

## **WANDO RIVER WATERMEN**

By Ben Moise

Written 2003

Back in 1978, when I signed up to become a Game Warden with the South Carolina Wildlife Department and began patrolling the coastal marshes and rivers around Charleston, the Wando River was already closed to the harvest of oysters and clams.

I think the closure was because of large crop farms and cattle operations with their associated runoffs near the mouth of the river and the presence of a ship repair yard in the upper river.

The only legal shellfish harvesting in the Wando that I know of took place probably around twenty years ago when the Health Department and the Marine Resources Division gave a Houma, Louisiana commercial fisherman, Leroy Chauvin, a permit to dredge for seed oysters in the lower Wando from just above the Wando-Welch Terminal up to around Beresford Creek.

In that area were huge beds of small to medium size single oysters widely dispersed on fairly firm bottoms but they were too deep to be harvested by hand tongs or mechanical escalators which made them fairly safe from the typical shellfish poacher. These oysters were documented as being polluted and could only be removed and 'planted' in areas to replenish shellfish stock.

The areas where the polluted seed stock had been planted would be closed for some length of time until they would be considered safe for human consumption. Another method was to 'depurate' them by immersing them in huge containers with a steady water flow under ultra-violet lights that would destroy bacterial contaminants. This method could become cost prohibitive if you were dealing with a substantial volume of oysters or clams.

Well Leroy went right to work dredging up huge volumes of these oysters. Didn't cost him a thing except for the commercial fishing permit from the state. Large quantities went to dealers in Louisiana. Some seed stock was sold to local shellfish leaseholders. He had built a makeshift dock up in Beresford creek near the Cainhoy Community where he would unload the bags of oysters onto waiting trucks.

The shells of those deep water Wando River oysters were fairly distinctive. The overwhelming majority of our oysters are intertidal, which means they are harvested off the exposed banks at low tide. They tend to be thin shelled, elongated and are usually a gray-green color and had a tendency to cluster.

The subtidal Wando River oyster shells were thicker, rounder, were white in color and were mostly singles. For some reason the shells were very wormy which made them brittle and difficult to open in one piece. Nevertheless, they were very distinctive in these parts, and could be easily spotted when among bags of oysters harvested elsewhere.

Alas, Leroy succumbed to greed and was caught putting these oysters for sale on the shuck-oyster market, a very definite and serious NO-NO, and his permit to harvest them was revoked along with having to make substantial collateral contributions to the state in the form of fines.

Most of the Mt Pleasant based shellfishing took place on the salt marshes along the Intercoastal Waterway between the Ben Sawyer Bridge and Prices Inlet. A black man, Henry Hutchinson, had a shellfish lease up in Whiteside and Toomer Creek on the other side of Copahee Sound. His oyster pickers harvested a good quality of culled clusters and he sold them around Mt Pleasant and out of his house near Six-Mile. There were a number of 'independent sellers', also known as poachers, who went out on the tide and picked eight to ten bushels a trip. Most of them had regular, dependable buyers who were not likely to 'rat out' their source of fresh oysters.

There was also quite an underground shucked-oyster trade along Highway 17 north of Mt. Pleasant and along the old settlements that ranged along the marsh front from Hamlin Farm up to Copahee Sound. There were a good many places where you could buy shucked oysters in a pint, quart or gallon jar at a good price. After viewing the sometimes squalid and thoroughly unsanitary conditions they were shucked and stored in, I was never tempted by the bargain and over the years was responsible for bring many of them to justice.

I remember late one afternoon driving into the yard of an old black waterman who lived on the marsh front near six mile to ask some questions about flounder gigging. I was driving an unmarked state truck and was not wearing my uniform. As I drove up, several small children came out of the house and approached me. I asked if "Mr. Ike" was at home. ""No Sir", one said, "But I can get you the oyster." No sooner than he had said that, he lifted the trunk lid of a derelict vine clad car in the middle of the yard and revealed six or eight bushels of oysters their daddy had picked on the low tide that morning.

