

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

The Stage Harbor Freezer

by spencer grey

Anyone who is old enough to remember when the large brick freezer building was at the head of Parker's Wharf will recall how it dominated the Stage Harbor shore line. Although it ended its existence as a facility for freezing cranberries, it originally was used to freeze fish from the weir traps.

The first weir traps were set in the 1850s in the lower part of Chatham Bay, the section of Nantucket Sound that is just west of Monomoy. At that time the principal catch was English herring, which was used for bait for the Grand Banks fishermen. With the invention of an efficient trawl called the otter trawl in the late 19th century, Grand Banks fishing boats were gradually replaced by trawlers and the demand for herring declined. As a result the weir trappers had to sell their catch in the fresh fish and frozen fish markets. At first the fish were put on ice and shipped to Boston by train, but eventually a shortage of ice occurred and the expense of packing and shipping made it so unprofitable to market fish in that way that many trappers went out of business.

But about 1910 Eugene Snow and George Parker bought land at the end of Port Fortune Lane and built a plant for the purpose of freezing fish, and in 1913 they incorporated as the Chatham Cold Storage and Weir Company. Because fishing was only marginally profitable at that time, the two men were able to buy out several trap companies to provide them with fish to freeze in their new plant in addition to the supply from the remaining trappers. By the 1920s, however, fishing was flourishing again so that the freezer was humming with activity.

During that decade activity at the cold storage plant would begin to pick up in April as the workers began to prepare the facility for the catches that fishermen would begin unloading daily at the wharf in front of the freezer. From that month through August thousands of cases of fish would be frozen and shipped to Boston in refrigerated trucks. The most commonly landed fish were squid and mackerel. While mackerel could be frozen and sent to domestic markets, most of the squid was shipped to Italy, where it was more popular. The Italians were particular about the size of the squid, insisting that it be exactly six inches long. After the fish were frozen, they were sent to the packing room to be boxed and loaded onto trucks for delivery to markets in the northeast.

With the onset of the Depression, fish prices fell so low that the Freezer Company went bankrupt, resulting in the sale of the land, the wharf, and the freezing plant to the United Cape Cod Cranberry Company in 1934. It later was bought and operated by the Ocean Spray Company.

For the next 25 years cranberries were frozen and stored in the building, but in November of 1959 the cranberry market collapsed when it was discovered that an herbicide commonly used had tainted the cranberry crops, and the secretary of health advised the public to be wary of serving cranberry products during the holiday season. As a result cranberries harvested that year were not frozen and stored as they had been in the past. It is probably because of this development that the Cranberry freezer was closed in 1960. The freezer remained abandoned for the next 10 years, but in 1970 some local residents bought it with the intention of removing it to make way for a new home they intended to build on the land. On Thursday, Dec. 31, 1971, while Fred Crowell and his crew were at work demolishing the interior of the building in preparation for knocking it down, one of the men started a fire with a cutting torch. The Chatham Fire Department was immediately called, but before long the fire swept through the building. The fire was so widespread that all of the Chatham Fire Department equipment could not control it, and they called in a ladder truck from Harwich and an engine from Orleans. Twenty-eight firemen

from Chatham, 10 from Harwich, and another six from Brewster attempted to gain control of the raging fire. But even with 44 men fighting the blaze, it took 30 and a half hours before the last ember was extinguished. The unexpected fire helped with the demolition of the building, but Fred Crowell and his crew had to finish the job, resulting in the removal of one of Chatham's landmarks.



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