

INSPIRATIONAL DAYS ON THE BAY

Columnist David Campiche recalls his youthful days on Willapa Bay picking oysters

Stories have it that Chief Nahcotti (some recent evidence suggests the native was called Old Klickeas) saw two whitemen in a stolen canoe paddling in the dense fog, lost for sure and headed for the deadly Willapa Bar. The good chief pounded out a communication on a hollow log. Here is safety and comfort, the message seemed to convey. Espy and Clark followed the drumming to shore, and soon after that spot became Oysterville, a lovely pioneer village on Willapa Bay. The year was 1854.

Nahcotti shared with the pair the native oysters, a bivalve similar to today's Kumamoto oysters (mild brininess, sweet flavor and honeydew finish). Those pioneers founded this small community and for a while it flourished. Poor Nahcotti died of either smallpox, influenza or the measles. So did most of the Chinook. So much for being generous.

Not so many years later, the indigenous oysters were played out. Time passed before the introduction of the Pacific oyster. That oyster, or shells covered with spat (larvae), arrived from Japan in force. A new incarnation began. Locals call the oyster the Willapa. I believe them to be one of the most delicious oysters in the world. Much of that has to do with the cleanest estuary in the country, if not the planet. One eats what one sows.

Those early years of my youth — so far away and not so far away — haunt and inspire me. I was 17, and that summer of 1965 I picked oysters for Jack Wiegardt, a clever man with strong ideas and a particular eccentricity who didn't seem to like this son of a local doctor. But I picked well for him. My motivation was dollars. A hard summer's work back then might generate a couple of thousand dollars. Those dollars paid all the tuition, room and board at most private West Coast collages. I wanted an education and worked hard for it. Oh, how those economics have changed.

An oysterman picked the bivalves at low tide. The day before — as the tide swirled about battered hip-boots — we would secure long alder stakes into the soft Willapa mud, marking out the location of our scow or barge for the next day's picking. The craft would be maneuvered into position during the flood tide. As the waters retreated, we would venture out on foot from the scow, filling the bushel basket with live oysters and the mud that clung to them.



Photo by Dwight Caswell

David Campiche's memories of picking oysters on Willapa Bay in the 1960s glaze over the arduous labor of oystering and rally around the jewel-faceted splendor of the summer sunrises.

During the next several hours, a hearty individual might make up to 200 trips back and forth in unctuous mud to the flat-topped scow, leaving about 50 or 60 pounds of the succulent oysters on the top of the wooden vessel with each passing. The mud was up to a foot deep, and with each step, one worked further and further away from the scow. Muscles protested, but what the heck. With thighs like fence posts, an average young oysterman running a football that next fall could carry three tacklers into the end zone.

The days on the bay were inspirational. Then as now, the Willapa simmered between mornings of dense heron-gray to sun blazes with colors rich in reds, golds and quicksilvers. One can't really pick apart the subtleties of so much color or hue, but the writer's mission is to valiantly try.

As I approach a plateau of the 1960s, those mornings of exploration on lovely Willapa Bay seem to neglect the arduous labor of oystering and rally around the jewel-faceted splendor of these summer sunrises, a rare guest, I suppose, superim-

posed on annual rainfall that deposited nearly 100 inches of wet Hail Marys that spelled out Northwest weather over the last century.

Traveling in small boats, we crisscrossed that shallow water. The bay teemed in waterfowl. Along the edges, particularly along Long Island, every nature of four-legged mammal seemed to wander into view.

The first days of this new employment became an initiation period. Handed a bushel basket, I was told to capture a large crafty raccoon that was feeding on the mudflat. I chased that dang critter across foot-seizing mud for what seemed hours. The raccoon retreated only steps ahead of mine, until, that point of time when he or she seemed undeniably trapped. Then my furry friend hissed, and, welling up in defensive mode, sprinted away, leaving me exhausted and frustrated. The older oystermen cackled and guffawed.

I've eaten the delicacies ever since (oysters, not raccoon): fried, sautéed, baked; Rockefeller, Italian, poached, and, of course, au naturel. And many other variations, all pleasant in their savory evoca-

tion. Often I would smuggle an oyster knife onto the oyster grounds, and, when hungry, open a few, clean them in the briny water of the Willapa, and send them unceremoniously on a short journey into the ol' tummy-tum. This made me happy then, and happier today.

Like the taste of that fine oyster repast, the beauty of that bay lingers. Unlike so many disappointments we experience today as we trudge back to the precious landscapes of our past, the Willapa remains virtually intact. Forgoing the impacts of warming waters and acidification, the treasure of this bay may forever foster delight and inspiration. We work at that. Certainly the oystermen do, and the environmentalists (though both sides pick on each other like birds of prey) and, please, you and me, too. Willapa Bay is our future, and the future is our deliverance.

And I covet those memories. And I pray for a kind tomorrow, one with plates of pan-fried oysters, gentle laughter, and the promise of more — more of those succulent and salty bivalves.