

American eel part of Pa.'s heritage

The following excerpts from journals and reports in the 19th and early 20th centuries highlight the American eel as part of Pennsylvania's heritage:

EEL FISHING IN THE SUSQUEHANNA

"According to the Lancaster (Pa.) Herald, the riparian residents on the Susquehanna enjoy in the early autumn of every year a season of piscatorial sport, and, what is of more importance, obtain a considerable amount of food.

"By September, the water in the stream is generally very low — but a few feet deep in the channel — leaving the stony bottom for a wide space on either side, in some places nearly bare, with occasional deep furrows. Previous to the advent of cold weather the fish instinctively descend the river, and the shallowness of the water renders their capture easy. For many miles of the river's length the owners of the shoreline erect fish dams and gins, by deepening the channel somewhat and building an elongated V-shaped wall, at the lower point of which is fixed a box, from which the fish, when once caught, cannot extricate themselves.

"Fishermen secure and salt down five or ten barrels of eels during the season, besides living almost entirely upon them during the catch. ... The eels are packed in barrels, and many of them sent to Baltimore, where quantities are purchased by seas-going vessels whose skippers are aware of the delicious flavor of this rather anomalous article of provision."

— *The Maine Farmer*, Jan. 20, 1859

IN DAUPHIN COUNTY

"The inhabitants of the Stony Creek Valley, which lies in the Blue Mountains, five miles above Harrisburg are great eel catchers. The fish of Stony Creek Dam are completely dominated by the eels, which grow to an unusual size.

"For the past five years there have been two eels in the dam that have refused all hooks, but have lived so sumptuously the delicacies of the dam that Stony Creekers believed them to have attained prodigious proportions. ...

"Jeremiah Hogentogler is one of the leading and highly respected inhabitants of Stony Creek Valley. He makes a frugal living by selling kindling wood, pine knots, mountain tea berries, and Christmas trees in the city on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

"He has now become a hero, for on last Thursday he captured the two great eels.

"As Mr. Hogentogler tells the incident himself, he had started his mule and wagon on a wood chopping expedition the mountain side that borders the dam. A Stony Creeker always carries a hook and line with him and when he of chopping wood or digging for sassafras he invariably a little recreation by bobbing for eels in the dam.

"Last Thursday Mr. Hogentogler baited his hook with some corned beef and landed both of the famous eels much to his surprise and after a tough struggle. One eel was within two inches of four feet in length, and the other measured a trifle over three feet. He skinned his prizes at once, and, to prevent the hides from shrinking stuffed each with green walnuts and tufts of dried grass."

— *The American Angler*, 1887

IN PENNSYLVANIA WATERS

"Anglers fairly reveled in their favorite sport during the month of October in Pennsylvania. In nearly every portion of the state the waters were in good condition, and fish of all kinds seemed eager to be caught. Bass, wall-eyed pike and



State estimates at the turn of the 20th century put the eel catch along the Susquehanna River at more than 150,000 pounds per year. *Joe Hermitt, PennLive*

pickereel fishing was much better even than in September.

"In addition, the sinuous eel began his annual journey to the sea, and tons were caught by hook and line, and in fish baskets in the Susquehanna River to satisfy the eel hunger of the human dwellers along the Susquehanna valley. Daily and weekly newspapers in that territory declare that the run of eels this year in the Susquehanna river greatly exceeds previous autumns'.

"From 1,500 to 2,000 pounds have been taken from a single basket in one night, and boys and men have frequently been seen at the close of a day's outing carrying home from thirty to fifty of these snake like fish."

— *Forest and Stream*, Nov. 3, 1906

EEL INDUSTRY

"The value of the eel industry in Pennsylvania can scarcely even be estimated. A faint idea however may be obtained when it is stated that in 1905 the returns made to the Department from the licensed baskets were 158,729 pounds with a value of \$18,687. ...

"In addition to the fish which are sold, a great quantity of those captured are taken and consumed directly by the families of the men who caught them or sold to individuals by the fishermen without their putting them through the markets. ...

"The Lancaster, Harrisburg, York, Williamsport, Wilkes-Barre and Scranton markets are very important markets for eels and, while I cannot substantiate it, I believe I am safe in saying that the towns mentioned themselves consumed more than the 158,729 pounds.

"I am convinced that if there were faithful reports of all the eels caught in 1905 it would be found that the industry in this fish would be worth at least \$100,000."

— *Report of the Pennsylvania fish commissioner*, 1908