

The Stinkhouse on Crab Island

by Lori Edmunds

One very early Saturday morning, a father awoke his young children to go on their scheduled family outing. The place of destination was, by tradition, a secret. The children enjoyed a guessing game to discover their day's event, which was usually more fun than the actual activity planned. Today it began with a long ride through towns and woods never before seen by these young eyes. The children's best guesses were losers to their father's ultimate cleverness. "We're going camping!" "We're going canoeing!" "We're going on a hike?"

Before long they reached the shore community of Tuckerton. The father stopped at what seemed to be some kind of store. "We're going shopping?" Leaving the children to their detective work, he disappeared through its door. Returning a short while later with a bucket and a bag of undisclosed items, they were off again straight up the road over many old rickety bridges.

The father stops again, but this time the children are allowed to depart the car to explore and discover clues to their mystery. It was cold and foggy here. 'Rands' read the sign above the docks where many small boats, of all the same color, were tied. "We're going for a boat ride ... to ...?" "You've got it half right" the father hinted, which he would sometimes do when the children were apparently at a loss.

Equipped in bright orange life vests, the family departed into the mist. It was a smooth ride through many marsh lined channels until the boat stopped. The children are absolutely baffled. They can only see water all the way around them. Their father, wallowing in his triumph sat drinking coffee. Still the children would not concede.

Very soon the fog lifted enough for the children to make out land to their right, and shortly a large building. "We're going exploring!" "It's a haunted mansion!" "Are you going to leave us here? Is that why mom didn't want to come?" Knowing he had no doubt won this round, the father gave up the answer. "We don't want to fish, we want to go in there!" "What is it dad?" "Why is it there?" "What does it do?" "Does somebody live there?" To their endless questions, the father's only reply was, "It's the Stinkhouse, a fish factory."

I went home that day thinking that this factory was making the fish that we had been fishing for.

The fish factory stands alone on 100.2 acres known as Crab Island which is part of a group of islands collectively known as 'Seven Islands', located in the Great Bay, Little Egg Harbor Township, New Jersey. Its decaying structures are now used only by the local fisherman, who employ it as a point of reference when giving directions to the spot where they caught 'the big one'. Receiving its nickname, the 'Stinkhouse', from the area's residents, its complimentary odor is remembered well by Elmer Mott, the former Post Master of Tuckerton. Mr. Mott recollects that when the wind was from the south, it would blow the factory's offensive smell right into town.

The exact date at which the factory began to exist is a mystery. The first mention made of a factory residing on Crab Island is found in the deed dated March 31, 1902, when it

was purchased by the Newport Fertilizer Company for \$6,500 from Joseph and Aurra Wharton of Philadelphia. Here it is specifically stated as the 'Fish Oil Works'. Although in deeds dated previous there is mention of existing buildings back to 1846, when this part of Ocean County belonged to Burlington County. In support of the factory existing earlier than 1902 "... Eliza Jackson from Manahawkin... [says] she was born in a shack on Crab Island in the winter of 1896 ...[She claims] her parents worked at the factory at that time, as they had for a number of years before that date (M. Depa), "but not before 1888, according to the Department of Commerce Coast Geodetic Surveys. These coastal survey maps of New Jersey show nothing significant out there until the next survey done in 1903. The survey done previously in 1871 shows a factory on Story's Island [In Little Egg Harbor Bay] so it would be safe to assume there was no factory on Crab Island until sometime after 1888 (L. Widjeskog)."

Hayes Parker, a resident of Mystic Islands, remembers the plant closing down for sometime during WWI, when he was a young boy. Then "it was used by Atlantic City to burn their garbage until probably the early 1930's, when it was bought by Mr. Smith (A. Shell)." The former mayor of Tuckerton, Malcolm Burd, also remembers the use of the plant by Atlantic City.

Elmer Mott confirms this information with this childhood story from approximately 1918. He reminisces of a night he and his father spent there, once, when his father's Coast Guard boat had broken down. (His father had been stationed at the Little Beach Coast Guard Station, and would take him on frequent boat rides) Remembering the owner to be McKeever, he tells of the dead horses lying on the docks waiting to be incinerated. And of watching the workmen let off the 'slime' (residue) into the water, which is what was left over from the garbage being processed for fertilizer. He believes that the garbage was stopped being prepared at the site because of environmental concerns over the handling of the garbage, and was then switched to manufacturing several fish products by Howard Smith. This line of reasoning, was verified by "the 1922 New Jersey Agricultural College Experimental Station Report, which was [doing] research on the declining oyster population. The report says, "large amounts of oil and grease came from the garbage plant in the Great Bay on Seven Islands during the winter of 1919-1920" (L. Widjeskog)."

