

## ELLISVILLE HISTORY

By Albert Marsh

My grandfather, Oscar Marsh, came to Ellisville and lived on the beach as a young man. He met my grandmother, Nancy, they married, and he came to live where we live at the present. He was a lobster fisherman setting approximately seventy traps. The boat he used was a dory propelled by oars and probably had a sail. The boat was very similar to the dories used in the Grand Banks cod fishery. His catches were as high as 300 lobsters a trip. The traps were tended daily weather permitting.

My father, Percy, was born in 1888, died 1966. He was born at home, went to school at the Ellisville School and I believe he went to a business school in Lynn. He probably helped with the subsistence farming at home, but his main interest was fishing. He did line trawling for cod, and built a boat here at Ellisville suitable to drag nets for ground fish, that is flounder, cod, and possibly some other species. His main source of income in my lifetime was lobsters.

One of his first boats was a Kingston style lobster boat. He was the first local fisherman to install a gasoline engine. All the other fishermen thought he was “crazy”. Later, he had a 28 ft boat built at Clark’s harbor in SW Nova Scotia. This boat was quite narrow, probably 8 or 9 ft wide. The engine was a 4 cylinder Palmer. It had two cylinder heads with petcocks to open in order to prime the engine: I don’t believe it had a fuel pump. Later he had a 28 ft boat built in East Boston. This had a 10 ft beam, which obviously was much more stable and had more room. It had a 6 cylinder Chrysler Crown.

In the earlier years of my father’s lobstering, before my recollection, he sold lobsters to a smack. That is a vessel of some size that may have come from Boston and bought lobsters from various fishermen as it proceeded along the coast. Later he sold to various buyers in Plymouth and on the Cape, sometimes delivering them himself, but mostly storing them in “lobster carrs” until he had enough for a buyer to come with a truck to pick them up.

The “lobster carr” was made of rough spruce lumber. They were 12 ft x 4 ft x 18 inches deep divided into three compartments to separate different size lobsters. The early method of mooring was to select a flat stone, perhaps 3 ft in diameter on the beach below the high tide level. We drilled a hole with a stone drill and sledge. I have helped with this – great fun! A blacksmith would fashion an eye of 1 inch iron bar with a stem long enough to go through the hole and be bent over. About 20 ft of chain would have had an end link enclosed in the eye by the blacksmith – no swivels which were not trusted. The other end of the chain would have a 4 inch diameter ring with a large u shaped hasp that could be bolted to one end of a mooring pole. This

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hasp was made of heavy iron stock by the blacksmith. The mooring pole was usually white cedar about 8 ft long by 10 inches in diameter. The top end of the pole had a 1 inch diameter hole drilled through and an oak pin was fashioned to go through the hole and extend 6-8 inches from each end of the hole. A ¾ inch d line would have an eye spliced to swivel below the oak pin, the end being fastened to the lobster carr. This same system was used to moor the lobster boats in good weather. They would be moored about 300 yds from the beach.

There were two methods of selling the lobsters. A dip net could be used at the carr, bailing the lobsters into boxes, covering full boxes with burlap and bringing them ashore to be taken to market by truck. The other method was to call the buyer a day ahead, and on the day of sale, tow the carr in about an hour before high tide, pull the carr out of the water, and unload into boxes and into the buyer's truck. The price had been set the day before and they were weighed before loading the truck. This system worked very well. My father was the first to sell to the Snow Inn at Harwichport, but we all sold to them for many years. They treated us very well. When my father was young he sold to a smack which was a coastwise (sailing?) vessel that loaded the lobsters at the mooring. During the great depression, the market for lobsters was almost nonexistent. My father at one time had two full cars and finally sold the entire amount for a nickel apiece regardless of size!

In the warmer months of the year we moored our boats using the same method as lobster carrs. We were only able to enter or leave the harbor about two hours either side of high tide. We very seldom left our boats on the moorings after Nov. 1<sup>st</sup> so quite often we would put the boats on the mooring in the middle of the night if the weather was favorable--not an easy way to work, but some nights were very beautiful.

My father used a 14 ft dory to get to and from his boat, always using oars. I saw him row ashore when it was blowing pretty stiff southwest - a rugged man! We younger fishermen had square sterned skiffs with 5 or 6 hp outboards to get to our boats. My father always had an open boat with no cabin or shelter. He called the shelters and small cabins we younger men had "ice cream stands"! We all fished in almost any weather. I have been asked if I miss the fishing, and my stock answer is "like a hole in my head", although I do miss it some. We started lobstering about April 1st and finished for the season in mid December.

All through my grandfather's, father's and earlier years of my lobstering, the lobster "pots" or traps were made from wood, mostly oak, and twine for the entrances. The wood was subject to attack from reredoes, a marine worm. My father dipped his pots in a hot barrel of tar. This was done at the beach where he had a large tank with a crude fireplace under it and a drain board beside it to hold the traps after they had been dipped. At that time all the rope was also dipped as

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it was made from manila or sisal fiber. This did help preserve the fishing gear but was a thoroughly messy job. We younger fishermen gave that process up. The buoys were also wood, becoming somewhat waterlogged part way through the season and had to be changed for lighter ones. Plastic buoys came into use probably in the 60's and vinyl coated wire came into use to build the traps in the 70's. All pots were buoyed individually until the 70's when they began to be set in trawls. The trawls consisted of a ground line that several pots could be fastened to and end lines with buoys. Two men could haul traps much faster than the old system of single pots. Fishermen set many more traps but this put great pressure on the resource. Pots were baited with any fish refuse or bait fish that could be obtained. My father caught some of his bait "cunner", or salt water perch, in traps especially designed for that purpose. He also speared some in shallow water, mostly sculpins and skates. Fish racks were delivered from New Bedford by truck at one time and redfish from Gloucester.

