



Herring fresh off the boat at the dock on the banks of the Roanoke River in Jamesville, N.C.

WILL HERRING *run again?*

The annual spring run of herring in northeastern North Carolina has slowed to a stroll. But hope stays alive that the beloved fish will become bountiful again some day.

Text and photos by Donna Campbell Smith

The spring ritual of herring fishing was first introduced to me in 1965 by my boyfriend. He picked me up one afternoon with a peculiar looking net tied to the top of his car, and we drove to Lake Phelps, near Creswell in Washington County. A network of canals, dug by slaves in the 16th century to irrigate the rich black lands of the area, radiate from the lake. Through the centuries blueback herring, also known as river herring, have found their way from the Atlantic Ocean, through rivers, creeks and canals to spawn in the lakes and the sounds of coastal North Carolina. Those that survive return to the sea. The young fish wait until the following fall to make their exodus to the Atlantic Ocean.

I was exposed to fishing trips all my life, Mama having been an avid angler. I supposed the fishing poles and tackle box must be in the trunk of my date's car. What I soon learned was that herring fishing and fishing poles had little in common. Instead of using a hook and line, herring are scooped up in nets as they swim in schools through the narrow parts of creeks and canals.

Until this fishing excursion with my high school boyfriend, my earliest knowledge of herring was the pungent odor of frying salted herrings wafting throughout my grandfather's house whenever my aunt cooked them for his breakfast. Papa Tom also enjoyed a

breakfast of scrambled eggs and herring roe. Herring roe is the sack of eggs found in the female herring, and is considered by locals to be the North Carolinian's caviar.

HERRING HISTORY

The tradition of spring herring fishing goes back long before the first European settlers arrived on the shores of the Carolina coast. American Indians fished the coastal waters for thousands of years before their arrival. The native fishermen taught the newcomers how to make nets woven from plant materials, and how to use traps called weirs that are still incorporated by today's commercial herring fishermen. The bow and dip nets of ancient times are made from more modern materials, but follow the same pattern as those used by Indians long ago and many recreational fishermen still use them to catch herring. My boyfriend fashioned his net by bowing a long piece of pliable metal tubing to make a loop. Then he attached chicken wire to the frame to make the net. It looked like a giant tea strainer. Some nets were simply a big chicken wire basket with a cord attached. When the fish swam into the net and the fisherman felt them bump he just yanked the net out of the water by the cord.

Herrings were preserved in the old days by packing them in salt brine or pickling them in a vinegar and spice

concoction. Before cooking them, the fish must be soaked overnight in fresh water to take out the saltiness, changing the water at least twice. The fish are then rolled in meal and fried in hot lard. Herring have many fine bones and are eaten bones and all. Fresh herring are fried the same way, but after cleaning the fish the sides are notched every half an inch down the length to ensure the fish are cooked through and the bones can be eaten.

NORTH CAROLINA HERRING

Herring have made a small eatery called Cypress Grill in the Martin County town of Jamesville famous nationwide. They are only open a few months a year, usually January through April, while the herring are running. Jamesville has revered the river herring with a festival in their honor every Easter Monday for more than 60 years. According to an interview with Mr. Tee Wee Blount of Jamesville in an article by Janet Simpson and Michael Williams, the tradition of going to

Jamesville on Easter Monday began in the early 1900s. Easter Monday was a holiday, and people had the day off. They gathered in Jamesville at the fishery to buy herring and corn. Those preserved herring were a matter of survival for some families according to Mr. Blount. Even if some folks were not in the market for a barrel of herring, they liked to hang around and watch the activity at the fishery. It was in the 1950s that the local Ruritan Club decided to organize a festival, and the Easter Monday Herring Festival was born. Today the event includes a parade, carnival rides, vendors selling arts and crafts and food, and of course plates of fried herring and roe. People still watch the fishery activities as boats bring in their catch for the day.

From the 1800s until recently, commercial fisheries along the eastern region of our state provided herring to people throughout the country and abroad. The commercial fishermen used pound nets hung on poles, stretching the nets across the

river. These nets “herded” the fish into traps like the weirs used by Native Americans centuries ago. In the Washington County and Martin County area there were five fisheries, two in Plymouth, one at Cam Point between Plymouth and Jamesville, and two in Jamesville. During the herring runs in the mid-20th century as many as 75,000 fish could be caught and processed in the fisheries per day. This was also true of other counties up and down the Carolina coast.

