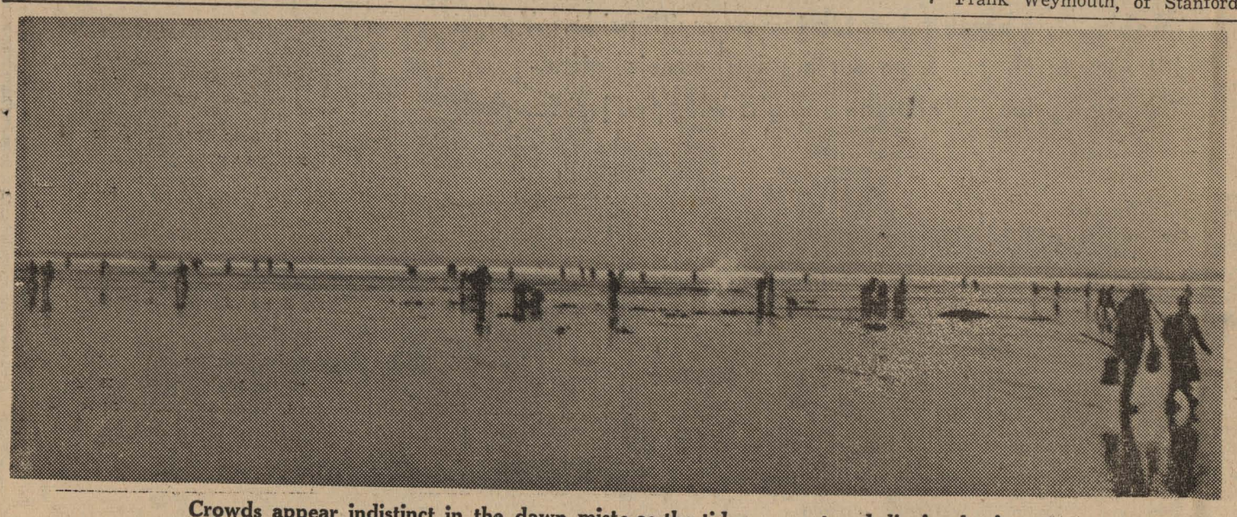
Clam Digging One Of Humboldt's Most Noted Sports

Out into the breakers they go! Tide's down and the clams are there.

John DiBene and Mr. and Mrs. Howard Watson bring in catch.

Rube Alberts (left), and Lee Gale get their pictures taken by Alice Wood. Note clam catch between the two men.

Mrs. Dane Jay (left), Mrs. Walter Craig, and Mrs. Marvin Pryer, and families enjoy an early morning picnic while menfolks dig.



Crowds appear indistinct in the dawn mists as the tide goes out and digging begins.

BEACHES FROM SAMOA TO LITTLE RIVER THRONGED AT LOW TIDES

By CHET SCHWARZKOPF

Have you ever gone clam-digging in Humboldt? Chances are you have, but if not, give it a try. It's fun! Especially when fishing season is closed, and you're in the mood to catch something edible out of the water.

Being practically a non-clam digger, we were at loss just what to say when the editor wanted a story on the subject—but, thanks to a number of expert friends, we have seen the light. However, if we've got our information mixed up, don't blame them. We'll take the rap!

Clam tides occur when the moon and sun are almost in a straight line toward the earth, during the dark and new moon period. At this time, their combined pull causes higher tides—with an accompanying reaction of lower tides in between. It is during these low periods that portions of the beach are exposed that remain under water for the balance of the moon's 28 day cycle. Good clam tides last four to six days . . . good for us, but ungood for the clams!

Favorite clam in Humboldt is the razorback. This is a thin-shelled fellow, found from about Samoa beach north to the lagoons. Razorbacks must have clean, deep sand, with no rocks. So their territory is limited. They are rated among the most delicious of all the clam family. They are not restricted to Humboldt, however. They're found on favorable beaches all the way from Alaska to Lower California. Our Humboldt variety belong to the northern razorback species, as differentiated from those found south of San Luis Obispo county. The northern species are generally larger, we're told.

A TRIP TO CLAM BEACH

Everybody knows Humboldt's famed Clam Beach. It got its name from the numerous razorback clams that live in its fine-packed sand just out of reach, except at low clam tides. Last week end, one of those tides occurred, and you should have seen the crowds out there!

Game wardens Walter Gray, Larry Werder, and Carl Exner estimated there must have been 2,000 clam diggers scattered between Samoa beach and Little river mouth in a day. The most favorable tides occur early, as you know, and there were hundreds of automobiles, jeeps, pickups, and jalopies parked in the dawn mists throughout the area. Probably the biggest concentration was at Clam Beach, although there were plenty at Mad river beach, and to the west of the LAES airport.

