

As Lent arrives, It's time to say Oysters 'R' us

Mr. d'Iberville's First Supper

Early settlers planned their meals with meager ingredients then congregated around campfires to share stories and information.

From the journals of Pierre Le Moyne

d'Iberville, we learn that his first meals on the Gulf Coast consisted of sagamite (ground up corn boiled with a bit of bear grease) accompanied by wine and brandy. This, of course, was before he and his shipmates found a treasure trove of fresh fish, crabs, shrimp, and oysters along the Biloxi shoreline. A seafood buffet, indeed!

Back in the Day



By Jane Shambra

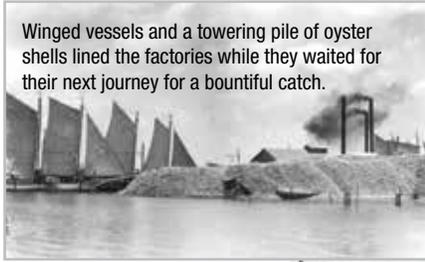
A Treasure within a Treasure

The abundance of seafood was not the only treasure uncovered. Within some of the oysters' homes, the shell, a pearl may be found. Early pirates collected and saved special pearls in their treasure chests. But, do you know how a pearl is formed? The poor little mollusk becomes irritated when a grain of sand or other irritant enters its humble shell home and it secretes a substance, thus, creating a unique gem. Over time, a magnificent pearl is formed. A treasure from the waters below.

Artifacts from the Past

Back-in-the-day Biloxi was known as the Seafood Capital of the World. So many vessels navigated the waters, in fact, the Biloxi Lighthouse was erected in 1848 to help guide fishermen home safely. In the late 1880s, canning factories opened and locally caught seafood, including tons of oysters, was processed in Biloxi. Piles and piles of oyster shells were discarded. During that time, many livelihoods depended on how much seafood was caught and how many times the factory would blow their whistles signaling a call for workers.

Recent street reconstruction projects throughout the city have unearthed relics of our past: fragments and even whole oyster shells from decades gone by.



Winged vessels and a towering pile of oyster shells lined the factories while they waited for their next journey for a bountiful catch.

▼ In the early 1930s on Biloxi's Back Bay, workers were hired to load and transport mounds of oyster shells, then plant and scatter them to support new reefs. This was called the "Shell Planting Project."



Larger than life. These Biloxi oyster pyramids provided quite a challenge for the factory workers to be able to reach the pinnacle of the shell mounds to deposit the catch of the day.

◀ This photo was snapped back-in-the-day near the Cruso Canning Company when oysters were more than plentiful and shipped all over the world straight from the Biloxi factories in both raw and canned varieties.

Early recycling in Biloxi

These unearthed relics may also be from the shells that were used to build roads, a process that began in 1875 with Mayor H.J. Meaut. He had them used to fill in and pave the muddy Biloxi roadways. Unfortunately, over time, the dust became unbearable and watering trucks were called upon to tone down the issue.

Grist mills were built, where shells were ground to a fine powder and added to the diet of chickens. The oyster shells continued to be recycled and used for home construction. In the City of Biloxi publication "The Building of Biloxi," a famous Biloxi house that still stands is noted: The Bowen House, built in 1906 for Louis Bowen. It was partly constructed from a mixture of oyster shell grit leftover from the oyster canning industry. Locals affectionately today refer to this structure, at Lee Street and Howard Avenue, as the "oyster shell house."

The March Diet

This year, March marks the month of food. Mardi Gras and King Cake season ends, and

another tradition of culinary delights begin. Churches and restaurants will feature meals of seafood, whether it's shrimp, oysters, fish, or crabs.

Many of our local restaurants will offer "Biloxi Bacon" on their menus. This entrée is not bacon at all. It's actually mullet, the manna from heaven, the food that saved many of our ancestors from starvation when times were tough.

Many homemade dishes and eateries will feature oysters at this time. Grandma always told us that a month with an "R" is the best time to eat oysters, and this month ranks in that pick.

Thus, oysters really "R" us in Biloxi, part of our history, part of our cuisine, and even part of the land upon which we all travel.

▶ Looking for oyster recipes, or want to know more about when Biloxi was the Seafood Capital of the World? Visit the Local History and Genealogy Department at the downtown Biloxi Library on Howard Avenue to learn more.