

**Natural Oyster Bed Report
Habitat Restoration Initiative EPA LISS Study
November 14th Meeting 2007**

**Mr. Robert Post - Westbrook Shellfish
Commission**

**Timothy C. Visel, Coordinator
The Sound School**

A series of conversations and meetings with Eileen Daily First Selectwoman of Westbrook CT in 1987 resulted in a discussion with Mr. Robert Post, Chairman of the Westbrook Shellfish Commission. He was very concerned about the local shellfish situation in the middle 1980's, which he termed "dismal." According to Mr. Post water pollution and navigational dredging had taken its toll on the commercial and recreational shellfisheries. The town once boasted areas known as the "clam flats" where according to Mr. Post summer residents could clam by "the bucket full" and harvest the soft shell clam or "steamers" as the cooked version is frequently called. Water pollution from land however had closed the town waters according to Mr. Post. In 1987, it had been at least a decade since any shellfishing had occurred in clean or "certified" shellfishing areas.

It was during this period, that nearby towns such as Old Lyme, Old Saybrook, Clinton, Madison and Guilford had developed shellfish management plans. In those localities commercial operators moved polluted shellfish into clean certified waters for a natural cleaning or depuration process. After a period of time the shellfish would naturally free themselves of bacteria and be opened recreationally to shoreline residents.

It was also the time when several shoreline towns considered installation of a waste water treatment plant. That would have permanently closed most of the surrounding shellfish areas to shellfishing within a 6 hour tidal/time zone. A six hour tidal/time permanent closure (NSSP) would have impacted neighboring towns shellfishing areas. This plan for Westbrook was not pursued.

In the mid coastal area of Guilford, Madison and Clinton municipal shellfish management efforts were underway to

reclassify shellfish areas for relay/depuration for both commercial and recreational purposes.

It was hoped that perhaps Westbrook could have developed a similar program in 1987.

A new effort for habitat restoration that could include shellfishing areas is now part of the EPA/DEP Long Island Sound Study. A section was devoted to shellfishing and to provide some observations and historical perspectives, Mr. Post agreed to be interviewed some 20 years later after the first conversations.

As part of a subcommittee of the EPA-DEP Long Island Sound Study the Habitat Restoration Initiative Connecticut's shellfish and shellfish producing habitats are again being considered for inclusion into restoration policy guidelines. The problem is that shellfish closures in the 1950's and 1960's eliminated much of the inshore habitats for recreational and commercial shellfisheries. Fewer and fewer people have direct knowledge or experience of the shellfisheries and the habitats upon which they depended. One of those persons is Mr. Robert Post of Westbrook. I recalled our earlier discussions and contacted Mr. Post again in the morning of August 23rd 2007. After a few moments on the telephone he agreed to share his experiences as part of a background information gathering effort to the Habitat Restoration Committee. I met with him later that same morning.

On November 9, 2007 a report of our August 23rd meeting in the form of a transcript of our conversation was provided to Heather Young who is leading the development of the shellfish habitat restoration chapter for EPA study.

Mr. Robert H. Post
746 Boston Post Rd., Westbrook, CT
August 23, 2007 - 9 am to 10 am

Mr. Post is chairman of the Westbrook Shellfish Commission. At 83 years old, he remembers the onset of pollution in Westbrook, which closed the town to shellfishing. He has clammed and oystered in town and still owns his shellfish grant on the Patchogue River. In 1987, we met and had several telephone conversations. I was finishing a project in Guilford that reshelled a dredged area in the East River. Oyster productivity was restored with oyster shell cultch. It was during this period that a similar program was discussed with both the harbor management and shellfish commissions in Westbrook.

