

110.—THE INCIPIENCY OF THE MENHADEN OIL BUSINESS.**By E. L. BARKER.**

[From letter to Prof. S. F. Baird.]

I passed my youth in daily contact with those who constituted more than one-half of all the "menhaden fishers" of that day. My grandfather was the originator of the net then and now in use, and was the first to discover, to "try out," to market, and to give value to this most valuable product. I have made from this fish, selected and properly cooked as the "staff" of the meal, more enjoyable breakfasts while yet a boy than ever since from "A 1" mackerel. I have seen my father and nine others realize \$440 cash for a few hours' work in seining, and this at a single catch. This was years before the use of steam in the business. I sincerely wish it were in my power to throw a little light on any recent changes, real or alleged, in their habits, in their migrations, as well as upon their relations to what are known as edible fish.

WASHINGTON, D. C., *December 28, 1882.***111.—REASONS FOR RESTRICTING THE USE OF STEAMERS AND SEINES IN THE MENHADEN FISHERY.****By LOUIS C. d'HOMERGUE.**

[From a letter to Prof. S. F. Baird.]

I have received, through the courtesy of a friend, a copy of the testimony taken by the subcommittee on Foreign Relations, "to examine into the subject of the protection to be given by law to the fish and fisheries on the Atlantic coast."

It seems to me that the questions were so put as to procure admissions on the part of the menhaden fishermen that they caught large quantities of food-fish in their nets, and that owing to the rapidity with which they were bailed into the vessels it would be impossible to detect them. This, of course, is a wrong impression, for other fish are so distinct that they are detected as easily as a lump of chalk would be in a load of soft, fine coal. The fact, however, has been clearly established by all the witnesses examined in the interest of the menhaden steamers that they do not catch enough food fish to furnish diet for their crews, and that whenever this rule is broken by an exception the food-fish is brought to market for sale. But the truth is that the market is soon glutted, so that what remained on two occasions had either to be thrown overboard or turned into guano which went to make food.

Tons of food-fish are removed weekly from Fulton market, in summer especially, and taken by two well known fertilizing firms.

I cannot understand why the superintendents of markets were not examined on this point. Then again, the questions were well chosen to gain the admittance that menhaden could be caught as well two or more miles offshore as inshore, and with nets of 3-inch meshes.

The answers to these questions, given as they were, by men of practical experience, who had not seen each other, and who did not know the object of the questions put or their purport, fully gave the negative to the position it seems had been assumed, that the menhaden fishing could be carried on at a distance of 2 miles from shore, and with nets of 3-inch meshes, with no ill effect upon the result; also that the season should not commence till July 1.

I am much pleased that the chairman, Senator Lapham, put his questions so shrewdly as to get at the truth of the matter.

Now, on the part of the market or food fishermen, their testimony amounted only to surmises. In answer to questions they either assume certain things or admit that they know nothing about the question at issue. Captain Wilcox very aptly put it when he said, "There are times when there is a little scarcity of food-fish, and they will turn right around and attribute it to the first thing that comes into their minds."

Mr. Eugene G. Blackford reduces all of his testimony down to one point in regard to legislative action, which, in his own language, sums up the question as follows: "But from my experience in regard to all fish, and protection of fish, there is no doubt but the protection of the fish during the spawning-season would give greater results and be most effective."

Now, in view of this opinion, take a previous answer of his to the question when the menhaden spawned. He answered, "The exact time, the exact localities of spawning are not determined."

If such is the case, when can legislative action be applied to the time of menhaden spawning? And why should from April to July be a close season any more than from July to November? The fact is that there are more than one reason accounting for the scarcity, abundance, or entire disappearance of fish, and that the prime causes of their absence or presence, besides food, lie in the conditions of weather, density and temperature of water. New York Harbor is becoming rapidly destroyed by garbage, its waters defiled with waste products of manufactory; these combined have a tendency to make all fish scarce in the waters adjoining New York.

Some of our menhaden people are running a little wild on the question of menhaden remaining in one locality according to the quality and quantity of their food. Mr. Friedlaender argues that the fatness of the fish caught off the capes of the Delaware would prove this, and mentions that my catches off Long Island were not so fat as those further south. In this he is mistaken, as careful inquiries developed the fact that there has been no appreciable difference in the fat-producing qualities of the fish caught between Narragansett and Delaware Bays.

It seems to be absurd that for the assumed preservation of two fish which are considered dainties, viz, bluefish and bass, all this ado is made. If the committee had secured the statistics of all the food-fish received for the last ten years in New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia markets, I feel confident that they would have found the quantities had largely increased to meet the increased demand. The food-fish forming the main fish diet of the masses of the people, such as cod, herring, mackerel, porgies, flounders, eels, halibut, shad, and numerous others, do not require the menhaden either as food or bait, yet they all have their occasions of periodical scarcity, and had even when menhaden fishing was unknown.

But I am one of those who believe in certain restrictions as to the mode of conducting the business. Not that the catching of menhaden in any way interferes with the supply of game or food fish, or that their catching by man diminishes their numbers to any appreciable degree; but that the manner in which they have of late been pursued has had, in my opinion, a tendency, with other causes, to keep them from following; what seems to be, their natural method of migrating up and down the coast. For these reasons, my observations have led me to the opinion that the Atlantic coast should be divided off into districts, say from the Gulf to Cape Hatteras, from Cape Hatteras to Chesapeake Bay, from Chesapeake Bay to Delaware Bay, from Delaware Bay to Fire Island, from Fire Island to Cape Cod, Long Island Sound to Point Judith, and from Cape Cod to Maine, &c.; that fishing for menhaden should not commence until the 1st of June, to allow the fish to school along the coast; that not less than 2½-inch meshes be used; that fishing licenses should be required for each and every vessel for the district it was to fish in; that said vessels should not be allowed to fish in districts except those for which licenses were granted, and before changing a district, the license would have to be surrendered and replaced by a new one for the new district before fish could be caught therein. By these means the fish would have a chance to school; young fish would not be caught, the fishing fleet would be scattered so as not to be concentrated at any one given point at a moment's notice, thereby preventing an even distribution of the fish along the coast. I know that some short-sighted people or some over eager for gain will strongly denounce this, but all I claim for the above is that it is the result of most deliberate consideration and the basis of my honest convictions that such a plan would benefit all concerned and reconcile opposition.

I notice the report of the steamer Fish Hawk meeting large bodies of menhaden off-shore; this circumstance may be used as an argument to the effect that steamers united with natural enemies and causes drove them off.

Recent occurrences have made me return to my first opinion, viz, that there should be legal and proper restraints over this class of fishery.

47 WILLOW STREET, BROOKLYN, *October 14, 1882.*