

VILLAGE VIEW

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Along the shore of Little Island, just south of the Grand Island Bridge stands a small structure called, ever since I can remember, the Oyster Shanty. It became, over the past half-century, a kind of symbol for the village of Osterville, probably because it was the last remaining building on the shores of the bay that retained its look of a typical fishing shack.

No one knows today how many similar little buildings have stood on their pilings at the edge of the bay. Around the turn of the twentieth century at least three, perhaps four, perched above the marsh that stretches a couple of hundred yards toward West Bay.

According to old records, one belonged to Richard Lewis, another to Clarence Baker and a third to Freeman Adams. A fourth, and the one that survived essentially unchanged to recent times, belonged initially, as far as anyone remembers, to Joseph C. Crosby. It passed from his hands to those of his son, Horace, fondly and widely-known as Johnny, and when Johnny died, to Joe, the elder of his two sons.

Virtually unchanged in a world where change is rapid and the rule, The Oyster Shanty harbored thousands of memories in the hearts and minds of Osterville people. Within its cool shade were stacked barrels of oysters, packed and ready for shipment to cities all along the Eastern Seaboard; village people who went down to the shore for a couple dozen of the succulent shellfish for a special treat remember those barrels.

When he ran the shanty, Johnny greeted each customer with gentle and loving concern. After asking about each family member, he'd go to the double, barn-sized doors that opened on the waterside, pull in a wire bucket containing half-a-peck of oysters, and upon request, shuck them into a quart carton. Oyster stew or scalloped oysters were a welcome change from chicken or pork dinners around the family dinner tables of the village. Or the bivalves might be taken home, unopened, to be enjoyed on the half-shell.

Oyster beds in the bay were marked by long still-twigged poles cut from small trees and shoved into the bay's muddy bottom, each oysterman marking the beds he had staked out for his own harvesting. Some shallow sections of the bay in years gone by were thick with the bare-limbed forest of these markers.

Cotuit oysters didn't just appear naturally in the mud offshore. The baby oysters, called spat, were produced by oysters originating in Long Island Sound, south of the Connecticut shore. From Greenport, on Long Island, oystermen would obtain quantities of spat, bring them to Osterville and Cotuit, and plant them on the beds of Cotuit Harbor and those in the bays all around Grand Island (Oyster Harbors). Here the infant shellfish grew to marketable size, gaining in the process the distinctive flavor that made them favorite menu items at posh New York, Boston and Providence restaurants.

In winter, when the bay was ice-bound, the flow of tides helped along by Johnny's efforts with oar and chipper, kept enough open water around the shanty to permit him to pull his buckets and meet local demand. Most of the year, though, the salt waters were ice-free and his work, although arduous, a bit easier.

Oysters feed on nutrients in the waters. Different waters give oysters special flavors. The waters around Grand Island produced oysters with particularly fine taste, texture, and size.

Spat from Long Island is no longer planted in West Bay; around the other side of the island, in Cotuit harbor, oysters are still being farmed. The functional purpose of Crosby's oyster shanty no longer exists.

Little Island, in the past few decades, has experienced a real estate boom. The pine woods and oak groves, even the marshy spit of land jutting out on the south side of Grand Island bridge, now supports fine homes surrounded with flower gardens, broad lawns and landscaping plants nature never introduced to these shores.

After surviving at least eighty years the rigors of winters both fierce and mild, of tides high and low, of hurricanes and storms, of summers hot and summers cool, the one remaining oyster shanty has now become a part of a neighboring estate and is being renovated for non-commercial purposes.

Gone are the big double doors that swung back against the face of the building to let the morning sun pour onto the salt-water-soaked floor planking. Gone, too, the four little windows on either side, north and south; they have been replaced with big ones for enjoyment of views of sea and marshland.

Gone, as well, the gently shelving sand beach, littered with dry salt hay, seaweed shreds, broken shells and the detritous of ebbing tides. The shanty is now bulwarked with a stone foundation that replaces the old piling posts that supported it many years.

And gone, forever, is the character the old oyster shanty reflected in the waters flowing past. The present structure is neatly kept; no heaps of smelly oyster shells, alive with buzzing flies, cluster around the entrance door. No dirty old skiff swings at a post that leans out of the water at a crazy angle. No oyster dragger is moored at the shaky pier. No pier. No heavy rubber boots, such as those Johnny Crosby wore day-in-day-out, lay collapsed in a heap in a corner. No woodstove burns cherry-red-hot in winter.

Change has come, even here. And no finger of blame can be pointed. The shanty's useful days are all in the past. Its newest owner sees changes he has wrought as improvements to his property. Surely he is at liberty to make of his shanty whatever he wishes, within limits of law and regulation.

All that remains now of the oyster shanty is our memories. We, who call up the scene south of the bridge, see it still as it was. To keep that recollection fresh, we have pictures. One such, an oil painted thirty years ago or more, hangs upon my wall. Another crafted at Pairpoint Glass in Sagamore and reproduced in a cup plate, is available from the Osterville Historical Society.

The mold from which cup plates are cast is broken after a short time; the edition is limited; the plates, popular collectors' items, appreciate in value, year-to-year.

Whoever would like a permanent memento of the oyster shanty as it stood, undisturbed, for nearly a century, may acquire this small circlet of glass for a nominal price. The cup plates will be on sale as long as the supply lasts; they come in both clear or amethyst color.

The oyster shanty as a symbol of Osterville has undergone such change as to make it unrecognizable, but may be retained always in the molded form that will, perhaps, endure longer than the structure now standing on the shore of Little Island, just south of the Grand Island Bridge.