Stephen W. McKeever and his family, from Brooklyn, New York, were the proprietors from April 13, 1910 to December 29, 1926, when it was sold to the Island fertilizer Company, which went bankrupt. So on October 22, 1934 the property was sold out of bankruptcy for \$6,100 to a banking corporation, which held the property until February 14, 1935. J. Howard Smith, of Monmouth County New Jersey, was the purchaser for the total price of \$5,771.04. He then "tore down the original buildings and built new ones, reopening the plant in 1944 (A. Shell)."

The Smith family maintained ownership of the property under various company names: beginning on April 1, 1940, with the Fish Products Company, then The Smith Meal Company Inc. from March 31, 1972 until December 29, 1973, when it transferred title to J. Howard Smith Inc., who in turn transferred it to American farm Products Inc. on December 31, 1973, then Hanson Properties Inc. from April 6, 1974 until August 16, 1974 when it was purchased by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection for \$100.00. "It was a family operation consisting of three brothers, (Harvey,

Otis, Gilbert) and two sisters (Mrs. Cabbage, Mrs. Clark). Otis Smith ran this plant (A. Shell)." All of the companies were Delaware corporations, with the exception The Smith Meal Company which was a New York corporation. But all had their main office in Port Monmouth, New Jersey.

The fish processed at the factory, continuously called the Fish Products Company, were menhaden, more commonly known as bunkers. These uneatable fish, because of their many bones and oiliness, "subsist almost entirely upon plankton, microscopic sea creatures ... (Beacon 6C)." The laws governing the catching of bunkers for fish meal are: "The season is from the third Monday in May to the third Friday in October, not less than 90 feet from the Sandy Hook Bay, Raritan Bay and Delaware Bay, not closer than 6/10 of a nautical mile from shore, and no fishing is allowed on Saturday, Sunday, Memorial Day, Labor Day, or Fourth of July (McClain)."

The procedure used to catch these fish is quite clever. The Menhaden Fleet operated along the Atlantic coast. "Made of wood until around 1948, when they were made of steel (A. Shell)," they "were about 125 to 200 feet in length ... and each boat had two purse boats ... (Figley)." These were "made of wood until around 1950, and then steel until around 1956, and then aluminum (A. Shell)," and "were about 20 to 25 feet long. When the bunker were spotted by a man in the crow's nest of the large boat, the smaller boats would go out and completely surround the school with a large net, weighted at the bottom with lead and kept buoyant by large corks attached to the top (J. Siegfried)." These "purse seine [nets] were about 90 feet wide and 900 feet long

[and when] the drawstring [at the bottom of] the purse was closed, ... the fish were trapped in the net. Then the big boat started to pull in the net. The fish were pumped right out of the net with huge pumps ... right into the holds. At the same time, the water was pumped overboard (Figley)." In the earlier days, "the large boat would come alongside of the filled net, and scoop the bunkers out using another net. Dumping the fish right on the deck, the crew would then push the fish into the holds (J. Siegfried)." "There were times when the boats had caught so many fish, that the crew would put up boards around the deck against the metal railings, to hold the fish on top of the deck (C. Stocker)."

"The crews especially hated sharks, because when they got caught in the net, they would tear it up. Costing around \$5,000 to replace, the large nylon nets were repaired, if possible, on a large rack. It looked like a paddle wheel and was motorized, as to wrap the net around the rack. It was also where the nets were washed and dried (H. Heinrich)." "Originally, there were six racks, one for each boat (A. Shell)"

"After WWII the plant added piper cubs to the search for bunker. The pilots would look for seagulls active on the water (B. Adams)," or "large oil slicks caused by the oily fish, to spot the bunker's location and then radio it to the captain (C. Stocker) ."

"This factory, one of several owned by the parent company, possessed six boats of the Menhaden Fleet. Their names were the Barnegat, the Beach Haven, the Seagerth, the Texas, the Manasquan, and the Palm Beach (A. Shell)." When not in use, "they were tied up at North Maryland Ave. in Gardener's Basin, Atlantic City (J. Siegfried)." (Once city docks, Gardener's Basin was converted into a water front park in 1977.) However,

“the boats were stored in Salisbury, Maryland for the winter (A. Shell).”