And people! You saw everybody from bankers and business men, out for an hour's sport before going to their offices, to transients living off the country as best they can. But no lines are drawn when you're clam digging. The best man gets 'em—and not a few of the ladyfolks were out there in the breakers, protected by hip boots, digging like power shovels. And they got clams!

CLAM-DIGGING TECHNIQUE

About all you need in the way of tools seems to be a sharp-nosed shovel. You wade in the shallow water at tide's edge and watch for a tell-tale "bubbling" in the sand, like a tiny spring under the water. Or, if the sand is exposed for a few minutes, these clam traces look like pock-marks. For all clams have the habit of "spitting" water, especially when alarmed. And with the razorbacks, which stay near the surface, that is the best way to locate them.

Razorback clams are scary fellows, and they start to dig like mad if they think you're after them. And if you don't dig fast, they'll get away! Honest! They can stretch halfway out of their shells and pull themselves through soft, wet sand, down and down.

That seems hard to believe, for you think of a clam as being about as stationery as a rock. Some kinds are—that's true—but not razorbacks. These fellows are the jackrabbits of the tribe.

Frank Weymouth, of Stanford university, in his excellent paper on clams says of the razorback—"Small razor clams, when placed on wet sand have completely buried themselves in a period as short as six or seven seconds." And again he says—"If the first spade thrust does not cut off the razor clam's retreat and throw it out on the sand, it is almost hopeless to follow it."

Not quite hopeless, though, for some of the boys really went to work on the fleeing clams and caught up with 'em. But you've got to hit the ball. This isn't like digging potatoes, although it's hard to imagine staging a race with a clam.

These razor clams—or razorbacks—average from four to six inches in length, although occasional ones are larger. Limit on them is thirty per day per person. So you can see how many clams will be taken from the beaches by 2,000 people in a day, even if they only average ten apiece. And they'll do better than that.

What a clam nursery those beaches must be! And they tell you there are more, and larger, ones farther out, where men are never able to go. Occasional large shells are washade ashore to prove it, and at extremely low tides, the best harvest is farther out.

It is at times a risky game, for if you venture too far out, a big comber can knock you off your feet, with attendant danger of undertow. And you're bound to get soaking wet. But that's part of the sport, including the satisfaction of bringing in a nice mess and treating your friends to clam chowder.

Razor clams do not live long out of water, for they depend upon a rudimentary gill to breathe, like a fish. You can see how they are able to move so rapidly under the sand, for they are apt to extend themselves from their shells almost quicker than the eye can follow, after they are caught. You catch yourself feeling sorry for them, and wondering what they think is happening.

MORE ABOUT CLAMS

From Professor Fred Telonicher, of Humboldt State college, we get data on how clams propagate. Most of the clam species spawn and fertilize eggs much the same as fish. The eggs float free in the water, and hatch into a tiny "larva." These are able to swim about at first, but after a few days, they settle to the bottom and begin to grow shells. It is during this period they are most vulnerable to predators. Clams live anywhere from four or five, to as long as 15 years, in the case of some large species.

There are several species found in Humboldt Bay, depending upon mud, water, and sand conditions, marine biologist Fred Hagerman tells you.

There's one little chap that is full grown when he's less than three-sixteenths of an inch long. Think of that! These midgets are often mistaken for "baby clams" when they are dug up by accident. They are said to be found only in Humboldt Bay.

The other extreme is the rare geoduck clam, that grows to the size of a dinner plate, and may weigh as much as six pounds. Fred Chamley, who knows his clams, tells us that a small colony of these giants is located on the hard beach just north of Buhne's Point. Only joker with the geoducks is that they bury themselves from three to four feet deep—but they don't run away. The name, according to Bonnot's pamphlet on California bivalves, should be pronounced "goyduck," but everyone long ago christened them "gooeyducks." They are quite plentiful in more northern waters.

Then there is the gaper, or "horseneck" clam, which is fairly abundant in the south bay mud flats, and sometimes grows so large he is mistaken for a geoduck. Horsenecks stay nearer the surface. Limit on these is ten clams, but there is no limit on any other Humboldt Bay clams, you're told. Horsenecks are also found on the beach below the south jetty, inside the bay.

Other mud flat clams are the Washington, and bent nose, while the familiar soft shell, or "mud" clam is found in the sloughs near Jacoby and Freshwater creek mouths, and Mad river slough on north bay. There is also a small, white razorback clam found along the beach at Elk river mouth.

