

Two Annual Events Honor The Oyster

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of-pearl beads within the mantle tissue of caged oysters and suspending the bi-valves in sheltered bays. Four years is required to produce the finished pearl.

According to Jerry Parker, shellfish biologist with N.C. Marine Fisheries, this industry is located primarily on the west coast. Our own local oysters produce only imperfect shells, he said.

By the turn of this century a decline in oysters had set in, partly through over-fishing, but also because of increasingly polluted waters.

During World War II oyster beds were neglected, followed by a parasitic infection that killed many oysters.

In 1962-63 waters off Britain nearly froze, wiping out the oyster industry in that area.

To increase the yield, river bottoms are covered with tons of oyster shells, providing places of attachment.

It's not always easy to find enough shells, however, as they are in demand for everything from driveways to decorations. Parker said, "There's a problem getting shells from shucking houses to replant now, because they're selling them to golf courses and other industries at better prices."

Harvesting is done on both coasts by hand, and in North Carolina, the dredge or other mechanical means used elsewhere is illegal.

Marine Fisheries and local health departments carefully regulate the taking of oysters in today's dwindling market. Waters are frequently closed because of pollution, oysters are often transplanted to a clean environment, and there are restrictions on the harvesting.

State fishing regulations say an oyster must be at least three inches long to be taken, and this culling must be done at the time of harvest.

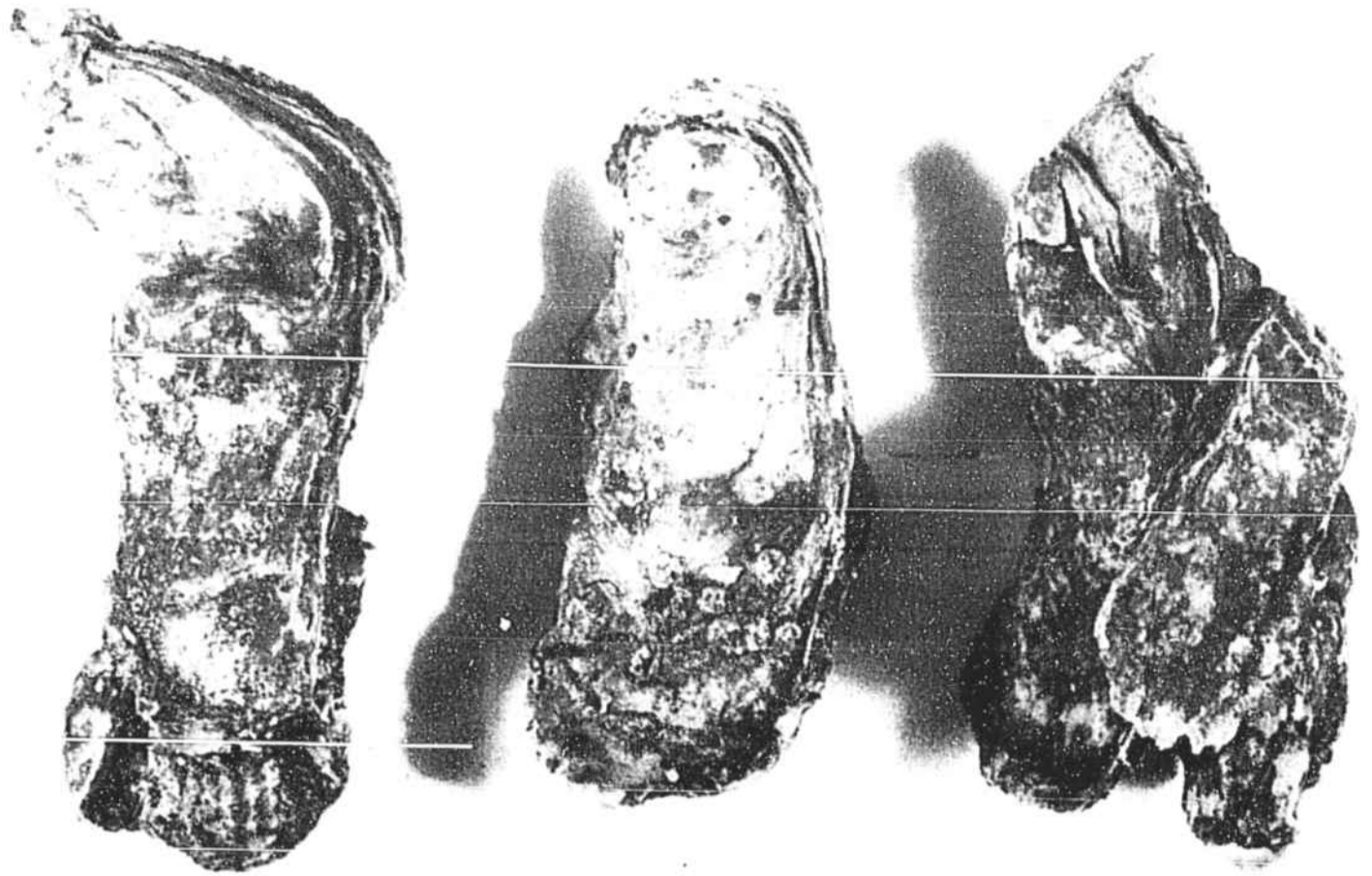
None can be taken on Sunday, except for one bushel per person, or between sunset and sunrise.

