

SHAD FISHING AT BLOOMSBURG

An Old Resident Tells of the Olden Times When This Luscious Fish Came Up the Susquehanna

Introductory Comment: *When the Susquehanna River was free of impediments, such as mill dams, reservoir dams to provide water for the canal, and dams for hydroelectric power, large numbers of shad entered the river to spawn. This annual event that occurred mainly in the months of April, May and June, saw the fish penetrating the upper regions of the river into New York. Accounts in the late 1700s and early 1800s described the shad run as being quite large and nearly unlimited. This situation gave rise to a short-term fishing industry in the spring. One of early methods utilized in catching shad was the use of seines. In the following article that appeared in the Columbian, a Bloomsburg newspaper, on March 9, 1894, Casper Kressler recounted this method of fishing for shad. He commented that shad fishing had declined with the building of North Branch Canal and the harmful environmental impact from sewerage and mine refuse diminishing the water quality in the river. For more information about shad fishing, see Richard Gerstell's 1998 book, American Shad in the Susquehanna River Basin. This resource was added recently to the Society's library collection.*

"It was a good many years ago, and of course you don't remember it, for it was before you were born probably, that we used to catch shad down at the river," said Casper Kressler, an old resident of Bloomsburg, the other day. "I can remember when I used to carry a dinner bucket down to my brother Samuel, who died at Wilkes Barre last week at the age of ninety-one years and seven days. I was only a boy then, and he used to go there with other men to catch shad. That was before the dams below Sunbury and at Columbia were built, and the fish came up this far, and on up the river farther. They would go so far up that they would die, and I have often seen lots of dead shad floating down the river. There was no cotton in those days, and they had to raise hemp, and make hemp cord for nets. The nets were big ones, and it took seven men to handle them. They would go out in the stream and drop the nets and form a semi-circle and bring the ends to shore first and they made big hauls sometimes. The fish were delicious, better than we get now from the Delaware, because they were fresh from the water.

"Every half mile there was a shad fishery. Down at the ferry was the Hendershott fishery, owned by grandfather of N. J. Hendershott; next above that was the Kuder fishery, and the next at Espy, was the Whitmire fishery. Then the Creveling, then Webb's, and Boone's. Above that was either Hick's or Hill's. Below Hendershott's was Wanich's but it never amounted to much as the bottom was too rocky. It required a smooth bottom so that they can draw the seines. I remember hearing William Creveling say, that he caught 4,000 at one haul. They used to feed them to the hogs. The law at that time not only prohibited fishing on

Sunday, but also on Thursday. My brother Samuel caught shad for fourteen years.

"In those days there were no railroads nor other means of sending shad to market, and the people have lived on shad, which sold for a shilling a piece, and sometimes as low as six cents. There were many other kinds of fish in the river then, salmon, suckers, and others. These being smaller than shad, would go through the meshes of the seine, and sometimes men would catch barrels of them as they came through. The last shad were caught here in 1828 or 1829. The canal was opened in 1830, and the dams were built which prevented the shad from coming up the river. Should the canal ever be abandoned and the dams torn out, no doubt the people who live along the Susquehanna could again catch their own shad, and have them just as plenty as they were over sixty years ago, unless the sewerage from the many towns, and the refuse from the coal mines would drive them back, but that I don't know anything about. There are but few of us living any more who remember about the shad, and I am glad to be able to tell you what I know about them. I could tell you a good many other things about Bloomsburg in the older days but I guess that is enough for this time."