

THE PORT LAVACA SHRIMP FISHERY

I. CONTEXT

Fishery is the occupation, industry, or season of taking sea animals.¹ Port Lavaca had an early beginning history related to fish and oysters; but it was not until around 1924 that a viable shrimp industry began to develop in Port Lavaca.² What caused the shrimp industry in Port Lavaca to develop into a thriving industry and then decline?

II. OVERVIEW

The otter trawl, a net used for catching bottom fish, was introduced to the Northern Gulf areas between 1912 and 1915.³ Capt. Gus Fisher from Florida is credited with bringing the shrimp trawl to Texas. He taught J.N. Fisher, a local, how to cut out and construct a shrimp trawl. Capt. Frank Bauer, an employee of the Texas Game & Fish Commission, brought the first shrimp net to Port Lavaca. In 1923, C.E. Fisher shipped the first load of headless shrimp and discovered they kept better if headed.⁴ Roselle Clegg, a former bookkeeper for Smith Bros. Seafood Co., reported it was 1924 or 1925 when the fishermen in Port Lavaca began catching shrimp with trawls instead of cast nets and seines.

Major seafood dealers were: C.E. Fisher, who established and operated Fisher's Seafood Company until his death in 1958; F.V. Gentry Company which later came under the ownership of Samuel C. Tisdale; and, Smith Bros. (W.H. Smith Jr., Stanley E. Smith, Owen E. Smith, and Harry C. Smith) Seafood Company. C.N. Fisher shipped the first rail carload of shrimp and thus aggressively marketed shrimp in large quantities. This, in turn, established a viable market for local fishermen that prompted the adoption of the trawling method of catching shrimp in large quantities.⁵

¹ Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. "Fishery" Massachusetts, 1997, p. 439.

² Clegg, Robert E, Memoir, The Port Lavaca Shrimp Fishery 1924-1990, presented to Mary B. Meitzen, 7/30/21, 305 Glenbrook, Port Lavaca, Texas.

³ Fish & Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Interior, Washington D.C., "Fishery Leaflet 437", p. 3.

⁴ Guidry, Katie, "Inventory of County Archives", #1923, (no date), Calhoun County Museum, p. 8.

⁵ Clegg, Robert, p. 2.

Many of the local boats were not suited for trawling and had to be modified and rigged for trawling. Sail powered vessels were converted to gasoline and diesel-powered vessels. The May 11, 1930, Houston Chronicle newspaper states “approximately 700 persons are directly dependent upon the shrimp fishery and forty boats are working out of Port Lavaca.” The story also states, “2,500,000 pounds of shrimp were shipped from Port Lavaca in 1929.”⁶ Harry Smith is the person credited to be first in the area to equip his boat with a hoist and steel cable to tow the shrimp trawl. All the other boats used manila rope tow lines and the crews pulled these in by hand. A dip net was used when the trawl was so heavy with shrimp, it could only be brought to the surface. The trawl was slit with a knife, and the dip net was used to bring shrimp onto the deck.⁷

At first, shrimp were shipped out fresh in refrigerated rail cars, packed in wooden barrels and covered with crushed ice and a piece of burlap. In 1936, the Port Lavaca Municipal Market was completed under the Federal Works Project Administration. It contained the most modern quick-freeze equipment. It was located on “high docks” at the City Harbor and had electric cranes for hoisting fish, shrimp, and oysters onto the dock. Shrimp were headed, washed, chilled, packaged into five-pound packages and frozen. The plant was operated by City of Port Lavaca with tenants, Smith Bros. Seafood Company, F.V. Gentry Company, and C.E. Fisher, leasing the property.⁸

In the early 1940s, several ownership changes took place. C.E. Fisher sold to Vincent Depugio, who hired Roselle Clegg as manager of Port Lavaca Seafood. Depugio then sold both his Galveston and Port Lavaca companies to Colter Corporation. Roselle Clegg was made general manager of the entire Texas operations. General Seafoods purchased the Smith lease and trucked shrimp from other ports to the freezing plant. Smith’s boats were sold and moved away from Port Lavaca.

