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Biloxi schooner: Workhorse of seafood industry

The Gulf Coast is full of modernized shrimping vessels equipped with powerful engines, refrigeration and ice for seafood freshness, and state-of-the-art technology that allows fishermen to take advantage of the bountiful gulf waters for days at a time. However, prior to the invention of the motor-powered boat in the early 1930s, fishermen relied solely on the winds in the sails of the Biloxi schooner.

This, of course, limited time on the water, and if the wind died before the vessel could reach the canning factories, then even the most glorious catch had to be shoveled overboard. The life of a fisherman was backbreaking work, but thanks to the schooner, the versatile workhorse of the seafood industry carried year-round supply.

“Biloxi is unique in its shrimping pursuit because the boat it used not only shrimped, but it oystered,” said Dr. Val Husley, author of “Biloxi: 300 Years.” “There’s no place in the country where you had a vessel and a pursuit like that where during a special season, it did one thing, and then during another season, it did another. Biloxi fishermen never stopped. They didn’t hang it up after shrimping season; they went right into oystering using the same vessel.”

Husley offers an excerpt from his book that paints a historic picture of how valuable these “white-winged queens” were to the industry:

The true workhorse of the local factory fleets was the famous Biloxi schooner. Sloops and single-masted New Orleans luggers, so named because of their unique, dipping lug sail reminiscent of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French fishing vessels, also plied the waters of the Mississippi Sound.

The versatile schooner, however, which had been used during the antebellum period for both fishing and hauling timber and freight, was still a local favorite. Broad of beam, with a shallow draft and a powerful complement of six sails, these two-masted, gaff-rigged vessels fished the waters of the Mississippi Sound and Louisiana marshes.

Often referred to as “white-winged queens” by local sailing aficionados, these locally

built schooners were used in combination with Biloxi skiffs to deploy seines during shrimp season and to dredge oysters. By the 1890s with its six to seven man crew, the Biloxi schooner was almost single-handedly responsible for carrying the town to prominence as the “Seafood Capital of the World.”

Each Biloxi factory employed its own small fleet of the town’s namesake vessels. During oyster and shrimp seasons, the Mississippi Sound and adjacent Louisiana marshes were filled with schooners, their decks awash with overabundant catches, racing back and forth between factory and reef.

Friendly challenges between captains returning with their catches evolved into one of the area’s major tourist attractions, an annual Fourth of July schooner regatta. In 1888 the best captain and schooner from each factory competed in a fifteen-mile triangular race. For decades enormous crowds flocked to the Biloxi waterfront for this annual event.

To read more, Husley’s book is only available at local libraries, but an updated edition with Hurricane Katrina coverage is scheduled for future print. Husley also is the author of “Maritime Biloxi,” which is available at the library, local bookstores and online.

This story is part of the Gulf Coast Seafood Fall Shrimp Celebration, a campaign by the Mississippi Hospitality & Restaurant Association and its partners Gulf Seafood Trace and the Gulf Seafood Marketing Coalition to promote area restaurants serving traceable Gulf shrimp. Visit gulfshrimptales.com to learn more about Gulf shrimp and the celebration.