

THE

HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

March 2018

COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, March 15, 2018, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. The guest speaker will be Aimes Kergosien who will speak on passages from the book *Pearls and Memories of Hancock County* written by Chris Vinsonhaler, Editor and Elizabeth Vegolia, Project Director. **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 467-4090. **Respectfully we must request that you please call by noon on Wednesday, March 14**, to make your reservation in order to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-eight people and to apprise us of the number of lunches to order. Lunch is \$12.00, payable at the door, and it is catered by Almost Home Catering, Michelle Nichols, chef.

MEMBERSHIP FEES

It's time for current members to renew their memberships in the Historical Society and to encourage family and friends to join us, too. The price of membership is **\$30.00** per year. If your membership is due, your address label will read "Time to renew your membership." Please mail your renewal checks to Hancock County Historical Society, P. O. Box 3356, Bay St. Louis, MS 39521.



A 14083 Oyster Factory, Bay St. Louis, Miss.

Peerless Oyster Factory

Until it was destroyed by the 1947 hurricane, it was located on North Beach Blvd., current site of the Bay-Waveland Yacht Club.

The Early History of the Seafood Industry in Hancock County (1870—1960)

By
James Keating MD

The Mississippi Sound is blessed with bountiful seafood such as oysters, shrimp, crabs, and finfish. The inhabitants of our land, both ancient and modern, have fished these waters for sustenance and profit. Nevertheless, the birth of the seafood industry in Hancock County had not happened until the introduction of railroads,

the building of an ice factory in New Orleans, and the invention of a canning technique. This story begins during the Civil War, and the main characters are the oysters and shrimp, the Dunbar family, and the mariners who plied their trade fishing the Gulf Coast waters.

In the early days oysters were harvested by fishermen in locally built skiffs or sloops (a boat with one mast). The "oyster lugger" was a small, round-hulled wooden sloop that had two mariners (See illustration.). The lugger derived its name from the old nautical term for its specific type of lugsail that gave the boat's appearance its Old World, Mediterranean charm. Tonging was

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**LOBRANO HOUSE
 HOURS**

MONDAY — FRIDAY
 10:00AM — 3:00PM
 Closed: 12:00—1:00 (lunch)

MISSION STATEMENT

“TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.”

the original method of gathering oysters. Tongs are two poles arranged like a pair of scissors, similar to a huge salad-server. At the end of these twelve foot tongs are strong rakes which can be used to scrape across the bottom of shallow water and scoop the oysters together (See Illustration.).

The other principal workhorse of the seafood industry in this early (1800—1920) was the “white-winged” Biloxi schooner. This boat, in contrast to the lugger, was a long, sleek, two to three mast sailing vessel which was also broad-beamed and of shallow draft. The schooners used a large haul seine net manned by crews of eight to twenty men.

The arrival of the seafood industry in Hancock County was delayed until the Louisville and Nashville Railroad established a rail line from Mobile to New Orleans in 1872, which serviced the “watering holes” along the Gulf. Railroads transformed the supply chain management of the early seafood industry from slow-moving sailboats to same day freight transport. Equally important was

the invention of artificial ice in the mid nineteenth century. Commercialization of the seafood industry was now possible and consumption of the product was not limited to the local marketplace.

A third key development in this time frame was the invention of the tin-plated canning technique for the preservation of food. A New Orleans shoe-manufacturing family by the name of Dunbar pioneered the technique for seafood. George Washington Dunbar (1816-1878), the patriarch of the clan, sent his sons George Hallack Dunbar (1844-1917) and Francis Bird Dunbar (1845-1908) to Europe during the Civil War to study French canning methods. They returned and applied the new technology first to fruit and then in 1867 to shrimp. The Dunbar family built a floating cannery anchored off Grand Terre Island in Louisiana where they could process the fresh shrimp before it could spoil. When the first artificial ice plant in New Orleans could provide inexpensive ice in 1875 the Dunbars relocated their cannery to New Orleans.



Two different centuries of men tonging oysters

Some things always remain the same.



This is an old post card showing an oyster fleet on the Bay of Saint Louis.

It did not take long before the Dunbars became attracted to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. GW Dunbar & Sons opened a canning factory in Bay St. Louis at the end of present day Dunbar Avenue in 1882 to process oysters and shrimp. Workers were brought in from Baltimore, MD, many of whom were Austrians and Slavs. A cannery required a fleet of more than fifty boats to harvest shrimp during the summer and oysters during the fall, winter, and spring. Traditionally, the months with the letter "R" in the name of the month constituted the oyster season. Skilled boatbuilding had been practiced on the Gulf Coast since the early 18th century, but the emerging seafood industry fueled the opening of many large and small boatyards near the several canneries in Biloxi, Pass Christian, and Bay St. Louis. The Dunbar cannery thrived because of good management, a large labor force, and a large number of privately cultivated oyster reefs. The cannery in Bay St. Louis was virtually destroyed by a hurricane in 1893, but

it was rebuilt and operational again in 1896.

