

## THE FISH FACTORY

Location, location, location pontificate the realtors. How about an island with an unobstructed view of Great Bay, Little Egg Inlet, the Intracoastal, and the skyline of Atlantic City? A prime spot for developers? No, just the remains of the old Fish Factory located on Crab Island.

Wind whistles through metal bending amid the old buildings, wood creaks, and birds screech in the background. “Keep Off” signs are everywhere along Newman’s Thorofare. Looking and sounding like a horror movie, the once bustling Fish Factory has been closed since 1969 when the menhaden population dropped dramatically.

Menhaden (*Brevoortia tyrannus*, bunker, alewife, Munnawhateaug by the Leni Lenape Indians, greentails, and other local names) were once in abundance along the Jersey Coast. In the mid 1800’s a small menhaden fish factory was built on Story Island located at the Southern end of Little Egg Harbor Bay. Today scattered bricks and a few pilings locate the spot.

The Crab Island Fish Factory (both island name and factory name up for debate) was built in 1930, one of a number of fish processing plants along the mid Atlantic Coast. Harold Anderson, in *A History of Menhaden Fishing*, states:

“The modern menhaden industry emerged in New England early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the species was recognized as a valuable alternative to whale oil, for lubricants, as fuel for lamps and in the making of soaps and paints ... By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century menhaden served as a component of fertilizer and animal feed, and in the manufacture of paints and other substances such as fingernail polish and perfume.”

Only two menhaden fisheries still remain open along the Atlantic Coast. Reedville, VA, with its eerie fleet of ghostly gray, rusting menhaden boats, processes the most fish.

Menhaden, considered too oily for eating, were a disgusting, odorous mess when processed. Local men from the Tuckerton, Little Egg Harbor and Mullica River areas worked on Crab Island. Tough workers were transported on and off the island by boats after putting in long and grueling hours. During the 1900’s ownership rested in the hands of the J. Howard Smith Processing Company and the Fish Products Company.

In *Jersey Genesis: The Story of the Mullica River* written in 1945 by Henry Carlton Beck, the hard lives of the factory workers were disclosed. “The turning of the greentails into glue or oil was never a pleasant business; and even when you got home, after three or four baths and a swim in the cedar waters of the Mullica, you smelled to high Heaven” Jack Ford told Beck.

Beck interviewed John McAnney who remembers the fish factory “going full tilt and full smell. You became hardened to hardship. You got used to hardship. You got accustomed to long hours of loneliness on Crab Island and Little Crab Island.” McAnney’s wife cooked for about twenty workers, three meals a day. Occasionally in the winter the boats were iced in and isolated workers walked across the ice.

An old landing dock is barely visible along Little Sheepshead Creek where boats once ferried workers and supplies from a mainland base on Great Bay Boulevard (commonly known as Seven Bridges Road) in Tuckerton. Buildings and boats remained in position until the 1980’s, decaying and settling into the bay mud until they were finally torn down.

Menhaden fishing itself was not easy. Members of the Northern Neck Chantey Singers, who performed at the 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival, once fished long hours year round out of Raritan Bay, sometimes delivering bunker to Crab Island. Singing sea chanteys kept their minds off the work of pulling

the nets full of thousands of fish by hand. Fishing boats before hydraulic lifts were especially hard on backs and muscles.

Upon meeting representatives of the Tuckerton Seaport at the Festival in Washington, these Reedville, VA singers were able to smile at their Crab Island Fish Factory memories. But songs like “Won’t you help me raise ‘em boys?” and the way these senior citizens now move tell the story of their physically taxing lives.

From Atlantic City to Port Republic, Tuckerton and Long Beach Island, depending upon the wind direction, the smell of “Stink House” (as it was sometimes called) could be easily detected. The smell of rotting and processing menhaden became commonplace for generations of coastal lovers, blowing for miles.

