

The Fishing Industry in Palacios

By: Alta Cox, 1985

At the turn of the century, there was no sound of motors out on the bay, and not many boats. The only sounds heard were the cries of seagulls, the splash of an oar in the water, the creak of an oarlock or pulleys, and the flag of a sail as the wind drove the sailboats to their fishing grounds or oyster reefs.

In the early 1900s, there were three oyster and fish houses from the south end of sixth street on west. These were built out over the water, with narrow walkways back to shore. These were mostly planked with barrel staves; so, they were concave. When the fish or oysters were unloaded, the boats would be anchored between the oyster house and the shore where the water was calmer.

Ruthven Packing Company was started in 1903 by A.R. Hillyer and Duncan Ruthven. Ruthven later took over the business and operated it for 30 years. He owned a warehouse where Minimax Groceryⁱ now stands, and their fish and oysters were hauled up there by wagon, to be packed and iced for shipment. Dietch's Liberty Fish and Oyster Company also hauled its fish and oysters to a warehouse to pack and ice, but the other house, J.J. Burkes, packed theirs at the oyster house.

The sailing boats I could find out about were the White Wing, owned by Lazaro Frangulie; J.T. Hicks, and a scow named Falcon, owned by Howard Stapp, Sr. The J.T. Hicks, White Wing, and Red Wing raced each other every summer on July 4th, in front of the Pavilion. From early Beacon files of 1915, I found "Capt. Geo. Hicks left for Galveston with his sloop loaded with 1400 watermelons, 2 bales of cotton & other produce."

When fishing, the sailboats would play the net out, sailing in a circle back to shore, and the men would then jump overboard and start hauling the net in by hand. When most of the net was piled up, and the fish were all bunched in one end, one man with leather boots laced up, would wade in, and get out all the stingrays he could see, before the other men got the rest of the fish out of the net.

When oystering, the sailboats were only used to get back and forth to the reefs, and to bring the oysters back. While on the reef, a small barge was used to pile the oysters on, and cull off the dead shell.

For a while, there was an oyster camp at Oyster Lake with a bunkhouse for the workers. The oysters were opened there, and the shell taken back out in the lake and planted to make new reefs.

About 1918 Mr. Fred Bates, Sr. took a barrel of fish to Grand Bay in Alabama to ship by train to Georgia. At the depot, he met a man who was promoting Palacios Development Corp. He went home with Mr. Bates and persuaded him to come to Palacios with him on the train. Mr. Bates stayed about a week, but the next year he brought his family over on two boats, the Helen B. and Emma. There was plenty of fish, but no market closer than Beaumont, so they returned to Alabama. However, they liked what they saw and so returned to Palacios in 1922 to try out shrimping. They caught 1200 lbs. in one short drag with a 35 ft. net and brought them to

town. They shipped 600 lbs. to Beaumont, but could not sell the rest, so they passed the word around town, if anyone wanted shrimp to bring their containers, and they could have what they wanted. What was left was shoveled overboard. So, they did not try shrimping again for a few more years.

About 1925, Carlton Crawford and his father, John W. Crawford, opened a cannery where they canned figs, and later, chile and tamales. From early Beacon files, I found in 1925 "Crawfords shipped 50,000 jars of preserved figs to New York." Then about 1930, Crawford went to Alabama with the Bates Boys to get others to come to Palacios and catch shrimp for the cannery. Several boats came from Alabama, and others were built here in Palacios.

One of the first boats to shrimp here was the Helen B., one of the boats the Bates family came to Texas on. It was a lugger type with the cabin on the stern and mast in front of the cabin. It was in operation until 1970 and was placed in the City Park as a Historical Marker in 1973.

About 1926, some of the sailboats were converted to motor power, and by the middle 1930's there were no more work boats with sails.

When the boats started catching shrimp, no one here made nets, or even knew how. So, the Bates boys got a net in Alabama made by Charlie Place, and Ted Bates, Sr. copied that net for other boats. He decided the mesh they needed to catch the size shrimp Crawfords wanted was 1 ¾ inch mesh. That is what they used, and it later became the legal-size mesh. He kept making nets for many years.

In the early 1930's, the boats were on a limit, because the market was slow. But the shrimp was so plentiful, that a boat going out late, might meet an early boat coming in with more than his limit. So, the early boat would shovel his surplus over on the other boat, and soon he had his limit, too.

The first nets were made from cotton webbing and had to be dipped in hot tar to keep from rotting. But the tar would burn them, so they were put in a tub with water. A 35ft. net would go in a #3 wash tub.

In the 1930's and 1940's some of the boats working for Crawford's were:

Alice A	Emma	Lillie R
Allie	Emma M	Lincoln
B9818	Evelyn K	Little Sister
Barbara Jane	Fleur de Lis	Lou Ann
Barbara Lee	Gene	Martha M
Bernice	Helen B	Martha W
Bettie L	Hilda	Matagorda #1 & #2
Bull Moose	Imogene	Minnie S
Callie C	Jeanette	Mystery
Cecile	J.T.	Niteauk
Clipper	Juanita	Ocean Mist
Dorothy Ann	Lavena	Peerless
Dixie	Lillie C	Peter Mac

Pride	Shorty	Tony
Riptide	Silver Cloud	Universe
Rose Marie	Stella	W.D.
Ruby	Texas Queen	Wimpy
Other boats in Palacios were:		
Alexandria	Faye	Rooster
Carolyn	Gertrude	Rosemary
Crab	Herbert B	Viola
Dewey	Morning Light	

By 1938, Crawford Cannery was averaging 40 to 60 thousand pounds a day of head-on shrimp, and some days, up to 100,000 pounds. They had 30 women and 15 men in the cannery, and 200 to 300 peelers as needed.

