

# The Song of the Sockeye

Oh, hark to the song of the sock-eye Like a sir-en's call of old; When it  
gets in your blood you can't shake it: It's the same as the fev-er for gold.

The musical score is written on two staves in G major and 4/4 time. The first staff contains the first line of the melody with lyrics: "Oh, hark to the song of the sock-eye Like a sir-en's call of old; When it". The second staff contains the second line of the melody with lyrics: "gets in your blood you can't shake it: It's the same as the fev-er for gold." Chord markings above the notes include Dm, F, C, Dm, C, Dm, C, Dm, Am, and Dm.

1.

Oh, hark to the song of the sockeye  
Like a siren's call of old;  
When it gets in your blood you can't shake it:  
It's the same as the fever for gold.

2.

There's a hole in the B.C. coastline,  
Rivers Inlet's the place I mean;  
And it's there you will find the old-timer  
And also the fellow who's green.

3.

Oh, the boats head for there like the sockeye  
And some are a joy to the eye,  
While others are simply abortions,  
And ought to be left high and dry.

4.

Now they go to the different canneries  
And before they can make one haul  
It's three hundred bucks for net, grub and gas  
Which they hope to pay off before fall.

5.

Then it's off to the head of the inlet  
At six o'clock, Sunday night,  
But when morning comes and you've got about three,  
The prospects don't look very bright.

6.

Of course, there is always an alibi  
To account for a very poor run —  
The weather is wrong, the moon's not full,  
Or the big tides will help the fish come.

7.

Now, along about dusk when you're starting to doze  
And you think you've got a good night's set,  
An engine will roar, and you look out the door  
As some farmer tows into your net. *[tug boat]*

8.

Now some of us think of the future,  
While others have things to forget,  
But most of us sit here and think of a school  
Of sockeye hitting the net.

9.

And when the season is over  
And you figure out what you have made,  
You were better off working for wages,  
No matter how low you were paid.

10.

For the comforts of home are worth something,  
So take it from me, my friend;  
Oh, frying-pan grub and no head room  
Will ruin your health in the end.

11.

So hark to the song of the sockeye  
Like a siren's call of old;  
When it gets in your blood you can't shake it:  
It's the same as the fever for gold.

The sockeye salmon with its red color, its firm flesh and its choice flavor is a highly prized commercial fish on the northwest coast. Canning began in British Columbia in the 1870's and by 1900 the fishing industry was packing annually millions of cases of salmon; by then the industry was dominated by consolidated packing companies employing seasonal workers. The main change in this pattern today is that while the packing business is even more concentrated the fishermen are well integrated for bargaining through their union, the U.F.A.W.U.—The United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union.

All five species of salmon of the northwest coast have a common destiny in that they hatch in fresh water, proceed to the Pacific Ocean and at maturity return to spawn in the waters where they hatched; fish of all but one of the species then die. The sockeye, a fish which does not readily take bait, is caught at maturity at the mouths of rivers as it proceeds on its spawning migration. So strong is the fish's urge to go forward that when a broad-meshed net is placed in front of it, a migrating sockeye will force its head into the net opening, ensnaring itself by the gills.

The gill-net, made of linen or nylon thread, is set out behind the boat, supported by a line of floats or corks at the top and held down by a line of lead sinkers at the bottom. It is about six hundred feet long and twenty to thirty feet deep. The nets were hauled in by hand until large wooden drums on which they could be wound were fitted to engine-powered boats. As the net was brought aboard, the enmeshed fish were removed, to be transferred later to a cannery packing boat.

The economic position of the gill-net fisherman is parallel to that of a farmer. The farmer depends on a return from his labor and his investment in land and equipment; the fisherman hopes for a return from his labour with his boat and net. For the short Rivers Inlet season in 1939, a fishermen required about three hundred dollars to invest in his net, food and fuel. Today it costs over a thousand dollars for the six-week season.

The prototype of the west coast gill-net fishing boat was the Columbia River skiff, the first of which was built about a hundred years ago by an unknown craftsman. The early boats were some twenty feet long, heavily built, with broad beam and a slightly raised bow. Before engines were common, the cannery-owned skiffs were towed to the fishing grounds by a packing boat. The fishermen would stay on the grounds for the regulated fishing week which was from 6 p.m. Sunday until Friday, when they would be towed back to the cannery. Shelter on these boats was under a piece of canvas stretched over an oar fastened to the mast, and the cooking was done on a primus stove. When engines and cabins were added to the skiffs, although there was greater mobility and independence for the fisherman, living conditions on board were cramped and unhealthy. Now boats are often over thirty feet long and are much more satisfactory to live on.

**Author Collection**



Mr. Ross Cumbers at Coal Harbour, Vancouver, in 1941, two years after he wrote "The Song of the Sockeye."

**Public Archives of Canada**



"Then it's off to the head of the inlet At six o'clock, Sunday night..."

A Fishery officer firing a bomb, Skeena River, B.C., c. 1930, a procedure used both to open the week's fishing at 6 p.m. Sunday and to close it at 6 p.m. Friday. Bluestone (copper sulphate) tanks in photo are for soaking linen nets.