

COMMERCIAL FISHING IN THE SUSQUEHANNA RIVER

Forever yielding products of economic value, the broad Susquehanna, beautiful as well as utilitarian, is studied by Mr. Heydinger in its role as a fish-monger's paradise.

The story of fishing in the Susquehanna breaks into time sections matching transportation history. The river above Clark's Ferry, the junction with the Juniata River, lost its migratory fishing in 1828 with the construction of the Pennsylvania State Canal Dams which also ended Durham Boating. Dams on the Juniata above the junction ended the fisheries on that river at the same period. The Columbia-Middletown-Harrisburg section enjoyed full catches until the 1841 Columbia and Wrightsville Dam of the Tidewater and Susquehanna Canal cut off migration. With the destruction of this dam in 1894 fish returned to the Susquehanna from the Atlantic ocean. Finally the York Haven and McCall's Ferry power dams of 1905-1910 ended migratory fishing. Only on the lower river from Chesapeake Bay to the first power dam does migratory fishing exist today.

Fishing on the Susquehanna predates the white man. Some authorities hold that the Indian drawings at Bald Friar Falls in Maryland are concerned with fishing. Before 1881, fishermen blasted away a 38-foot section of an island containing Indian drawings to obtain rock for fish dam erection. Frenchman Laincourt de la Rochefoucault in 1796 located 15 fisheries near the river's mouth, ten on the western shore, five on the eastern, worth \$60-\$100 a year. Shad and herring were the main catch during the five-week-season. The area total catch was 12,000 barrels of fish worth \$5 a barrel. Often a single sweep of a net caught 200 barrels.

York County Histories tell that Chanceford Township fisheries caught 3000 shad in the single sweep of a seine. Fisheries at Jackson's Battery, Shenk's and McCall's Ferries secured immense numbers. Fulton Rock fishery often caught 800 shad per day before 1825. The shad season was a rich harvest for rivermen, some of whom made \$300 in six weeks and "rested" the remainder of the year. This same catch-and-retirement story occurred about Falls of Schuylkill Fisheries near Philadelphia. Hundreds of teams came to the York County shore of the Susquehanna from the south and the west to buy the fish catch. The river from the mouth of the Codorous to the Conewago was a line of fisheries selling shad at .125 to .15 each. Dozens of wagons awaited the catch at each fishery. Lichty's Fishery was near the Conewago's mouth. The most profitable

fisheries were on islands; Santa Cruz, Black Rock, Haldeman, Forge, Center, Silver Lake, Small, and Black Eagle. 1500 shad in a single net sweep was the record in this area.

The story on the Lancaster County shore duplicates the accounts already related, immense catches with wagons waiting to haul the fish away for resale. Eli Bowen, 1852 editor of the *Columbia Spy*, related that Safe Harbor at the Conestoga's mouth, always a great fishing location, had increased its catch especially since the construction of the Safe Harbor Dam, after 1841 a link to the Tidewater and Susquehanna Canal. Until washed away in a 1868 flood, this dam was a barrier to migratory fish. Bowen told that it appeared to arrest (!!) the fish in their upward course, enabling the fisheries below to catch immense quantities of shad. Fishermen carried seines 100 yards long and four to six feet wide out on the river by canoe on a circular course while the men along the shore advanced their end of the net. Then both ends of the net were swept to the shore and trapped the fish. A lookout with a spy glass constantly watched for the approach of fish schools. Hauls were irregular, but the effective netting of a school insured an immense catch. Fishing was a laborious process, but before dam erection, Bowen told, was a regular occupation. Productive fisheries yielded large fortunes in the course of years.

At Washington Boro below Columbia, fishing was a method of earning a livelihood. Here great quantities of bass were caught. At Columbia, proprietor Wright presented a section of the river front to the town for access to the ferry, river traffic, and the shad fisheries. The three famous fisheries in this area were Mifflin's Island, Barber's, and Wright's.

Conoy Township, northernmost section of Lancaster County on the Susquehanna, had seven fisheries, the ownership of anyone of which "was a fortune." Four were on islands opposite Bainbridge. The record catch in this area was 5300 shad. As usual, scores of wagons awaited the catch.

The Rife family operated a fishery in the Middletown area. Dr. Eugene Laverty, born in 1864, told in 1956 that his mother, working at a hotel just west of (today's) Main and Union Streets, often helped to clean mule-cart loads of eels and shad brought from the fishery at Spayd's Wharf, the island near White House Lane, the north end (now) of Olmstead AFB.

Egle's History of Dauphin County told that in 1807 7 to 15 pound fish were caught in the Dauphin County area. Shad, rockfish, salmon, white salmon, and perch were common. Susquehanna shad sold in the Reading area after the 1818 Schuylkill Dams cut off the supply and again in 1894.

The islands at the Juniata's mouth were famous and valuable for their shad catches. Near Millerstown on the Juniata, the prize catch was a sturgeon of over a hundred pounds. (A similar catch occurred at Schuylkill Haven on the Schuylkill River.) Halifax gained part of its business life from its shad fisheries, "the largest and best paying." Here 50 to 60 wagons often waited for the catch.