At this time Bay St. Louis was a sleepy little fishing village of approximately twenty-five hundred people. It is estimated that in 1892 over one half of its citizens acquired their livelihood, either directly or indirectly, from the seafood industry and fishing. The economic boom in the seafood industry in the 1890's coupled with a boom in the timber/turpentine industry and tourism changed the lives of many citizens in Hancock County because of increased employment and prosperity.

The brothers Frank and George Dunbar in 1902 merged with the Biloxi canning entrepreneurs, Lazaro Lopez (1850—1903) and W.K.M. Dukate (1853—1916), and formed the company Dunbar, Lopez, and Dukate with a capital stock of \$1.5 million. They now operated fifteen canneries in coastal Louisiana and Mississippi and were considered the largest company in the seafood industry in America. This conglomerate em-

ployed 2,500 workers and produced each year jointly 400,000 cases of oysters 40,000 cases of shrimp and 15,000 cases of figs for worldwide distribution.

During the early years of the 20th century, the states of Mississippi and Louisiana went to Federal Court to contest the boundary in the Mississippi Sound that would determine jurisdiction (taxation) over the many oyster reefs. According to local legend, a committee formed to do a survey decided to float a whiskey barrel from the mouth of the Pearl River. As it drifted out to sea, it hugged the Mississippi coast giving Louisiana a disproportionate share of the mutually contested oyster reefs in the Mississippi Sound. Some cynical historians have suspected that Mississippi was conned by the Louisiana advocates who picked the best time of east-setting tide to drop the infamous whiskey barrel into the water. Consequently, in 1915 the Dunbars moved their cannery in Hancock County to Violet, Louisiana.

A second cannery in Bay St. Louis was established in 1904 named the Peerless Oyster Company by Charles H. Yorsch of Baltimore, MD. The plant was located at the site of present day Bay Waveland Yacht Club. Besides shrimp and oysters, Yorsch would can vegetables, fruit, and turtles. This cannery ceased to exist after being destroyed by the Hurricane of 1947. A third seafood factory, the Johnson Cannery, flourished in the 1930's. It was owned and operated by Louis O. Johnson, Jr. It was located at the terminus of the Blaize wharf at the head of Washington Street. It also closed after being destroyed in the Hurricane of 1947. After 1947 the shrimp and oyster

fishermen of Hancock County would transport much of their produce to Biloxi by boat and later by truck.

After World War I small gasoline powered fishing boats also called “luggers” replaced wind-driven schooners and sloops. These boats could be rigged for shrimp with otter trawl nets in the summer and drag a dredge for oysters the rest of the year. The cost of the new luggers was only approximately \$1000 compared to \$2000 for the obsolete schooners. This resulted in a shift of ownership of the fishing boats from the factory to the individual fishermen. Entire families worked in the industry. The men worked in the boats bringing in the product, and the women and children worked in the canneries.

The seafood industry along the Gulf Coast survived the Depression although a few canneries went bankrupt. Technological innovations like automated canning and refrigeration storage were introduced. New distribution methods fed a high demand for these products and maintained profitability through hard times.

In conclusion, a flourishing seafood industry emerged in Hancock County in the late nineteenth century. The wealth created by the seafood, timber, and turpentine industries of that period provided the foundation of our modern 20th century local economy. Large numbers of finfish were hooked and netted also and then shipped from the store of Lucian M. Gex in the depot section of town to New Orleans. The canneries were a blessing for the local shrimper and oystermen. In a forthcoming publication the story of the more modern day seafood industry in Hancock County will be told. The Sylvia and Joe Cure family who bought a small fishing camp in Bayou Caddy in 1959 will be the

main characters of this compelling saga.

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Gulf Coast Historical and Cultural Exposition

By
Eddie Coleman

The City of Biloxi, the Mississippi Coast Historical and Genealogical Society, and Preserve Biloxi hosted the Annual Gulf Coast Historical and Cultural Exposition on Friday and Saturday, February 23, and 24 2018, at the Biloxi Civic Center on Howard Ave.

Organizations which pre-

sented exhibits were Mississippi Gulf Coast Historical and Genealogical Society; Mississippi Archeology Society; Mardi Gras Museum; Dan Ellis; Museum of Historical Photography; Historical Society of Gulfport; Miss. Gulf Coast National Heritage Area; Disability Connection; Slavonian Lodge Ladies Auxiliary; Mississippi Heritage Trust; Hancock County Historical Society; USM History Department, Beauvoir; Biloxi Public Library; Greek, Russia, Ukranian, and Romanian Society; Biloxi Historical Society.org and Ocean Springs Archive.net; Ocean Springs Genealogical Society; Keesler Air Force Base 81st Training Wing; Hibernia Society; West End Hose Company Fire Museum; Biloxi Bay Chamber of Commerce; D’Iberville Historical Society; Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art; Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum; and Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain.

