

South Bristol Historical Society

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Newsletter

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SBHS News Notes

Mementos of the Old Bridge

As the demolition of the old bridge across the Gut proceeded this winter, contractor Cianbro Corporation and the Maine Department of Transportation donated several significant artifacts to SBHS. Perhaps most exciting is the operating console that sat in the bridge tender's tiny building on the bridge itself. Now just inside the SBHS museum door, one can stand in front of it and imagine turning the dials and pushing the buttons that made that bulky (and sometimes balky) span turn.

On the wall to the right of the console are the instructions for operation in three small frames. One of the large green and red lights that stood on the bridge is also inside the museum. Finally, outside resting against the side of the building, is the large yellow sign with two big lights on the top: "BRIDGE OPEN WHEN FLASHING."



The bridge tender controlled the opening and closing of the 1930 bridge using this console.

Other Recent Accessions

The year 2015 was a banner year for our museum collection. Inspired by the Town's Centennial celebrations, some 36 gifts or loans of items or groups of items representative of South Bristol history were entrusted to SBHS. Space limitations allow only a few of these to be mentioned here,



Flashing lights on this sign warned motorists that the bridge was opening for boat traffic.

but all are greatly appreciated. These few items demonstrate how many different facets of South Bristol history are being preserved (donor's name is listed first). Marjana Tracy: photo of Dr. Mary Jane Westcott Tracy, Army Captain, Nursing Corps WW II. Patricia Foster: photo of Patricia Spillane Foster in uniform, USMC Reserves WWII. BeBe Naylor: family photo albums with each person identified (on loan, being scanned by SBHS before return). Cynthia Garrels and Betsey Dailinger: original map of the Christmas Cove Land Co, (Nash Map). Linwood Gamage: half model of a Gamage-built dragger (see photo on page 2).

Virginia Miles Saunders: heart-shaped locket engraved "Jessie," the name used by Sam Miles' wife Maude Mary as a bicycle racer, and a tiny round photo of Maude Mary Miles and son Arthur T. Miles, mounted to be worn as a pin. Paul & Pauline Farrin: (loan) large piece of metal from a 1940 airplane crash and a civil defense helmet worn at lookout tower during WW II. Carl & Emily Poole: green glass mug "Souvenir of So. Bristol Me." and a plate with image of summit House. David Andrews: print of a 1973 painting "Lobstering" depicting Dennis Farrin on his boat—original was 4' x 6' and hung in Raybestos Corp headquarters in Trumbull Ct. Donna Plummer: Red Men regalia shirt and feathered headdress.

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This half-model of the 81-ton poggy steamer, E. T. DEBLOIS, built by A. and M. Gamage in South Bristol in 1877, hangs in the SBHS museum, on loan to SBHS by Linwood Gamage.

Memories of Maine

An article by SBHS Historian David Andrews will appear in this (spring summer) issue of *Memories of Maine*. As described by its editor David Branch, this magazine brings “to your doorstep... an endless library of unique stories about the people, places and events that have shaped who and what we are as a state today.” Dave Andrews’ contribution to that library brings alive what was happening in and around South Bristol village and Christmas Cove in the latter half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th as hotels and the ‘summer business’ altered the landscape and daily life. Numerous postcards from Dave’s large collection illustrate the theme. *Memories of Maine* is free and will be available the last week in May at the Fishermen’s Co-op, the library and the Historical Society as well as at many of its advertisers in the area, including restaurants, banks, variety & grocery stores.

2016 Program Preview

As this newsletter goes to print, our annual cemetery visit is scheduled for **Saturday, April 23rd**. The site this year is the small cemetery located on the west side of Route 129 just north of the Union Chapel, known as the **Kelsey Cemetery**. Since parking will be difficult near the cemetery, the plan is to meet at the South Bristol School parking lot at 9:30 and arrange car pools to the cemetery. Anyone who can spare some extra time after exploring the grave sites, is asked to bring along a rake and some clippers to help remove any brush or vines obscuring the headstones. If the weather interferes, we will try again Saturday, April 30.

The first regular evening program will be on Wednesday, **May 18th at 7:30 pm** in the Parish Hall at the Union Church

in South Bristol village. **Michael Dekker**, a resident of Bremen, is the author of ‘The French and Indian Wars in Maine’ which was published in 2015. He will speak about the conflict between Native Americans and European settlers that occurred in the midcoast region from 1675 to 1759. Also at the Parish Hall at 7:30 pm on **June 15th**, **Belinda Osier** will introduce the audience to “A Hunter Family Journal” providing a fascinating glimpse into what life was like on a farm in Walpole in the mid 19th century.

