

## THE RED SNAPPER FISHERIES: THEIR PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE.

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The subject assigned to me is one whose breadth covers the whole of the Gulf of Mexico, and whose history extends from the times of myth, commonly designated "before the war." This history must be based mostly on fishermen's tales, which are of proverbial authority, but whose credibility no disciple of Saint Peter would deny. During the little time I have been able to snatch from other duties I have interviewed such old-timers as still survive, and have compiled this history from their accounts.

Somewhere in the late forties or early fifties some New London fishermen ventured into the Gulf of Mexico in pursuit of snappers. They sailed in small sloops, such as were used in the cod fisheries on the Nantucket shoals for New York market purposes, none being over 15 or 20 tons measurement, and carrying in their wells loads of live fish of not more than 5,000 or 6,000 pounds. The catch was sold at New Orleans at a price commensurate with the dangers of the passage from the home port and with the scale of values that then governed the markets of New Orleans in all lines.

Capt. Leonard Deskin, of New London, seems to have been the pioneer. He suffered shipwreck on one of his outward voyages and never returned to his home. He settled on the Florida coast, near East Pass, Pensacola Bay, where he lived during the war, and died some fifteen years since, leaving a family who still pursue the same industry.

During the later years of the war the fishery was pursued by other vessels, some of Southern build and others from Connecticut. They mostly disposed of their catch in New Orleans, the fish often selling for from \$1.50 to \$2 per "bunch." The "bunch" was a varying quantity, ranging—as the state of the market might seem to justify—from 16 to 20 pounds, no "bunch" being considered marketable unless it contained at least two fish; so that only purses filled by the depreciated currency of the day could afford the luxury of a baked or boiled snapper.

The rumors of these prices, together with the allurements of our summer seas, induced some fishermen whose apprenticeship had been served on the Georges Banks and amid the whirling tide rips of the Vineyard Shoals, to wet a line on the Snapper Banks. Some adventurous fishermen, mostly from Noank, Conn., were enticed to make winter voyages to the Gulf of Mexico. Having better and more fully equipped smacks than the natives, they did well, and for some years held the monopoly of the trade in Mobile and New Orleans. This trade, however, was a local and mostly retail trade—the difficulties of transportation, not only in time, but in price, together with the high cost of ice, averaging nearly 2 cents per pound, making a shipping trade impossible. About 1872 the first venture in the snapper business at Pensacola was made, the Pensacola Ice Company being forced into the business by the establishment

of ice factories in the interior of Alabama, where they had before done a considerable business in ice, which was cut off by the new competition.

As is the case with most successful industries, the beginnings were small. During the following five or six years the trade was pushed into every market that could be reached by express or freight, without much regard to present profit, but looking to the future trade for compensation. During this time the business was suspended in the summer months, the principal dependence for supply being on contracts with northern smacks, which came every fall from the North and East and returned home at the end of Lent. This proving unsatisfactory, a beginning was made in 1879 of a fleet owned by the dealers, and so under their control. One vessel was bought. From this single vessel the fleet has now grown until it numbers some 35 vessels owned in Pensacola, 4 in Mobile, and 2 in New Orleans, the latter belonging to retail dealers, who use them for the local trade. This fleet is of many sizes, ranging from 20 to 50 tons measurement, and of varying ages, from 50 years to those which were launched this last year. The old ones are of all descriptions, some having been Boston and New York pilot boats, others eastern bankers, and many were built for the New York and Fulton market fisheries. The new ones are of the most modern design and construction, being the product of the best designers, whose plans have been executed in the shipyards of Massachusetts and Maine by some of the best builders of the Eastern States. Very recently one of this design has been launched from a Pensacola shipyard and built of Florida woods, which it is believed will prove the pioneer of a large fleet, and that thus a new industry will grow up on Florida soil.

