

A Short History of the West Coast Oyster Industry with Emphasis on Willapa Bay (Shoalwater Bay)

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Wiegardt Brothers is the oldest family business to continuously harvest oysters in the US, in operation since the 1970s. We are oyster growers, or aquaculturists.

The west coast oyster industry was founded on the native oyster, *Ostrea lurida*, also regionally named the Olympia or Yaquina oyster. The name native stuck to the Willapa oyster from the onset, and is so to this day.

The year 1851 saw the start of sailing oysters to San Francisco. The Gold Rush of 1849, and the wealth that followed, made this possible. It is estimated that 8,000 baskets were shipped that year. In late 1851 the Robert Bruce landed in an area later named Bruceport. Either the cook drugged the crew and burned the vessel or all of the crew were drunk and she burned (I was told both stories as a boy. The latter seemed to me most likely.) The crew stayed in Bruceport, and John Morgan became the most famous and successful oysterman of the time.

From 1851 until 1854 most of the time was spent getting ready to do business. Oyster shipments increased from 1854 to 1870. From 1870 to 1876 750,000 bushels were shipped from Willapa to San Francisco. This is a low of 950,000,000 to a high of 1,300,000,000 individual native oysters.

Hard to believe? Yes, it is one heck of a lot of oysters! Of course, this quantity was reflected in the oysters' price, which went from a high of twenty dollars to a low of two dollars per bushel.

During the winter of 1878 there was a terrible freeze. As a boy, I was told a man could walk across the bay on the ice. The year 1878 is regarded as a major El Nino event. The native oyster cannot stand freezing weather nor extreme heat for that matter, so a high rate of oyster mortality slowed things down.

The oysters recovered and by 1890 were again going strong. From 1890 to 1905 1,250,000 bushels were shipped. My father said that the price was more stable at this time.

Two acts were passed in the first years of the State Legislature for oyster tideland ownership--the Bush Act and the Callo Act. These gave the oysterman the right to apply for oyster land ownership. The Bush Act had two unusual features. The land would revert to the state if it was used for anything but shellfish culture, and if the land was not good it could be exchanged for other good land. Even today private ownership has given the state of Washington a strong position in shellfish aquaculture.

The principal reasons for the demise of the native oyster were over-harvest and mismanagement by industry and the state. You cannot just take the oysters and never return shell or clutch. In 1918 my father placed many razor clam shells to the west of Long Island in Armstrong Sink. These caught up to one hundred spat per shell. He knew that they were too light to stay put, but they did catch. Today we still get a native oyster catch. The brood stock is located in many sinks, and the Long Island-Naselle River Channel. It mostly dies every year.

One cannot help but believe that the growers knew the end of the native oyster industry was at hand. In 1905 serious efforts were made to revive the stock and carloads of Eastern Oysters (*Crasostrea virginica*) were shipped for planting in Willapa Bay, with varying amounts of success. There were local sets and some survival. During 1918 20,000 bushels were harvested and sold, again sent to San Francisco by sailboat.

During 1919 and early 1920 a disease hit the Eastern oysters in the bay. Everything died. In sixty years I have never found one of these Eastern oysters living in the bay--not even an oyster shell. We have attempted to grow Eastern oysters in our hatchery. They will catch but will not survive.

What happened? There was not much work done to find out why. Willapa is still the cleanest bay in the Continental United

States, so certainly industrial pollution was not the cause. Is it possible that this was Dermo, or MSX? These organisms have laid waste to the Atlantic Oysters and have caused big trouble in the Gulf of Mexico.

Again, new oyster plantings followed the mortality of the Eastern oyster. This was done with Pacific Oysters, (*Crasostrea Gigas*). In 1920 the first major effort was made to plant oysters from Miyagi, Japan. Oysters were tried from Chiba-ken, Tokyo Bay and Hiroshima Bay.

The Hiroshima Bay oyster is regarded as a superior oyster; it grows rounded and with more cup. Little is written about the Chiba oyster as it didn't work in this area. We have hatched and grown Hiroshima seed. It will catch but we lose it. The Miyagi oyster worked. As a matter of fact, it is now the world's most prolific oyster, outproducing all other species.

Mogan was an educated attorney, an excellent promoter, who took advantage of Professor Kincaid's knowledge. He acquired land taken back for delinquent taxes. Some was not good for Pacific Oysters, but some of the best land we have was acquired from Mogan. Not enough attention was paid to oyster sales. Dad and I used to wonder if the oyster itself exceeded his promotion (better yield and growth). Please don't confuse J. S. Morgan and Mogan. Most always they are referred to by their surnames only.