The **SBHS Annual Meeting** is scheduled for 7:00 pm on **July 20th** in the Parish Hall, at which time Officers and Trustees will be elected and brief reports on the year’s activities presented. Then at 7:30 pm, **Chuck Plummer** and **Arnie Gamage**, two South Bristol lobstermen with vast experience and knowledge, will discuss the many facets of the industry. Their presentation will be educational, interesting, and humorous. They especially enjoy answering questions from the audience.

In **August**, the S Road School will once again be the site of a special exhibit. A series of color photographs as well as videos will tell the story of the demolition of the swing bridge and construction of the new bascule bridge at the Gut during this past winter. Also on display will be artifacts given to SBHS by Maine DOT, as noted above. Watch the Lincoln County News and your own email for the dates and more details.

Historical archaeologist **Tim Dinsmore** will present “Up in Smoke: The 17th Century Anglo-American Settlement of the Damariscotta River Region and Its Demise” at the **September 21st** meeting, also in the Parish Hall at 7:30 pm. Tim will describe living conditions along the Damariscotta as well as explaining what led to the outbreak of King Philip’s War in 1675/6 which resulted in the evacuation of the mid-coast.

At the final program in this year’s series on **October 19th**, a number of the photographs of people and scenes taken by Ann Hillis in and around South Bristol in the late 1970’s will be on display, along with genealogical information about the South Bristol families represented in the photos.

South Bristol Veterans List

The South Bristol Historical Society has collected the names of over 400 South Bristol veterans who served from 1915 to 2015. This list includes both fulltime residents and other people with a significant connection to South Bristol such as summer residents. The official list is located next to the memorial stone at the South Bristol Town Hall in Walpole except in the winter when it is kept in the town office. Copies of the official veterans’ list are at the town hall, South Bristol post office and the South Bristol Historical Society building. Additions or corrections to the list can be made using any of these copies. Changes gathered the previous year will be added to the official list before it is placed outside again before Memorial Day each year.

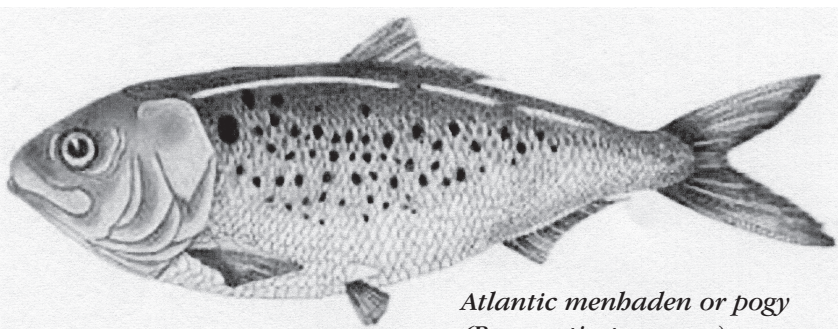
BAD DAY AT THE GUT...

by Ed Myers

(Excerpted from the 1986 *Island Journal*, the annual publication of the Island Institute)

Pogies were for centuries the source of one of the essential oils on which American industrial life depended – fish oil. If you’ve ever wondered why house paint in the old days seemed to stay on better than the expensive stuff currently available, fish oil was part of the reason. If you wonder why Rustoleum seems so good, it is because fish oil is still used as its carrier. About 50 percent of a pogy is oil, so when several million of them gather together for a cove feeding party, the result can be more than just a little bit yukky.

When South Bristol received the benefits of one of these orgies, crabs and other crustaceans were observed literally crawling up out of the water on shore or piling to find oxygen. For days afterward, a thousand seagulls became so glutted on fish eyes that they could hardly get airborne and fly. Dead fish, bubbling crabs, and gluttonous seagulls. What a wonder time! Ed Myers tells the story.



*Atlantic menhaden or pogy
(Brevoortia tyrannus).*

On the pleasant afternoon of August 10, 1985, two men in search of bluefish drifted under the drawbridge connecting Rutherford’s Island with the main. On the east side of The Gut, the boat slowed as it encountered what looked like a solid mass of fish. Millions of fins above the surface of the water; nothing but fish as the boatmen looked straight down through six or eight feet and saw what looked like more fish than water. All the fish were headed in the same direction, toward the eastern exit from The Gut into Johns Bay.

