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THE RHODE ISLAND CLAMBAKE

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The Rhode Island Clambake

MANY things can be used to classify a state or its people in an informal fashion so that outsiders, confronted with its name, can say glibly . . . "Maine? oh yes, that's where they raise so many potatoes!" or "Colorado? The home of the Grand Canyon, of course." Very often the classifying element which imbeds itself firmly in the popular mind is far from being anything important as far as the state in question is concerned. Vermont has many more valuable products to offer than maple sugar; New Jersey is not the home of all the mosquitoes in the country; Kentucky is not one unbroken meadow of blue grass. Yet what are we prone to think of when the names of those three states are mentioned? Even long after we have become sophisticated in our knowledge the same old classifications linger in our subconscious minds along with a host of other catch-words and phrases.

And so it is with Rhode Island. We who are inhabitants of this Narragansett basin know many ways in which our state is outstanding industrially, culturally, or historically. Yet asked ourselves to name one

thing, the very mention of which conjures up the name "Rhode Island" in the same breath, and we hesitate not a moment in answering, "The clambake!" Of course, if the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, it is quite possible that the road to a fixed place in his mind and memory follows the same route. And that may be one reason why clambakes and Rhode Island seem so widely synonymous. But other places, other states, other sections of the country have clambakes too. Along the coast from the Gulf to Maine they are certainly not unfamiliar. Consequently we may suspect that it is on some special grounds that the Rhode Island institution bases its nation-wide distinction. Perhaps where other places have made of the clambake a mere prosaic achievement, Rhode Island has made of it an art.

In Rhode Island it is a very old art, one which has been perfected and practiced for decade after decade for years longer than we can remember. Just how far back the taste for clams as a delicacy goes is not known. It is certain that the Indians who frequented the bayside included clams as a part of their diet long before the advent of the white settlers. However, it may well be debated

whether the Indians actually baked the clams they dug, thus being the originators of the present famous institution. Roger Williams, in his *Key to the Indian Languages*, speaks specifically of the Indians' great love of clams, saying that their women dug these shellfish at low tide and then boiled them in their natural liquor, but mentions nothing at all like a clambake. From the Indians the whites first learned about the value of shellfish as food.

Where and when the Rhode Island clambake was officially born are, then, two points which may invite reasonable controversy. It was probably, like many another delicacy, discovered quite by accident and then heralded about from one person to another until it became a family and statewide institution. But we may fairly determine upon Buttonwoods as the place where the Rhode Island clambake seems to have been started. At least it was here that it first received public and national notice.

The particular event which brought the clambake out of obscurity was the great bake held at Buttonwoods in 1839 as a special treat in honor of William Henry Harrison, the Whig candidate for president, then on a tour of New England. A gentleman who was

present on that day said, "Thousands came to that bake. All along the shore tripods were set up and kettles hung, filled with chowder; bakes holding uncounted bushels were made. The bay was full of boats from Newport, Bristol, Warren, and all along shore. There were bands and speeches and eating and more enthusiasm than I have ever seen since. I think it was one of the history-making days in the annals of our State."

It should be noted that, from almost the very beginning, the clambake was as much a social function as a feast. In itself it was the *pièce de resistance* of many a church or club outing or family reunion, but it provided the convenient stimulus for many a social function which otherwise might not have taken place. Of these social gatherings which centered round the clambake the family reunion was probably the first. Such reunions and neighborhood parties were adopted with enthusiasm by Pawtuxet residents, who would gather at a fixed time and meet in their carriages at a central point, thence to form a procession and drive off merrily to the shore.

Very soon, in 1844 to be exact, other sections of the bayside took up the practice of

holding great clambakes. In that year the White Church in Swansea held its first bake in Percy's Grove. The Hornbine bakes started in 1860 and those of the Rehoboth Antiquarian Society about the same time. These three—the Hornbine, Antiquarian, and Swansea Band—bakes soon became famous institutions.

Buttonwoods gradually became less of a clambake center, due to the influx of settlers, but Rocky Point rapidly became an able successor. Across the bay clambakes were bringing fame to Bullock's Point, while, at Providence, Field's Point was for half a century another mecca of clambake lovers.

Among the records we find the names of many men who did a great deal to make the clambake famous. There was Smith Shaw, known to many as "King of the Clambakes" over a period of some 65 years. His first establishment was at Mark Rock, but later he moved across the bay, first to Cedar Grove, Riverside, and finally to Bullock's Point. His reputation was known throughout New England and he did a tremendous business. Larned Peck was another of the noted clambake artists, while the names of "John Jeff" Bishop, Arnold Medberry, and Col. Atwell are familiar to scores of people.

If there is one thing that has always been characteristic of the clambake it is the air of informality that prevails. If held out in the open (as it by rights should be), it is a very simple affair. Long tables are made from boards and sawhorses—benches the same way—and everyone settles down to the hearty enjoyment of the feast. And the clambake of today is truly a feast. In addition to the steaming clams and the delectable chowder, the bill of fare includes lobster, chicken, baked white and sweet potatoes, corn on the cob, sliced onions, sliced tomatoes and sliced cucumbers, brown and white bread, fish, sausages, Indian pudding, and watermelon. In the olden days, although the additional delicacies were quick to come, a clambake consisted of only chowder, clams, fish, white and brown bread and butter—but when it comes right down to a decision those are the things that count. And nowadays most people partake of a clambake indoors, in regular pavilions devoted to the purpose. In general, the gathering of a clan, society, church, or political body for a clambake is now more unusual than customary. We should not expect to see a huge clambake given at Rocky Point in honor of President

Hoover, if he should visit the state. Yet that was part of the hospitality and reception accorded President Hayes during his visit here in 1877. That had all the appearance of Navy Day at Rocky Point, what with guns booming a presidential welcome, a great flotilla of boats rounding the point, and 20,000 people gathered to join in the bake. It was an event which again brought the Rhode Island clambake to the forefront in the news of the nation.

And now in closing perhaps it would be well to describe how a real Rhode Island clambake is prepared. In the olden days a flat ledge was selected as a site, and on this a roaring fire of pine wood was built. Into this four or five good-sized rocks were thrust to heat and, when white hot, were drawn aside. The fire to the very last ember was raked away, the stones were replaced on the clean ledge, and buried under six inches or more of damp rockweed. A bushel of clams was dumped into the rockweed and covered over like the rocks. Then fish, chicken, potatoes, corn, and sausages, wrapped respectively in their husks or in cheesecloth, were laid on top and the whole covered tightly with a great tarpaulin. The steam arising from the moist rockweed on the hot rocks did the cooking and at the same time gave everything a tang of flavor that can hardly be described.

The procedure is still unchanged in principle. Balls of iron are often used in place of rocks, which too often crumble with the heat, and special cement platforms with drains take the place of ledges. Wooden pavilions take the place of tents or the shelter of sea pines. That is all. In the whole preparation of a bake one has only to be careful to provide some way for the condensed steam to run off quickly without cooling the rocks or balls of iron, to be sure that no dead clams are used (this can be determined by placing the clams in a tub of water—the dead ones float), and to be sure and rake away every particle of smoking embers before building up the bake. The time for baking varies, but 45 minutes should be long enough.

This, then, is the process. Following these instructions anyone can prepare a bake with success, and proceed to enjoy the same sort of unequalled treat that his forefathers have enjoyed for nearly a hundred years on Rhode Island shores.

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