Mr. Post has shellfished primarily for his own use but remembers several commercial fishermen, a "Mr. Spada" and Wally Heck and perhaps 6 others including Jerry Cerruti. Oysters were tonged and sold, sometimes even trucked out of state. Westbrook Lobster¹ used to ship Westbrook oysters to Rhode Island. Mr. Clark, owner of a seafood and tackle store at Saybrook Point, ²site of Old Steamboat Dock. Mr. Clark told me he purchased oysters from Westbrook tongers. They were high quality oysters, he recalled. In 1987, Mr. Post and then First Selectwoman Eileen Daily had suggested the boating industry and those wanting to restore shellfish populations could work together. A series of meetings and correspondence to various town commissions explored a possible restoration program in 1988. Most of the lower natural oyster beds had been dredged in the 1950's.

When I arrived, Mr. Post had his garage door open and in plain view was his pair of oyster tongs; just below was an

old eel spear that his father used to spear eels over the oyster beds in the river. His father had used a canoe!

After a brief hello, Mr. Post wanted to show me his oyster tongs.

The tongs were of the hard bottom type, small basket, sharply angled teeth. Mr. Post confirmed that the oyster bed bottoms were hard then, and shelly. The oysters that grew there were nicely shaped. Tonging was always a low tide event.

Although he didn't "pole down," he chose times when he didn't need to fight the tide. He did recall a feature previously mentioned to me by other tongers iron rings bolted to skiffs that would accept poles, but he said that was for more tides/currents

¹Old location original structure raised about 20 years ago - across from "Bill's Seafood" today.

²Building raised after town took possession as part of the Saybrook Point redevelopment project. then he had. When he tonged, he didn't move around that much, so he could stay over the bed (sometimes with two people in his boat). He was very discouraged over what had happened to shellfishing - "the river is polluted; you could see the oysters, now the river is murky - muddy - you can see the difference. I can see the difference. I tell people that water was clear back then but they don't believe me; the pollution covered the oysters and killed them all." (This was in regards to the decline in water clarity). (Note, please see similar statements in Clinton, Madison and Guilford) Mr. Post continued to give his account of oystering in Westbrook.

Then the marinas dredged the mouths of the Patchogue and Menunketesuck rivers. They took all the shellfish out and polluted the River with "waste." He was very discouraged and angry after all these years about what happened to the shellfishing and to Westbrook's natural resources in general. But according to Mr. Post, no one did anything about it. He had used a small skiff that Westbrook High School students built many years ago - (16 feet) to tong his oysters. He owned his shellfish grant, something that dates back to Colonial and post-Colonial 19th century shellfish rights (oyster ground committees) but didn't know if the town maps were still on file at the Town Hall.

Mr. Post continued that the oysters would grow on top of each other - you had to remove them or they would kill each other - so he cropped the top. He had a small claw rake for testing. (It's now without a handle; it broke years ago). He recalled that at one time, a farm in Killingworth owned the right to salt hay in town, but a developer took title to the salt hay marsh and built houses next to the marsh and sometimes over the marsh (location). He observed changes in the river and oysters in general. Mr. Post continued to talk about the pollution, the "filth" that washed from the land and streets which covered the oysters. {Note: Many times oyster tongers and other shellfishermen equate a lack of water clarity with "pollution," if the water looked bad then too them it was bad since nearly all of them experienced the decline in water quality; therefore the concept of bacterial contamination and decreasing water visibility was often linked.} "It's filthy now you can see it on the bottom; it's everywhere." He described a loose muck on the bottom that was once "hard shelly bottom" in which eels lived over the oyster beds. His father had used a canoe to spear them, but no one does that any more.

The tongs were of the hard bottom/small basket type with sharply angled teeth. Mr. Post confirmed that his oyster bed was hard then, and shelly. He owns the shellfish or grant beds from his house to Pier 76, but he remembers dense oyster populations in the rivers to the mouths of both rivers, and at the mouths, hard clams or Qhahog (Hydraulic clamming occurred in the 1980's off Westbrook.) Concerning fish habitat, he didn't remember anything specific; every once in a while, a fish would come up - but nothing like that was described in the Hammonasset, Neck, East, or Oyster Rivers. He didn't recall seeing a lot of flounders, but did see others like snapper blues. Mr. Post fished mostly up river and thought that type of fish would be closer to the Sound. He did think that Jerry Cerruti tonged oysters but he would write down the names of other fishermen. He thinks he is the last one in town; Wally Heck now lives in Hawaii, etc.

