

From Sail to Motor

The Transformation of New Jersey Charter Fishing Catboats

By GRETCHEN F. COYLE

“Remember big catboats with no sails tied up at Willow Landing along Tuckerton Crik. They were powered with used automobile engines,” reminisced Lyle Richards, a West Creek resident who has an avid interest in history. “These were 30-foot or bigger catboats that were used for charter fishing.”

Charter fishing in big catboats was popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s. By the late 1920s, the more popular fishing charter captains began to use motor boats. It was quicker to get out into the ocean and bays in New Jersey – and, of course, easier without worrying about the sails and lack of or too much wind. Fishermen coming to the Jersey Shore by train, or the popular automobile, often came just for the day, limiting the time actually spent fishing.

Initially, catboats had sailed out to the fishing areas with a captain, one mate, and maybe four people. The mate helped with the tackle, cleaned fish, and cleaned up the boat. About 1920, sensing that their sailboats were becoming outdated, sailboat charter captains began to install used automobile engines from broken-down cars in their boats. Masts were completely removed, or maybe a small stump was

left standing. These boats could then be used for both ocean and bay fishing during the day. “But for night charters, they stayed in the bays fishing for croakers, weakfish and striped bass,” Lyle said.

A native of Tuckerton, a volunteer at the Tuckerton Seaport Maritime Museum and a former ranger for the state park system in Batsto, N.J., Lyle remembers three brothers by the name of Smith – Joe, Claude, and Ralph – who all converted their charter fishing catboats from sail to motor. “It made running Little Egg Inlet a lot easier.”

Modernization was also the name of the game at the Beach Haven Yacht Club in Beach Haven, where catboats still lined the charter fishing long dock minus masts and sails. The yacht club, founded in 1882, was at one time one of the largest sport-fishing clubs along the East Coast. Catboats had ruled the dock there with both races and charter fishing for visitors.

A 1932 publication titled “Long Beach, A New Jersey Resort” contains an advertisement for the Beach Haven Yacht Club: “This club boasts one of the finest fleets of boats on the Jersey Coast, and are captained by men who

have built reputation on service and production. Fishing and sailing parties accommodated, both ocean and bay. Reasonable rates. Restaurant at dock.”

The Beach Haven Yacht Club captains and crews soon also realized that fishermen wanted bigger, faster, and surely more modern boats. Out came most remnants of sailing; big gasoline engines covered over by a wooden “box” took up a lot of the cockpit floors. Pictures show extra lines carefully coiled on top of the catboats’ low cabins and large wooden bait boxes placed on the stern. Then even the transformed catboats began to be outdated as motor boats captured everyone’s fancy. By the mid-1930s, the docks were lined with motor boats, the old catboats slowly disappearing due to age and lack of use.

“By 1936 there were no sails in Tuckerton Crik,” Lyle tells a group of visitors at the Tuckerton Seaport. “Both the captains and the regular folk were relieved not to have to traverse our winding Tuckerton Crik by sail.”

Gasoline-powered catboats lasted about 20 years in New Jersey, bridging the gap between the day of sailing charter fishing and faster, more efficient motor boats. ■