

Oyster Dinners

By Barbara Glakas

Oyster dinners were once a common tradition in the Herndon area. People who lived in Herndon in the late 1800s and early 1900s sometimes mentioned these dinners in their memoirs.

The earliest evidence of oyster harvesting in the Chesapeake Bay dates to 2500 B.C. Colonial settlers later raked and waded into the waters to harvest oysters. In the 1800s, fishermen started dredging the bay to harvest oysters. By the 1820s, Baltimore started canning oysters, becoming an established industry in the 1840s.

The Virginia oyster fishery expanded in the 1850s with the advent of the rail lines that linked commerce centers. The railroad was built out to Herndon, and the Herndon depot was established during that same time period, c. 1860. In an old photo of the Herndon depot dated c. 1905, you can see another building in the background, a building that once stood near the northwest corner of Station and Lynn Streets. On one corner of the building a large vertical sign can be seen that says "OYSTERS."

According to a 2017 Michigan State University article entitled, *The Great Oyster Craze: Why 19th Century Americans Loved Oysters*,

"From 1880 to 1910, oysters were harvested in massive quantities. During this time, as much as 160 million pounds of oyster meat was harvested per year. This intensive exploitation did irreparable environmental damage, but it did create an ample supply of oysters. The fact that oysters were so abundant made them inexpensive, which only boosted their popularity. In 1909, oysters cost half as much as beef per pound. Oysters were used to add bulk to more expensive dishes such as meat pies. They were eaten at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and by rich and poor alike. People even owned special plates for serving and eating oysters, shaped and painted like oyster shells. Because oysters were cheap, they were often served with alcohol at taverns and saloons. Essentially, oysters in the 19th century were served like burgers and fries today. Every town had its own establishment for serving oysters."

In the 1920s, The Herndon Restaurant, which once operated on Station Street in the building now occupied by the Maude hair salon, advertised their good short order meals in the *Herndon Observer* newspaper, which included "fish, oysters and crabs." Oyster dinners were also often used as fundraisers for various organizations. Old *Herndon Observer* newspapers from the 1920s and 1930s indicated that oyster dinner benefits were conducted frequently for various local organizations such as the Herndon Volunteer Fire Department, St. Timothy's Church, the Floris PTA, the Methodist Church, and the Dranesville Tavern. Many recognizable Herndon names were involved in sponsoring or organizing oyster suppers, e.g., Alder, Wynkoop, Cockerille, Middleton, Hawxhurst, and Wiehle.

A 1927 newspaper advertised a Floris Bazaar, saying,

“The Annual Floris High School Bazaar will be held on Thursday night Dec. 15. There will be no admission charge and all kinds of fancy work will be on sale. The Domestic Science Class will serve Oysters, chicken pie, hot coffee, cake, etc.”

A 1979 book written by Elizabeth Brown Pryor, entitled “Frying Pan Farm,” commented on oyster dinners. Pryor noted that “skating on the baptismal pond of Frying Pan Baptist Church, and neighborhood events such as picnics, watermelon feasts and oyster suppers” lent to the excitement of children’s life in the Floris/Herndon area. She added, “serious organizations like the Farmer’s Clubs, Community League or church-affiliated women’s clubs, mixed work and play by sponsoring picnics, quilting bees, and oyster suppers.”

In her writings, Pryor also mentioned Herndon resident Lottie (Dyer) Schneider, the daughter of Herndon Mayor Elisha Dyer. Lottie was born in Herndon in 1879 and lived in Herndon until about 1920. Pryor said:

“Oyster suppers were a regional specialty held all over the county, of which Floris sponsored its share. They were often money-making events (as were the ice cream socials) at which dinner cost from twenty-five to fifty cents and featured stewed and fried oysters. Lottie Schneider recalled the bustle of preparation for an oyster supper given in Herndon, involving the setting up of tables and benches and flower arrangements, and the difficult choice to be made between fried or stewed oysters and the many different relishes brought by each lady. The suppers in fact generally held an overabundance of food. Again, Joseph Beard described the scene:

“There were always a few who didn’t like oysters and they always had ham for those.... Anything that you would have in a farming neighborhood like that, when you sat down to eat it was just like having a Thanksgiving dinner. Everything from sweet potatoes to scalloped potatoes to macaroni and cheese to string beans to corn-on-the-cob to tomatoes [would be served]. Most anything that could be raised or produced in a vegetable garden or in a truck patch they’d bring. Then we had custard pies and lemon pies and apple pies.

“The money made at the oyster dinners was used for school projects, to buy church furnishings or aid in mission work.”

In her own book, entitled, “Memories of Herndon, Virginia,” Lottie Dyer Schneider wrote:

“I recall with much pleasure the oyster suppers which were held in the Town Hall. What a lot of preparation our mothers made, setting up the tables, covering them with white cloths, placing flowers, china and glass, and arranging seats and benches! What a major choice it was to decide whether we would have fried or stewed oysters, what relish to select from the many different kinds arranged in gleaming glass dishes down the center of the long tables!”

The obsession with oysters eventually waned. There was bad press about less-than-sanitary conditions in the oyster industry. Bad press also linked oysters to typhoid outbreaks. New regulations increased the cost of oysters. Prohibition took a toll on the oyster industry which

once sold large quantities of oysters to bars and saloons. Eventually, the demand for oysters decreased considerably and the oysters fell out of fashion.

Herndon, like many other localities, had been part of the oyster craze that once captured the nation.