“The crew, around 18 men, lived on board. These men got paid by the amount of fish they caught, the captain receiving 52 cents per 1,000 fish, and the crew 18 to 26 cents depending on their job. The best season was 1958, when the total catch from late May to October was 210 million. The average season being around 160 million (A. Shell).” Hayes Parker remembers the bunker to be in such abundance, that they would swim up the Tuckerton River and then die in the fresh water. The people would then collect them and use them whole, without any processing, on their gardens. He said they worked very good raw.

“Only when filled to capacity, would the boats come back to the factory. Before the boat’s arrival at the island, a siren would sound to alert the ground crew that a boat was coming to be unloaded. They had to be ready any time of day, to process the fish immediately (C. Stocker).”

“Mostly southern blacks, the worker’s shifts at the factory were 12 hours on and 12 hours off. They would stay for the season and live on the island, in the bunk houses provided by the company, and leave in November. They were paid every two weeks. The upper management were mostly from town, and they worked through the winter in eight hour shifts, doing maintenance work. They [also] had their own dining room, separate from the workmen (A. Shell).” “Although there were not many locals full time at the factory, it was common for schoolboys to work there for the summer (B. Adams).” It was not unusual for “the workers to live on the island up to a month, before they would go to shore to take a break (J. Depa).” Although “some had wives with them on the island (H. Heinrich),” “they were mostly poor guys without regular homes (B. Heinrich).”

When the fish arrived at the plant “they were bailed out by hand with buckets, up to the 1950’s, when they started to use suction. Then they were put on a conveyor belt to go through a counter, and a bell would ring for each thousand fish caught (H. Heinrich).” “In 1953 scales replaced the counters, and it was decided that 746 lbs would equal a thousand fish. The fish were then put into a raw box, a big storage bin, when unloaded to await processing (A. Shell).”

In the earlier days, “any good fish caught, like blues or weakies, were salted down and saved in barrels (H. Heinrich).” Later, “the food fish were put into freezers and given away to the men to take home. These good fish were not allowed to be processed, and there was inspectors there who could close down the plant, if they did get processed with the bunkers (C. Stocker).”

“From the raw box, the bunkers went to the cookers. There were six cookers, that were about thirty feet long and thirty six inches in diameter. Inside, there was a continuous conveyor screw, and steam jets would cook the fish. Then the fish went to the pressers. There were six pressers, that pressed out the liquid (water, oil, blood). The liquid would drip on a grated floor, flow into a gutter and be pumped to the separators. There were ten separators, that worked on centrifugal force to separate the oil from the other liquids. The oil, because it was lighter, would stay on the inside of the machine, and then be pumped to storage tanks (A. Shell).” “The oil emerged as a clear amber liquid (Beacon 6C).” “There were five oil tanks, that had storage space for 1 ½ million gallons

of oil. Twenty gallons of oil was produced from a thousand fish. The remaining liquid would then be evaporated, and what was left was called solubles (A. Shell).” “Prior to WWII, this residue was thrown away (B. Adams).”

Meanwhile, on a conveyor the squeezed fish went to the driers. There were six driers, that took around half an hour for the fish to go through, but left in about 10% moisture. The dried fish (scrap) was put in the scrap shed in large piles to be stored. Then, as needed, was put on a conveyor to the grinding mill in the scrap shed. Here it was made into a fine meal (A. Shell).” “odorless when dried, it was put into 100 lb. burlap sacks, that were sewn shut by electric machines, and stored on wooden palates (H. Heinrich>”

“The oil was mostly used for paint in the US. But, when exported to Canada and Germany, it was made into margarine (A. Shell),” on account of “the oil from menhaden is high in unsaturated fat content (Beacon 6C).” “It sold for 20 cents a pound. Solubles sold for 18 cents a pound and were used for chicken feed. The fish meal sold as fertilizer until 1950, and then as an additive for animal feeds. It was gritty looking, resembling a brown corn meal, weighing about 4 lbs. per cubic foot, and sold for \$160.00 a ton (A. Shell).”