The shrimp industry boomed in 1945. The Smith brothers had left shrimping and gone into dredging. King Fisher was involved in marine construction. The Port Lavaca Municipal Market was expanded to accommodate the increased tonnage of shrimp being trucked in for

⁶ Houston Chronicle, May 11, 1930, preserved by Owen Smith Jr. and used by Robert E. Clegg, 1 Meadow View, Victoria, Texas, as reference.

⁷ Clegg, Robert, p. 4

⁸ Clegg, Robert, p. 6.

processing and freezing.⁹ Samuel C. Tisdale and Archie Brady (A.B.) Tippit combined their three boats to create the T&T Packing Company. Later, Tippit bought out Tisdale to create the Lavaca Shrimp Company.¹⁰

During this time, two distinct shrimp fisheries began to develop; the inshore and offshore, i.e. the bay and the Gulf. The inshore fishery consisted of older and smaller boats that fished the bays. The offshore fishery consisted of larger boats, forty-five to fifty foot that fished the Gulf waters.¹¹

In 1948, Roselle Clegg established his own company; J.R. Clegg Shrimp Co.¹² At the time, white shrimp were becoming scarce, but a new species was discovered in deeper waters that could be caught at night. The new species was golden brown in color. At first, the shrimp could not be sold because the public thought they were spoiled. Roselle continued to harvest the brown shrimp and package them just like the white ones giving them a 15/20 A-grade; indicating 15-20 shrimp per pound and high quality. Free samples were given out and customers began to accept the brown shrimp.¹³

In the 1950's, there was a decline in the shrimp production produced in the local bays by local boats. No bay boats were being built. Shrimp were coming in by trucks, not boats. There were only three locally owned companies, "Key Fish Market", "Clegg Shrimp Company", and "A.B. Tippit's "Lavaca Shrimp Company". Many local people were drifting away from the hard life of being a commercial fisherman and went to work for better wages at the developing area industrial plants. There were only two retail establishments operating in the area then; Tommy Matulik's "Evelyn's Fish Market" and Forest Priddy's "Priddy Oyster House."

By 1954, shrimp trawlers were being built in the 65-75-foot class with up to 225 horsepower. They were equipped with a shortwave radio, depth recorder, and autopilot. Each carried enough fuel to go into the Gulf of Mexico and stay out two weeks. Roselle Clegg had two

⁹ Clegg, Robert, p. 8.

¹⁰ Mary Meitzen, phone interview with Wayne Allen Tippit, April 24, 2022.

¹¹ Clegg, Robert, p. 8.

¹² Calhoun County Historical Commission, The Shifting Sands of Calhoun County, Texas, "J. Roselle Clegg Family," p. 136.

¹³ Clegg, Robert, p. 9.

65-foot steel trawlers constructed. Then, Roselle's involvement in the shrimp business in far South Texas and Mexico necessitated his move to Brownsville to oversee the business.¹⁴

In 1955, Robert Edward, (R.E) Clegg founded R.E. Clegg Trawlers, Inc. This company engaged in the management and servicing of a fleet of Gulf shrimp trawlers.¹⁵ Pass Cavallo, with its unpredictable tides and channel navigation difficulties, necessitated Robert (Bobby) to operate the larger Gulf boats out of Aransas Pass, Texas, during winter months. The Gulf shrimp trawlers entering the Texas shrimp fishery increased, but Port Lavaca did not share in this boom. Pass Cavallo was the only outlet to the Gulf. The larger trawlers could not safely navigate the treacherous channel. Port Lavaca had excellent processing and freezing facilities for shrimp, but no safe outlet to the Gulf for the big boats to get to the facilities. Also, the harbor area was not sufficient for the larger boat size.¹⁶

In 1961, Hurricane Carla devastated the wooden trawlers and the two steel trawlers were undamaged. Robert Clegg immediately started shrimping. The hurricane had changed the depth of the shrimp concentration and the boats brought in over 8,000 pounds of beautiful white shrimp, which help to compensate for the hurricane loss.¹⁷

In 1965, the new Matagorda Bay Jetties and deep channel to Point Comfort brought safe steering to Port Lavaca. Robert Clegg expanded his trawler operation to include managing trawlers for absentee owners and one-stop service to out-of-town trawlers. H. Morgan Daniel moved his shrimp processing operation to Port Lavaca and purchased the old Port Lavaca Municipal Market in the City Harbor from the United States Cold Storage Corporation. The Viet Nam war was on, and the U.S. Government was a heavy buyer of frozen shrimp, along with the Campbell Soup Company.

