

The GREAT SIPPEWISSETT ADVENTURE

The first time I went clam-digging was maybe July, maybe 1957. A local friend who claimed to know all the secrets of this activity didn't turn up, but I went anyway, under the impression that - from what I knew about clams in the wild, which wasn't much - it couldn't be that hard. Not like hunting deer or any other fleet and wily prey. I mean - where's a clam going to run and hide? Duh!

So off I go with the gear into Great Sippewissett Marsh west of Falmouth. Tide is out and water in the creeks is about up to my knees. I find a likely-looking spot and start raking.

One thing I hadn't counted on was the fact that there were other things living in the sand that weren't edible molluscs, at least not edible in the Brooklyn cultural milieu in which I had been raised. I came across a couple of squishy-looking things that could have been sea urchins, a very indignant crab or two, and other assorted marine odds and ends that didn't look particularly suitable for chowder. There was also a horseshoe crab watching me, and its very ugliness made me nervous (I speculated about whether it could turn quickly around and attack me with that pointy thing; only years later did I learn that the species is not only harmless but a great benefactor to mankind, which makes me feel slightly guilty even at this late date, although they still give me the creeps).

In any case by the end of the afternoon I had accumulated enough bivalves to make carrying the basket a chore, so I headed off to our cottage to begin preparations.

Soon enough, however, it occurred to me that I had no idea how to get my captives to open their shells so that I could get at their tasty innards. That was one of the secrets that my absent pal was supposed to reveal to me, but he was still nowhere to be seen. That left me sitting on the front step with a couple dozen hard tightly-closed grey things spread out before me and not a local in sight to make any suggestions. Everyone was somewhere else and I was very lonely.

City kid as I was and unfamiliar with the subtleties of uncooperative Buzzards Bay marine life, I came to what I believed was the reasonable conclusion that a tool would help. A screwdriver seemed the obvious choice, but it didn't work. Pliers seemed unsuitable - what do you grab on a clam? That left the crudest of all the household helpers available to me - a hammer.

So there in the July sunset I sat shattering the bejayzus out of a few dozen innocent clams, knowing as I banged away that this wasn't the right way to do it and cursing my absent native guide. It goes without saying that the clams were a mess, the hammer was a mess, the front step was a mess. The top shells remained stubbornly closed in spite of the battering, and in the few instances where I actually had access to the meat, it was so befouled with broken shell and sand that it was unusable.

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The sad tale ends with roars of laughter from the returned neighbors, badly-muffled snickering as they showed me what I should have done, and my silent oath never again to try and obtain my own food. But I can never to this day pass Somebody's Clam Shack, or see a restaurant advertising "Best Chowder on the Cape", without remembering that July day long ago.

(A postscript - the Great Sippewissett Marsh is the same now {April 2014} as it was when all this happened, although I don't know if it's open for shellfishing any more. But it's still beautiful to look at.)

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