

Alligator fish returns to Merrimack

We have all heard that the Merrimack River is gradually getting cleaner as waste water treatment plants and other cleanup projects along the river's path from upper New Hampshire do their jobs, but will it ever be as clean as it was when the area was settled?

Well, probably not quite, but almost.

At this time the state fish and wildlife people are working with the University of Massachusetts in a study of the short-nosed sturgeon in the river.

More than a century ago this smaller version of the primitive sturgeon abounded in the river, particularly in Rocks Village. There was, in fact, a commercial fishing industry there.

The short-nosed sturgeon has a maximum length of about 4 feet. The Atlantic sturgeon can grow as long as 8 feet and there have been reports of even larger ones being sighted in the 1800s. These may be exaggerations.

The best fishing was actually on the West Newbury side of the river near the Rocks Bridge. It was known as the Mowhawk Grounds.

Today's anglers are catching shad, and some big ones — between 2 and 3 feet long — are being pulled out.

According to a paper on Rocks Village by Fred Noyes Lloyd, the Town of Haverhill granted the first fishing rights in the area to David Chase in 1754. Chase was a Newbury man, who set up his fishing operation at the end of Swett's Lane, later known as Wharf Lane.

This was on the Haverhill side where the water was deeper than the West Newbury shore, and ships could tie up and unload sugar, rum and molasses from the Caribbean. In return cargo the holds were filled with barrels of pickled shad from the Merrimack.

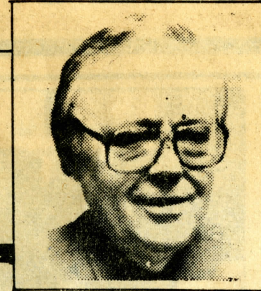
Fishing at that time was the principal source of revenue for Rocks Village people.

Even though the first fishing rights went to a West Newbury man, the Haverhill Rocks Villagers soon took control of the operation.

ACTUALLY, NEWBURY people were fishing there for profit much earlier.

Haverhill: The town and the city

BY JIM LENANE
Gazette Staff Writer



Courtesy Haverhill Public Library

It was around 1870 when this quartet of commercial fishermen were photographed after hauling their catch of shad and a single sturgeon out of the Merrimack River in Rocks Village. From left are Benjamin Brown, Charles Ordway, who owned the fishing rights for the area, Albert Cooper and Hazen Ordway. State fish and game authorities have joined in a University of Massachusetts project to study the return of the short-nosed

Shad once were a mainstay of the Rocks Village fishing industry. The plentiful shad were caught, pickled in brine, packed in barrels and shipped to England and countries on the Continent.

The flesh of the sturgeon resembles salmon in both texture and flavor and that was its undoing in the Merrimack River. Around 1880, Noyes tells us, a New York company sent a fishing crew here. It caught virtually all the sturgeon in the river. Only a few were seen thereafter, but, as we noted above, they seem to be coming back.

During the early years of this century an Atlantic sturgeon of about 100 pounds was caught in a shallow pocket below the Great Stone Dam in Lawrence. An enterprising Lawrencean hauled the giant scaled monster out of the water and brought it to an empty storefront he had rented on Essex Street, Lawrence's main drag. He charged a dime each to see the thing, but soon he knew the attraction had its limits because he had no refrigeration. In a day or two more the board of health ordered him to close his hastily set up piscatorial exhibition and the fragrant sturgeon was buried in an unmarked grave.

A study including the state Fisheries and Wildlife department and University of Massachusetts, has reported this spring that there a lot of young sturgeon, 2 feet or so long, in the river in the Rocks Village area.

The last commercial fishing operation in the Rocks Village area was that of Charles Ordway, second from left in the picture accompanying this column.

Ordway fished the area during the last half of the 19th Century and the operation continued on into the 1900s, but not long.

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ACTUALLY, NEWBURY people were fishing there for profit much earlier. Records show that on Sept. 23, 1719, that town granted to Moses Chase, John Carr, John Swett and seven others 80 rods frontage along the flats on the south side of the river for fishing.

The only stipulation was that they had to pay one salmon per year to The Rev. Toppan and another to The Rev. Tafts, both of Newbury, "If they get them." This was part of the town's support of their clergymen, and part of the Yankee work ethic that "you don't get something for nothing."

The Merrimack teemed with fish in those days with the aforementioned sturgeon and shad and Atlantic salmon, trout, alewives, bass and trout. Below Chain bridge horse mackerel, what we now know as tuna, were found. In the 1700s these invaders from the ocean were considered worthless by the settlers and a nuisance to their fishing nets. Today a good, large tuna will bring thousands of dollars in Japan, and that is where a lot of the tuna caught offshore in this area go.

As soon as the ice melted each spring, smelt fishing began. Smelt fishermen used small nets and boats and many a story tell of dories being filled with two or three hauls of the net. When was the last time you saw any smelt from the Merrimack?

AS INDUSTRY flourished upriver in



Courtesy Haverhill Public Library

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Haverhill, Lawrence, Lowell, Nashua, N.H., and Manchester, N.H., the Merrimack became a sewer. At first it was the textile mills that were the big polluters, but as urbanization spread, sewer systems were built, and where would the sewage go? It went into the Merrimack, of course, or perhaps a nearby tributary.

After all, the river was large and had an unlimited capacity for getting rid of the waste materials of civilization. It wasn't until well into the 20th Century that we began to realize that the river had very definite limits, and by then they had been surpassed a thousandfold.

Smelt were sold around Rocks Village at 10 cents a "score" or a half cent apiece. They were never sold by weight, Noyes says.

Alewives, another herring-type fish, were often thrown back when caught. Sturgeon, however, were sold, but not many were caught. They are bottom dwellers and do not hunt other water life voraciously like the salmon. Thus they were not easily attracted to a fish hook. They could be snagged with large hooks or speared if the fisherman was lucky enough to get close.

The sturgeon was no lazy dolt, however. They were strong swimmers and had a habit of throwing themselves up out of the water only to land with a loud splat before disappearing quickly back into their domain. The 5-footers were so strong that a shad net could not hold them.

THERE IS a story about a party of sightseers out rowing on the river near the Rocks Bridge that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when one of these bony-scaled, alligator-like fish popped out of the water. It landed smack in their boat, turning it over and throwing the occupants into the Merrimack currents.

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As the river became dirtier, the "good" fish steadily declined.

During the worst days, in the 1940s and early 1950s, before the textile industry was gone South, the only fish seen regularly in the river were carp, eels and a few hardy small panfish such as kibbies and yellow perch, but these last two were not too common.

By the late 1960s scuba divers were reporting the river below Rocks Bridge, where the in-out pattern of tides couples with the to-the-sea flow of the Merrimack, was producing clear, sandy bottom stretches.

In the 1970s the river was noticeably cleaner and as this decade nears its end, we know the river is just a little cleaner every year.

Atlantic salmon have been stocked in the river, and a relatively new fish-watch window on the river at the Lawrence Dam has reported salmon for several years. Oddly the salmon count has been down during the past year or two, and that has yet to be explained.

It may be just part of nature's pattern, but since we battled nature for so long in this useful old waterway, we have a lot to study and learn.

In the meantime keep your eyes open for sturgeon, especially if you're in a rowboat on the river. You just might pick up a passenger who has arrived by air.