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Treasures from the sea : the Virginia seafood industry

Virginia Fisheries Laboratory

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TREASURES FROM THE SEA

The Virginia Seafood Industry

Virginia Fisheries Laboratory
Gloucester Point

1955

TREASURES FROM THE SEA

Early Treasure Hunters

Early colonists coming to Virginia dreamed of gathering quantities of gold. With this wealth they would return to England and live the rest of their lives in comfort. The colonists were disappointed, for gold was not one of Virginia's great treasures.

New Treasures Are Found

Not until 1870 did Virginians begin to realize the extent of wealth existing within their tidal waters. With the improvement in refrigeration and transportation, seafoods which had regularly appeared on the tables of Tidewater residents began to appear in markets far inland.

Demand for the delicacies of the sea increased from year to year. More and more men gave their time to harvesting a wild crop which was to be had for the taking.

There seemed to be no limit to the quantity of fish and shellfish in the water. Here was a treasure which, unlike gold, renewed itself and would produce a new crop each year!

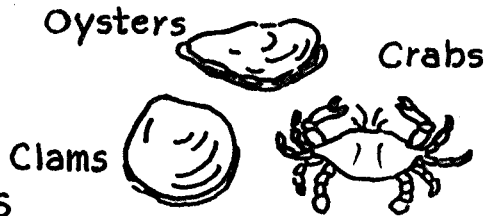
SEAFOOD PRODUCTION OF VIRGINIA FOR 1950
314 MILLION POUNDS

FISH



247 MILLION POUNDS

SHELLFISH



67 MILLION POUNDS



6132 VESSELS AND
BOATS WERE IN USE



9698 FISHERMEN
WORKED AT SEA
AND ON SHORE

VALUE OF SEAFOOD PRODUCED IN 1950
16 MILLION DOLLARS

SHELLFISH



|| \$ 8.6 MILLION ||

FISH



|| \$ 7.4 MILLION ||

Treasures Pile on Treasures

By 1880, 159 million pounds of seafood from Virginia were sold in the markets. Ten years later 185 million pounds of fish and shellfish were produced. By the turn of the century 378 million pounds of food from the sea appeared on the market, and these marine products were filling the pockets of fishermen and seafood dealers with money.

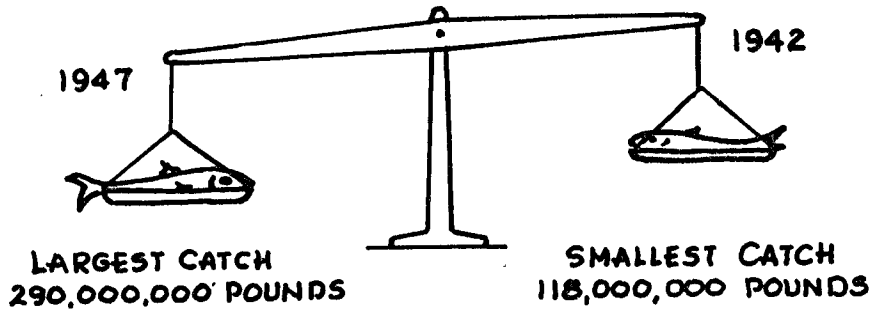
Nineteen thousand Virginians were employed wholly or in part in the expanding seafood industry of the state in 1920. The greatest harvest ever taken from the sea, 471 million pounds, was placed on the market that year.

The Make-up of Treasure Changes

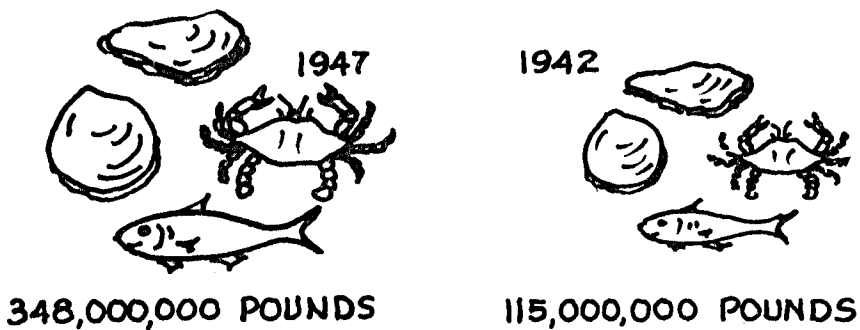
Oysters provided about one-third of all the Virginia seafood in 1880. Twenty years later they accounted for only one-tenth of our production, and by 1950 they furnished barely one-twentieth of the catch.

Croakers were taken in small numbers before 1920. Between that year and 1949 they were taken in large quantity. A fifth of all seafoods landed in Virginia in 1945 were croakers, but since 1949 the number caught has been tragically small.

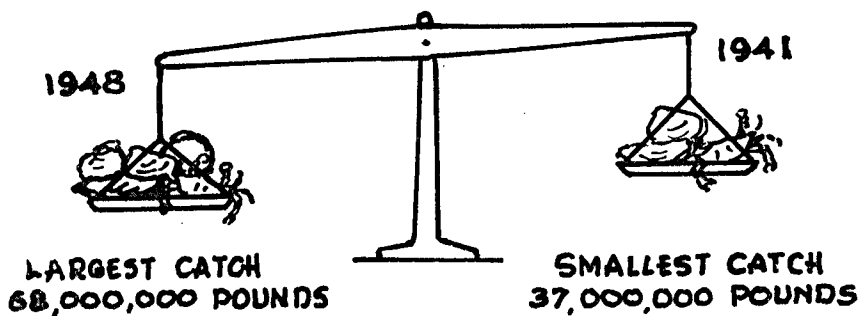
LARGEST AND SMALLEST CATCHES OF FINFISH



LARGEST AND SMALLEST TOTAL CATCHES OF FINFISH AND SHELLFISH COMBINED



LARGEST AND SMALLEST CATCHES OF SHELLFISH



Menhaden made up more than half the catch in 1880 and usually these fish are taken in great quantity. Even today the total pounds of menhaden landed is frequently greater than all the rest of our seafoods combined.