Hanson, Inc. bought the salvage rights to the desolate Fish Factory in the mid 1970’s, taking what was still usable. The island was then given to the state to be included in the Great Bay Wildlife Refuge. A fire in the spring of 1982 severely damaged the buildings; storms yearly take their toll.

Local fishermen head for the protected areas behind Crab Island when the weather is choppy. “I caught a sheepshead recently in one of the Sheepshead Creeks,” says Tony Colgan of Beach Haven. “There used to be a lot around there, but not any more.” Fishing is good in the area with many anglers going for striped bass.

Fascination continues for the old Fish Factory, its workers, and the menhaden boats. Every boater who passes Crab Island – now technically identified as Seven Island or Fish Island - or spots the rotting buildings from a drive out Great Bay Boulevard is mindful of the men who toiled at this occupation.

Looming above grasses, phragmites, and bayberry, the Fish Factory debate has gone on for years. Should it be torn down? What environmental problems could there be? And the costs of such a project are but a few of the concerns. A local entrepreneur wants to put a wind farm on the island. At least it cannot be developed into multi million dollar homes with equally expensive views.

Maybe Crab Island should stay as it is, the Fish Factory a relic from more than a half century ago, a haunting reminder of a way of life long gone along the Jersey shore.

#### SIDEBAR:

Navigating the southern end of Long Beach Island and Great Bay reminds me of the credit card ad that states, “Don’t leave home without it.” In this case it is an updated chart #12316. Sand shifts in the area almost weekly, so don’t even assume your chart is correct. Follow all markers carefully, keeping a close eye to stay within the narrow channel or you will be high and dry.

Coming from the Atlantic, take Little Egg Inlet to old Coast Guard Station (now part of the Jacques Cousteau National Estuarine Research Reserve) and follow markers to Seven and Fish Islands. Ruins will loom up in front of you. Navigating the unmarked Beach Haven Inlet is for locals only.

Crab Island (Seven and Fish Islands) is easily visible going both North and South along the ICW for about 4 miles on a clear day. Newman’s Thorofare behind the island is deep and an excellent fishing spot. Two channels lead from here into Great Bay although it is easy to go aground if you don’t pay attention. Best channel is well marked on the mainland side.

The Fish Factory stands alone in the middle of nowhere. It speaks more of “Deliverance” than upscale. And don’t go without bug spray, even though the flies are impervious to most anything. Exploring the island is forbidden, but boats can come within yards of old bulkheading and docks. For those who have a hankering for history just seeing this place is a must.

Lunch up the Mullica River at Sweetwater Casino Restaurant (maybe an hour’s trip) is worth the trip with an absolutely pristine river, little boat traffic, and few houses). Oyster Creek Inn is located on the South side of Great Bay. Located on the southern side of Great Bay – entrance is marked FL R “2” – Oyster Creek takes one back a half century with its 1950’s old shacks and boats, but the seafood is superb.

Civilization is just to the South with places to eat along the waterfront in both Brigantine and the more popular Atlantic City. The Farley State Marina in the Inlet section of Atlantic City welcomes lunch goers with different types and priced restaurants at Trump’s Castle. Gardiner’s Basin has dockage in front of the Flying Cloud Restaurant.

To the north Long Beach Island has many places to eat, but dockage is minimal. It is best to pull up to a marina like Morrison’s and ask what is available within walking distance. Unfortunately for boaters, the restaurant burned to the ground a few years ago. For those interested in history and the old town of Tuckerton, slip up Tuckerton Crik (a “no wake” area taking 20 minutes to navigate) to the WNW side of Little Egg Harbor Bay. Dockage is readily available and restaurants are varied. Once again, walking is a must.

Dockage is free at the Tuckerton Seaport (located at the headwaters of Tuckerton Crik) for the cost of Seaport admission (\$8.00). Skeeters Restaurant on the premises is a delight in the historic setting of the Seaport’s duck carvers, boat builders, and docents explaining the ways of the baymen. Walking around the town of Tuckerton with its new streetscape is a must. Collectibles, antique shops, and a first rate art gallery offer unique gifts.