



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 35 No. 1 Send letters & stories to Dennis Historical Society, Box 607, S. Dennis 02660 or pjhowes@verizon.net
Copyright 2012 - Dennis Historical Society

January 2012

***Please visit our all-new website!!
And we have a new e-mail address***

***www.dennishistoricalsociety.org
info@dennishistoricalsociety.org***

Eels for Breakfast

During his famous visits to Cape Cod, Henry David Thoreau often turned to private homes for hospitality and a place to sleep. He made three visits, traveling the length of the peninsular by stage coach and with much walking, in 1849, 1850 and 1855.

On at least one of these trips, the hospitality offered him at a Cape Cod home was fried eel for breakfast and fried herring for dinner. If this fishy menu distressed the Concord resident, he made no note of it. After all, eels were a common dish during 19th century Cape Cod, as they had long been a staple in the diet of the Native Indians here and certainly, when available, of the early colonists.

According to Brad Chase, the aquatic biologist with the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, (and a descendant of one of the original settlers of Harwich), the Cape's nomadic Indian population depended heavily on a diet of smoked eels and dried berries, especially when traveling.

And like so much of the ocean fisheries, eels have seriously declined in Cape waters – fresh and salt – as human development and damaging environmental practices have increased during the Cape's spectacular 20th Century growth.

Chase's job these days has him working on ways to bring back the teeming population of eels that once came and flourished in the Cape's salt water estuaries, streams and creeks, as well as in many of the numerous fresh water ponds.

If you wonder how eels get into fresh water ponds that have no direct connection to an ocean-going stream, the answer is they cross on any available wetland. If there is a barrier to getting from the stream to the wetland, then, if available, the eels will use an eel-avator. What's that? It's a kind of elevator for eels, but that's another story and you would have to go next door to Harwich in the spring to see one in action.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, in season, I remember my father telling of seeing a great number of eels pushing their way with an incoming tide up Swan River to Swan Pond. When my parents camped on our land bordering the river in 1938-39 and when they built a summer cottage in 1940, my father often caught eels in the river. My mother always fried the eels. She was happy to have a gift from Nature to stretch her food budget.

My parents sold the cottage on Swan River in 1945 and we moved to South Dennis. During my teenage years, I recall she bought eels in season from Joe "Wiggles." His name was actually Joe Perry. He lived in West Dennis and sold fish products of all kinds door to door around the town from his truck.

To be honest, I never shared my parents' enthusiasm for an eel dinner. And I can't recall ever seeing eels in any local fish market. However, they must have been there, because in the 1985 edition of "A Cape Cod Seafood Cookbook" by Margaret Deeds Murphy (late of West Dennis) there are four recipes for eel: Fried Eel, Broiled Eel, Eel in Beer Sauce, and Grilled Eel with Caper Sauce.

If efforts like Brad Chases's are successful statewide in restoring the eel population to its former level, maybe eels will again be available locally. In spite of eels' snake-like appearance (the form we are most familiar with here) they have clear white meat, a sweet, fresh taste and are an excellent source of protein. At this time, eels are listed as a "protected" fishery.

In a recent talk in our neighboring town, sponsored by the Harwich Conservation Trust, Chase said that eels will eat just about anything below them on the food chain and, in turn, are eaten by just about anything above them, including numerous marine animals, shore and marsh birds, land mammals and, of course, people.

Besides being one of the prime food sources for the fin fish so vital to a healthy fishing industry, they have a truly fantastic life cycle, changing form several times during the average 15 years of each eels lifetime. What is known of their lives and wanderings is far outweighed by what today's marine scientists still don't know about them.

In the 1700s and 1800s, the early settlers of Cape Cod had no way of knowing that the eels they – and the Indians – caught in weirs set in tidal rivers and creeks – were born far away on the open ocean, usually considered to be only in the area known as the Sargasso Sea. But no one knows for sure.

And no one has ever seen them when they actually disperse from that area. The tiny hatchlings apparently always leave under the cover of a heavy rain. At this point, we would not likely recognize them as the same species we caught one summer day in a net along Swan River. The young eels, called “glass eels” are believed to be propelled by wind and ocean currents in their incredible journey that leads them to shores and inlets from Greenland to Brazil.

Even today, when eels are scarce in comparison to their multitudinous numbers in earlier centuries, I know they are still to be found in the creeks and tidal pools of the salt marshes on the south side of Dennis.

On several occasions I have seen a great blue heron pull a 16 to 18-inch eel from the water and then spend the better part of an afternoon in a battle to coax the wiggling giant down its throat. Sometimes, though, the eel wins and lives to swim away, leaving the hungry heron to search for easier prey.

