DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Pictures Available

Gathering sufficient oysters for a meal is a cinch, but the harvesting of our annual crop of more than 17 million bushels is a real job requiring the labor of thousands of workers.

Our eastern oysters, under natural conditions, the Fish and Wildlife Service, United States Department of the Interior, said today, in observance of the opening of the 1940-41 season, range from or near high-water mark to a depth of about 130 feet, the latter in Patuxent River, Maryland. In South Carolina the natural beds are found almost entirely between high and low-water marks. In similar situations in Florida, oysters are found growing on the aerial roots of mangroves. In many areas the oyster farmer plants his oysters in comparatively shallow depths of 12 to 15 feet or less, but in Long Island Sound the oyster growing grounds are located in depths down to 60 feet or more. As oysters in such areas may be transplanted three or four times, the job of moving millions of bushels of oysters expeditiously is an undertaking of considerable magnitude."

Most of the oysters are harvested in one of several ways--by hand tongs, patent tongs, dredges lifted by hand or hand windlasses, or large dredges operated by engines or hoists. Tonging of oysters is carried on in waters up to 20 feet or more in depth. On shallow-water oyster-bars open to the free-bay oystermen, however, hand operated scissors-like tongs are in general use and afford employment to thousands of our watermen. The long slender handles of the tongs are

worked scissors-fashion, nipping the oysters free from the bottom, after which they fall into a basket-like arrangement and are lifted aboard the small boat onto a culling board. Here they can be sorted out and the smaller, illegal-sized oysters, dead shells, etc., returned to the water. The market oysters are stored on board the boat.

Oyster dredges are employed generally by the oyster farmers who must handle large quantities of oysters quickly and cheaply and in the deeper waters open to the public where tonging is impracticable. The dredges have a triangular frame with a toothed bar at the bottom and a meshed bag capable of holding as much as 25 to 30 bushels or more of oysters. The dredge is dragged over the bottom, the teeth freeing the oysters, permitting them to slide back into the meshed bag. When filled, the bag is hoisted aboard and the small, unmarketable oysters culled out and thrown back while the market stock is stored on the deck of the vessel. The largest of the fleet of oyster boats are equipped to handle four dredges, two on each side of the boat and may catch up to 1,000 bushels or more per hour.

The geographical distribution of this 17-million bushel harvest in 1938, according to statistics collected by the Service's Division of Fishery Industries, indicates that the New England States produced 1,179,114 bushels; the Middle Atlantic States, 2,388,389 bushels; the Chesapeake States, 7,459,767 bushels; the South Atlantic and Gulf States, 4,822,678 bushels; and the Pacific States, 1,278,778 bushels. This grand total of 17,128,726 bushels is equivalent to 86,931,800 pounds of oyster meats. In many other nations, the bivalve is a luxury food with only very limited quantities available; in the United States, however, they are a staple article of food, at prices within the reach of all classes of people.