The Hancock exhibit included an 1857 map of the Bay of Saint Louis and Shieldsboro Harbor, a child’s chair made by Prudent Mallard, noted New Orleans furniture maker, the preserved *Book of Marks and Brands* for Hancock County, and the Live Oak Registration information for Hancock County. The item which drew the most attention in the exhibit was this *Book of Marks and Brands*. In addition to the entries in the book, visitors were most intrigued by the handwriting and made many remarks bemoaning the loss of good penmanship nowadays.

History Day is held each February around February 13, the date d’Iberville and Bienville set foot on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 1699.



SNAPSHOTS FROM THE GULF COAST HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL EXPOSITION



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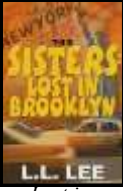
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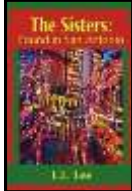
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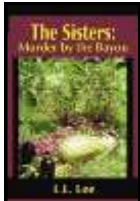
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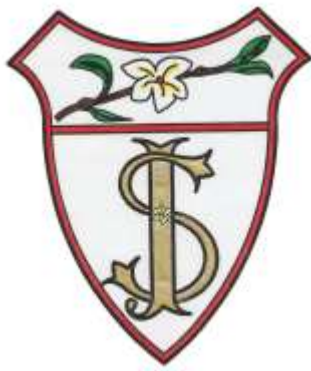
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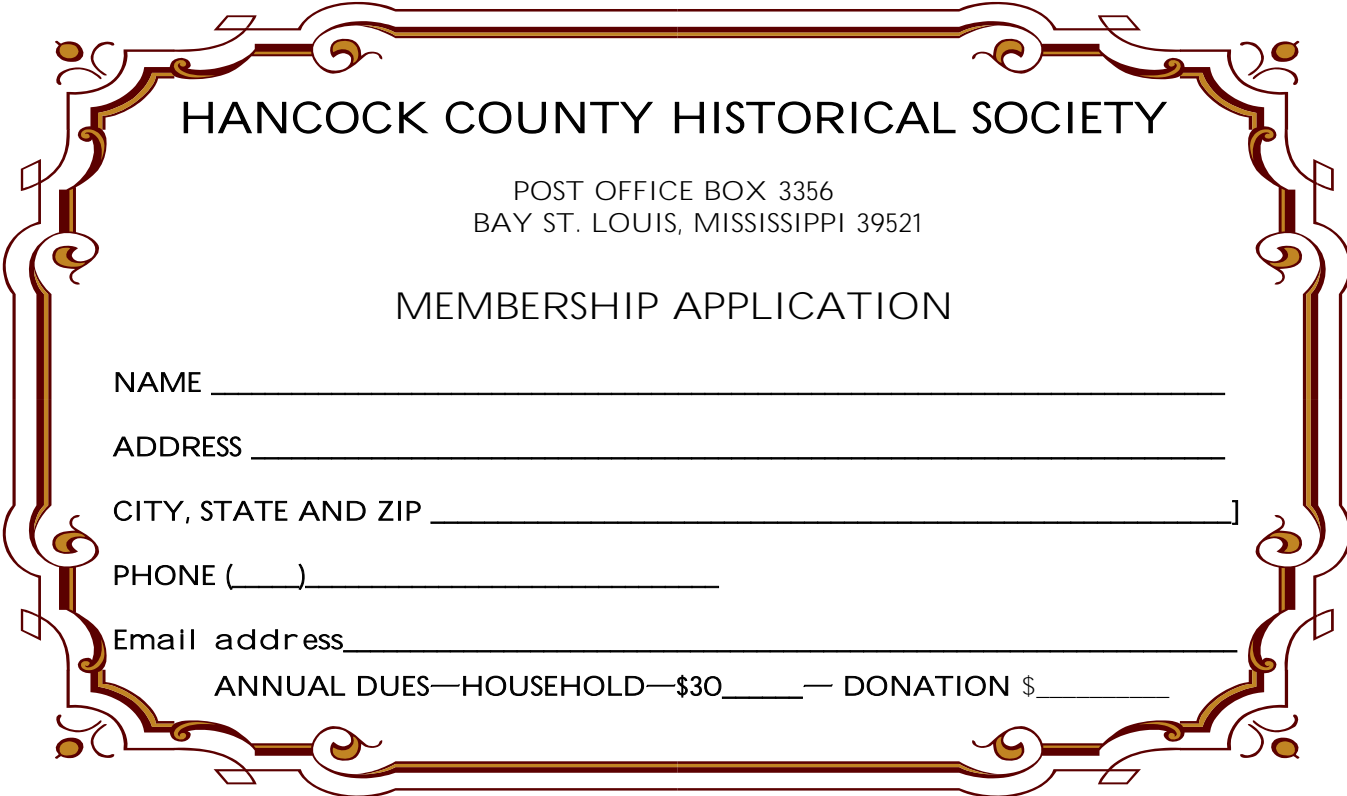
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