

The Short Life of the Oyster Industry in the Stanwood Camano Area.

Given the fact that Camano is an Island, many newcomers may wonder about the potential - past and present - for a shellfish economy in our surrounding waters. Perhaps the story of local oyster companies has the answer.

In the midst of the Depression, the Camano Blue Point* Oyster Company was formed by George Kosmos. Mr. Kosmos purchased 5300 acres of tidelands between Juniper Beach and Livingston Bay of which 3500 acres were suitable for growing oysters. They planted 20 cases of seed (spat) from Japan in a test plot and by 1932 were anticipating enough to fill a growing demand for commercial oysters. Indeed, in the State of Washington oyster production increased from 31,000 gallons in 1931 to 1,131,100 gallons in 1941 due to the introduction of the Japanese or Pacific Oyster seed. The native Olympia oyster seed was not successful at the time and growers (encouraged by the State and University researchers) wanted to avoid dependence on Eastern oysters.

In September of 1932 the first scowload of oysters was towed from Livingston Bay to the Stanwood wharf. "All the workers are local people and must be taught the art of taking the oysters out of the shells. Mr. and Mrs. Sam Morimoto have been secured to act as instructors and most of the workers after some practice are able to make fair wages.... the wage is determined by the number of gallons a worker is able to shuck."

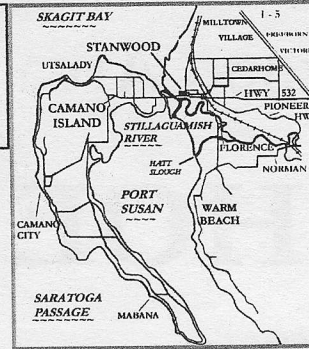
The first cargo of oysters was sent out by refrigerator truck to Seattle. It was hoped that this economy would replace the declining lumber industry with the company contracting to process

the oysters from other beds in the area. One such company was on land just east of Juniper Beach, the Port Susan Bay Oyster Company with George Weerda, Even Eide, Lars Eide and Ole Eide as investors.

As one of these investors, Ole Eide reports that this venture did not succeed. He planted spat from Japan off of Hatt Slough and worked very hard to experiment with the best location. The oysters grew best at a 2 foot tide he found and the shells were large. But the "stomachs" were unappetizingly disproportionate. The buyer, New England Fish Co. in Seattle, would not be able to sell them and refused to buy. It seems there was not the right amount or combination of minerals and plankton in the Port Susan waters to support commercial activities. Ole also planted oysters in Skagit Bay north of Arrowhead Beach for a different group of investors in Everett—they died from freezing during a cold winter.

It was a precarious business. In 1938 the *Twin City News* reported that "Mr. Kosmos says he can buy oysters at 30 cents per gallon and the cost of harvesting them is 24 cents" therefore they were not worth harvesting. At this time he hoped that the smaller oyster producers would drop out and the price would go up to make them profitable again. That year the plant was used for processing peas. Then large headlines appeared in the April 27, 1939 paper announcing the re-opening of the plant.

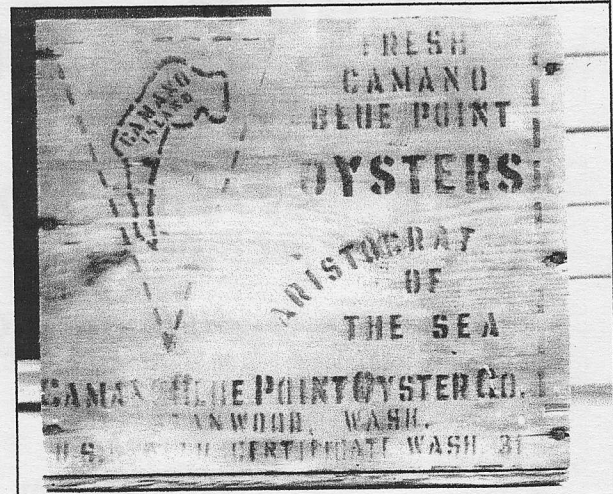
But alas, in January of 1940, a company



Times & Places of Stanwood & Camano Island

called the Cooperative Food Products announced that it would be taking over the Blue Point building to specialize in canning of rabbits and fish. They would also process and pack certain white fish in the Norwegian style cakes and balls. Following that, it appears that the Edlund Shipyards leased the processing building to be used as part of the shipyard where seven barges were built for the U.S. Army.

