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EARLY HISTORY OF THE CRAB INDUSTRY IN THE U. S.

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Early History of the Crab Industry in Maryland

Mr. Winthrop A. Roberts of the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries published a report on the crab industry of Maryland in 1904. He quotes Capt. John H. Landon, the first crab shipper of Crisfield, as saying that the first shipment of crabs from Crisfield were made in 1873 or 1874. (He was speaking of soft crabs.) Only two firms would buy crabs at that time, one in New York and one in Philadelphia. Two or three years later crabs were shipped to Baltimore for the first time. Nothing was received for the first shipment to Pittsburgh as no one there would buy crabs. In fact, there was great difficulty in extending the market as many people thought crabs were poisonous. Express agents and railroad employees were the first to buy crabs; they gave them to friends or sold them in cities and thus city people gradually learned that crabs were good to eat. In the early years soft crabs sold for 60 cents to \$1.00 a dozen, but crabbers and crab buyers increased more rapidly than customers and competition later made prices lower. Ice was first used in soft crab boxes about two years after the first shipments. The present type of box with trays came into use about 1884. At first all soft crabs and peelers were caught in dip nets. After four or five years, L. Cooper Dize of Tangier began the use of small oyster dredges to catch crabs and later invented and patented the present type of scrape net or bag. Scrape came into general use the following year. The use of floats for holding peelers began almost immediately after the first shipments of soft crabs in 1873 or 1874.

The canning of crab meat was started in Oxford, Maryland, about 1880; the canning was said to have been successful but the market was so limited that the business was unprofitable and soon closed. About 3 years later another Oxford man began the present method of handling crab meat, that is, steaming crabs, picking out the meat, and shipping in unsealed cans or buckets. By 1901 there were 20 firms engaged in this business in Maryland, and two factories canning crab meat in sealed cans.

In 1901, Maryland had over 5,000 soft crabbers, who caught nearly 13 million soft crabs; nearly two-thirds of the soft crabs and peelers were caught in scrapes. There were over one thousand trotliners in Maryland in 1901; they caught nearly 30 thousand hard crabs in addition to a considerable number of soft crabs taken as doublers.

In early years, all boats used by crabbers were either rowboats or sail boats. Some sail boats dragged 3 peeler scrapes at once. About 1902 gasoline motors were used for the first time by buy-boats, and already fears were expressed that gasoline boats would be used for scraping crabs and that this would soon cause a decrease in the crab population. Up to 1901 there had been no decrease in the crab catch, but this was attributed to the fact that the number of crabbers was increasing each year. In 1902 the catch of crabs was small throughout Maryland. Crabbers believed the severe winter of 1901-1902 was responsible for this decrease.

At the time of Roberts' 1904 report there were no legal restrictions on crabbing in Maryland, either as to size of crabs or season of crabbing. No licenses were required, except for a scrape license required in Dorchester County.

History of the Crab Industry in Virginia

The canning of crab meat was started by Mr. James McMenamin at Norfolk in 1878. In 1879 he moved to Hampton and began operating on a larger scale. A second crab cannery was started at Hampton a year or two later. These early establishments packed meat from steamed crabs in hermetically sealed cans for permanent preservation. In 1879 the two crab canneries employed 226 workers and produced 84,000 two-pound cans of crab meat which sold for \$16,800. They used 6 million crabs in that year. Virginia was the leading crab state in 1880, producing over 2 million pounds of crabs, and Maryland was a close second with 1,700,000 pounds, but New Jersey was the leading state in value of crabs produced because of the concentration on soft crabs and nearness to the New York market.

In the early years of the Hampton crab industry the canneries did very little during June and July because most of the local crabs were spawning and were not considered fit for use during that period. The work began again in August and continued until the first of November.

