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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Pioneered Canada Oyster Culture Here

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I HAD some most interesting talks about the development of the Oyster industry when Roy Drinnan was scientist in charge of the experimental laboratory at Ellerslie. Dr. Drinnan did a great deal to develop that artificial hatching of oysters in a laboratory where conditions could be controlled to render the environment just about as suitable to those tasty shell fish as it is possible to be.

Now I find that Ernest Kemp – he was the father of Reg Kemp of the Research Station here – was one of the pioneers in the oyster industry here so far as scientific care was concerned.

A manuscript given to me by Reg reviews the early days of the oyster as early settlers found them. Here are a few paragraphs:

The First Settlers

WHEN THE first settlers came out to Canada, especially those who took up residence in what is now known as the Maritime Provinces they discovered the oysters in these waters to be of an excellent quality, size and flavor, especially those in the Malpeque Bay area. Oysters were found to be plentiful in the Bay Chaleur, Bay-du-Vin, Richibucto Bay and Shediac Bay in New Brunswick, Tracadie and the Bras d'Or Lakes in Nova Scotia.

In Prince Edward Island there were the Hillsboro and Elliot Rivers emptying into Charlottetown harbor as well as in the Alberton and Malpeque Bay areas.

These oysters may have received a certain amount of supervised cultivation from individuals, mostly for their own use and no doubt some were sold, but the Canadian Government did not obtain the services of an oyster culturist until the year 1892. In that year they applied to the Whitstable Oyster Company of Whitstable, Kent, England for an oyster expert to come out to Canada to cultivate the oysters in the Maritime Provinces.

Whitstable Oysters

THE WHITSTABLE Oyster Co. had been famous for many years in cultivating what was known as the Whitstable "Native", a small but very flavorful oyster which they sold in large quantities to the London and European markets.

Ernest Kemp was 31 when he came to Canada and looked over the oyster area along the shores of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and P.E.I.

He came here with a great deal of experience. He had served as the manager of the Whitstable Oyster Company with which he had been associated as a very young man.

A report he wrote of the Oyster situation resulted in his being named Oyster Expert for the Dominion of Canada, department of marine and fisheries.

Mrs. Kemp arrived in October, 1892, with their three children and the family took up residence in Shediac, New Brunswick.

Five years later the family moved to Charlottetown where they made their permanent home.

Oyster Expert For Canada

CAPTAIN KEMP held the position of oyster expert for Canada for 20 years – he was superannuated in 1921.

I'm not sure what this part means but the old manuscript says he (Mr. Kemp) cultivated the oysters from the Miramichi River to the Bras d'Or Lakes and around the shores of Prince Edward Island.

He must have been a busy man, for he was also protective officer against the poaching of oysters and lobsters out of season.

A tribute to Mr. Kemp's success is this clipping from the Moncton Transcript in 1895 that said in part:

"The fisheries department is arranging for the continuation of the work of oyster culture under the supervision of Mr. Kemp, the English expert. The first bed planted at Shediac by Mr. Kemp has been most successful and the oysters will be ready for gathering this year."

One Million 'Brood'

ANOTHER TRANSCRIPT item said that one million oyster brood had been planted, apparently in the Shediac region. He was also working "on a new bed at Tracadie on Antigonish County, Nova Scotia".

The manuscript I have says further that Mr. Kemp took railway carloads of oysters and lobsters from the Maritime Provinces to Victoria, British Columbia.

He was conducting an experiment to find whether the oysters from the Eastern seaboard, as well as the Eastern lobster would survive in the waters of the Pacific Ocean.

The experiment proved the Pacific water was too cold and the oysters and lobsters did not survive, the manuscript relates.

The manuscript continues:

When Capt. Kemp began the culture of oysters in 1892, the Federal Government chartered a small steam boat each year to carry on the work until 1903, when a patrol boat was built by the Federal Government at Yarmouth, N.S. especially designed for work on the oyster beds and was named the S.S. Ostrea (Latin for Oyster), a small vessel of 55 feet in length with a draft of five feet.

Larger Patrol Boat Built

THE S.S. Ostrea proved too small for the work but it was not until 1916 the Federal Government had a much larger one built. Capt. Kemp proceeded to Sorel, P.Q. to take delivery and command of the new vessel which was also named the S.S. Ostrea. This new ship was 85 feet in length and a draft of six feet and was equipped with more modern devices to carry on the work of planting, cultivating and dredging oysters.

Capt. Kemp lived to see the culture of oysters carried on in a much more scientific manner when Dr. A.W.H. Needler opened the biological station at Bideford, P.E.I. and one of the happiest days of his retirement (the year before he passed away) was when he had the pleasure of spending a day with Dr. Needler at the Biological Station. He was deeply impressed with the advancement which had been made in the breeding and cultivation of the oysters he had worked with for so many years.

“The Captain”, as he was affectionately known by his friends in Charlottetown and throughout “The Island” passed away on March 1st, 1939, age 78.

The work of Dr. Drinnan in recent years has added greatly to the success of oyster culture.