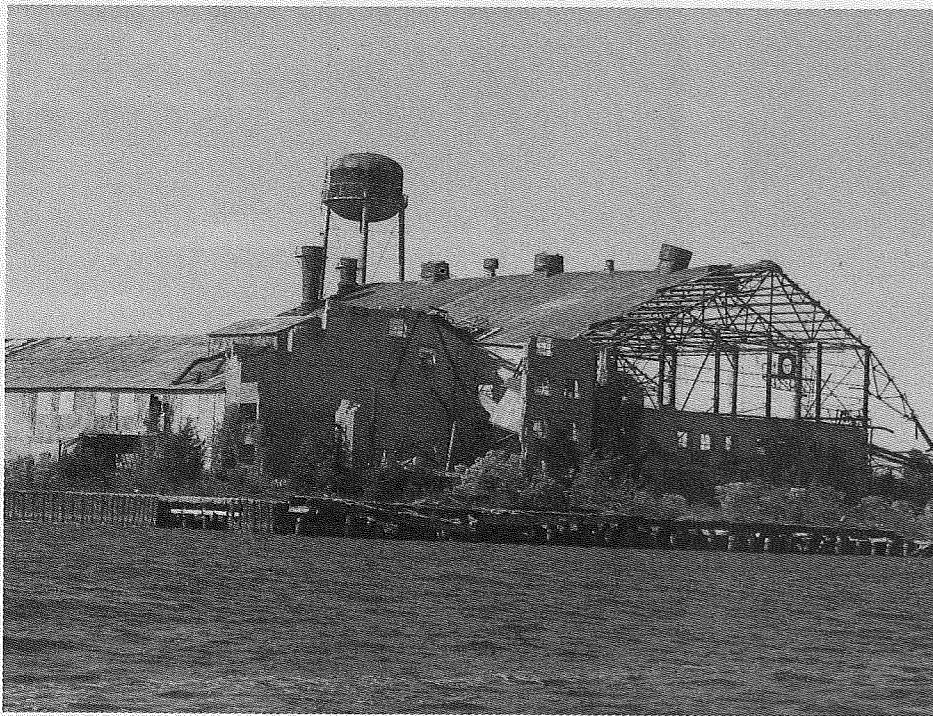


The Old Fish Factory



Visible for miles in all directions, the 1930 Fish Factory in Great Bay (closed in 1969) remains a symbol of both the hard working fishermen who crewed on the Menhaden boats bringing in tons of bait fish to be processed and those who worked in the factory itself. Crab Island and the J. Howard Smith Processing Company – both island and business names up for debate – was first started on Story Island in the mid 1800s.

Location, location, location pontificate the realtors. How about an island with an unobstructed view of Great Bay, Little Egg Inlet, the Intracoastal and the skyline of Atlantic City? A prime spot for developers? No, just the remains of the old Fish Factory located on Crab Island.

Wind whistles through metal bending amid the old buildings, wood creaks and birds screech in the background. “Keep Off” signs are everywhere along Newman’s Thorofare. Looking and sounding like a horror movie, the once bustling Fish Factory has been closed since 1969 when the menhaden population dropped dramatically.

Menhaden (*Brevoortia tyrannus*, bunker, alewife, Munnawhateaug by the Lenni Lenape Indians, greentails, and other local names) were once in abun-

dance along the Jersey Coast. In the mid 1800s a small menhaden fish factory was built on Story Island located at the southern end of Little Egg Harbor Bay. Today scattered bricks and a few pilings locate the spot.

The Crab Island Fish Factory (both island name and factory name up for debate) was built in 1930, one of a number of fish processing plants along the mid Atlantic Coast. Harold Anderson, in *A History of Menhaden Fishing*, states:

“The modern menhaden industry emerged in New England early in the 19th century after the species was recognized as a valuable alternative to whale oil, for lubricants, as fuel for lamps and in the making of soaps and paints ... By the beginning of the 20th century menhaden served as a compo-

nent of fertilizer and animal feed, and in the manufacture of paints and other substances such as fingernail polish and perfume.”

Only two menhaden fisheries still remain open along the Atlantic Coast. Reedville, VA, with its eerie fleet of ghostly gray, rusting menhaden boats, processes the most fish.

Menhaden, considered too oily for eating, were a disgusting, odorous mess when processed. Local men from the Tuckerton, Little Egg Harbor and Mullica River areas worked on Crab Island. Tough workers were transported on and off the island by boats after putting in long and grueling hours. During the 1900s ownership rested in the hands of the J. Howard Smith Processing Company and the Fish Products Company.

In “*Jersey Genesis: The Story of the Mullica River*” written in 1945 by Henry Carlton Beck, the hard lives of the factory workers were disclosed. “The turning of the greentails into glue or oil was never a pleasant business and even when you got home, after three or four baths and a swim in the cedar waters of the Mullica, you smelled to high Heaven” Jack Ford told Beck.

Beck interviewed John McAnney who remembers the fish factory “going full tilt and full smell. You became hardened to hardship. You got used to long hours of loneliness on Crab Island and Little Crab Island.” McAnney’s wife cooked for about 20 workers, three meals a day. Occasionally in the winter the boats were iced in and isolated workers walked across the ice.

