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The Ocean's Power

*This ocean,
knows nothing
of its size.*

from Dark Noon

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The following are excerpts from *Dark Noon*, which tells the story of a disaster at sea and the final voyage of the fishing boat *Pelican*.

Though it was the easternmost point in New York State, Montauk was still dark at 4:30 AM on Saturday, September 1. It would be another half hour before the first tinge of pink began to define the seaward horizon for anyone awake and at the Montauk Lighthouse to see it.

The hamlet was stirring, though. Lights shone here and there at Fishangri-la, the whimsically named sport-fishing mecca that included the Union News Dock, the Eat and Run coffee shop, a bar called Liars' Lair, and a tackle shop built into a former airplane hangar. The hangar had been stocked with torpedoes to be tested by the navy in Fort Pond Bay during the war, but the war had been over for six years, and Montauk, like America, had other business to pursue.

At the Eat and Run, cooks heated griddles for the charter boat captains and mates who would start swaying in at five o'clock. By 6 AM, the coffee shop would be packed, every counter stool and table seat occupied. The air would be filled with the sounds of spitting bacon and percolating coffee, waitresses kidding groggy customers, the striking of matches, and pancake batter and scrambled eggs hitting hot metal griddles.

A brief lull would follow the departure of the charter boat boys at 6:30 to make the two-and-a-half-mile drive to Lake Montauk, from which a dredged channel gave access to Block Island Sound. The captains would board their customers there, then negotiate the channel

and head twenty miles or so out into the Atlantic. It wasn't exactly offshore fishing, but it was plenty deep and far enough out for green-horn and experienced customers alike. Then the lull would end as the open-boat captains filtered in. These men would have until 7:30 to savor breakfast and coffee, because their business wouldn't start until the Fisherman's Special train from New York City pulled in. Then all hell would break loose.

After periodic setbacks, Montauk had finally made it as both a commercial and recreational fishing capital of the country. Its big wooden draggers, eighty to ninety feet long, could pursue herring and groundfish hundreds of miles into the Atlantic, although they often didn't have to go that far. They returned regularly with holds full of fish, which were packed in wooden boxes, as though in ice-lined coffins, and shipped by train to the city. Although Montauk's draggers had always done all right, even during the grinding Depression and the long war that followed it, now—in the summer of 1951—recreational fishing was hot, and anglers from the city could find plenty of it in even half a day at Montauk.

Leisure-time fishing was a lot younger than commercial fishing in Montauk. During the 1920s, people from up-island and New York City had begun arriving by automobile with rods and tackle boxes and brown-paper-bag lunches, asking for the chance to go out on the draggers to catch whatever was running that week. Some of the dragger captains, such as Frank Tuma Sr. on the *Junior*, would let them fish off the stern during one-day trips. Later the Union News Dock, built on Fort Pond Bay in the late 1920s, allowed anglers to put out in small boats or simply fish off the dock.

In the early '30s a few dragger captains, hedging their bets in a plummeting economy, had refitted their boats for charters. Among the pioneers were brothers Frank and Charlie Tuma, Gus Pitts, Harry Conklin, Carl Ericsson, and Henry Sweeting. Not all of New York high society was broke, and with charter prices so low anyway—in

On Montauk: A Literary Celebration

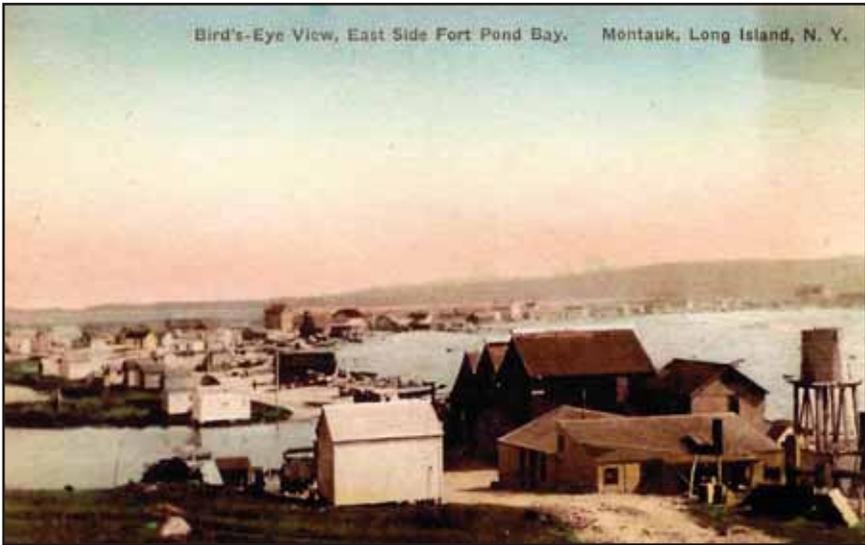
1932, Gus Pitts was charging \$18 for his boat for an entire day—the Montauk captains did a steady business.

Whereas the charter captains hired out to small parties by the day or half day, “open” or “head” boat captains charged their passengers individually. Open-boat fishing was a post-World War II development in Montauk, offering—from the Fishangri-la docks on Fort Pond Bay—a less expensive, more informal fishing experience for a blue-collar market than the charter facilities in Lake Montauk, over two miles east. The opening of Fort Pond Bay to Block Island was two miles wide, which made navigation easy for pleasure and fishing boats, and the high bluffs ringing the bay provided shelter from the southerly gales that buffeted Montauk’s Atlantic side. It took a few minutes longer for a boat leaving Fort Pond Bay to round the Montauk Lighthouse and venture into the Atlantic, but that was all right with customers if they could enjoy a whole day of fishing for only a few bucks, even on summer weekends.

So at 4:30 AM this Labor Day Saturday, the head boats awaited the arrival of the Fisherman’s Special, still hours away. The train would pull in at the Union News Dock, and disgorged passengers would have their choice of boats to board—first come, first served, no reservations. There were always at least a dozen open boats tied up at Fishangri-la, sometimes as many as twenty.

As dawn approached, a few workers carrying lanterns hosed down the Fishangri-la docks. Every few minutes, streaks of headlights piercing the dark signaled the arrival of more charter captains and mates, the bobbing red glows of their cigarettes marking their progress from cars to coffee shop. Later, when the head-boat skippers began their breakfast shift, some would simply stagger up the dock from their boats, where they slept. Houses, money in the bank, community standing—that was what many head-boat skippers hoped to find in the pot at the end of the Montauk rainbow.

On this Saturday morning ushering in September, the breeze freshened a bit, heralding dawn, but it remained from the southwest, a sign



Postcard view of the fishing village in thirties.

of settled summer weather. The forecast that Gene Goble, owner and dockmaster of Fishangri-la, had tacked to the bulletin board just outside his office the evening before was still there.

The forecast was good—not great, but it would allow for a decent day of fishing. The cold front itself wouldn't arrive until late afternoon, and the fresh south-southwest winds ahead of it would probably build slowly, giving boats plenty of time to retreat from the Atlantic to the sheltered waters north of Montauk Point. From there, the four-mile run back to Montauk Harbor (or, for the head-boat captains, the six-mile run back to Fort Pond Bay) would all be in flat water under a lee. A few rough seas south or east of the point might make some passengers queasy, but many of the anglers this Saturday would be regulars, and they had experienced worse. By the time any strong winds out of the northwest arrived behind the cold front, the boats would be back at the dock.

Satisfied with the forecast, the charter captains spat their cigarette butts into the dark, oily water of the harbor and headed for breakfast.