

## “Consider the Oyster!”

I was face down on the papery surface of Dr. Kraus’s examining table. My ten-year-old foot, bare and grass-stained no doubt, was defenseless and bottoms-up as the scalpel poked and sliced across a painful abscess. My mother must have thought her chatter was serving as a numbing agent, but I felt every cut along with acute embarrassment as I heard her say gaily, “Oh, my Susan is as steady as the little calf she hand-raised on a bottle. She can handle this!”

I survived the humiliation as well as the outpatient surgery, and I survived that and many other oyster shell cuts. After all, where would children of the Denbigh Colony go swimming, if not in the oyster-infested Warwick River?

As for the oysters themselves—a hazard for swimmers but a gourmet treat—they might have been what sealed the deal for Hertzler and Yoder when they made the decision to buy the original 1200 acres that Dr. Young had to sell.

I.D. Hertzler’s grandson Vernon seemed to think that was exactly what Dr. Young had in mind when he organized a boat trip that would end with an oyster feast on the sandbar. In Vernon’s words: “...Took them out Lucas Creek and around, let down oyster tongs, brought the oysters up—oysters, dip them in vinegar. Now these oysters are yours if you buy the property, see.” They did. They ate the oysters and they bought the property.

Until those early peach orchards and dairy farms were up and running, the river’s bounty of oysters continued to sustain the community and impress newcomers who weren’t used to Tidewater ways. Evangelist John S. Coffman marveled in his diary in December of 1898: “the tide being low we reached down with our hands and picked up a lot of large oysters.” This was after they had refused to buy fish at the “enormous price” of 10 cents a pound. What was not to like about delicious, nutritious free food, especially those in the frugal Mennonite tradition?

Another writer, Coffman Shenk, reminisced: “In those days we could go to Menchville, buy the oysters minus their hard shells, ready for frying or stewings, or for eating raw if you preferred, for \$1.00 per gallon.” This must have been about the time when people described looking out over the Warwick River populated with a hundred oyster boats in full sail.

While my mother preferred her oysters in a sandwich, fried, she would collaborate with Daddy on Christmas Eve to transform a little container of something gray and slimy into a glorious oyster stew. The smells of butter in the skillet, and warm milk, along with the tang of salt and marsh, filled the warm kitchen. I preferred munching the little golden oyster crackers, myself, but I sensed the festivity and tradition the stew represented.

Recently, Don Brunk shared photos of both the oysters he harvested from the Warwick River and the delicious meal he and Laurie prepared when they were served. Next time he might want to try Dave Longacher's recipe. It's part of local lore now that it's been published in the Warwick River Tide at least twice, in 1977 and again in 2011!

## OYSTER STEW

by Dave Longacher

*Reprinted from the November 3,  
1977 issue of the Tide*

- 1 pint shucked oysters  
(drain and reserve liquid  
to add to milk below)
- ¼ cup butter
- 1¼ teaspoons salt
- 1/8 teaspoon Tabasco
- A dash of paprika
- 2 cups milk plus liquid from oysters
- ½ teaspoon Worcestershire sauce



Heat all ingredients except oysters and butter in a saucepan at low heat. Meanwhile chop oysters into small pieces (this gives the stew additional flavor) and fry in the melted butter over medium heat for approximately 3 minutes or until edges curl. Add oysters to milk mixture, bring to almost boiling and serve