

Fish Oil Plant Described In An Old News Account

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In its Summer-Fall, 1986 issue *The Batsto Gazette* ran a story on Mullican River fishermen who made a living catching fish for processing in the lucrative if somewhat malodorous fish fertilizer business.

Since then more information on this aspect of Pine Barrens life has come to light. The following was found in the 1871 issue of *The South Jersey Republican*.

It would be well to mention first the history of the organization and formation of the company owning and operating the works, which started under many unfavorable auspices, also premeditates any unreasonable obstacles thrown in the way by persons actuated by questionable motives. About eight months ago several gentlemen in the vicinity of Bakersville and Leedsville conceived the project of utilizing for lubrication and fertilizer purposes the countless schools of mossbunkers, a species of herring absolutely unsuitable for culinary purposes that swarm and inhabit the waters of the ocean off the Jersey coast. A company was formed and application made of the Legislature for an act of incorporation. Considerable opposition was met with here, from a few residents of Atlantic City, but after several vexations and unnecessary postponements resulting from the factional opposition, the company finally obtained a charter and proceeded to organize and commence operation with considerable skill and energy.

Permanent Organization

John Saunders, Joel C. Fifield, Israel S. Adams, Wesley Robinson and John Townsend were elected directors and subsequently John Saunders was elected president, Joel C. Fifield secretary, Israel Adams treasurer and Capt. Mahion Frambes superintendent under whose management everything has been brought into tolerable working order and their anticipations are likely to be realized.

Approach And Location

It is situated on the southern point of a meadow reaching off into Great Egg Harbor Bay, lying between Main and Scull's Thoroughfare, three miles from Somers Point and one mile from the ocean directly opposite the southern end of Absecon Beach.

Buildings And Machinery

The main building is a substantial wooden structure in which are situated two large wrought iron boilers elevated upon strong and capacious brick-work furnaces capable of holding and boiling 15,000 fish each. Also a round boiler for boiling the last grade of oil or drippings, which is in great demand for paint-drying purposes. Also the hydrostatic press capable of exerting immense pressure, and three large tanks or reservoirs for the reception, clearing and skimming of the oil. There are two large frame buildings attached for the reception of the remains of the fish after cooking them and pressing out the oil. There is a comfortable residence for the superintendent and workmen and outbuildings for a horse, boats and stowing of barrels. A well of fresh water is on the spot although the bay is not 50 feet distant and the meadows often overflowed with salt water.

Catching The Fish

For this purpose the company has three yachts of about 50 tons burden each, two seine boats each carrying seine 84 feet wide and 660 feet long and 500 meches deep. Also two caraway-boats (sic) with sails, each boat capable of holding 40,000 fish each, and several surf boats. The fish are caught in the ocean from one to seven miles from the mainland. The hands connected with one yacht frequently take from 70,000 to 100,000 per day for which they are paid at the rate of a dollar per 1000. More could be caught were it not for the sharks which often get in the nets, break through and some of the netted fish escape.

Scarcity of Edible Fish Caught

It is remarkable that so few eatable fish are caught. This was one of the objections to the establishment of this factory but the fears turned out to be all fudge, for out of 100,000 mossbunkers (bankers) caught not enough eatable fish are caught to furnish the workmen with their daily supply for their table use.

Producing The Oil

The fish are lifted from the boats by horse-power and conveyed to cars on an elevated railway, one hundred feet long to the factory where they are emptied into the large boilers. After an hour's boiling they are put into the press and the oil forced out. The oil drains below into the reservoirs where it is skimmed

and allowed to settle when it is ready to be pumped into the large vats and exposed to the sun for a limited time to evaporate and clear. It is then drained off into casks for shipment. Twelve thousand fish can be prepared for the press in an hour. The yield is about four gallons of oil to a thousand fish in the summer when the fish are "poor". But in the spring and fall the fish are usually fat and if so the fish will produce eight to ten gallons of oil to the thousand. The superintendent says he can press out 250,000 fish a day and this will produce 2000 gallons of oil.

Fish Guano

The refuse after the oil is pressed out is placed in large heaps under cover where large blow-flies hover over and it soon is a mass of worms and flesh and yet there is no overpowering stench as one would suppose. The worms after thoroughly permeating and dissolving the refuse very soon disappear and guano soon settles and becomes one solid mass again and is ready for market. It takes about 8000 fish to make one ton of guano and the company makes 24 tons a day. The guano sells for \$15 a ton at the factory and will be freighted in large quantities to Millville, Bridgeton, Salem for two and half dollars a ton. The company furnishes steady employment to about 30 fishermen and laborers.