

Sunrise Fish Company

Written by Mary Schaper 2008

The Sunrise Fish Company, as well as the Short Beach and the Long Island Fish Companies, were originally situated on the South side of Oak Beach across from the Fire Island Coast Guard Station. In 1935 the State Boat Channel was being dredged and the sand was thrown to the north side of the channel, thus creating a new sand island. Robert Moses made the decision to re-locate the commercial fish companies from Oak Beach to this new island so that the beach road from Jones Beach could extend eastward to what is now Captree State Park and Boat Basin. This new island would be named Havermeyer Point Island, and known as Fisherman's Island to the locals.

The fishermen built large boardwalks on their section of land which had been divided into distinct Fish Company areas. Sunrise Fish Company was deeded the most Southern part of the new island with Short Beach and the Long Island Fish Company of West Sayville the second and third section. Many of the equipment sheds were transported across by boat to the new Fishermen's Island and several summer family homes were built by the fishermen at a time that fishermen only came to their mainland homes on Wednesday nights and weekends. At that time there weren't any bridges that crossed the bay and families were more isolated. Each fishing company had a "cookhouse" with a hired cook who provided all the fishermen's meals. The cook lived there the entire season. The fishermen slept in bunk houses, two or three to a house, ate all their meals in the cookhouse, and could go to the mainland on weekends if they had family locally. Fishermen were up by 6 A.M., had breakfast in the cookhouse and set out for their nets by 6:30.

Sunrise Fish Company had 4 nets in 1942. The fishermen returned from the ocean around noon, depending on the weather and the catches. The cook had a hot meal ready for them after which the Pound boat crossed the bay to unload and pack their catch on the mainland. If there was a boatload of fish all the crew was needed inshore where they packed the fish and iced it up before crossing the bay again for a fish supper by the cook and then an early bedtime.

If the catch was light some of the crew stayed on the dock to repair nets, dip them in copper paint and prepare them for when they were needed. Nets were changed about every 4 to 5 weeks depending on weather conditions and the amount of sea growth they collected.

Fishermen worked Monday through Friday, 6 A.M to about 6 P.M. and a so-called ½ day on Saturday; that is, they worked until the fish were unpacked, iced up and put in storage and the fish boat was scrubbed down. They all hoped for a light catch on Saturdays!

Upkeep of equipment on the boats - the sharpies, the scow and pound boat, plus the constant care and repair of the net sheds and boardwalk kept the fishermen busy constantly. The houses were originally lighted with kerosene lamps until later when a generator house was built. The generators were maintained daily and used to provide electricity on a needs only basis. Their main use was to power the water pump and to provide electricity for the wringer washing machines that were used in the 1950s and 1960s for the fishermen's families.

We did have gas stoves and some had hot water tanks heated by propane. The pound boat brought ice for the ice boxes several times a week to keep food cool until the era of gas refrigeration came in. Families with ice boxes used their perishable meats and vegetables first, then relied on fish catches which came in daily.

Children of the fishermen who lived at the beach loved the island way of life and never wanted to go ashore. They swam and clammed and rowed. They visited kids on the other Islands, and never tired of playing in the sand, the water and in the net sheds. They put on skits for their families. The big event of the day was when the pound boat was seen coming around the bend from the inlet. The children would announce its coming and all would go down the dock to meet it and see the catch of the day.

When the children were small, bedtime was when the lighthouse came on. When they were older, parents tried to keep their eyes on the teenagers and herd them in after dark for safety and rest.....so many out of the way places to meet and date!

Life at the beach was, and remains today, a rustic and meaningful lifestyle; a simple time set aside from the many pressures of modern life.

Family members of the original fishermen who labored long and hard in their generation have endowed their children's families with the same deep regard and appreciation of the past; the fishing industry, the historic lifestyle, the beach life as it was then lived.

It is those families who now occupy those fishermen's beach houses who have a fervent desire to preserve the past. It is their heritage and their dream to carry this meaningful life on for themselves and future generations -- a way of life which sometimes seems as fleeting as the sands along the shoreline.