The salt they sued to make the brine came in a bag with a red star on it, but it was hard to bleach out. When Crawford began to use more salt, he asked for unlettered sacks, and got them. They sold the sacks for five cents each, and half the people in town had dish towels and underwear made out of salt sacks.

Also, Crawford went to Sears, Roebuck, and Company and ordered white uniforms in small, medium, large, and X large, with white headbands and green aprons. Some of the women walked home through town, just to show their uniforms. Later, they had blue aprons. The cannery closed in 1942 and the shrimp were sold fresh, until they started freezing them in 1953.

Sometime between 1922 and 1927, H.L. Lantron built a fish and oyster house out over the bay, making the fourth one. He later sold out to Clarence Buller. Then Buller sold out to the Colter Corporation, and they built a new building east of Crawford's in 1937.

During World War II, Crawford got a contract to sell mullet to the Army, and the net fishermen were allowed to fish in closed waters with a special permit to catch mullet. By that time, most of the nets were trammel nets, which consisted of two pieces of large mesh hung together, with a piece of smaller mesh hung very loosely in between. When a fish would hit the net, the smaller mesh would go through the larger mesh and make a pocket, and the fish would be trapped in that pocket. The boats would pull motor skiffs behind them to the area to be finished; then the skiffs would be used to set out and take up the nets.

After WWII, diesel fuel was cheaper than gasoline, and a lot of the shrimp boats were equipped with diesel motors. By 1965, diesel fuel was thirteen cents per gallon, but it had been ten cents per gallon before that.

Crabbing as an industry did not get started in Palacios until after WWII. Some man named Willis operated the first crab processing company at the north end of Turning Basin #2, and later they were bought out by the Lowes, who operated under the name of start Crab Company. In 1970, Collins Seafood bought out Star Crab Company as they needed more space.

Through the years, hurricanes, bad shrimp seasons, and time itself have caused many changes. Some of the dealers have weathered the hard times, and others have sold out or have been put out of business by storms.

In the 1940's, Clarence Buller and Clarence Ripke had a fish house on the east side of Turning Basin #1. Then about 1950, they dissolved partnership, and Ripke went into business on the west side of Turning Basin #1, and his business, Texas Fish Company, is still in operation in 1985, run by his grandson, Ricky Ripke.

In 1954, the Seaman family started the Seaman Fish Company at the southeast corner of Turning Basin #2 and operated there until 1958.

Al Gallot had a fish house on the northeast side of Basin #1 in 1969-1970, and he sold out in spring of 1970 to Palacios Seafood Company, owned by Fred Harr. They operated until 1979, selling out to Captain Bill's Seafood, owned by Bill Scurlock, and still in operation in 1985. Palacios Seafood also had a fish house on Basin #2, from 1972 to 1975. They also built a freezer on Newsom BLVD which they still own.

Lovell Fish Company was located on the east side of Basin #2 and was in business from 1963 to 1979.

Latapie seafood Company took over the building on Basin #2, occupied by the Palacios Seafood Company and is still at the same location in 1985.

Collins Seafood built a cannery on the west side of Basin #2 and was just getting started to can shrimp, when the 1961 Hurricane Carla demolished the plant. It was rebuilt and continued operations until 1968, when it was sold to Foltz Coffee Company. Mr. Collins stayed out of business until March 1969, when he opened a crab processing plant on the southeast corner of Turning Basin #2. While this was being built, they handled fresh shrimp, with Cliff Elliott managing this part. In 1970, they needed more space, so they bought out Star Crab Company. In 1973 Mr. Collins sold out on account of poor health to a Baltimore group. But in 1983, Cliff and Anna Mae Elliott purchased it from the Maryland group and still operate it in 1985.

Dumas Seafood came to Palacios in 1960, taking over Crawford Packing Company and the large freezing plant. E.N. Dumas was president and continued in business here in Palacios until November 1978, when he moved the plant to Brownsville.

In 1973, some of the shrimpers and fishermen organized the Gold Coast Seafood Co-op to try and find a better market and higher prices for the boat owners. They are still in operations in 1985 and have a loading dock on east side of Basin #1 and part of the old Crawford plant. They have enlarged the original harbor and added more docking space.

Over the years, the boats have gotten bigger and the motors more powerful. In 1936 the average length of the boats was from 36-40 ft and were planked hulls. Today, in 1985, many of the boats being built are constructed of plywood, with fiberglass on the outside. But many of the boats fishing in the Gulf are of steel construction. Some are as large as 85 ft in length and have living quarters as nice as some of our homes. They usually make long trips, and the shrimp are headed on the boat before being iced, to make them keep better.

Sources:

Various issues, *Palacios Beacon*

Interviews with Ed Barrett, George Frangullie, John Martino, Theo Cox, Anna Mae Elliott, Hazel Hawkins, Nelo Seaman, Ted Bates, Jr., Vernon Bates, Sr., and Roger Lovell.

ⁱ Minimax Grocery building was located on Main Street right across from the current Ace Hardware.