

Legendary Biloxi booster and civic leader Anthony V. Ragusin (1902-1997) captured this image of a group of factory workers on the Biloxi waterfront in the 1930s or 1940s, piling on oyster shells at the Barataria or Gorenflo factories. Photo from the Biloxi Public Library local history archives.



A shell of an idea

It wasn't that long ago, really, that you'd see the massive mounds of sun-bleached oyster shells along the Back Bay and Point Cadet waterfronts.

The hulking piles, some 40 feet tall, were the by-product of the ring of seafood processing factories that once lined the eastern end of Biloxi.

Oh, the stench at the height of the season as you drove the winding streets along Back Bay and the Point. The smell of money, they called it.

The mounds were all but gone by the 1990s. The city was on its way from being hailed as "the seafood capital of the world" to ushering in a new industry that today makes Biloxi and the "Gulf Coast" the fifth-largest gaming market in the country.

Still, turn a spade of dirt anywhere in Biloxi today and you'll uncover an oyster shell.

Today, even without the seafood processing volume, we're generating a significant amount of oyster shells, according to a report by The Nature Conservancy.

The Conservancy said South Mississippi is home to 85 seafood restaurants, including 51 that serve oysters on the half shell. The heaviest concentration:

▶ See more about oysters shells, piles and video, at biloxi.ms.us/oystershells

The nom de plume Nick L Shrimp is a homage to Walter Fountain (1920-2003), original olde crab, longtime editor of the Biloxi-D'Iberville Press, and longtime Biloxi Chamber of Commerce manager.



18 in Biloxi, eight apiece in Bay St. Louis and Gulfport, and six in Ocean Springs.

Those restaurants shuck about 5.1 million oysters a year, and the shells generate 1,200 cubic yards or 1.6 million pounds of discarded shells a year.

That's where the Conservancy wants to step in. The non-profit, working for the Mississippi DEQ, which is drawing from Restore Act money, wants to see a recycling program that would intercept shells before they go to a landfill.

The program could involve 10 to 20 restaurants and collect a half-million pounds, 250 to 500 cubic yards of shells, a year.

Contracts for coordinating restaurants and collection – the restaurants are on board if it's free, they say – are in the offing, and a site would have to be found for curing the shells, which takes about six months.

No word on cost. Somebody else is paying anyway. And in promoting this environmentally focused program, the Nature Conservancy likes to say that eating a dozen raw oysters at a local restaurant is

actually an act of conservation! Be a good citizen and order a dozen.