Even in the 1960s locals were noticing a reduction in the size of the herring run. Stories of nets so full of fish it took more than one person to drag them out of the water were common in the old days, but rare by then. When I was introduced to the art of fishing for herring the catch was somewhat disappointing. My boyfriend dropped the net into the dark canal water. We waited a

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The Herring Queen's float in the Easter Monday Herring Festival Parade, Jamesville.





while and sure enough I saw the net quiver. We pulled it out to find a dozen or so wiggling fish trapped in the bottom of the net. Not a great catch by the usual standard, but plenty for us to cook over a fire on the canal bank.

Some folks were already complaining then, that the corporate farms surrounding the state park were changing the environment by not opening the canal locks and allowing the fish to gain entry to their Lake Phelps spawning ground. Locals saw this as the reason for the smaller catches. As the years have gone by, the herring have all but stopped traveling up the tributaries of eastern North Carolina, and biologists are not sure why. One reason may be that the locks and dams built to control the flow of water have hindered their route to the lakes and sounds for spawning, breaking the cycle. But, biologists think a combination of over-fishing, both on a local level and by oceanic fisheries, along with pollution and habitat loss can account for the herring's demise.

The problem of over-fishing started long before the 1960s. According to an article by Jim Wilson titled "Fish of Yesterday, Fish of Tomorrow," which appeared in the last October's issue of *Wildlife in North Carolina*, as early as 1905 a law was passed mandating fishermen leave a channel in the Albemarle Sound for migrating fish. That was because Albemarle Sound was filled with pound nets. And even before the 20th century shad was being restocked in the Albemarle in an attempt to replenish that fish population.

In any case, on March 2, 2006, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission voted to ban the harvest of herring in the rivers, creeks and streams of eastern North Carolina. It is now unlawful to possess herring over six inches long. Some doubt the moratorium will save the herring at all, others warn it is going to take a long time, 10 to 15 years.

From that spring in 1965, when I tasted my first herring cooked on the bank of a canal, hardly a spring has passed that I have not enjoyed a mess of fried herring and roe. I fear I might have enjoyed herring for the last time. Organizers of Jamesville's Easter Monday Herring Festival say the festival will go on, herrings or no herrings, and Cypress Grill may have to offer a substitute menu. Some have the nagging feeling that we have seen the end of an era; that the "herring runs" are a thing of the past, leaving us with only the memories. 📍

Donna Campbell Smith is a Carolina Country contributing writer who lives in Wake Forest. She wrote about mules in the February magazine.

Top left: Easter Monday Herring Festival vendors sell fried herring plates in front of the Old Post Office Building.

Bottom left: Herring are fried crispy and eaten "bones and all."

Right: Fried herring vendors at Jamesville's Easter Monday Herring Festival.

Fried Fresh Herring

- 6 fresh herring
- Bacon drippings
- 1 tablespoon margarine
- Salt and pepper
- ¼–½ cup white cornmeal

Scale and clean herring, removing heads. Soak for ½ hour in cold water to which 1 tablespoon salt has been added. Wash fish under cold running water. Pat dry. Sprinkle with salt. Heat bacon drippings in electric fryer to 380 degrees. Add margarine just before putting fish in.

Put cornmeal in paper bag. Add ¼-teaspoon pepper. Shake each fish in cornmeal, put in hot fat, cover and cook 10 minutes on each side until golden brown and crispy (time may vary). Drain on paper towels; keep hot on heated platter. Serves 4 to 6

Serve with coleslaw, boiled potatoes and good cornbread.

Herring Roe and Scrambled Eggs

- 6 strips bacon
- 1 8-ounce can herring roe drained, or 1 cup chopped cooked fresh roe
- 2 tablespoons bacon drippings
- 6 eggs
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper

Fry bacon, drain on paper towels, keep warm in oven. Pour off and reserve drippings. In same fryer, put 2 tablespoons bacon grease, add roe, salt and pepper. Brown slightly. Beat eggs. Add salt and pepper. Add 2 teaspoons bacon grease to browned roe, pour in eggs and mix scrambled roe and eggs. Cook until eggs are partially done. Remove from heat, cover for a minute. Serve immediately topped with bacon. Serves 4 to 6.

Recipes courtesy of Eddy Browning, food columnist for the Washington Daily News

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