patterns in oceanographic conditions across much of the North Pacific, generally referred to as El Niño, which decreased catch production. Furthermore, internationally and in the United States and Canada, rigorous fishery management measures were implemented, which further stressed the Pacific Albacore Tuna Industry. Declining revenues, rising production costs, and increased competition from canned imports forced United States processors to shift their operations overseas.

Historically, the three major tuna processors purchased over 90% of the Pacific Albacore Tuna caught by the Troll and Pole & Line fleet. Today; however, they purchase less than 10%. The Troll and Pole & Line Albacore Tuna fleet has responded to these changing economic conditions by seeking alternate markets for their catch. Currently, much is shipped to Europe, where the choice white, tasty albacore tuna is highly prized.⁵ Like in the past, as economic and political trends change, the industry will continue to evolve and change in order to market this premium product.

⁴West Coast Spotlight Article: Economic Status of U.S. Fisheries, The U.S. Pacific Tuna Industry 1996 pg. 61.

⁵Wayne Heikkila, Executive Director, Western Fishboat Owner's Association and manager of American Fishermen's Research Foundation 2004.