There was no winter dredging for crabs anywhere in 1880, but some crabbers used oyster tongs in winter around Lynnhaven Bay. Practically all hard crabs were caught on 600-700 ft. trotlines which had "snoods" or short lateral lines 18 inches to 2 feet long tied on the main line at intervals of 18 inches. Tripe, eels, and stingray flaps were used as bait. The average daily catch per man, of the trotliners in immediate vicinity of Hampton, was stated to be 60 to 75 dozen (2 to 3 barrels), with some catches of 250 dozen (10 barrels). About 75 trotliners crabbed for Hampton packers. Boats from Baltimore came to Hampton Roads and surrounding regions both to catch and to buy crabs which

were marketed in Baltimore; some crabbers in Virginia also regularly shipped crabs to Baltimore. Soft crabs from the Seaside of Virginia and Chesapeake Bay were also shipped to New York in considerable quantities, but only during May and June, as it was too hot for shipments to live in midsummer.

Dr. E. P. Churchill of the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries wrote a very complete report on the crab industry of Chesapeake Bay in 1918, in which he reviews some of the earlier history of the crab industry. After the beginning of the soft crab industry about 1874, the invention of the soft crab scrape a few years later, and the founding of the hard crab business in Hampton in 1878, there was no further change in crabbing methods until some time between 1900 and 1904 when winter dredging of crabs in Virginia waters became important; in 1916 dredging was legal from Nov. 1 to May 1; average catch was 10 barrels a day. Between 1880 and 1901, the production of crabs in Virginia increased from 2 million to 7 and one half million pounds, the value increasing from \$32,000 to \$119,000 (soft crabs made up about one-sixth of the bulk and over one-half of the value in 1901.) (Meanwhile the Maryland catch increased from 1-1/6 to 14 million pounds of which about one-third was soft crabs, the total catch being valued at \$288,477.) In 1908 the Virginia catch was 25 million pounds worth \$645,000; soft crabs made up only 2 million pounds, but their value was \$326,000. (The Maryland catch in 1908 was 20 million pounds of which 7-1/2 million was soft crabs.) The 1915 catch, the next one reported, was 20 million pounds worth \$981,807; soft crabs made up 1-1/2 million pounds worth \$74,402. (The Maryland catch was 30 million pounds worth \$664,651; soft crabs made over 7-1/2 million pounds.) In 1916 Virginia's catch was 17-1/2 million pounds of which 1,200,000 was soft crabs; Maryland's

production was 28 million pounds of which soft crabs made up 6-1/2 million.

By 1916, the use of motor boats to run trot lines was common; most simply passed the line through an oarlock or over a spool on the end of an arm projecting from the gunwale, removing the crabs with hand dipnet, but the patent dipnet was already in use around Hampton. "Snoods" 6 or 8 inches long were used when lines were run by hand, but baits were tied in main line when run by power. Hand line catches averaged 3-4 barrels; power boat trotlines averaged twice that.

In 1916 shipping of steamed crab meat in cans packed in ice had become the main part of the crab business, McMenamin being the only packer who made canning (in sealed cans) his main business; one other Hampton packer canned a few crabs.

History of the Crab Industry in Other States

Blue crabs have never been abundant enough to support an extensive crab fishery in New England, but crabs have been caught there for local markets since early times.

New York state ranked third in quantity of crabs produced in 1880, with over 1,600,000 pounds. New York City has been the principal market for soft crabs and crab meat since the beginning of the industry.

In New Jersey, crabbing was an extensive fishery at least as early as 1855; by that time the practice of holding peelers in floats to obtain soft crabs was already common on the northern part of the New Jersey coast. In 1880 there were over 500 men engaged in catching crabs in this part of the state; in this year New Jersey produced over 300,000 dozen soft crabs and led all states in the total value of the crab catch. Most of the methods of handling peelers and soft crabs

which were later used in the Chesapeake Bay seem to have originated in New Jersey.

The crab fishery in Delaware seems to have been started at Indian River by crabbers from New Jersey. By 1880 about 250 boats were engaged in crabbing around Indian River. Seven-eighths of the crab catch was shipped to New York and one-eighth to Philadelphia, in addition to the crabs sold locally.