Our (Wiegardt Brothers') first Pacific seed arrived in 1928. By 1930 the Japanese seed was in full swing. The oyster was in a surplus position (glut) by 1934. It is history that what makes a good oysterman, does not make him a good salesman. The glut condition exists today.

Sales of fresh oysters were very limited, perhaps because the oyster grew so fast and were so large. Many were under fifty to the gallon. Not only Americans, but the western world had not seen or eaten this large an oyster. Even in Japan they ate the same oyster at over two hundred to the gallon.

Some relief came to the fresh oyster market, but not enough. During the year of 1936 three plants started to pack canned oysters. Willapa, H. Cron Oyster and Wiegardt Brothers. Oysters were canned in ten ounce and sixteen-ounce cans. Frozen oysters were also experimented with, but they just don't freeze well.

World War II began. Tin plate was hard to come by, and the O.P.A. froze the price of oysters. The U.S. Army purchased large quantities of oysters. This used up the over supply of oysters planted as seed in the late 1930s.

Seed was not available for planting. There was enough local seed caught to sustain the industry. The year 1947 was the largest crop ever harvested in Willapa. This was 1,234,000 gallons. It was surrounded on both sides by crops that were pushing 1,000,000 gallons, all produced with local seed. The importation of oyster seed from Japan resumed in 1947. Large amounts came over from Japan--80,000 cases came over to the Pacific Coast. Not all was planted wisely.

Seed from Japan continued to be imported until 1978-79. The industry became aware that we could not count on Japan forever. Our biggest fears were pollution and inflation. Every effort was made to produce seed in the United States. Local catch was pushed harder and hatcheries came into play by 1980. We quit importing from Japan, not because of pollution or inflation but because the mighty U.S. dollar went to hell. We could not afford to import seed.

Canned oyster stew became a big item. It was short profit item but gave an out for not only big oysters but cuts and pieces. My guess is that this used 250,000 gallons a year. Heat canned oysters used another 250,000 to 325,000 gallons a year.

Japan entered the canned market and flooded the market with cheap product. We, the West Coast packers and the Gulf Coast packers, hung on not in price position but because of our known quality. The Japanese Government allowed Japanese producers to can an oyster from polluted water. We could not do this.

The United States entered an agreement with Korea in 1967. We (the United States) built them seven oyster plants. Each had 600 oyster openers. Entry was given to the United States market. Winter conditions were of no concern. The Koreans delivered to the United States C.I.F. & D. paid. Their oysters sold in the Midwest for \$5.65 for a case of twenty four eight ounce cans. At this time we were inventorying at \$14.40 a case for unlabeled cans at Ocean Park.

Korea then started packing oyster meat partly processed and frozen for the USA packers. This not only took away the exclusive relationship between grower and packer in the United States, but introduced a cheaper product. The American canned oyster and oyster stew business folded.

Today there is no oyster stew packed on the West Coast. One plant puts up a small pack of canned oysters in the Gulf. The infrastructure to pack 750,000 cases of canned oysters is gone. You can imagine the burden this has put on the fresh market, both the West Coast and the Gulf. Again the market is in an upheaval- too many oysters are grown to sell at a profit.

Ocean water conditions have been bad since 1990. Oysters grew smaller every year, until the fall of 1999 when the oyster made a complete change. Oysters went from as small as 300 meats to the gallon to a size of 90 to 140 to the gallon. This happened within three months. Of course this created over twice as many gallons of raw oysters. Again a surplus.

With all the negative impact of these developments I feel the oysterman has an optimistic outlook--"Next year will be better." At the same time, he expresses great worry and sorrow about the plight he is in.

My father would be 113 years old if he were alive. In the 1950s he told me how little the industry had changed. We had replaced canvas with gas and diesel engines and had developed a rubber glove to pick oysters with. How I wish he were alive to see the changes in the last two decades--the hatchery, control of burrowing shrimp, and a hydrostatic machine using 50,000 pounds pressure to open oysters and at the same time kill bacteria have all changed the business. The computer has entered the business, too. It really seems we know more about numbers but can't control nature. Who would have believed in my father's time that we would navigate our boats by satellites in the sky that tell you exactly where you are.

The oyster grower has many things to worry about - mortalities, pests, storms, markets and government regulation. The biggest worry is clean water. You cannot sell oysters from water that causes people to get sick. If you have the best of land, best of plants, best crop of oysters, and the best of boats it is to no avail if the water is not passable to produce oysters for consumption. The laws are there to protect the water. Talking about keeping bays clean is politically popular and the "in" thing. Actually doing it is another thing.

Sometimes I wonder about the future for my grandchildren and great grandchildren growing oysters. We are in the fifth generation of growing oysters--a short time, as history goes, not too long to remember everything.