Daniel Seafood operation ceased in the late 1970's. The old Municipal Market became vacant. Lavaca Shrimp Company and Clegg Shrimp Company had installed their own freezing and cold storage.¹⁸ In 1967, both R.E. Clegg Trawlers Inc. and Clegg Shrimp Co. Inc. had a half page ad in Port Lavaca Magazine, "Frozen Shrimp For Texas Sea Food Outlets" for modern

¹⁴ Calhoun County Historical Commission, p. 136.

¹⁵ Calhoun County Historical Commission, p. 137.

¹⁶ Clegg, Robert, p. 11.

¹⁷ Clegg, Robert, p. 10.

¹⁸ Clegg, Robert, p. 12.

trawlers, equipment, and storage.¹⁹ In 1969, Robert Clegg served as a Director of the Calhoun County Navigation District.²⁰

By 1967, the shrimping industry began building even larger trawlers that were 80 to 90 feet in length and powered by diesel engines up to 425 horsepower. The equipment was duplicated to have a back up in case of failure. Some had on-board freezers so the shrimp could be frozen in bulk. The boats had a capability to go anywhere in the Gulf of Mexico, fish forty-five days and return to home base.²¹ During that time, Port Lavaca became considered as the “Gateway to the Gulf.”²²

In 1974, Roselle’s son, Samuel Philip Clegg, became general manager of Clegg Shrimp Company. In the early 1980’s, Sam purchased the Clegg Shrimp Company from Roselle and developed it into a major seafood processing facility. The company became Clegg Seafood, International, encompassing seafood products from countries worldwide.²³

By 1975, the heavy steel boats were very expensive to operate. The first energy crisis was here, and fuel costs had risen considerably. Robert Clegg began to sell the older trawlers and replace them with new boats; a combination of wood and fiberglass. Long-cruising steel boats were not necessary since shrimpers were no longer allowed to shrimp off the Mexican coast and that amounted to one-half of the Gulf of Mexico waters they fished.

A.B. Tippit purchased the Port Lavaca Municipal Market facility and handled shrimp and under-utilized species of fish. A cat food processing plant occupied part of the facility.²⁴ Wayne Allen Tippit worked with his father at the Lavaca Shrimp Company. In the 1980’s after A.B. Tippit retired, Leon Tippit and Stanley Williams continued to operate the facility. The fish they sought became scarce, and it was not profitable for the trawler to operate. The packing plant was sold, caught fire, and burned to the concrete slab around 1985.²⁵

¹⁹ Port Lavaca Chamber of Commerce, Calhoun County Navigation District, Port Lavaca Magazine, 1966-67 Annual, p. 26.

²⁰ Port Lavaca Chamber of Commerce, Calhoun County Navigation District, Port Lavaca Magazine 1969 Annual, Official Port Book for Matagorda ship Channel, p. 1.

²¹ Clegg, Robert, p. 13.

²² Port Lavaca Chamber of Commerce, Navigation District, Port Lavaca Magazine, p. 26.

²³ City of Port Lavaca, Port Lavaca, Texas, 150th Birthday Celebration 1840-1990, Commemorative book, p. 249.

²⁴ Clegg, Robert, p. 14.

²⁵ Meitzen, Mary, phone interview with Wayne Allen Tippit Jr., April 24, 2022.