Cockle clams, also known as quohaugs, or butter clams, are well distributed over Humboldt Bay, where they stay near the surface on sandy bottoms. These are said to be especially abundant around the bay islands, and were esteemed by the Indians as food. However, the north coast Indians were—and are—connoisseurs of clams, and know all the species from generations of experience.

ENEMIES OF CLAMS

Paul Bonnot, of the Bureau of Marine Fisheries, gives data on clam predators in his booklet. Starfish account for a good many, especially near the surface. Then there's a miserable little snail, equipped with a drill, that follows the clams' necks right down into the shell, and eats them from the inside.

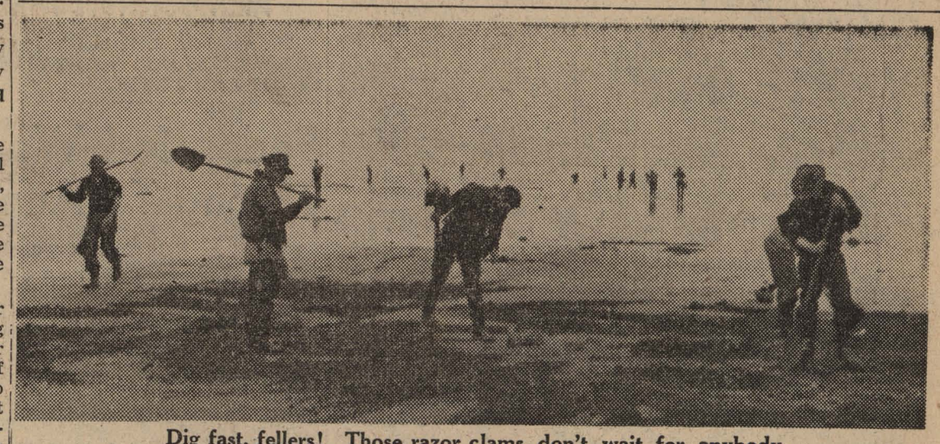
Storms, shifting bottoms, and freshets kill clams in large numbers, at time, while flounders nip off the exposed necks, or siphons, when they can. These so-called necks are actually the clams' mouths, while their "heads" are inside the shell.

If a clam's neck is nipped off, he will grow a new one—but only once. Nipped off again, and he dies, according to Bonnot.

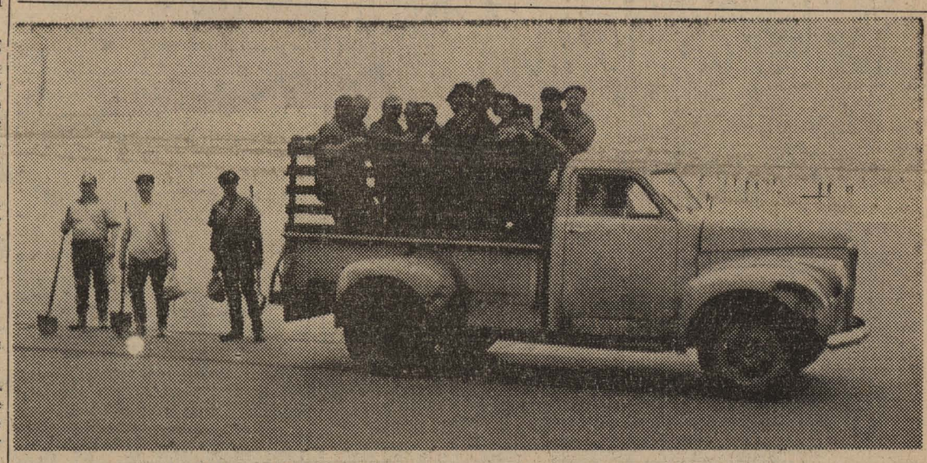
Bonnot continues—"The greatest enemy of the bay clams is the sting ray . . . which actively digs clams by pulsing movements of its "wings." The clam is pulled out and crushed by the powerful pavement teeth. Sting rays are found from Humboldt Bay to Mexico."

Incidentally, the clam season in Humboldt Bay is closed from April 30 to September 1, but there is no closed season on the beach clams, you're told . . . but there ought to be all-out war on the sting rays the year 'round.

F. J. Branson and Charles Hyney, of Rohnerville rest for a moment after bringing in their catch.



Dig fast, fellers! Those razor clams don't wait for anybody.



A jolly truckload skirts the water's edge in the early mist.