At first all smacks were provided with wells for the bringing of live fish and ventured only a short distance from port, seldom going east of Cape San Blas and being satisfied with loads of 5,000 to 6,000 pounds weight. In those days fish seemed more plentiful than now. It was not uncommon for a smack to make a trip every week during favorable weather, landing what was considered a good load on every voyage. As the demand increased and the price of ice became lower the taking of ice to sea in connection with the well fishing was begun. It proved so successful that it soon superseded the well fishing, and for some years only two vessels supplied with wells have been in use, even these depending on ice the most of the year, only bringing fish in the wells during the favorable time in the summer. It has been found that better and sounder delivery to the consumer can be made with the use of ice than in any other way. The introduction of ice has broadened the boundaries of the fishing-grounds so that snappers are now caught as far as the region of Tortugas on the one side, in latitude 24, longitude 83, and at the extreme western end of Campeche bank, in latitude 20, longitude 92, some 700 miles from Pensacola. These voyages are usually made without the use of chronometers, dependence being put entirely on the dead-reckoning as furnished by the aid of the patent log and observations for latitude by the sextant.

The skill that has been developed among the skippers is little less than marvelous, they being able to beat back and forth across the whole breadth of the Gulf of Mexico, making their landfalls with precision, and often being spoken both by sailing and steam merchantmen, who correct their observed position by the aid of the illiterate fishermen, to whom the more exact methods of astronomical navigation are unknown. Masters of dead-reckoning, they are also expert seamen and are able to bring their craft, having a freeboard of only a foot or two, through gales and hurricanes that cover the Gulf with the wreckage of merchantmen of a thousand tons.

In July, 1896, one of the most destructive hurricanes that have swept the Gulf of Mexico was encountered by the smack *Clara*, of only 26 tons register, with her decks not over 18 inches above the water. She rode out the gale in perfect safety, although her decks were swept by the seas, washing overboard all movable articles, and staving her boats, but with no damage to hull or rigging, and able to resume her voyage as soon as these trifling losses were made good. The same storm proved the death of many a staunch ship, and for weeks the public was thrilled by stories of disaster and loss of life. So staunch are these vessels and so skillful their handling, that when danger signals are displayed and winds howl we are in the habit of giving thanks that no more of the fleet are in the harbor, considering those at sea much safer than those in port. In fact, the same July gale above mentioned sunk and disabled six fishermen that were in port, and damaged none at sea.

The crews are of as various lineage as the vessels. Some are from Norway and Sweden, some were subjects of the King of Denmark, some were born under the flag of the Kingdom of Greece, and not a few of these hastened home to assist their country in its late war. The sunny skies of Italy shone over the birthplace of many others; while, of course, Yankees and Nova Scotians are present in great numbers.

In the methods of finding and catching the fish, little change has occurred since the inception of the fishery. The fish are found by the continual throwing of a lead line, carrying a baited hook. A man standing on the weather rail, supporting himself by a hold on the main shroud, swings the line, to which is attached a 9-pound lead; he releases it as it swings under and forward, and lets it swing to the bottom, and 40 fathoms depth is reached as the hand of the leadsman comes over the lead, although the vessel may be moving forward 3 or 4 knots per hour. If fish are present and are hungry, they snatch at the hook, and one is brought to the surface. As soon as a bite is announced, a dory, with one man, provided with fishing gear, is at once launched, and if the fish bite well the smack is brought back to the spot and either anchored or permitted to drift broadside across the ground. When she drifts away from the fish, she is again worked to windward, and the same process repeated until the fish cease biting or the fare is completed. This process of sounding is sometimes followed all day without success; and again, the fish are quickly found. Sometimes six men will catch a thousand fish in a few hours, and at other times two or three hundred fish will be the limit of a day's hard sounding and patient fishing. When the snappers are spawning, they often are so abundant around the smack as to color the water, but refuse to take the hook, and in such times the only recourse is to search for other schools.

