

The Poor Man's Fresh Meat—the Clam

It also fills the Fisherman's bait box

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Bonnycastle Dale

WHAT are all those big fires over there?" asked Laddie. We were seated by the sea shore. The night had fallen and the prevailing west wind had died down. "Clam bake I guess," I told him. Just as you good people of midcontinent have "corn roasts" and "fish picnics" so do our new neighbors in Nova Scotia have their "clam bakes." And it takes a good host and careful cooking so as not to serve up a nice wee portion of sand with each and every clam. "I guess their bellies are full," irreverently quoth the lad, as wisps of merry songs were borne across the inlet. What other fires have burned along this strand? Only ten generations ago the then French settler watched with alarm the twinkling fires built by boat crews of the attacking British fleet, and on another beach to the westward the natives (Micmacs) built merry fires of the poor settlers' homes and crops. All these warlike scenes are past and gone. The Union Jack replaces the lilies of France. The Indians have gone to their unknown graves; all but a very few; and this forested, sea begirt, peninsula of Nova Scotia is settled with descendants of Scotch, English and Irish, whose young roast clams where the Indians in olden times had more tragic roasts.

The main use of the festive clam is for bait; bait for the millions of big codfish that swim in the shallow water off the coast. Water to twenty fathoms where the modern steam drag-net (the new fishing boats) will foul every time on the boulder-covered bottom. From where I write this, as far as the eye can see, each and every field and all the shores are covered with great and small boulders and stones left by the retreating ice of the glacial period. If it spoiled the "hay-fields"—the one I see from this window is so bespattered that Laddie could leap from stone to stone across it (yet they take a fair crop of "English hay" from it; the other hay grown wild on the tide flats is known as "red top"). So it was the glacier that deposited the rocks in the fishing grounds and made them so that only handline or trawl fishermen could use them.

Laddie is going out on the morrow with some fishermen to catch the big brown codfish, if he is lucky enough not to hook all dogfish. So, as the baitbox is empty, it is up to him and they to fill it. Anxious eyes watch the retreating tide; as it takes two clams to every hook—two on a cod line and three to five thousand on a trawl, so it takes some digging, as the codfish eats only the soft bag and not the hard snout of the clam. I pictured the four men at the work. They use the N.S. clam hoe, and a good man can dig a bucket of these shell fish in a few minutes where they lie the thickest. They prefer the medium sized clam as the great big chaps have too much snout. It is wonderful how thickly they will lie within

a foot of the top of the sandflat. These are the "soft shell" clams. The big "hard shell" ones are found out on the open ocean shore. The lowest low tide lasted only a small part of an hour; so the men were constantly backing up. Before the tide finally covered the flats they had a good many thousand clams of the right size to pour into the bait boxes. These were then tied to anchors in the tideway and left floating there all night. It is remarkable how long clams will live in a floating box. I have known of a derelict box afloat until it was all chafed and rubbed up by battering for many tides on many shores, yet when we opened it the clams were right and hearty—as if that was their natural course of life. Within a few months these flats on which the clams were dug will again be filled with medium-sized bait. The men I am writing of take bait only for their own fishing. The men over at Fundy Bay dig bait for the fleets of fishing boats which go out to the banks. So they dig on every tide and store their clams alive, others catch and open and salt the bait.

There is an odd yarn of one of the young men of this "southwest shore" (really it is the east shore of Nova Scotia, but in the time of Halifax being the headquarters of the fleet all roads were built out from there; and so this is "southwest" of Halifax all right!) This young man was used to digging clams on this shore where we have only seven-foot tides. Arrived at Fundy and his work obtained he set out with his pails and took an outside position so as to be on good rich clam flats where the other chaps were not bothering him with their clam hoes. He threw his clams in piles as the ground was enormously rich. Once he thought he heard a cry or call, but the wind was setting towards the dory and the other clambers. A rich creaming wave that splashed into his outer pile of clams awoke him to the fact that the tide had him all but cut off. He started in haste to fill his pails or buckets; but the water was over his feet in no time. Discarding everything he started splashing ahead for all he was worth, but he was soon in softer flats and up to the knees. His mates now came rowing towards him and hauled him in. First thing he asked was, "how high does this tide run?" When they told him, "fifty feet odd during blows," he remarked he was lucky that only his legs were wet.

Although it is seldom that we men who follow Natural history work meet strange adventures (all these are met by the writers who never leave their desks—met in their minds) I did see an odd sight made by even the humble clam. I happened to be staying on one of the islands of the Gulf of Georgia. It was cold weather and sometimes at night we had nipping frosts. I was afoot along the great sandspit anxiously watching for seal which "sun" there. None were to be seen. A single blacktail deer, herded by me towards the narrow end of the spit,



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Nova Scotia fishermen digging clams for bait.