

## **SALT HAY AND EEL GRASS TIME IN NEW JERSEY**

Green head flies zeroed in for the taste of sweaty flesh, whatever part of the body was exposed; hands, neck and face were left uncovered. Mosquitoes swarmed under the brim of Charles Weber's felt hat. His back was sore from constant bending over the pitchfork, picking up as much salt hay as he could carry on the end of the fork, pitching it on top of the fast growing pile beside him. One more load today was all his relatively young body could handle. Blisters and calluses covered his hands from constant cutting with his scythe and raking.

An August sun beat down on Charles, he felt dizzy and light headed. How nice it would be to take off his heavy canvas coveralls and long sleeved shirt, to take a swim in the cool brownish - brackish water near the mouth of the river. There was no time. In addition, taking off some of his protective clothing would leave him vulnerable to the multitude of insects that had formed a gray cloud around him.

A few miles away his father, Charles Sr., was maneuvering down a slippery bank of boggy marshland in Lower Bank, attempting to tie a flat bed scow to a tree. His catboat, which was anchored just off the bank in the Mullica River, still had its sail up. He had just towed a precariously high pile of salt hay in from the marshes. Luckily there was enough breeze for his catboat to pull the scow. On some days the task was all but impossible.

The hot summer day was far from over. Hopefully, he could get this load onto an open cart that would then be taken to Tuckerton to meet the railroad. From there the salt hay would be taken to cities such as New York and Philadelphia. Charles sympathized with the struggling horses, their heads covered by hoods and bodies draped with wool blankets to keep the bugs in the "medders" from eating them. Mud boots over their shoes ensured that their hooves would not slip deep into the bog. Harvesting salt hay was a hard way to earn a living for both man and beast. He thought of his son still working out on an island. Neither could afford to slack off. Both had families to support.

Harvesting salt hay (*spartina patens*) in New Jersey was big business from the early nineteenth century up to the early nineteen hundreds. It was done by baymen who spent their lives on the water earning a living from whatever the waters had to offer in the way of fish, shellfish, birding (killing birds to sell for food, strictly a New Jersey term), and collecting salt hay and eel grass. Both were collected between June and early winter, but mainly during the hot summer months.

Eel grass was harvested much the same as salt hay. This once thriving industry of the 1800's and early 1900's declined when new materials were substituted for the eel grass and the eel grass itself had begun to die out.

One may ask what an article about salt hay and eel grass is doing in a magazine dedicated to catboats? The answer is simple: catboats were the means of transportation for getting the product part way to its destination. Catboats pulled large scows loaded with salt hay or eel grass from islands in the bays and inaccessible marshland along rivers to the mainland. The catboat, which was once referred to as "the pickup truck of the bay" by an old timer living along the Mullica River, was strictly a workboat, doing its job, in its early days.

You may remember the clever Volkswagen ad of the 1970's that asked, "How does the snow plow driver get to the snowplow?" It showed a municipal worker in a Beetle driving through drifts to get to his snowplow. (This ad comes to mind because its originator is a neighbor on Useppa Island in the winter.) The same analogy could be used for the bayman getting to his eel grass or salt hay. He sailed out in his trusty catboat, a dirty old wooden workboat with yellowing canvas sail, designed to do the job, not be a thing of beauty.

Once salt hay was taken to its destination it was used for many purposes in packing such as surrounding breakable objects like glass and pottery. It was also a rich fertilizer and mulch. Salt hay was also good

food for horses and cattle. Insulation was another use for both salt hay and eel grass. Many an old house has been torn down only to find the walls stuffed with both natural substances.

After eel grass was pulled in with large rakes, it was dried, baled, and taken to the railroad in the same manner as salt hay. Barges of eel grass were towed by catboats; one or two pulling ahead with long tow lines, plus one or two sailing on each side, depending on the load and the amount of wind.

Eel grass and salt hay was used in the 1800's for stuffing cheap mattresses and upholstery. Jerome Walnut, a respected environmentalist from Barnegat Light, NJ was told that the cushions of Henry Ford's Model T were filled with eel grass.

An orange glow was settling over the pine trees to the west as the sun slowly set. Charles and Charles, Jr.\* tied up their catboats at the dock. Sails were tied down with strips of old dirty line in case a storm came up during the night. "Eve'n captains," a clammer said, tipping his hat in salute. Both men headed home, each in a different direction. Charles walked slowly, hunched over from many arduous years working the Mullica River. Charles, Jr. led his two horses down a dirt path, eager to see his wife and young children. Salt hay and eel grass harvesting would be drawing to close for the season in a few months. Then maybe they could take a little time off, sit by the fire in their hundred year small cedar shake and clapboard farmhouses, their families kept somewhat warm in winter because of the natural insulation in their walls.

\* Charles Weber, Sr. and Charles, Jr. lived in Lower Bank, New Jersey in the early 1900's. They owned a boat works on the Mullica River where, in addition to farming and building boats, they tethered their barges and tied up their catboats. For more information on the Weber clan read "Jersey Genesis: The Story Of The Mullica River", written in 1945 by Henry Carlton Beck.