Pogies, of course. Atlantic menhaden (*Brevoortia tyrannus*). The particular tyranny these fish posed at the time was the possibility of exhausting all oxygen from the water. Nothing was driving them from either end of the eastern Gut; there was none of the mad skittering rush that’s so exciting when bluefish are in a feeding frenzy or when a seal has herded some pogies into a tight group and then attacks them from below.

The sound was remarkable. Even though there were eight or ten outboards around for the spectacle, all the human and mechanical noises went unheard over the slithering susurrus of that gang of fish. At the eastern end of the school, the fish were all headed the same way with nothing attacking them, but making no observable progress through the slack water.

Pogies like to school with others of their size and age-group, and they don’t much care where they do it. They’re not predators on anything except the plankton. Each fish will filter about 25 liters (almost seven gallons) per minute. Judging from the pogies foul-hooked by the rebels being cast into their midst. The author figures that they were fourth- or fifth-year fish averaging a pound or a bit more. A prototypical school, photographed from the air off North Carolina, was caught in a purse seine set by boats, and the catch was 64 tons. The school dimensions were approxi-

mately 115 feet by 75 feet, a size that would fit handily in the eastern Gut. And if that’s near the truth, then 141,000 fish pumping seven gallons apiece were filtering just about a million gallons every single minute. Other estimates in the daily press were from 2 to 4 million fish, but we’d rather err on the conservative side.

In any event, there were sufficient pogies to reduce the dissolved oxygen level to two parts per million, low enough to be totally lethal if it persisted for very long.

Enter Dennis Farrin, proprietor of Farrin’s Store and Lobster Buying Station, a man with an acute sensitivity to natural events, for their own sake as well as the safety of the lobsters usually carried up off his dock. When he saw the pogies finning as far as the eye could see, he checked his lobsters and found them weakening and dying. Then he studied the bottom and observed a number of small lobsters belly up in the mud. This proved to Farrin that the problem was in the whole water column, as indeed it was.

So he crated up as many lobsters as he could threaded the rope handles with a tow-line, grabbed an outboard left in his keeping, put it on the first skiff he came to, and set out to tow the lobsters through the bridge to the western Gut in order to get them into better water. (This desperate measure helped the lobsters but got Farrin arrested by the local warden for operating an unregistered motorboat. The warden’s parting shot to Dennis was, “Have a nice day.” Dennis’s parting shot was, “It’s too late.”)

Including the crates fishermen had on their moorings, the South Bristol Co-op, and Farrin’s, pretty close to 2,000 pounds of lobsters lost their lives to the mephitic atmosphere created by the pogies. Around the shore that morning you could pick up samples of other species that didn’t do too well: flounders, sculpins, mackerel, smelt, eels, blennies, and tomcod. Green crabs and rock crabs were climbing walls and pilings in search of some oxygen, dissolve or otherwise.

That was the event of August 10. On the evening high water, the dissolved oxygen count was still at one-third of normal. During the night, the school of fish took a notion to go elsewhere; by high water on August 11, the oxygen level was back up there, and the South Bristol Gut resumed the even tenor of its ways...