He was still angry about the shellfish situation and at Avery Point UCONN (me). Why didn't you stop the pollution; you knew it 20 years ago - he asked? I tried to "set the stage" for UCONN and Sea Grant and involvement in Cooperative Extension educational programs, but he pressed. You knew the shellfish (oysters) were being dredged; you knew that when we talked 20 years ago but you didn't stop the dredging. I tried to explain that I just couldn't stop the dredging. The program I had in Guilford was to return

shell to the bottom after the dredging occurred, not to prevent the dredging. "But you get taxpayer money; your salary. You represent the taxpayers. Still, why you doing this? This was reference to my current study. I work now for the New Haven Board of Education and have Westbrook students, I asked if he would work with students who would like to learn more about shellfishing? The second reason is that I now belong to a habitat restoration working group and the topic of natural oyster beds (shellfish chapter) has been discussed in Connecticut for over two decades. The current discussion is on natural oyster beds, beds that historically thrived in coastal rivers free of predators. Mr. Post responded "I guess you could term the Army Corps today the biggest predator. They took all we had. Beautiful oysters here in town but nobody cared; they dredged the rivers, the whole thing - shells and young oysters. It's gone, it's all gone. They took the oysters out and dumped them" (disposal site?). I briefly reviewed the East River project which took years to conduct. Part of that study was to demonstrate how oyster beds could be rebuilt over time. The oystering activity itself would keep the area clean and lessen the need for dredging. Habitat studies also showed that the oyster shell supported small fish and other organisms.

When asked about working with some Westbrook students, he replied, "Certainly but we lost it all; the eels are gone, flounder - what's that? The oysters and clams are gone or polluted. My friend has 50 lobster pots; they pulled them the other day for 6 lobsters; 6 lobsters. Can you believe that? Westbrook had a lot of steamer clams; you can't dig them anymore. It's no wonder you're having trouble getting Westbrook students. What's the point, everything is dead or polluted. It's so discouraging, but what do I do now, I'm 83 years old; I tried and failed. All I do now is post the (no shellfishing) signs. I tried to get some rainfall openings but what the heck; I can't do all the tests after each rain. Money - I can't get the town to give me any. My shellfish commission budget, it's \$80/year. What can you do with \$80 now a days?" Mr. Post asks, I responded that Natural oyster beds are being discussed; why now?" he asked. I explained that a group of people, part of the EPA Long Island Sound Study meet and discuss restoration projects for the Sound and it's estuaries, like fish runs and marsh restoration. The finfish and shellfish chapters are now being discussed. Mr. Post responds, "the people that are at the meeting about shellfish - did they ever shellfish? No, I think I'm the only one (I tonged for shellfish in 3 states). How can people write about

shellfish when they haven't been shellfishing? This is how we got into the trouble now (we are in.) No one talked to the people who fished. I would have told them about the oysters here, but they dredged anyway. They didn't want to hear it."

I explained that this is a group that is talking about coastal restoration projects - how to bring back some coastal resources and that oyster beds (reefs) are important parts of the ecology - and that the new concept of environmental services - the oyster habitat provided homes for other organisms such as small fish, crabs and worms. Mr. Post acted surprised, "Of course they did - oyster beds were alive with other small fish, crabs, etc. The oyster bed was alive; it was a living thing - people are just talking about that now? This is news? I responded yes. You must be kidding? No, that's why I'm here." I recalled our previous conversations about oystering and the two rivers mentioned are the ones in Westbrook but other natural oyster beds also are being examined in other towns.

