

Return of the Watermen

Written by Mark Shaffer
Wednesday, 13 March 2013 07:01



Frank Roberts' Lady's Island Oyster Farm brings a sustainably harvested oyster to the Lowcountry and hope for the revitalization of a lost way of life.

(Note: A version of this article first appeared in Lowcountry Weekly December 21, 2011.)

THE MAN BEHIND THE MOLLUSK

It's a crisp morning in late November on Brown's Island and the dock on Half Moon Creek, home base for Frank Roberts' Lady's Island Oyster Farm. A cold front blew through last night and took with it the clouds and humidity, scrubbing the air clean. The sky is bright turquoise. A light breeze only hints at what awaits out on the big water.



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Frank Roberts preps the boat as a pair of bottlenose dolphin fish near the creek bank just a few feet away. Roberts' dog, Jack, cocks his head as they cruise past the dock and disappear into the sun's molten mercury reflection on the rippling current.

We're headed out to the mouth of the Coosaw River to look over part of Roberts' oyster farm. The sustainable operation is – as far as Roberts knows – the only one of its kind in South Carolina to actually grow select single oysters on a viable commercial scale. Roberts works closely with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and is currently involved in a study that could revolutionize oyster production in the state.

Roberts is experimenting with growing sterile oysters. Unconcerned with the preoccupation for procreation, these mollusks grow twice as fast – mature at around seven months rather than fourteen.

We snake out of Half Moon Creek and break out into Whale Branch, the bridge about a half-mile to



starboard. We turn in the opposite direction to make for the Coosaw. Out on the open water a westerly wind beats the incoming tide to a rough chop. A mini-armada of snowbirds in vessels of all descriptions dots the horizon in a southerly caravan on the Intracoastal Waterway toward winter berths in warmer climes.

We cross the mouth of the Beaufort River and into the waters of the Coosaw River. In the distance a coastline of maritime forest gives way to a vast savannah of salt marsh. The wet plains of spartina grass are a ruddy auburn. Summer's heady scent of necessary decay is gone. The air rushing over the bow smells of renewal – clean, sweet and salty.

"I love going to work like this," Frank half-shouts over the engine. "There's nothing else like it."

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Like most days this is a two-man operation. We pick up Roberts' 1st Mate, family friend John Holden, and set about the task of pulling cages.

THE OYSTER AND DANIEL WEBSTER

Here in the Lowcountry oysters are part of our collective DNA, the literal "something in the water" that helps to set us apart as a culture. The first hint of a chill in the air means gathering around backyard fire pits to consume mass quantities of mollusks, a local feast that predates us by unknown millennia.

The Sea Islands themselves took root on ancient oyster rakes. New archeological research indicates that pre-tribal native peoples harvested oysters en masse thousands of years before the first Europeans set foot on the continent. Oysters are a rich source of nutrition, high in protein and essential vitamins. Dozens of prehistoric dumpsites – oyster & clamshell hummocks – have been identified so far. Patterns suggest there may be hundreds more. When the Europeans did show up, they helped themselves to this natural bounty and literally built their New World settlements with material made from its crushed shell, a kind of primitive concrete called "tabby." Many of those ancient walls and foundations still survive. The oyster, however,



r, has had a rough go.

A tsunami of Oyster Mania swept the nation in the 19th century. At one point nearly every town boasted some manifestation of the craze. Oyster parlors, oyster cellars, oyster saloons, oyster bars and oyster houses were ubiquitous. The nation's oldest operating restaurant is Boston's

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Union Oyster House where both Daniel Webster and John F. Kennedy held court as regulars. I made certain that my wife's first raw bar experience took place at the same half moon bar where old Daniel consumed a daily lunch of six orders of a half dozen raw oysters with a tankard of watered brandy to wash each plate down. Little wonder he beat the Devil.

As technology evolved, methods of harvesting became more industrial and more damaging. Demand exceeded supply. Little or no thought was given to management or conservation. Shellfish grounds once thought to be inexhaustible disappeared virtually overnight. An oyster is essentially one of Nature's most efficient filtration devices. A healthy and abundant oyster population means cleaner clearer water. Once that filtration system was virtually wiped out a perfect storm of environmental collapse was only a matter of time. In the Pacific Northwest over harvesting combined with disease destroyed Washington's entire native oyster population. On the East Coast the Chesapeake Bay imploded. The native oyster population still shows little sign of significant recovery after decades of management – some say less than 1% of its former peak. And in the Lowcountry a centuries old way of life was all but gone by the time JFK was in the Oval Office.

SINGLES MATCH

Frank Roberts developed his passion for oysters as a boy during summer visits to the family farm on

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