Random Notes on the Pogy Industry in South Bristol

- “The first steam menhaden oil factory in Maine was erected at South Bristol, in 1864, by W. A. Wells & Co. This firm, also, was first to make the attempt to catch the fish in purse seines....in 1864-65 the Wells establishment with one seine and two boats, which were forty-five feet long, thirteen wide and six deep, obtained in John’s Bay all the fish they needed and made a large sum of money.” (*History of Boothbay, Southport and Boothbay Harbor, Main*, by Francis Byron Greene, pg 371)
- “This company, W. A. Wells was the first of what became eleven pogy factories in South Bristol by 1870 valued at three-quarters of a million dollars and employing 500 fishermen. Every resident along the shore had his press— not unlike a cider press in general effect. Attracted by the profits of the trade, swift steamers were fitted out by Rhode Island capitalists to cruise for them with seines, and numerous regular factories put up, to such purpose that the pogy was presently all but annihilated, and this year (1879) came no more.” (Found in the files of author Ellen Vincent)
- “Local shipbuilding was given a much-needed boost in the early 1970’s by pogy companies’ demand for steamers. Shipbuilders produced sloops and schooners for local companies, but steamers proved to be the most efficient vessels in fishing the bays and inlets of the jagged Maine coastline, given their maneuverability and reliability over sailing vessels. Between 1871 and 1874, A. & A. Gamage of South Bristol built five steamers ranging in size from the fifty-ton *William A. Wells*, built in 1873 for Captain Thompson of the Wells Oil Company, to the one hundred and ten-ton *Albert Brown* built in 1871 and the seventy ton *Leonard Brightman* in 1874.” (Excerpt, Dissertation, Dartmouth College 1994, Josh Hanna)
- “I was one of the first to convert the menhaden or pogie into oil and fertilizer on the Maine coast. We had a lot of pogie factories and for nearly 20 years did business at a good profit and added more than any other industry to the valuation of our town and of Lincoln County. The menhaden business employed thousands of men in fishing and operating 365 steamers and 15 factories representing an outlay of more than a million dollars in this county alone. Strange, but after 20 years of constant appearance, not varying more than 10 days in their arrival or departure, they failed us and did not again show up for 10 years, yet on the south coast of Cape Cod they were abundant. Then back they came to Maine, and for two years factory owners who were able to take advantage made good money. But it was only a flash in the pan. Again they deserted us and today there is not a menhaden fishing boat or factory east of Cape Cod.” (Found in the files of author Ellen Vincent, attributed to Luther Maddocks of Boothbay Harbor, October 1929)



Getting ready to transfer pogies caught with nets (most likely a purse seine) to a larger boat which in this image appears to be a sailing vessel.

Bristol's Menhaden Industry

The Pemaquid Messenger, May 4, 1892

Explanatory note from Bob Emmons: The state passed a law restricting seine purse fishing (a type of dragnet fishing) to protect the menhaden stock. Fishermen were generally opposed, and the Pemaquid Messenger agreed that the restriction was unfairly harming the fishing industry. The writer felt the law unnecessary and preferred the proposed Lapham Bill being debated in the US Congress that would give the federal government control over fishing regulations. The fish-oil and guano industry and its lobbyists helped defeat the bill in Congress, largely on 'states rights' grounds.

Whatever industry concerns the prosperity of Bristol and her people should be encouraged. Not many years since, a large and important element in our growth was the menhaden business. In 1876 the disappearance of this specimen of fish caused us much anxiety.

Our factories in which our townspeople had largely invested (and which up to this time had been paying properly) rotted from disease, fishing gear was worthless and the greater part of our fishermen were thrown out of employment. While it was noticed that all along the Atlantic coast, these fish made their yearly pilgrimage, they seemed to shun our state. Up to this time they had shown no diminution. Of course the catch in some years had surpassed that of others, but this was no sign of disappearance. Certain years in which they had been quite scarce, were followed by years of remarkable abundance. Either from some change in their food, temperature of the water for some unknown cause, they had left our waters.

In the year 1889 our fishermen woke up to find that the fickle and changeable pogy (sic), after ten years vacation

had again come to our coast in greater abundance than ever. Factories were built by our people, and for two years they pursued their business with prosperity.

Last year our bays and rivers fairly swarmed with the menhaden. Within their (unreadable) were millions of barrels, but meantime our fish wardens interpreted the law in such a manner, that at fishing grounds where before the fishermen were unmolested, their steamers were taken, and their captains arrested for violating the law. As a result the menhaden fishery was a failure and this business in which our citizens are interested and upon which many of the fishermen depend for a livelihood is now in a state of depression.

...With some degree of consolation, we have watched the progress of the Lapham bill now before Congress for enactment. This bill places the menhaden industry in the hands of the U.S. Fish Commission, a body of highly scientific men who have devoted their lives to the study of our fisheries in the interest of the government. The bill also provides that the national government shall make laws concerning the taking of menhaden, instead of the state legislatures. This would assure a uniform law from Key West to Eastport.

The Lapham Bill at once (as every other public measure) found in this state supporters, the fishermen and those who are interested in the business, and who think that if the national government should control this fishery, that our present state restrictions after careful inquiry would be found to be useless. Its enemies are chiefly the fish wardens, fish commissioner Gould and others, to whom the abolishment of a Maine fishing law would be steps toward destroying their business.

...Whatever decision may be taken in Congress regarding the Lapham bill, we trust that the people of this state will soon awake to the fact that a valuable industry is being crushed out by restrictive state laws not one person (except fish wardens) derives a benefit.



A mass of pogies washed up on the shore - not a pleasant sight or smell.

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