Peggy Eastman

Tales of a Cape Cod Pantry

The kitchen in our Dennisport farmhouse had not one single cupboard. The one four-inch deep cabinet held the built-in ironing board, which dropped down for use. Instead, with no cupboards, we had a pantry right off the kitchen. It had the perfect counter for mixing ingredients, rolling out piecrust, and making cookies. The pantry had shelves for the dishes, drawers under the counters for silverware and cooking utensils. It had a big cupboard for pots and pans. Under the counter in one corner of the pantry was the little door to the tiny nine-foot circular Cape Cod cellar where we kept the big barrel of potatoes from Grampa’s garden.

One Saturday morning, Mother mixed up thick molasses cookies in a big, heavy, crockery bowl. We kids were delighted when we saw Mom get out that big tan bowl with blue stripes, for we knew what she planned to cook. The recipe she used was the very same one her grandmother used to make cookies for her four sons way back in the 1890’s. Grandpa always raved about the cookies and told us it was the favorite after school snack for he and his brothers. Our Mom had her grandmother’s recipe and had written beside it in her cookbook, “Good for school lunches and feeding the neighbors kids.”

The cookie dough was very thick and toward the end of adding the flour, it became very hard to mix. Mom got right into it with both hands. One day, horror of horrors, just at the end of adding the last of the flour, as we were watching Mom, the bowl slipped right off the counter, fell, and smashed into a thousand pieces on the pantry floor. Oh, no! We feared our cookies were ruined.

We knew there’d be no cookies for our school lunches that week. But Mom rescued most of the cookie dough. She picked up the broken bowl, still held together by the stiff cookie dough, and put the broken bowl upside down on the pantry counter. With a sharp knife, she proceeded to carefully cut away the broken crockery. She carved the cookie dough away from the smashed bowl, and threw out any dough with crockery shards stuck in it. She rolled out the dough that was left to about one half-inch thickness and cut out the cookies with the round biscuit cutter and baked them. We simply had fewer of the thick cookies than usual from that batch and were relieved to find no crockery crunch in any cookie.

We had another “almost” dessert disaster. One hot summer afternoon, Dad had taken his four kids to pick blueberries. He’d driven along a back road in Harwich and suddenly announced, “I smell blueberries!” He stopped the car, we piled out of the back seat and with each of us having an empty soup can hanging from a string around our neck, we went into the woods to pick blueberries. It took us a while to pick enough for a pie as we ate two or three berries for everyone we put in the can hanging from our necks.

When we got home, the housekeeper the oven heating and had a piecrust chilling, ready to roll out to make a blueberry pie for supper.

Shortly before supper Dad was drawn to the kitchen, by the delectable blueberry pie aroma. As a matter of fact, the whole house smelled good. He entered the kitchen just in time to see the housekeeper carefully pouring blueberry juice from the hot pie down the sink. She thought the pie was much too juicy. Our mild-mannered father practically went into orbit. “Stop! That’s the best part of the pie you’re pouring down the sink!” he roared. He made such a fuss, she never again poured off a drop of juice from any pie. We still enjoyed the blueberry pie for our dessert, even though it wasn’t as juicy as it should have been.

On Saturday night Mom always mixed up bread, using a hand turned bread mixer. Having the big tin mixer with a sturdy dough hook meant she could use the whole five pound bag of flour. The mixed yeast dough was left to rise overnight in the pantry and next morning the dough had risen to the top very top of the mixer, and Mom turned down the dough. Sometimes, on a warm night, the bread might rise so high it even lifted off the cover of the mixer. Mom made us fried dough cakes for breakfast to go with her baked beans. And Dad

would fry up a pound of bacon for the whole crew. Then there was just enough bread dough to bake our Sunday dinner rolls and shape and bake two loaves of home made bread for two days of school sandwiches. On Sunday afternoons the baking bread filled the kitchen with a wonderful yeasty fragrance.

Many delicious breads and desserts began in that tiny pantry room off the kitchen.

Betty Dean Holmes

KEZIAH'S MILL

A new historical marker has been erected in the South Dennis Historic District by the Dennis Historical Commission, commemorating "Keziah's Mill." This was one of at least three windmills in South Dennis used for the grinding of grain.

This windmill was built at the north end of the so-called Highbank Fields. This is the area west of Main Street extending from Capt. Nickerson Lane northward to Highbank Road, and extending to Bass River. Water for this field was plentiful from springs and from Tobey's Swamp.

The exact date when the windmill was built, and the builder, have not been discovered. Maps show that the mill existed before 1793. James Nickerson (1744-1815), a Revolutionary Soldier, with his wife Keziah Godfrey (1750-1823), owned ¼ interest in the mill and were its operators. When James died in 1815, the windmill became known as "Widow Keziah Nickerson's Windmill," and it continued to be operated by Keziah and her sons James (1770-1818), Jephtha (1772-1825) and Elijah (1789-1871).