That appeared to be the end of oysters and the shellfish business in general until 1943 when the Gaetz Oyster Company purchased the Blue Point flats near town (Livingston Bay). The oysters from all over Puget Sound as well as Port Susan were processed in the Stanwood Hardware building (Home Center) and then moved to the waterfront. This father and son business had been



Thanks to artifact donors **Scott and Kathleen Chase** for buying this Camano Blue Point Oyster Company box and donating it to the Historical Society.

buying fish at Utsalady and in 1946 they planned a plant expansion to include freezing facilities as well as canning of crabs, clams, salmon and bottomfish. They offered to provide canning services for housewives, which was a long, tedious, smelly process in the home kitchen. A smokehouse was also built.

They also began construction of 60 ton capacity oyster dredge with living quarters, its own lighting system employing 16 men. He expected to soon be canning 70,000 pounds of clams and more if the channel of the Stillaguamish River could be dredged for better navigation of vessels of seafood products to the cannery. Ultimately, in spite of repeated attempts by local business interests to have the Corps of Engineers fund this, dredging was occasional and had little effect in making the channels navigable.

In 1947 an oil spill occurred in Port Susan that contaminated the Livingston Bay oysters. The oil leaked from a Russian tanker *Donbass* that had broken apart in the Aleutians in February 1946. Newspaper articles failed to explain why the bow of a broken Russian tanker full of oil was towed to Port Susan to spill its contents into Port Susan. The company closed the oyster beds and stated it would turn to Samish Bay for its supply of oysters.

More articles on this topic are conspicuously absent from the newspapers, but at this writing we

are still seeking more specific reasons for the demise of this industry in this area. One source said the oil spill did not leave prolonged effects but perhaps with that, combined with the navigational problems on the river, Mr. Gaetz was sufficiently discouraged to discontinue the oyster business, at least here. And the following year, Twin City Foods was formed from the previous canning business that occupied the waterfront, Lien Brothers Canning Company and this company grew into Stanwood's most important local business taking advantage of the rich agricultural lands in the river delta.

—Editor

1. *Oyster Stew—Celebrating 100 Years of Oyster Culture in Washington State*—
<http://www.wsg.washington.edu/oysterstew/oystermain.html>
2. David G. Gordon, Nancy E. Blanton and Terry Y. Nosh, *Heaven on the Half Shell: The Story of the Northwest's Love Affair With the Oyster*. Washington Sea Grant Program, University of Washington, 2001.
3. *Shellfish & Seaweed Harvests of Puget Sound*. Daniel P. Cheney and Thomas E. Mumford, Jr.. Washington Sea Grant Program, University of Washington, 1986
4. Alice Essex, *The Stanwood Story*, Vol. III and news articles from the *Stanwood News & Twin City News, 1925—1949*.
5. <http://oldcamano.net/bluepoint.html>
6. *Blue Point is the name for oysters originally found off Long Island and now usually refer to any East Coast oyster and are not the Japanese Pacific oyster.

Current Exhibit !

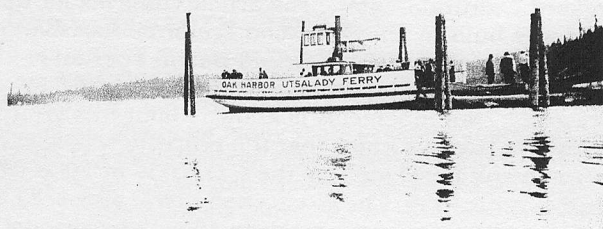
Steamer, Ships & Shorelines

Explore our historic connection to our surrounding waters—Port Susan, Saratoga Passage, the Stillaguamish River and Skagit Bay. Featured are the Native American canoes, local workboats and mosquito fleet, the steamboats, the story of Vancouver's grounding in Port Susan, ferries, tall ships and a local shanghaiing story. Also included are the Camano Island and Port Susan resorts with their boathouses and fishing that brought visitors, many of whom ultimately bought cottages or retired in the area.

Through December 2005.

Steamers, Ships & Shorelines

A Historical Photograph Tour of Stanwood & Camano Island



It's not too early to plan for the Independence Day Parade and Ice Cream Social!

Antique cars, floats, farm vehicles, wagons, buggies and other moving vehicles should plan on this event held this year on Monday, July 4th, 2005. A costume contest is held for children who enter the parade to be presented in the short program that follows the Parade at the Floyd Norgaard Cultural Center. The Ice Cream Social follows the program until 2 pm.

Camwood Genealogy Workshop meets to discuss genealogy the second Monday of each month on the second floor of the museum at 1 p.m. (Call Dave at 360-387-9220)



River, Rail and Road ~ a Pictorial History of Stanwood & East Stanwood is for sale for \$10.00 at the Snow Goose Bookstore or the Museum.

