

OYSTER FARMING IN THE BAY

By Susan Cluff & Dave Gotz

In early California, oysters were a familiar and favorite food for many Easterners who arrived after the Gold Rush - enjoyed raw, baked or stewed, or in a "Hangtown Fry," a decadent dish of fried breaded oysters, eggs and bacon cooked together like an omelet. Oysters were the Big Mac of the 19th Century, says historian Mathew Booker in his book "Down the Bay" - everybody ate them.

Starting in the 1850s, enterprising fishermen began imported youngling and seed oysters, planting them in Bay tidal flats, fattening them up over three or four years to suitable size and plumpness to be served in San Francisco or shipped off to the Mother Lode. Oyster yearlings from Washington State were planted in shallow waters that could be fenced to protect them from predators. When the railroad arrived in 1869, companies began importing the larger Eastern seed oysters in barrels.

From 1866-76, the Morgan Oyster Company operated oysters beds off **Strawberry Point**, along what is now San Rafael Avenue and some of the tidelands at the north end of the present **Belvedere Lagoon**. Later, the Bay Area Oyster Company took over the beds near Belvedere, and the Connell family who owned the **Blackie's Pasture** property, planted oyster beds in **Richardson Bay**. Workmen in waders would level and prepare the surface for the oyster beds and later, use flat bottom scows to tongue up oysters, sort and harvest them.

Along with stingrays, the biggest threats to the industry were oyster pirates who, according to author Jack London, would come by moonlight in sloops and rowboats to plunder the oyster beds. Carrying pistols and

working mostly in pairs, they'd wade through the thick mud and fill sack after sack with mollusk booty. Oyster workers, who lived on site in shacks on stilts or on houseboats moored out on the water to guard the beds, were instructed to shoot dead anyone who came to rob them.

After 1851, California recognized tideland claims on the basis of occupancy to raise shellfish and until 1909 tideland lots on the Bay could be purchased from the State. In 1879, five companies were engaged in the oyster business of importing, growing, and selling oysters. By 1893, there were 3,000 acres of owned and leased oyster lands on the Bay. Oyster meat volumes reached their highest levels at 2.7 million pounds in 1899.

While imported oysters could grow in Bay waters, they could not reproduce. After 1905, oysters showed poor growth, likely because of water contamination and pollution. Oyster companies then established beds in Tomales Bay and other sandy areas on the Marin coast using Pacific oyster seed from Japan. While not edible, native oysters can also now be found on local Marin coasts thanks to various conservation projects.

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1. Looking from Tiburon Blvd. around 1930 toward Greenwood Beach you can see the fence in the water to protect the oyster beds from predators. On the right are oystermen's shacks at Blackie's Pasture.

2. By 1959 the shacks at Blackie's have been mostly abandoned, but still stand on the beach. Look carefully and you can see Blackie and another horse on the right.

3. (no caption)

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