

Hosking, Richard (ed). *Authenticity in the Kitchen: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery*. Blackawton, Totnes, Devon: Prospect Books, 2006, 283-291.

Riverworld: The Vanished World of Illinois Riverfolk.

Bruce Kraig

Marking the boundaries and draining its central prairies, rivers flow around and through the state of Illinois. In the century before World War II the largest and slowest flowing gave home to groups of people who lived on the rivers, along their banks, and who made their meager livings by harvesting the waters. In those days, the rural societies that bordered the river formed themselves into social hierarchies: farm owners and town folk; tenant, farmers; share croppers; and at the bottom people described in Southern Illinois communities along the Ohio River as “them river rats.” The same opinion held for the musselers of the Illinois River in the western side of the state. Although mostly of the same American stock as their neighbors, mostly of German, Irish, English, and “American” (meaning Appalachian) origin, these river people were recognized as distinct not only by their occupations, family ties, and relative lack of cash, but partly by their diets. Except in hard times, they tried not to eat fish but to eat “normal” meat and potatoes diets. Ecological disaster, population demands, and changes in commerce ended these generations-long traditions, but they are remembered by some as authentic folkways that are now lost. (Note 1).

Chillicothe, Illinois is a modest town of some six thousand people with the now familiar signs of small-town American economic decline. It was once a lively commercial center for railroaders, farmers, businessmen, and especially fishermen who harvested fish and freshwater mussels, usually called “clams.” Virginia Smith, now in her 80s, worked in her mother’s tavern from the 1920s onward: “it was rough little town back then, thirteen taverns, bootlegging, ladies...not what you see today.” 2

I was talking with Jay Close, now in his sixties and a life long resident of Chillicothe, Illinois about the history of food in his native town. Once home to a large musseling industry, I asked if he had ever eaten shellfish as a youth. “No, not until I was an adult,” he replied, “but once in a while, turtles. Club Lacon [in nearby Lacon, pronounced LAY-con] still serves fried turtle on Friday nights. Especially for the EYE-talians from Toluca, you know, the coal miners there.” He went on, “There was Mrs. Gurdy’s tavern in Rome, IL that served more turtle dinners in 1952 than anyone in the United States. Or so a wire story said. She later worked at the nursing home run by a friend of mine with another great cook, Mrs. Leggio. The manager always said that he had the best restaurant in Illinois. But, when they cooked they had to cut back on heavy spices like oregano, because only the EYE-talians would eat food with it.” Such are the flavors of the Anglo-German Midwest and along the Illinois River.

The Setting

The Illinois River is formed by the confluence of the Des Plaines and Kankakee rivers, about 80 50 miles southwest of Chicago, Illinois. It then flows 273 miles to join with the Mississippi River

about 31 miles northwest of St. Louis, Missouri. Except in flood conditions, the Illinois is a placid river that flows through a chain of marshes with small lakes scattered up and down its whole length. Early French explorers preferred navigating it to the parallel Mississippi, calling it “a paradise.” With an enormous wealth of wildlife of all forms and rich soils, paradise was a good description of the Illinois valley. The river bottom was sand and gravel laid down by the last glacial moraine. Older river residents remember when they could see clear through to the river bottom. It was an ideal environment for game fish and mussels, or clams, *was* being the operative word.

The river bottoms gives rise to once heavily wooded low bluffs on either side. Beyond them, to the west and southeast, the land levels out into prairie lands. Both river bottoms and bluffs are remarkably fertile, among the America’s best farmland. Once the prairies were cut (after invention of a hardened steel plough) they became famed corn and bean producers. Bluff settlements in the region began in 1820, with settlers from New England and New York, both having their own eating patterns. Chillicothe, right on the riverside, dates to 1834, named for the town in southern Ohio from which the founders hailed. From the start, riverbank settlers built levees, some small, some extensive, against river floods. When these became larger after 1910, especially along the river’s southern reaches, they can be planted with small gardens, and folks living in shanty boats did so.

Early settlement patterns remained stable, a word of growing towns providing agricultural products to external markets via flatboats in early years, steamboats later, until the 1870s. Fishing and hunting wild fowl was mainly local, duck and catfish, smallmouth bass, and bluegill eaten fairly regularly. New technology and the press of commerce brought changes in occupations and industry along the river. At the same time, enormous changes in America’s foodways were also taking place, changes from local farming and home production to large scale agriculture, food processing, and marketing. Life on the rivers would be transformed.