Blue crabs made up less than two per cent of the 1901 catch. In 1950 they accounted for over 15 per cent of all seafoods landed.

During the past twenty-five years five seafoods accounted for 89 per cent of the total catch landed by fishermen in Virginia. Listed in order of the number of pounds produced they were: (1) menhaden (bunker), (2) blue crabs, (3) croakers, (4) oysters, and (5) alewife (river herring). Although the amount of various kinds of seafood has varied considerably over the past 70 years, the total weight landed between 1946-1950 was greater than during any other five-year period of our seafood industry.

Treasures of Greatest Value

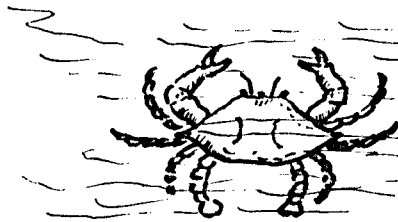
Virginia reaped her most valuable seafood crop in 1945. The fish and shellfish landings that year poured 22 million dollars into the pockets of the fishermen! This harvest was worth perhaps 75 million dollars in the retail

**THE FIVE SEAFOODS TAKEN IN GREATEST QUANTITY
DURING TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, ENDING IN 1950, WERE:**



MENHADEN

**131 MILLION POUNDS
AVERAGE ANNUAL CATCHES**



BLUE CRAB

**31 MILLION POUNDS
AVERAGE ANNUAL CATCH**

**27 MILLION POUNDS
AVERAGE ANNUAL CATCH**



CROAKER



OYSTER

**17 MILLION POUNDS
(MEAT ONLY) AVERAGE
ANNUAL CATCH**



ALEWIFE (RIVER HERRING)

**14 MILLION POUNDS
AVERAGE ANNUAL
CATCH**

**THESE FIVE
SEAFOODS
MADE UP 89%
OF THE TOTAL
POUNDS FISH-
ERMEN LANDED
DURING THE
YEARS
1926 TO 1950
INCLUSIVE**

market.

Values dropped to an all-time low when the fishermen received little more than four million dollars for their landings in 1936.

Shellfish have always been more valuable to our fishermen than finfish. Oysters are the greatest treasure to be found in Virginia waters, and in recent years blue crabs have assumed second place.

Between 1880 and the turn of the century oysters yielded from nearly three-fourths to three-fifths of the fishermen's earnings. In 1950 they yielded little more than one-third of his income.

Blue crabs have dramatically increased in value. From contributing one-one hundredth of the fisherman's income in 1880 they supplied about one-seventh of his income in 1950.

The value of the croaker industry was small prior to 1925, but it increased steadily up to 1938. It reached its peak in 1945 when it accounted for well over a fourth of the fisherman's income.

The menhaden fishery has often supplied fishermen with one-eighth of their income. Since 1946 it has supplied

THE FIVE SEAFOODS YIELDING THE GREATEST
INCOME TO FISHERMEN DURING THE
TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ENDING 1950 WERE:



\$3,039,243
AVERAGE ANNUAL VALUE

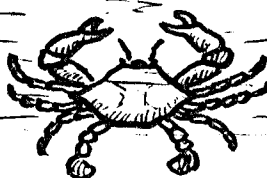
OYSTERS



\$1,273,343
AVERAGE ANNUAL VALUE

CROAKERS

\$1,192,157
AVERAGE ANNUAL VALUE

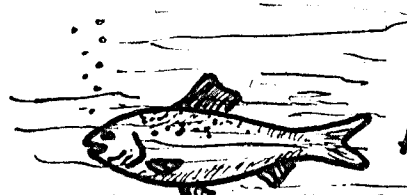


BLUE CRABS



\$808,733
AVERAGE ANNUAL VALUE

MENHADEN



\$516,881
AVERAGE ANNUAL VALUE

SHAD

THESE FIVE SEAFOODS FURNISHED 72%
OF FISHERMEN'S INCOME FROM
1926 TO 1950 INCLUSIVE.

only a little over one-eleventh of the income of the men on all fishing boats.

Shad were producing about one-seventh of the income of the fishermen in 1925. Then the fishery declined until in 1936 it yielded less than one-twenty-fifth of their income. Although the value of shad landings has increased since that year, they make up but a small part of the total value of seafoods landed.

During the past twenty-five years the five seafoods listed in order of importance producing the greatest wealth to fishermen were: (1) oysters, (2) croakers, (3) blue crabs, (4) menhaden, and (5) shad.

The income from seafoods to fishermen was greater during the five years, 1946 to 1950, than in any similar period since the seafood industry had its beginning.

Guarding Our Seafood Treasures

A prosperous seafood industry is a great asset to Virginia. Not only does it afford a livelihood to many of our people, but it furnishes high quality food and industrial products useful to our citizens.

Conservation as applied to our salt-water resources

must determine at what age various organisms should be taken to assure their most economic production. They must know how such natural factors as temperature, saltness, tidal and ocean currents, diseases, predators, and the like, affect the lives of our commercial seafoods.

Men especially trained in the methods of answering these questions are diligently seeking out and finding the answers necessary for the wise regulation of our seafood industry. Bit by bit information is being gathered. Often records have to be accumulated for many years in order to determine a trend in a fishery. Those who look for spectacular, overnight results are certain to be disappointed.

The scientists must depend upon fishermen for cooperation in furnishing information needed for solving the many problems.