Opposite Selinsgrove, Silverhead's Island was an excellent fishery producing a handsome income. At this point the record catch was 3000 in a single seine. Above Sunbury, where Shamokin Dam barred migratory fish from 1828 to 1904, the fishing accounts repeated the stories of the lower river. Catawissa had a noted shad fishery.

The Annals of Luzerne County told that fishing in the Wilkes-Barre area by white men began when 1772 settlers used seines brought from Connecticut as common property. There were 21 fisheries in Luzerne County each catching thousands of shad. Several times before 1828 there was insufficient salt to cure the catch. The fishing season extended from 10 April to 10 June, a season which enabled every man, woman and child within 20 miles of the river to feast and fatten on fresh shad. Every family salted down from one to three barrels for use during the remainder of the year. Fisheries netted shad at Berwick, Nescopeck, and Beach Haven. Between this last place and Nanticoke were three or four more. Fish Island, Stewart's, Plymouth, Wilkes-Barre, and Forty Fort each had a fishery. Monocacy Island had two; Scovel Island, one.

The Wilkes-Barre region recorded the greatest shad catch (found by author) on the Susquehanna. At Stewart's Fishery, a seine captured 10,000 shad in a single haul! Unable to pull the load to shore, men scooped them into boats, and loaded them directly in wagons driven into the river. Known as the "Widow's Haul" because a widow, who owned a share in the net, received the haul in turn as practiced by the net-owning group. Records of catches almost as great on the smaller Schuylkill River in a single day and accounts of 20 to 25,000 hauls on the Potomac verify this Susquehanna catch.

Above Wilkes-Barre, Towanda enjoyed fishing until the erection of canal dams. In the Athens-New York State Line area, shad arrived in schools. Lookouts directed seine operation. Fisheries operated day and night, often as fishing parties. Seines from 200 to 300 yards long and 33-meshes high were canoe carried as described at Safe Harbor, Pa. Hundreds of shad were caught in each sweep, often thousands. Inhabitants packed and salted many barrels. At plentiful catches, shad sold at \$3 per hundred with 125 fish to the hundred. The Chemung Branch of the Susquehanna in New York also enjoyed Susquehanna migratory fish. Carl Cramer's 1956 **Susquehanna** described brush-sweep fishing at Great Bend, Pa. Brush tied to a rope pulled by horses on either shore drove fish toward nets or into fishing areas of stakes, and often caught 1800 shad. At Cooperstown, N. Y., on Lake Otsego, considered the source of the Susquehanna River, Judge Cooper wrote about the famine of April 1789 "unusual shoals of fish . . . moving in the clear waters of the Susquehanna . . . able to take them by thousands. In less than ten days each family had an ample supply with plenty of salt."

Fishing then was of considerable importance on the Susquehanna from its mouth on the Chesapeake Bay to one of its sources (and without doubt all branches) in New York State.

A campaign to allow migratory fish to return to the Susquehanna dated from 1860. Stewart Pearce, author of the **Annals of Luzerne Coun-**

ty, proposed the removal of the canal dams — the railroads could readily handle all the traffic offered — so that ten million shad might be caught from the Susquehanna. At ten cents each, these fish were worth a million, worth more to the people than the Susquehanna in its 1860 condition. The poor would always have an abundance of cheap and nutritious food.

Selinsgrove recorded an 1866 campaign for the return of shad while Egle told that Harrisburg sportsmen introduced Potomac black bass to the river in 1868.

Harry Hall of Columbia, 90 years old in 1956, recalled that he sold Susquehanna shad by parcel post to Philadelphia before McCall's Ferry Dam ended the second fishing period of 1895-1910. Mr. Hall recalled hundreds of shad being caught in a single seine sweep.

In April 1905, York Haven reported shad running nicely. One net haul caught 50!! The backers of McCall's Ferry power dam bought the Thompson and Huagh's fisheries in Conestoga Township and the Lower Neck Fishing Rocks in Martic Township, Lancaster County.

By 1906, the dam at the York Haven Power Plant, drawing four-fifths of the Susquehanna's water into its turbines, received blame for the disappearance of shad. Rumors circulated that the fingerlings and returning-to-sea parent shad went through the turbines. A fisherman with a 1¼ mile net claimed that he caught only one shad in the 1906 season. Nine fishways at McCall's and the York Haven Dams were planned to allow migratory fish to ascend the river. A fishway, 45 by 4 by 4 feet, the same size as at McCall's, was erected at York Haven Dam. In 1910, the remarkable zig-zag fishway built at McCall's at a cost of \$15,000, allowed migratory fish, the newspaper account stated, to ascend the dam with facility.

While an occasional shad succeeds in crossing dams considered impassable, fish ladders to attract shad-school passage must consist of more than a series of pools within leaping distance for the fish. A Lehigh University professor of biology and ichthyology related that fish ladders capable of passing shad must be mirror lined to make the individual fish think it is in the midst of a school even though alone.

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