In the middle 1960's, bay trawlers increased. White shrimp were decreasing while the brown shrimp catch was increasing. Machines that could automatically peel and devein the smaller brown shrimp had been invented. The demand caused prices to increase. The Vietnamese war refugees began arriving and offered reasonable prices to the native commercial shrimpers for any old bay boat available. The native shrimpers then began to build new boats. The United States consumption of seafood was increasing annually resulting in higher prices for shrimp. The offshore operators were catching less shrimp per boat, but the increase in price per pound still made it profitable. In 1979, the Texas offshore operators tried unsuccessfully to get legislation passed that would significantly halt the total brown shrimp catch in the inshore fishery.²⁶ Both inshore and offshore operators accused each other of the small catches. In 1980, the Palmetto Bend Dam began impounding the Lavaca-Navidad River fresh water for municipal, industrial, and recreational purposes. The certificate of adjudication was amended to provide for environmental freshwater flow releases to maintain the Lavaca-Matagorda Bay and Estuary System.²⁷

Robert Clegg sold his entire fleet of fifteen trawlers in 1984-85.²⁸ The Clegg shore facility at the City Harbor was purchased by Lee Kalisek.²⁹ Margaret Clegg said, "The saddest sight I ever saw was the last of the five trawlers in a line moving out over the horizon."³⁰ In 2021, Robert Clegg presented a copy of his memoirs, The Port Lavaca Shrimp Fishery 1924-1990, and a list of 44 boats detailing their size, material, length, and purchase price, to the Calhoun County Museum.³¹

Clegg Seafood International voluntarily closed in 1990. Shrimp suppliers diminished and the level of quantity was not available from the Gulf.³² The same year, Broadway Fish Market

²⁶ Clegg, Robert, pp. 15-16.

²⁷ Texas Water Development Board, Volumetric Survey of Lake Texana, prepared for: Lavaca-Navidad River Authority, in cooperation with the United States Army Corps of Engineers, April 6, 2001. https://www.twdb.texas.gov/hydro_survey/Texana

²⁸ City of Port Lavaca, p. 247.

²⁹ Clegg, Robert, p. 17.

³⁰ Meitzen, Mary. Personal Interview with Margaret Clegg, 7/30/21, during Clegg presentation of The Port Lavaca Shrimp Fishery 1924-1990.

³¹ The Port Lavaca Wave, Former Port Lavaca Local Talks Shrimp Industry History. Wednesday, August 18, 2021, p. A5.

³² Meitzen, Mary, phone Interview with Samuel Clegg, April 26, 2022.

(Evelyn's), Priddy Oyster House, Dietzel Shrimp Company, and Cunningham Seafood were the only seafood operations still in existence.³³

In 2022, there are still four, but different seafood operations in business: Poor Boy's Bait; Miller's Seafood; Big Bear Shrimp and Seafood Market; and Capt. John's Wild Reef Seafood. A vast change to Port Lavaca seafood operations compared to just 100 years earlier.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

The Port Lavaca Shrimp Fishery developed through ingenuity, building, and creating the trawlers and equipment necessary for successful bay and Gulf harvests. The company owners, over the years, participated in city and civic organizations, including one serving as mayor, another helped in rescuing Ranger Cemetery from destruction. The fishery provided a livelihood for the Port Lavaca population until local industry offered higher wages. The lack of a deep-water channel until 1965 prevented the larger Gulf trawlers from unloading their catch in Port Lavaca. Poor Boy's Bait owner, Lencho Reyna, reflected, "Each year there are less and less shrimp."³⁴ Sam Clegg said, "It is no longer sustainable for the shrimp fishery to operate. The demand for product is there, but the cost is prohibitive."³⁵

Port Lavaca experiences many out-of-town and out-of-state visitors. They purchase seafood and bait at the local markets. With input from the Calhoun County Historical Commission, new updates planned by the City of Port Lavaca for the Municipal Harbor will be enhanced by The Port Lavaca Shrimp Fishery marker. The marker will be used as a historical educational tool that will tell the "Shrimp Fishery" story to locals and visitors alike.

Robert Clegg concludes his memoirs with, "It has been said that the Lord always looks after his fishermen and takes care of them, let us hope and pray that he continues to do so."³⁶

³³ Clegg, Robert, p. 17.

³⁴ Meitzen, Mary, phone interview with Lencho Reyna, April 27, 2022.

³⁵ Meitzen, Mary, phone interview with Sam Clegg.

³⁶ Clegg, Robert, p. 17.

