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Oysters

By Jane Morton Galetto

You may have heard it said the first person to eat an oyster was indeed a brave individual. The Native Americans were among the first to rely on the American or Eastern oyster as a food source. In the 1700s European settlers significantly increased the consumption of these bivalves, so much so that in 1719 New Jersey regulated the harvest.

In 1876 the advent of rail lines along the Maurice River further developed the oyster industry, enabling large quantities of oysters to be taken to larger metropolitan areas. By the 1880s, the Victorian prosperity years, over 90 railcars per week were hauling burlap bags full of oysters to market. Later, pasteurization allowed oysters to be shipped free of their shell in cans. Entire villages were dependent on this industry. Bivalve, Port Norris, Shellpile, and the now non-existent Maurice River Town all revolved around the oyster industry. It is said that during this period there were more millionaires per capita in Port Norris than any town in New Jersey, and that oystermen smoked hundred dollar bills to celebrate a good catch. In fact, at the turn of the 20th Century oysters were America's number one fishery. The street vendors of Philadelphia sold oysters like pretzels and hot dogs are peddled today.

More than 500 registered schooners were dredging oysters during the height of the fishery, and 4,000 people worked in commercial oystering in Cumberland County — and an even greater number of workers were involved in processing, shipping, shipbuilding, and other oyster- dependent industries.

Post World War II state regulars allowed oysters to be taken using motorized craft. Oystermen removed the masts and other sailing gear and placed pilot houses on the decks, keeping the original shallow draft hulls. Regulations and enforcement were not enough to keep harvests in check. In 1957 the oyster industry was devastated by the advent of a protozoan parasite referred to as MSX. The Baywide harvest went from 711,000 bushels to a mere 49,000 by 1960. Since that time the industry has had ups and downs. From 1970-1985 there was a modest period of prosperity. Then in 1990 a new parasite which caused Dermo disease surfaced in oyster beds and killed untold numbers

of oysters. In spite of these many setbacks the Delaware Bay and its Maurice River Cove oysters have a reputation as a highly prized delicacy that can be eaten in many ways

Regardless of how you feel about consuming an oyster, their contribution to the ecosystem is undeniable. A single three inch oyster can filter up to 50 gallons of water a day. It is estimated that at the height of oyster occupation in the Delaware Bay, the waters could be cleaned in less than a week's time by this filter feeder.

Today, oyster health remains directly related to the health of the Bay.