Fishing.

The invention of box cars refrigerated with natural ice made commercial fishing in the Illinois River possible and a new fish species created a new market. German Carp were introduced in 1885 because of their use as a food fish by the many new immigrants from Europe to America’s cities. By the 1890, Illinois River fish were being sent up river to Chicago and from there to cities of the east coast. A history of Chillicothe reports that Carp and Buffalo were harvested for Chicago and eastern markets: “At these cities they were known as Illinois River Kefelta Fish and were a delicacy to the Jewish and other ethnic populations.”³ Old World eating patterns and religious practices drove a new industry.

The carp population grew exponentially. In 1894 about 600,000 pounds were caught and processed and by 1908 the catch was 24 million pounds or 64% of the total catch from the Illinois River and its lakes. Live and dressed fish were sent over long distances urban markets.³ Commercial fishermen worked seine nets on both the river and lakes to catch carp, catfish, and buffalo. The latter two and game fish such as bass, perch, and bluegill declined in numbers after 1908 for several reasons: competition from the new carp; the increase in water from the Chicago

Sanitary and Ship Canal; sewage from that canal, and the leveeing of lands from 1910 onwards to gain and protect arable land against floods. 4

As a result, fish catches were regulated by state officials beginning in the 1920s. Carp were legal but real money came from game fish that could be sold in Chicago. Jimmy Mattox, a former excursion boats captain (including the Delta Queen) and a native Chillicothean says that the fishermen: “They packed shipping barrels this way: carp 4 inches high, then ice, then game fish like catfish, bullheads, bass, crappies, and others, then carp on top, then another layer of ice again. So inspectors would not get wise. The barrels were sent by Santa Fe Railroad to Chicago, to the Fulton Street fish market.” He went on: “River people were always getting away with something. They used illegal seine and hoop nets, big seines a city block long across the river with 15 people pulling in. They used seine boats, boats with flat bottoms and shallow drafts. That’s a good way to get catfish, they just pulled them in and fish flopped onto boat decks. Another way to fish was ‘hogging.’ Flatheads are really big catfish that dig themselves into holes in the river backwaters. Fishermen get down into the water and pull them out by hand-50, 60, 70 lbs. or more in size.” 5

Virginia Smith remembered that fishermen had sheds on the side of the river where they processed the fish-skinning and scaling fast: “they could do it fast as lightening.” Carp, she says used to be good to eat when the river was clean. It was filleted and fried in a corn meal batter, seasoned with salt and pepper. Once, every tavern along the river served this delight. Fried carp is still a local specialty in Bath, just south of Chillicothe and anywhere where old German food traditions remain. The fish has to be scored first. That means slicing across a piece of fish every quarter inch to a depth of about two-thirds of the way through. This allows the cooking process to soften the fish’s many small bones.6 Frying makes it perfectly American.

“Typically, fishermen rowed for hours in the early morning to reach their nets, traps, or lines, where they would collect their catch and deliver it to the local market. Almost every community along the Illinois River once supported a fish market. Traditionally, small, family-operated markets sold fresh fish to local buyers, but with increased demand from wider markets, the small floating markets became transfer points for shipping fish destined for tables in Boston, New York, and Chicago. Large scale commercial fishing became possible after railroads linked the Midwest with the eastern seaboard. Wives and daughters of the market owners assisted with cleaning and packing (called dressing), although in the larger markets, hired hands performed these chores.”7

But the river was to decline. One of the 20th centuries greatest engineering feats helped destroy river ecology. The Chicago River that runs through the city flowed into Lake Michigan carrying with it all the city wastes. Typhoid fever and Dysentery were a constant danger. That and a perceived need to link Chicago with the Mississippi River for barge traffic led to Chicago Sanitary & Ship Canal in 1900 and later the reversal of the Chicago River. Illinois River communities protested that Chicago was sending garbage downstream, but to no avail.8 Initially the canal raised the water level from the diversion of water from Lake Michigan. A fisherman could 80,000 pounds of fish per day. However, this water carried raw sewage from the residents of Chicago and would soon begin harming the fish and their habitat.