There was no crab fishery in North Carolina in 1880. Crabs were caught in immense numbers in trawl nets, but were killed and wasted by the fishermen or used only for fertilizer. A few soft crabs were sold locally, mostly by children.

The only crabbing in South Carolina in 1880 was around Charleston, where about 16 men crabbed during the season. Until a few years before, soft crabs had been discarded as worthless, only hard crabs being used.

Several hundred men were engaged in catching and selling crabs in Georgia in 1880, most of the catch being used in Georgia and Alabama, as New York was too distant for shipping crabs at that time.

In 1880, crabs in Florida were caught only for home consumption.

On the Gulf coast, there were small local crab fisheries in 1880 around New Orleans and Galveston, but no crabs were shipped out. There were about 100 crabbers in Louisiana and 12 around Galveston.

The total commercial production of crabs in U.S. in 1880 was estimated at 7,400,000 pounds worth \$322,622 to fishermen.

In 1901, the commercial crab production of Maryland alone was estimated to be 42,385,125 crabs worth \$288,447 to the fisherman. The soft crab catch of Maryland in 1901 was almost 13 million, valued at \$202,563, while the 29 million hard crabs were worth only \$85,884 to

the fishermen. There was no winter dredging for crabs by Maryland crabbers at that time, but some 67,000 hard crabs were caught in dredges while dredging for oysters. In Virginia commercial winter dredging for crabs had been started before 1904 (acc. to Churchill (1919) sometime between 1900 and 1904).

Other Crabs of Commercial Importance in 1880.

Fiddler crabs - used as bait; in New England for tautog, in South Carolina for sheepshead. Are said to be sometimes used in making soup.

Oyster crab (Pinnotheres ostreum) - As early as 1817 restaurants saved oyster crabs when opening oysters and served them separately as luxurious delicacies. In 1880 crabs from oysters open in Fulton Fish Market, N. Y. C., were sold fresh or pickled in glass jars, at high prices.

Rock crab (Cancer irroratus) considered very good eating in New England; the only place where they are specifically fished for is in Boston Harbor, but rock crabs and Jonah crabs (Cancer borealis) are caught for home consumption at many places along New England coast. Soft crabs of these species are seldom found and are not used. The total sales of these two crabs did not exceed \$200 in 1880.

Stone crab (Menippe mercenaria) ranges North Carolina to Texas. Must be pulled out of holes by hand. Some are caught on baited lines while fishing. It is used as food from Beaufort, N.C. to the Gulf coast of Florida. Stone crabs in N.C. average 10 ounces with some reaching a pound; in Georgia they were said to average a pound. About 12,000 pounds were sold for food (in U.S.) in 1880; value to fishermen

was about \$450. Stone crabs are seldom found in soft condition and all are marketed when hard.

Green crab (Carcinus maenas) ranges only from Cape Cod to New Jersey; in Europe it is the common edible crab. In the U.S. it was much sought for tautog bait in 1880 but was seldom used for food.

Lady crab or sand crab (Ovalipes ocellatus) occurs Cape Cod to Mexico. In 1880 it was occasionally sold on New York markets in winter; soft crabs brought high prices on New York market. It was also commonly sold and eaten in New Orleans in 1880. "It is smaller than blue, but equally abundant, and is said to be of good flavor."

Pacific Coast crabs: Six species regarded as edible: common crab (Cancer magister), red crab (Cancer productus), rock crab (Cancer antennarius), kelp crab (Epialtus productus), yellow shore crab (Heterograpsus oregonensis) and purple shore crab (Heterograpsus nudus). Only the "common crab" was extensively marketed in 1880 mainly because it was the most abundant and the largest. The shore crabs were eaten only by Chinese. About 300,000 "common crabs" sold annually in San Francisco markets, worth \$15,000 to fishermen. They average about a pound each.

In Alaska, several species of large crabs are eaten, among them species of Chionoecetes and Hyas; the females of the former are taken when they come inshore to spawn; they average 10 inches over all, the body 3 to 4 inches. None were sold commercially in 1880.