Mr. Post continued after all these years, people are starting to look at this (natural oyster beds)?" I replied yes, it's just the beginning." Mr. Post, "Well it's 50 years too late. Of course we had natural oyster beds here. That's where oysters live (rivers) naturally. They don't live in the middle of Long Island Sound." (He seemed disgusted at this point). Noticing Mr. Post's boat, I asked him if we could go to his oyster beds - he said yes but it's all gone (the oysters). I replied, "I understand that, but I bring a metal pipe, and measure how deep the sediment is over the oyster shell base. Sometimes it's only a couple of inches; sometimes it can be feet." If the area hadn't been dredged, the shell base can provide information about the health of the bed. Often the shell base remains but it's preserved, but just covered, and we can estimate how deep the shells are now. I can tell a lot about what happened to the bed by the shape of the shells; they record a history of what happened. Mr. Post replies excited, "That's right, bad bottom produces long thin oysters; I noticed that." At this point, he discussed repairing his old eagle claw oyster rake so we could go out rake up some shells. I said that if that was to occur, I would try to get a permit, but he responded, "I need a permit to rake up dead oyster shells? "I replied, "Yes, it might be needed." He continued, "The water is closed to shellfishing. I don't need a permit to go and rake up some dead oysters. What about the marinas? Permits for them?"

I have friends watch the pump out station at a major marina. A friend watched it for 3 days, and not one person came - not one. It's fine to put it in, but what happens if no one uses it." I discouraged him from repairing the rake - I don't want to risk losing it. I decided to drop the permit issue.

We left on a cordial note, and I explained I would like to have Alicia Cook take some pictures of him with the oyster rake and tongs; he said "sure." But he said to me in closing, "I don't know why you're doing this - it's just too late." I told him it's important to record the habitat history. I shook his hand and said I would be back in touch.

"That's okay," he replied.

Some additional notes/questions -

Notes bought some seed oysters from Fishers Island (He) or the town - George on fishers Island.

Clams - soft shells had lots of them - Gary Nolf. Knows son Justin, knows someone who would be interested at Pilots Point?

Shellfish Map? - Available in Town Hall

Copy of Grant? - Deed or assignment

Did he plant shell?

How often did he observe sets?

When he oystered - 2 hour tide, 4 hour tide?

How many bushels would he get on an average tide. What year did he start oystering - when did he stop.

He mentions Ed Lang owning shellfish ground does he still use them?

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Timothy
Coordinator

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mr. Robert H. Post
Westbrook Shellfish Commission

FROM: Timothy C. Visel, Coordinator
The Sound School Regional
Vocational Aquaculture Center

DATE: September 4, 2007

RE: EPA/DEP Long Island Sound Habitat Restoration
Initiative - Natural Oyster Beds

Mr. Post just a quick note to thank you again for your time last Thursday. As I mentioned to you I'm currently a member of an advisory panel looking at restoring Connecticut's Coastal Habitats. One of the chapters in a developing guidebook will include shellfish restoration and a subsection includes oyster both cultivated and natural oyster beds. An old map (1889) from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics shows both the Patchogue and Menunketesuck Rivers as containing natural oysters beds - denoted in red ink.

We discussed this situation two decades ago but today efforts are underway to review oyster habitat and research

the ecology of oyster beds. That is why your direct knowledge and observations is of value to understanding these oyster populations.

Many of the committee members were uncertain about the existence of oyster beds or the gear with which one could harvest them. It would be great to get some pictures of you with your oyster tongs, etc. perhaps sometime this fall? I also appreciate your offer of a quick shellfish survey. It was very good to talk to you again after so many years and your feelings about oysters, the river and shellfish observations. I tried to write up notes from our conversation but have a few more questions.

Perhaps we can talk soon. Thanks again for your willingness to help once more.

Tim.

TCV/ad

Cc: Steve Pynn, Principal, The Sound School