In the spring, alewife herring were used extensively. In later years sea herring could be bought at the freezer in Sandwich. In earlier years the bait was salted in barrels and stored in fish houses at the beach. Needless to say, in hot weather the bait took on a pretty healthy odor! In the 60's we installed walk in refrigerated coolers which meant we could keep bait in much better condition. Contrary to some old wives tails, smelly, old bait is not better to use.

Our method of mooring when our boats were in the harbor required fairly extensive work at low tide. We moored on the north side of the channel. We dug holes for four oak poles, placing two poles about ten feet ahead and astern of the site, and two more spaced about one third and alongside from where each end of the boat would be. When digging the holes after we had reached a foot or so below the ground, we would place a barrel with both ends removed to prevent most of the water from entering the hole. We worked the barrel down so that it was mostly below ground. We continued to remove as much gravel inside the barrel as possible. Then the oak poles were lowered into the hole and worked down as far as possible. The poles had been sharpened at the lower end with an axe to provide a chisel point. Two lines had been attached half way up the pole and two men could work the pole down by working the pole back and forth. After the pole had been worked as far down as possible, the remaining space inside the barrel and around it were filled with stones and some gravel. "Dead men" or eight feet or so logs were buried about thirty feet abeam. Lines had been attached to the center of the logs and extended to the breast poles. When the boats were tied up, the lines held the boat upright as the boats were mostly out of water at low tide. Of course there were two other lines, one from the bow pole and one from the stern. Once tied up inside the harbor the boats were in a very safe location until colder weather came and ice formed in the harbor. We tried to have the boats out of the water by mid December.

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The breakwaters and channel: The first breakwater, as far as I know, was constructed of logs forming squares about eight feet on a side. The squares were filled with rocks and arranged in a continuous line, perpendicular to the beach. In the late 1930's arrangements were made with a contractor to build a more substantial jetty and to dredge the channel. Over subsequent years the jetty caught sand coming from the northeast in storms, and the sand and gravel finally flowed over the jetty into the channel. In 1961 a much more substantial jetty was built and a fairly wide and deep channel was dredged. The depth of the channel never extended below normal low tide, but it did provide enough depth to allow 36 foot boats with 3 feet draft to come and go at half tide. The channel remained good for about ten years although storms eventually filled and buried the north side of the jetty, eventually allowing storms to fill the channel again. Local contractors were hired by the town, and private money was used to clear the channel each spring and as necessary. This was continued until 1987 when the Commonwealth stopped any further work until environmental permits and engineering plans were provided.

Two of the older fishermen nearing retirement and I moved to the Sandwich Marina harbor at the east end of the Canal. Major northeast storms in the next few years made the Ellenville channel mostly unusable. Tremendous amounts of gravel flowed in a southerly direction, changing the beach south of the beach opening a great deal. The beach changed in each storm and eventually caused extreme erosion to Dr. Hruby's property. He acquired permits and plans to reopen the channel as it had been in 1986 or so. This was accomplished in about 2004.

Sea mossaing: In the early 1940's we started harvesting Irish sea moss. This was accomplished by starting an hour or so before low tide and continuing the same time after low tide. We would each have our dory or skiff, and usually filled them to capacity. We used a specially constructed rake with long (6 +/- inch) curved teeth and a handle about 6 inch diameter and 16 feet long. We always enjoyed this work—unless the wind came up! The moss would make your hands as white as snow. When the tide came in, we brought the loaded boats into the harbor and spread the moss on the beach to dry. We would turn it a time or two, and after a day or two, pack the moss in burlap bags and bring to the barn until we had enough to call for a truck to take it to a buyer that was in Scituate???. Later in the 1950's the moss was sold wet each day and taken to a buyer in Kingston where it was dried in a machine similar to a clothes dryer except much larger. This relieved the individual "mosser" from a great deal of work. There were times when we could harvest moss twice a day when the low tides came at each end of the daytime-HARD WORK! But we enjoyed it.

Cod fishing: In the early 1960's we learned about a system of catching cod on hand lines which was new to us. The line was 300 lb test monofilament with a stainless Norwegian jig at the end. About two feet above the jig we fastened a single hook imbedded in a rubber "worm". The most

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common size jig weighed 27 oz, but we had other sizes from 17 oz to 42 oz. The various sizes were used in order to get the jig to the bottom depending on wind and drift speed. Two or more worms could be fastened at intervals above that. We fished mostly on ledges about three miles or so from the beach. The cod seemed to come into the bay in the late fall to spawn. We caught many large females which had scratches on their underbelly indicating they had scraped or forced the spawn from their bodies by scraping against the rocky bottom. We never anchored, but found the fish in fairly small spots from one year to the next.

In Dec 1962 my father and I caught just under 1700 lbs dressed weight of cod in one afternoon and the next morning. The fish were mostly large weighing as much as 70 lbs. We sold them at Sandwich and Plymouth and then they were shipped to NY. In subsequent years the catch fell off until it became almost non-existent.