An old landing dock is barely visible along Little Sheepshead Creek where boats once ferried workers and supplies from a mainland base on Great Bay Boulevard (commonly known as Seven



Sturdy docks held Menhaden boats and a ferry that shuttled workers back and forth along Little Sheepshead Creek from Seven Bridges Road in Tuckerton. When in operation, the Stink House (as it was sometimes called) could be smelled for miles as the bait fish were made into fertilizer, soaps, paints and fuel.

Bridges Road) in Tuckerton. Buildings and boats remained in position until the 1980s, decaying and settling into the bay mud until they were finally torn down.

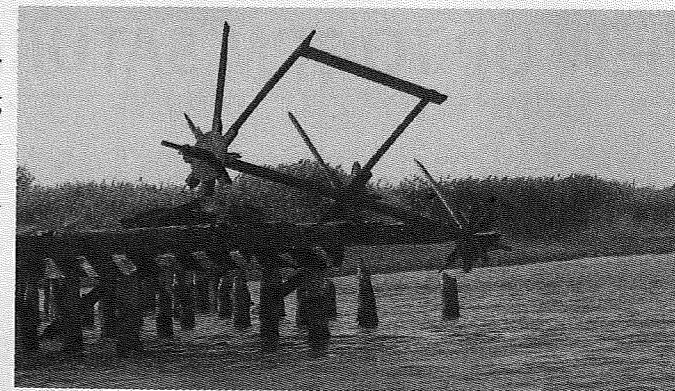
Menhaden fishing itself was not easy. Members of the Northern Neck Chantey Singers, who performed at the 38th Annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival, once fished long hours year round out of Raritan Bay, sometimes delivering bunker to Crab Island. Singing sea chanteys kept their minds off the work of pulling the nets full of thousands of fish by hand. Fishing boats before hydraulic lifts were especially hard on backs and muscles.

Upon meeting representatives of the Tuckerton Seaport at the Festival in Washington, these Reedville, VA singers were able to smile at their Crab Island Fish Factory memories. But songs like “Won’t You Help Me Raise ‘Em Boys?” and the way these senior citizens now move tell the story of their physically taxing lives.

From Atlantic City to Port Republic, Tuckerton and Long Beach Island, depending upon the wind direction, the smell of “Stink House” (as it was sometimes called) could be easily detected.

The smell of rotting and processing menhaden became commonplace for generations of coastal lovers.

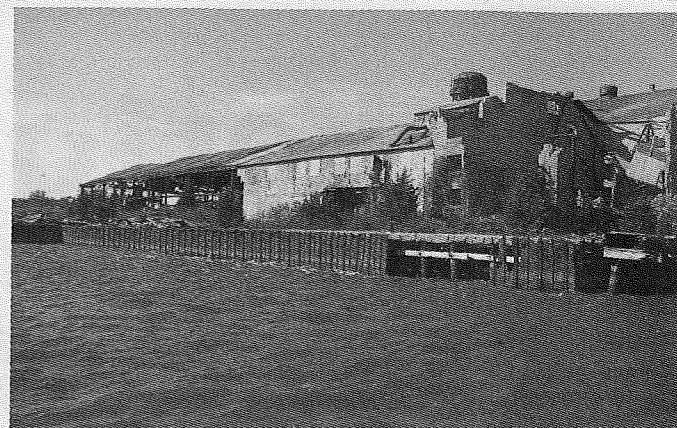
Hanson, Inc. bought the salvage rights to the desolate Fish Factory in the mid 1970s, taking what was still usable. The island was then given to the state to be included in the Great Bay Wildlife Refuge. A fire in the spring of 1982 severely damaged the buildings;



Reels for drying nets are almost intact as seen from Newman’s Thorofare, a favorite spot for fishermen. Now owned by the federal government, the island is marked “Keep Off” and not accessible to the public.

storms yearly take their toll.

Local fishermen head for the protected areas behind Crab Island when the weather is choppy. “I caught a sheepshead recently in one of the Sheepshead Creeks,” says Tony Colgan of Beach Haven. “There used to be a lot around



‘Smoke was silent money,’ James Carter of the Northern Neck Chantey Singers and former menhaden fisherman, told a group at the Tuckerton Seaport in 2006. ‘When you didn’t smell the smoke, we wasn’t making any money. Pure gold in them nets.’ Chanteys were repetitive chants sung by the men telling of their families, jobs and friends. Many signified hard work by the men in the long row boats that hauled in the nets.

there, but not any more.” Fishing is good in the area with many anglers going for striped bass.

Fascination continues for the old Fish Factory, its workers and the menhaden boats. Every boater who passes Crab Island – now technically identified as Seven Island or Fish Island – or spots the rotting buildings from a drive out Great Bay Boulevard is mindful of the men who toiled at this occupation.

Looming above grasses, phragmites, and bayberry, the Fish Factory debate has gone on for years. Should it be torn down? What environmental problems could there be? And the costs of such a project are but a few of the concerns. A local entrepreneur wants to put a wind farm on the island. At least it cannot be developed into multi million dollar homes with equally expensive views.

Maybe Crab Island should stay as it is, the Fish Factory a relic from more than a half century ago, a haunting reminder of a way of life long gone along the Jersey shore.

Story and photos by Gretchen Coyle