

OYSTERING IN NEW JERSEY

Think oysters, and one usually thinks of places like the Chesapeake Bay or Northwestern Florida. But Southern New Jersey once had a large oyster industry. By 1914 Cumberland County alone was shipping 12,000 carloads of oysters a year by train to big cities for use in restaurants. 1930 showed sales of 700,000 gallons of opened oysters and 4000,000,000 shell oysters.

Oyster licenses issued for the early 1900's in New Jersey indicate that sloops, schooners and scows were used for oystering. However, the prestigious Dr. Julius Nelson appears to have done much of his oyster research and investigation from his Catboat "Ostrea" that he sailed throughout the Barnegat Bay/Little Egg Harbor Bay/Great Bay areas.

An act of New Jersey State Legislature created the State Board of Agriculture in 1872. By 1888 Dr. Nelson became part of the College Station Staff and a department of Biology was started. It was estimated at this time that 100,000 people made their living part of the year off oysters. Did oystermen "farm," "drag," "harvest," or "cultivate" was one of the first questions asked by the Department of Agriculture?

With much local cooperation Dr. Nelson began experiments on oyster spawning and larvae research. In 1901 \$25,000 was set aside in New Jersey for protecting and increasing the amount of oyster seeds. Four Miles south of Tuckerton, at the mouth of Stopwater Creek was a property owned by George A. Mott. Consequently the first scientific research station was called The Mott Station. Mott himself lent the property and joined the cause. While this primitive laboratory was in existence it was lovingly called "Hotel Bivalve."

Dr. Nelson, dressed in coat, tie and hat as every gentleman was in those days, maneuvered his small Catboat in and out a winding Tuckerton Creek and through the marsh islands. "Ostrea" had a small cabin where he no doubt kept some of his equipment. Maybe there was a bunk inside and even a small stove. He would sail the area, visiting local oystermen and recording their observations. Docking at the rustic dock by the experimental station, Dr. Nelson would check his breeding station most every day. Unfortunately in 1904 storms completely destroyed The Mott Station.

By 1905 there were four research stations in New Jersey: two in Tuckerton, Barnegat and Keyport. Dr. Nelson soon had a helper, a floating laboratory, and finally a motor boat. His son, Thurlow C. Nelson, also joined him. On February 15, 1916 Dr. Nelson died, but Thurlow and others expanded his work.

In 1923 a permanent station was established at Bivalve along the Delaware Bay. Oystering off the SW coast of New Jersey had become a multi million-dollar industry with oysters taken by train to the cities of New York and Philadelphia in record time.

Delaware Bay oysters have had their ups and downs – mainly downs such as disease has taken away a large number and the Great Depression left the number of fulltime oyster watermen slim." Watermen in Delaware Bay continue to harvest oysters, though certainly not in the same amount as a century ago.

Captivating the imagination, the restored 1928 "A.J. Meerwald" sails Delaware Bay as a floating classroom teaching all ages about the glory days of oystering off the SW coast of New Jersey. With over 3,500 sq. feet of sail, the 85' the "A.J. Meerwald" hopes to "motivate people to take care of the environment, the history, and the culture of New Jersey's Bayshore Region through education, preservation, and example."

Today the Barnegat Bay/Little Egg Harbor/Great Bay coastal areas are almost devoid of oysters. Efforts are being made in Cape May to grow seeds into "Cape May Salts."

A dedicated and prestigious man in the Little Egg Harbor/Tuckerton area started New Jersey oyster research. Dr. Nelson devoted much of his life's work to the betterment of the entire oyster industry.