“In 1963, the factory began to make a high protein fish flour, which was actually de-fatted meal. Fish scrap had 8 to 10% oil left in it. It was treated with Hexan to remove the oil down to 1%. In 1965 to 1969, the factory, no longer catching its own fish, processed fish scrap shipped here by railroad from Louisiana. The de-fatted meal was mostly sold to the Purina company for animal feed. It sold for \$210.00 a ton (A. Shell).” “At peak production, the automated equipment can produce 50 tons of fish flour daily (Jasinski 39).”

“There were two tugboats, or workboats, owned by the factory: the ‘Alex M’ and the ‘Little Georgie’ (H. Heinrich).” “The Alex M was named for a very well-liked factory employee, who had died. The company bought him a burial plot in the Green Street cemetery, probably for lack of family (E. Heinrich).” “John Rutherford was one of its captains (J. Depa).” “The little Georgie named for the plant manager’s son, George Hettich Jr., was captained by (Francis) Pat Heinrich from around 1944 until the factory closed (E. Heinrich).”

These “tugs, having their original docks at Cape Horn in the Great Bay, were docked in the Little Sheep’s Head Creek on Great Bay Blvd. This creek was dug-out by the factory to make it a more navigable route. It is now more of a straight path, instead of a curvy one. At low tide it ranges in depth from 10 to 12 feet (C. Stocker).” Also “located on Great Bay Blvd., by the tug’s docks, was a scrap shed, where the bagged fish meal was stored (H. Heinrich).”

“The tugs would pull barges full of finished products, one barge could hold about a thousand bags of fish meal, to Atlantic City, where they were put on the railroad to be shipped out (H. Heinrich).” They also “served to ferry people back and forth from Crab Island (M. Depa).”

“It was really a big operation. It had its own general store, approximately 30 x 30 in size. Run by Francis Heinrich, who had a home on the island, approximately 40 x 40 in size,

it offered everything from candy to clothes. Also on the island were two large homes used by hunters from around the world, during duck season. Equipped with its own landing strip, the hunters could fly in. In early 1947, the company put up a water tower (H. Heinrich), "to help maintain the water pressure. The water was pumped from a very deep well on the island (A. Shell)." "It was basically self-sufficient, only importing electric daily from the mainland. The electric line went across the marsh meadow, on wooden poles, from Great Bay Blvd. to the water line, where it went under water, through Newman's thoroughfare, with about a 17 foot depth at low tide, to the factory (C. Stocker)."

"Once active with as many as 100 employees, the plant [in 1967 was] staffed by ten. Two factors have caused the reduction -automation and lack of fish in waters off the coast of NJ (Jasinski 39)." "The plant stopped operating in 1969, but kept on a crew of eight men until 1973, to keep things in shape in case of a restart (A. Shell)." Mrs. Pat Heinrich remembers her husband's last day working the tugboat to be January 1, 1974.

Presently owned by the state of New Jersey, "it was part of 4,670 acres purchased with money from Federal Aid to Wildlife, which comes under the Pitman-Robins Act that raises money from a tax on hunting equipment. Now a Wildlife Management Area, it is used for bird watching, salt water fishing, crabbing, and water fowl hunting (Soldwedel)."

The factory's remains have yet to be removed. "The state plans to reclaim the area, and turn it back into tidal marsh (L. Widjeskog)." "The funding was allotted in 1978 to remove the structure, but the funds were diverted to another project considered to be more important at that time. In 1982, there was a fire at the factory, probably deliberately set. Upon investigating the fire, they found small amounts of asbestos, used to insulate the pipes. This will add to the cost [of reclamation] (R. Haul)," which will be in excess of \$1 million. Under state regulation, the [structures can not be buried there. [The remains has to go to a landfill (I. Widjeskog)." "It has been proposed to use the heavy metal and concrete for an artificial reef (B. Haul)."

Since the factory closed down several of the local fishermen claim the fishing has never been the same. "Sloop thoroughfare, (the channel that runs on the south end of the island) is better known as "The Cut'. It was a favorite spot for flounder (C. Stocker) ."

Although an eye-sore, the buildings are a local landmark. A beacon, of sorts, it marks the entrance to the Great Bay, and is a welcomed sight to travelers who've lost their way. Despite the deficient information of its inception, the eventual demise of the factory is not unfathomable. The apparent over-fishing of the area, caused a considerable decrease in the amount of bunker available for harvest. An attempt to keep the factory viable by reprocessing another plant's fish meal, became too costly. If the factory were to finally vanish, Crab Island would be remembered as the Stinkhouse Island, no doubt to be used by future generations of fathers taking their children on family outings.