

92.—NOTES ON THE RED-SNAPPER FISHERY.

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The following notes relative to the past and present of the red-snapper fishery on the coast of Florida are based on information gathered from Capt. Silas B. Latham, of Noank, Conn., who was one of the pioneers in this industry, and who still engages in it during the winter season.

Fishing for red snappers on the west coast of Florida probably began some fifteen to twenty years previous to the civil war. Capt. James Keeny, a Connecticut fishermen, who used to go to the Gulf each winter in the smack Mississippi, beginning these trips nearly thirty years before the war, often told the following story of the beginning of the red-snapper fishery:

“On one occasion when I was on my way to New Orleans with a cargo of beach fish (pompano, sheepshead, red-fish, &c.), I got becalmed when several miles off shore. We had just finished eating, and the cook came on deck and threw over some refuse from the table. The vessel lay motionless, and very soon many strange looking red fish were seen in the water alongside, eagerly feeding on the material the cook had thrown overboard. We quickly baited some lines and threw them out, and the fish bit as fast as we could haul them in. Nearly two hundred snappers were caught, which we took to New Orleans, where they sold like hot cakes.”

The fishermen knew nothing of the off-shore grounds of the Gulf at that time, according to Captain Latham, who says that Captain Keeny and his crew did not even know that they were on soundings—that is, in less than 100 fathoms, where they caught the first red snappers. This lack of knowledge of the soundings in the Gulf delayed the discovery of the red-snapper banks, even after this accidental capture by Captain Keeny. But when they were ultimately found, the snapper met with a fair demand in the Southern markets.

At the start all fish of this species were taken only on welled vessels. If the smacks ran to New Orleans, the snappers were kept alive until the vessels entered the Mississippi. A few hours later, with the assistance of a tug, they would arrive at the city.

Captain Latham says that he was the first to use ice in the Gulf fishery for the purpose of preserving fresh fish on board a vessel. In the spring of 1868 he purchased 8 tons of ice to use on beach fish caught at Tampa Bay. He paid \$25 per ton for the ice. He iced his cargo of fish, including a considerable number of red snappers which he caught on his way from Tampa to Mobile. For this innovation, he was called the “crazy Yankee.”

For several years past, Captain Latham has fished on the east side of Florida, landing his catch chiefly at Savannah for shipment to New

York. He generally fishes for red snappers from off Cape Canaveral southwardly to Indian River, in 12 to 15 fathoms of water. Comparatively few snappers are caught north of Cape Canaveral, the grounds north of the cape being of little value in winter except for the capture of blackfish and various other species, most of which are not commercially valuable.

The fishing-grounds on the Atlantic side differ materially from those on the west side of Florida. While the favorite localities for red-snapper fishing in the Gulf are generally depressions of the sea bottom, commonly called "gullies" by the fishermen, on the east coast the snapper is found most abundant on narrow coral ridges, which usually run parallel with the coast line, and are elevated 2 or 3 feet above the bottom immediately surrounding them. Some of these ridges are not more than 100 feet wide, while others may be 300 feet wide or more.

The methods of fishing differ somewhat from those commonly employed in the Gulf. On the Atlantic side it is seldom that a vessel anchors, the common practice being to fish "at a drift." Occasionally a "bunch of fish" is struck late in the day, and then it is usually the best plan to anchor and hold on until next morning, when fishing can be resumed, for it seldom happens that red snappers bite so well at night as they do by daylight.

Red snappers are not nearly so abundant on the east coast as they are on the west coast of Florida, but they average larger in size. A vessel carrying a crew of seven men will make a trip in about two weeks, and an average fare will be about 6,000 pounds.

The Connecticut vessels fishing on the east coast generally carry from home several barrels of salt menhaden for a reserve supply of bait. The greater part of the bait, however, is obtained on the fishing-grounds, refuse fish being used for this purpose, among which sharks are highly esteemed. Sometimes bait is obtained from the fish-traps along the coast.

The food of the snapper is various. Captain Latham says he has often caught snappers off the Saint John's River, Florida, which, after being taken on deck, disgorged small mackerel of "spike" size, which he thought were of the common species (*Scomber scombrus*).

The New York and Connecticut vessels generally ship their fish through to New York, where their agents dispose of the catch. The price received for the fish is governed by the supply and demand, and is influenced to a lesser extent by the size of the fish, a small red snapper being relatively much more valuable than a large one.

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