Once a load is secured no effort is spared to hasten along, and only the most severe of adverse winds will cause the skipper to lay to and await a more favorable chance. The fish after landing are either repacked in vaults and deeply covered with freshly broken ice or are forwarded at once to market. The conditions of marketing differ from those in any other fishing port, so far as is known. All the vessels being the property of the shipping firms, there is no haggling about prices. For some years past there has been a stable and constant price which is allowed the vessel and which remains the same in times of scarcity or abundance. Out of the price of the fare of fish is first deducted the cost of the ice taken on board at the beginning of the voyage. Then the crew receive a fixed percentage of what remains, out of which their provision bill is deducted and the remainder divided according to the rank and skill

of the individual fisherman. This system, or "lay," as it is called, is the result of many years' experience and of some trials of strength between the fishermen and the owners, and has proven the most satisfactory and fair method of dividing the proceeds of the fishing voyage.

The prices being uniform at all times to the shipper, it has been found expedient to establish a scale, varying with the size of the fish and the shape in which they are forwarded, as round, with entrails removed, or with all waste parts cut away. The sparseness of our Southern population, the great distances which separate the sea from the consumer, and the high price of telegraph tolls, have all tended to discourage any effort to vary prices with the supply, and to encourage the maintenance of standard prices, with some concession to larger dealers. That the prices have been fairly fixed, as a result of years of experiment and many bitter wars between the rival Pensacola shippers, needs little confirmation, in view of the fact that only two considerable shippers have survived the strain and stress of unrestricted competition, although a half dozen other firms have entered the field, only to be absorbed by the older houses after an unsuccessful attempt to realize their hopes of profit. The market reached by the existing houses is one that covers most of the country, reaching from Boston, Mass., to Denver, Colo., and from the shores of Texas to the borders of the Great Lakes. In fact, as one dealer aptly remarked, "No man who is willing to buy a red snapper has lacked the opportunity."

The future of the fishery can not be readily foretold. That the cost of production can be reduced seems unlikely. Climatic conditions compel the marketing of the red snapper in a fresh and unfrozen state. It does not take kindly to freezing; its color fades and its flesh, in the dry atmosphere of cold storage, shrivels and wastes. In fact, it has come to be recognized that no fish can be thus preserved except with considerable loss of flavor and of marketable value. It is almost impossible to distribute frozen stock in these latitudes. No market, either in North or South, has been found that will consume such quantities as might be economically transported and stored in a frozen state. The crude and wasteful methods of the retail dealer also work to raise the cost to the consumer, so that it bears little relation to the price the shipper receives, and the retailer's profit is so large that the consumer finds a mess of fish a costly luxury, in which he indulges only at long intervals. Canning has been tried and found wanting. Preservation with salt is unprofitable, owing to the great loss of weight it entails and the high cost of the raw material, which makes profitable sale out of the question.

The dearth of skilled cooks is also an almost insurmountable obstacle in the way of the introduction of our fish into such general use as is enjoyed by the products of the packing-houses of the West. Another difficulty is that the larger red snappers, which cost least by the pound, can not be conveniently used in a single household, being excessive in both cost and quantity. Great effort has been made, with only partial success, to introduce the custom of selling sliced fish.

The supply afforded by the fishing-grounds, while not threatening immediate failure, seems to be comparatively less than twenty years ago. Before 1880 it was common for smacks to make weekly trips, and they were seldom compelled to go far for good fishing; now they go far and consume more time on every trip, although most of this time is employed on the outward passage and in search of productive grounds. On the other hand, the men earn about the same wages, and the market is kept fully

supplied, interruptions by stormy weather excepted. The supply seems to vary from year to year, some seasons finding fish abundant on one ground, and others showing the fish to have moved their feeding-grounds to other portions of the Gulf.

Many matters relating to the red snapper, its life-history, its feeding and breeding grounds, how quickly it reaches maturity, and its duration of life, have never been sufficiently studied, and we shall be indebted to the officials of the Fish Commission when they have time and opportunity to prosecute to a conclusion researches which will require years of intelligent labor. So far they have had no such opportunity; but it is earnestly to be hoped that they may yet be able to take up the subject as carefully and patiently as it deserves.

It will be noted that statistics have borne no part in my remarks. Inquirers for such information may obtain it in the reports of the Fish Commission.

PENSACOLA, FLORIDA.