

Transcript of Radio Documentary: Shad Fishing on the Hudson

Fishing on the Hudson River in New York for shad—a marine fish which ascends each spring up rivers to spawn—has a long history as one of the oldest traditional industries on the coasts of North America. For hundreds of years, both Native Americans and European colonists have netted American shad, but pollution has threatened the industry. The history of shad fishing has spawned a variety of traditional arts and occupational skills. For the New York Folklore Society's Voices of New York Traditions, Ginger Miles spoke with veteran shad fisherman Everett Nack.

Start of Documentary:

Everett Nack: Oh, this is very bad. [Up music—"Take Me to the River"]]

Ginger Miles: Everett Nack owns a bait shop. He's a gardener, a winemaker, and environmentalist. For a fisherman on any river as Nack sees it, it's impossible not to be an environmentalist. He recalls a conversation he had with the governor of New York.

Everett: I said you know that if a frog or something jumps in your swimming pool, the next day he's dead. I said, that's exactly what's happening in the river. So the Governor says to the Commissioner, 'We could correct that, couldn't we?' And the Commissioner says, 'Well, if we wanted to.' And the Governor says, 'I'd like you to correct that right away.' So what they did, they implemented the regulations they made way back in 1990. Last year, in one year, the little fish started hatching by the millions all over. It's a lot better than it was when the chlorine was in the river. Come on, we'll go for a ride. [Ginger: OK.]

Everett: Well, for shad we fish right through here...

Ginger: Jensen Kill is the Marina where Nack keeps his boats, just south of the Rip Van Winkle Bridge. As we head out on the river the Amtrak train passes, bouncing sound back and forth to each side of the Hudson.

Everett: I got out of the service in '53, and there was a fisherman whose name was John Bicus. I kind of like to fish a lot so I uh, went to work for him. Back then we rowed; there weren't any outboard motors or--. We would row way up the river, throw our nets out, drift down, pick 'em up, and then row back. And you were always rowing against the tide. And two of us rowed. After a week you'd think your wrists were going to come apart. So, I worked for him for two years, and my pay were the buck shad that he didn't want. You know I'd bring 'em home and my mother would can some and freeze some and I'd sell a few to the neighbors. And finally I thought, 'This is ridiculous,' so I swapped my uncle eight muskrat skins for an old linen gill net that he was going to throw away. You know they're like 500 feet long and 20 feet deep. And the fish come up and they stick their heads in it, and they get stuck, behind their gills. So I mended all winter,

and I patched up the bigger holes, and my buddies and I went out. We borrowed an old fourteen-foot row boat and we made enough money to buy a nylon net.

So the next winter, I worked down in the cellar. I put that nylon net together all winter. Then you had to make your buoys; those old nets had eight-inch rings on the bottom for weights, and my uncle--I got some rod and my uncle helped me web 'em together. We made our rings, we made our buoys, and we put the whole net together, and the next year I made enough money to buy a fourteen-foot aluminum boat. Well, we fished that for three or four years, then we had enough money to buy another net, and then we finally got enough money to buy a bigger boat, and we worked our way up. We now have three 18-foot boats like this.

The shad come up in the spring. As soon as the weather temperature gets to the right degree, they lay their eggs and go back. They get here about the fifteenth of April. And they come up here out of the ocean to spawn because they can't lay their eggs in salt water. A few years ago, we tagged four thousand shad up by the Rip Van Winkle Bridge, with the Canadian Government. And um, it's amazing. They travel thousands and thousands of miles and yet they come right back. We tagged them up by the Rip Van Winkle Bridge, and the next year we recaptured them, right at the same spot where we tagged 'em. Those shad went from the Hudson River [music comes in] up to the Bay of Fundy, over to the Bay of St. Lawrence, down to North Carolina, and all the way back up...and they came right back to their home river.

(Music up—"Take Me to the River")

Ginger: With special thanks to the New York Humanities Council, this is Ginger Miles for the New York Folklore Society.