These precautions may enhance the oyster industry. Milliken hopes so. Employing up to 50 workers, he once operated year-round, but now summer work is scanty, and prices are climbing.

"Last year we paid about \$20 for a 110-pound bag," he said of his out-of-state purchases, "and the retail price was about \$2 per bag, or \$10-\$15 per bushel."

The season has been October 1 through March 31, but recently a statewide change was made, moving the opening date to October 15.

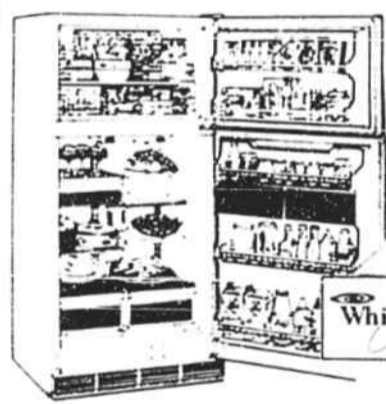
In Brunswick County there's abundant interest in the oyster, with two annual events in its honor. Dixon's Chapel oyster roast is set this year for Oct. 24, and the N.C. Oyster Festival near Ocean Isle Beach will be Oct. 10-11.



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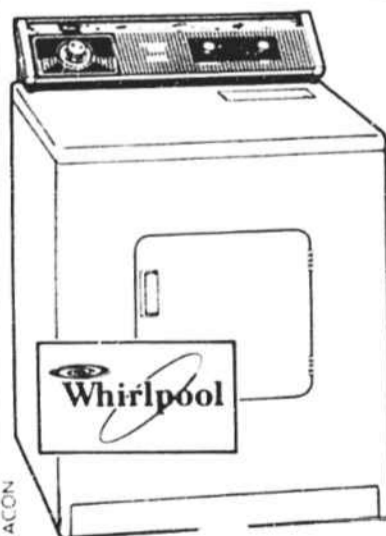
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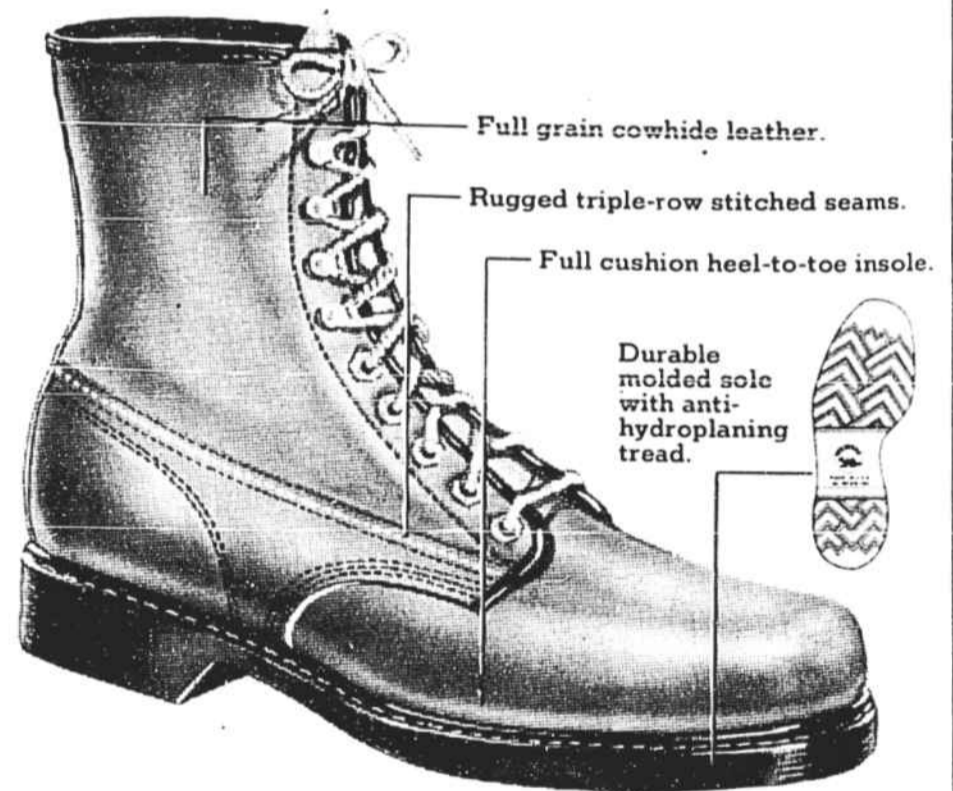
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