Although his operation was illegal, he had been a valuable source of information about when I should be in the creek and what I might find if I happened to be there at a certain time. He was also a very amusing man, who worked hard to support his family so I chose, in this instance, to leave my ticket book in my pocket. It proved, time and time again, to be a good move.

When I first started enforcing the law the greatest number of watermen in the Wando were and probably still are the crabbers. I remember such names as Manigault, Coakley, Gaskins, Aytes, White, Crane, Smith and a host of Hispanics and Asians who crabbed in the River over the years.

Most of the crabbers fished in small boats, 16 to 18 feet, and worked forty or fifty pots, which they pulled in by hand. As a rule they carried an assistant, called a 'striker', who graded out the crabs as they were emptied out of the crab pot into the grading box.

The small, under five inch crabs were tossed back and the remainder sorted into baskets of 'number ones' or 'twos-and-threes'. Number ones were the larger blue clawed, male, 'jimmy crab' and the twos and threes were the smaller 'jimmys' and the red clawed female or 'sook crab'. The number ones brought the highest price.

Some of the crabbers were very territorial and claimed whole creeks and stretches of the river and often would become very aggressive when another crabber would encroach on what they fancied as 'their' territory. Turf battles are one of the chief law enforcement problems in the regulation of this business and frequently occupy a huge number of officer man-hours to investigate and resolve.

The main retaliatory sanction against perceived interlopers was then and continues to be cutting off the floats, an act of vandalism, which not only deprives the owner of the use of the pots but is extremely wasteful of the resource as the pots continue to attract crabs which die and attract other crabs until the pot becomes overgrown or deteriorates.

During my early years in the river, I remember that there was at least one outright killing over one crabber stealing another's crabs and there were several crabbers who drowned under mysterious circumstances while out working their pot lines. I will never forget the 'gatherings' at Remley Point Landing, where friends and relatives of the missing crabbers would convene there for days as the searches were conducted and the awful commotion that ensued when the body was finally recovered and brought back to the landing.

There were frequent clashes that involved boat collisions and fisticuffs. There was a full fledged crab war at one time among crabbers in the Charleston/Mt Pleasant area and crabbers were carrying guns and making serious threats. "The War" largely focused on differences between locals and several Virginians who had moved into the area. The Virginians fished a lot more pots and spent more time on the water. Some of the locals seemed to think that they had come down here and were catching all of THEIR crabs. It had turned into a very volatile situation and several of the meetings that were held in an attempt to moderate some of the issues and misperceptions turned into ugly shouting matches.

My little contribution towards ending the war was grading every single crab in any boat I found carrying a gun. Ordinarily, I would randomly select one basket of crabs and grade all the crabs in that basket. Most crabbers, on a good day, will have anywhere from twelve to twenty baskets of crabs on board.

For the duration of the "war" I would stop a crab boat, give it a thorough inspection, and if I found a weapon, I would grade every crab in every basket in the boat, a time consuming process that could take hours. Hey, what else did I have to do?

This unorthodox practice served to focus the crabber's anger on me and not on each other. Some were getting larger engines so they could outrun me if they saw me coming. All I had at the time was a forty horsepower engine on a fourteen-year-old, thirteen-foot

Boston Whaler. After awhile they were actually banding together to bring official pressure on me to stop harassing them in the river.

At length the "war" was over, and while there isn't exactly a love-fest among them, most crabbers try to avoid difficulties and laws have been enacted that can ban those caught cutting floats or stealing crabs from the business for a substantial length of time.

There were a lot more watermen engaged in the various components of the fishing business: trawlers fishing for shrimp or conch; set-netters and gill-netters catching finfish; the net makers; the wholesale dealers, a whole segment of the population either directly or indirectly involved in the seafood business.

I think the best monument to the watermen is an ongoing, viable industry.