At that time the mill was located north of Edmond Nickerson's house (NW corner of Highbank and Main), slightly back from Main Street, and to the west of the present intersection of Main and Upper County (where the plaque is now located). Elijah's house sat on Main Street, just north of Edmond Nickerson's driveway, and remnants of Elijah's root cellar may still be found there. This area is defined in a land deed of division of the estate of Capt. James Nickerson, and there is no doubt of where, within a few rods, the windmill sat at that time.

Elijah had little interest in milling, and Jephtha and James Jr. kept on with the job for the few years until Jephtha passed away in 1825. His heirs sold their half-share in the mill to Seth Taylor Whelden (1787-1877) in Oct 1828 for \$230. Capt. Whelden, who had been a coasting master, and master of freight vessels to Europe, lived at what is now 324 Main Street. He was fairly well off, and tiring of the sea, and looked for this as a possible opportunity to stay ashore and be prosperous. Within a few days of the first purchase, Capt. Whelden purchased the remaining half of the mill from James Nickerson Jr. for \$275. It appears that Capt. Whelden operated the mill at its then location for a few years.

In 1833, Capt. Whelden bought four acres of land at the end of what is now Bass River Lane, described as all the land between his house and Bass River. Small additional parcels to the north and south of this initial piece were added in 1838. Sometime soon after this date, Capt. Whelden moved the windmill from behind the homestead of Elijah Nickerson to his new land, on the bluff overlooking Bass River. Bass River Lane was then called "the way to the mill."

The mill continued to operate under Capt. Whelden's direction until after the Civil War. Written evidence shows that he paid laborers to fix the mill vanes, to "pick the stones", and to make sails for the vanes until 1862. Anecdotal evidence indicates that corn was grown on the Highbank Fields, ground into meal in Keziah's Mill, and transported by schooner from West Dennis to Union troops in Virginia.

The demise and disposition of Keziah's Mill is not yet found. It is not mentioned in the settlement of the estate of Seth Taylor Whelden in 1877. Whether it was torn down or moved to another location is unknown as of this writing.

Keziah's Mill is unique in the history of our village. It is the only mill we know about operated by and named for a woman, and it probably operated for over 100 years. It also demonstrates how man has used wind power on Cape Cod over the generations – a subject that is still in the headlines today.

Burt Derick

Winter Solstice

There will be no Board Meeting in January. The next Board Meeting, open to all members, will be Tuesday, February 14 at 2 pm at the Jericho Historical Center, 90 Old Main St., West Dennis.

The next Newsletter will be the March issue and will include your *DHS Annual Calendar*.

Dennis Historical Society
P.O. Box 607
South Dennis, MA 02660-0607

Non-profit Org.
US POSTAGE PAID
Permit No. 24
South Yarmouth, MA
02664



ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

What a December it's been at our museums!

1736 Josiah Dennis Manse: This beautiful home on Sat., Dec. 10th was decorated in finery from nature, welcomed a gathering of volunteers, new DHS members and committee persons to a lovely social event. After resting overnight, the museum welcomed nearly 500 visitors who looked, ate goodies, drank cider & punch, bought little trees, listened to the sounds of the lovely "*Cellobrations*" playing songs of Christmas inside and the D-Y Band outdoors. What a day ... and all of this in just 4 hours!
June Howes

1801 Jericho Historical Center:

Sunday December 4 was Teddy Bear Victorian Tea Party at Jericho Historical Center. Mostly sunny skies prevailed as 12 children (each with a favorite teddy bear) and nine mothers/grandmothers gathered for afternoon tea in the historic home built by Capt. Theophilus Baker in 1801.

The house was decorated in Victorian style. Visitors were treated to an "English Tea" complete with china, silver, linens, flowers and music. A story and crafts entertained the young ones. Tea, cocoa and goodies were enjoyed by all, Special thanks to all who helped, especially Susan Kelley's floral arrangements and Dawn Dellner's story and craft time.
Peggy Eastman

1867 West Dennis Graded School House:

On December 6th and 7th, the West Dennis Graded School Committee was pleased to host the 2nd grade classes from Ezra Baker School. About eighty students along with their teachers and chaperones attended four lively sessions conducted by our own Burt Derick. He regaled the children with tales of school life in the 1800's and they were all enthralled. The children were attentive, asked numerous questions, and were fascinated at the basic differences between schools of long ago and today. Burt also talked them through the "Bounty of the Seas" on display in the exhibit room. They loved the tales of whaling, sword fishing, and the stories of Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Ben Baker.

As always, the committee is grateful to the Town of Dennis for allocating funding for these student field trips.
Roger Sullivan

Dennis Historical Society:

"O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree," how lovely were your branches ... the 21 decorated, one-of-a-kind, tabletop trees designed made and donated by DHS members realized a grand total of \$1,050 for the Caleb Chase Fund to aid elderly needy in Dennis. Congratulations to the creators and buyers - our thanks to each and every one. A belated Merry Christmas & Blessings in 2012 from all of us involved with *your* Dennis Historical Society.
Jah