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GENERATIONS

## Digging for Summer

By VALERIE PETERSON

DURING my childhood in the late 1960s and early '70s, the ritual of eating a steamer used to be an all-day affair that began with a long drive from Yonkers to Sherwood Island State Park in Connecticut. The tide tables had been consulted in the planning, so the water would be high when my extended family's procession emerged from four-door sedans and station wagons with fake wood panels — some of us slightly carsick — laden with the day's supplies.

Uncles marched authoritatively with hibachis, or with bags of Kingsford charcoal hoisted over their shoulders. Pairs of older cousins flanked laden coolers, arms stretched, straining at the handles, walking out of sync in fits and starts with their awkward load. Aunts hugged brown paper grocery bags of paper plates and cups and napkins, white boxes of doughnuts and coffee cake, bags of fresh rolls and buns, ripe peaches and plums. Younger children dragged blankets and towels, and someone held up the rear with arms wrapped around an unwieldy watermelon, carrying it as one would a wet dog.

We'd stake out a few tables in the grassy, tree-shaded picnic area — close to the fresh water fountain, to the sand's edge and to one another. After unfurling a plastic tablecloth over the rough gray slats, my father would plunk the hibachi on one end and fill it with charcoal. He would douse the briquettes with copious and undoubtedly toxic amounts of lighter fluid, then flick a wooden match and jump back at the sudden, roaring flare-up.

Right after my mother lighted her first L&M King, she'd pull a can of Maxwell House from a grocery bag. One of us would fill the percolator at the fountain, and while she waited for the coffee to brew, she'd start the skillet sizzling with bacon. When the strips were nearly crisp, my father would crack eggs on top, swoosh them around the pan, divide the mess and serve it to us on fresh Kaiser rolls.

The aunts and uncles sat at the tables and drank coffee or cracked beers, squinting from the sun and the cigarette smoke that curled around their heads. We cousins made our way down the sloping grass toward the sand. Flopping down atop blankets, we marked the hour from breakfast until we could safely make our way into the ocean.

Before diving in, we would throw on our oldest, most worn-out pair of Keds for protection from Sherwood Island's sea floor: smooth, lichen-mossed rocks, studded with razor-sharp barnacles. As we swam, our feet floated up behind us, buoyed by air in our sneakers.

The day progressed in a cycle of swimming and sunburning and poking at hermit crabs, periodically punctuated by calls for us to return to the picnic area — for grilled hot dogs and Velveeta-topped burgers, for watermelon. Then, late in the afternoon, when the tide was deemed low enough, the entire party descended on the slippery, cutting beds laid bare by the outgoing sea to seek our soft-shelled prey.

Clad in wet sneakers, we had a hard time keeping our footing. Sometimes, as they felt the weight of us, the clams squirted spontaneously; if not, we threw down large stones, hard. When we saw the arc of seawater, we dived in. Crouching, we hurriedly removed the biggest rocks, tossing them away from the area of the squirt. Hurriedly because, despite the diminutive size of a clam's brain, the self-preservation instinct is alive and well in the pseudopod community: once alerted to the movement, those clams moved like crazy.

The sand was black under the surface and stunk of the many sea creatures that had died natural deaths and rotted in their salty graves. We used our hands and arms to scoop out the muck to uncover our quarry quickly, embedding our nails with the crud and sometimes ripping them in the process.

Any clam worth eating was already on the move, so we knew to plunge our fingers into the mud around the shell and grab as much of the clam as possible — firmly enough to hold, but not so hard as to crush the delicate shell. Its rocky habitat offered the clam an advantage over us hunters — if the grip was too light or not around the full clam, it would burrow its escape with its foot, and the sharp shell sometimes sliced the flesh of one's hand as it slipped away.

Losing a battle to a bivalve was a humbling experience, but it was well balanced by the satisfaction of feeling the successful suck of a clam being pulled from its bed, raising it high and shouting, "I got one!" Nearby adults weighed in on its size and worthiness, before it was plunked into a pail. When the battle seemed too easy, it usually was — smelly, sludge-filled carcasses of dead clams were dismissed with disdainful cries of "Mudder!" and were tossed away.

The late afternoon beach would be nearly empty of people. Emboldened, fat gulls would stalk, first circling widely, tentatively, then strutting closer and closer to our catch, cawing loudly in annoyance at us poachers. When the pails were full, we'd carry the load up to the picnic tables, and leave the birds to fend for themselves.

As the sun dipped in the sky and the cooler air raised goose bumps on our sun-tender, pre-SPF

skin, the adults scrubbed and rinsed the day's bounty. The clams were packed into cleaned coffee pots with a couple of inches of water and situated on the stoked hibachis. Small saucepans of butter were set beside them, to melt.

When the water had boiled and the clams had steamed opened, the broth was seasoned and the butter was poured into bowls. The adults peeled the clams from their shells, rolled the black skin from the necks, then held them to swish the bodies through the broth and dip them in butter. They tilted their heads back to savor the dripping morsels. Between bites, they obsessively reviewed the catch for size, sweetness, degree of sandiness, or lack thereof.

For us children, the thrill was the hunt; most were content to leave it at that. I would eat a token steamer, the smallest I could find. Imitating the adults, I cleaned the black gook from the neck before dipping it in broth, then butter, which inevitably dripped on my chin before I got the clam into my mouth. I disliked the rubbery chew of the neck, the mealy texture of the body sac, the occasional crunch of sand, and I held my breath as I chewed, so as not to taste much. When the clams were gone, we packed the cars.

By the mid-70s, because of water quality issues, shell-fishing was prohibited to the general public in the park and our Sherwood Island clamming days were gone for good.

But I still think of them today whenever steamers are served in a restaurant. I don't remember when I started to order clams, or when I came to love their mild, briny flavor, but now I eagerly take the black gunk off the necks before dipping them in broth, then butter.

Although clamming is still prohibited at Sherwood Island, I recently discovered that the Town of Westport has made certain shellfish areas accessible (even to out-of-towners) with proper permits. As I wonder if perhaps it's time to pick up the old tradition, I pop another steamer in my mouth, the butter drips down my chin, and I feel my feet float up behind me in old, wet sneakers.

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