Overfishing became a problem as early as 1915 when a fisheries scientist reported that fish had been seined out along the southern end of the river. A 1931 law made the Canal divert less water (this to control floods that raged across the United States), the Illinois became muddier and more shallow, increasing stress on the remaining fish species. Fishermen could still pull thousands of tons of fish from the river in the 1930s, though selling them in a depressed market was another matter. By the end of World War II the fishing industry was but a shadow of its former glory. A few local fisheries remained, such as Roberts in Chillicothe (Virginia Smith's step father) and were completely gone by 1960.

Other pollutants infected the river. New levees made for new fields and with it much more agricultural chemical runoff. A rubber tire plant at the river bend near Henry spewed black waste straight into the river until the 1970. And the federal munitions plant upriver in Joliet, producing more than five tons of TNT per day during the war sent its waste down the river. Jay Close says that he could almost walk on the black crusted waters in the back bays by the 1970s. 9 By the 1960s the river was almost dead and so were former ways of life.

Clams/Mussels

“Freshwater mussels are bivalve mollusks (Phylum Mollusca, Class Bivalvia) distantly related to marine clams, oysters, mussels, and scallops. They have soft inner bodies and hard outer shells consisting of two valves. Historically, North America had the richest fauna of freshwater mussels in the world.”⁸

The rivers within and around Illinois harbor many species of freshwater clams. With extremely hard shells, the mussels spend most of their lives partially or completely buried in the bottom of a body of water. They prefer sandy bottomed rivers and streams with a good current. These animals have experienced dramatic declines in both actual numbers and species due to pollution.

Another human activity is reason for the decline. From about 1890 to 1948 most buttons for clothing in the U. S. came from clams, many from Illinois. 40,000-60,000 tons of shells a year were used to make buttons in various sizes. Waste parts were used in chicken feed and road fill, but rarely for food. In the 1890 pearl buttons as the clothing fastener of choice, created a large market. “Fresh-water mussel shells were a cheaper and higher quality source than salt-water shells and other materials such as wood, glass, metal, and bone. Other events helped to create this industry. In 1890, the McKinley Act prohibited the importation of buttons. This protection continued with the Dingley Act of 1897. The design of shell-cutting machines was improved to work better and faster. The primary use of shells was the manufacture of buttons, although some shell was made into decorative parts for items such as handles of knives, hairbrushes, and cigarette cases. Illinois River button factories mainly cut the unfinished blanks and shipped them overland to be ground and polished into buttons in much larger facilities, such as those in Muscatine, Iowa that opened in 1891 and transformed musseling from parties of waders searching shallow waters to fleets of motorized boats plucking huge numbers of mussels from the deepest pools.”¹⁰

Musseling boats and tools were specialized instruments, the first flat bottomed, the latter varieties of hooks, pikes and nets. Mussels were processed by steaming. A large wooden vessel containing some water was set over a fire and filled with mussels, then covered. After 20 minutes, the dead shellfish were removed with wide pitchforks and allowed to cool. Sorters, mainly women and children, pried open the shells with a knife, scooped the meat from the shells, searched for pearls, threw out the meat, this to be used for pig feed, or fish bait. "Saw shops" as they were called washed sorted, and categorized the shells by use, color, size, and species. By season's end the shell middens had overwhelmingly sickening odors. That smell stuck with the musselers and set them apart from their neighbors.

The shell collectors manually scooped the shells into tubs that held 100 pounds and loaded them onto trucks that came by weekly: payment was by the ton. Shells were then delivered to factories that made buttons and other decorative items. Soon small plants opened near the mussel beds and a new industry grew.

By 1910 at least 2500 musseling boats worked the river bringing higher levels of income to those who clammed and those who worked in the button factories. Many workers were women from poorer farmer, but many also were from fishing families. However, like fish, mussels began to decline in numbers from over fishing, pollution and changes in fashion and technology. When Japanese manufacturers introduced celluloid buttons in 1926 with buttons made of celluloid, metal, and ivory nut (the seed of the South American tagua palm *Phytelepas macrocarpa*), American button income declined. Zipper and metal clasps introduced in the 1930s also hurt business. And by 1930, local mussel had been over-harvesting, killed by pollution from the Sanitary Canal and silted out by farm runoff. Perhaps worst, the heat produced by the new automatic washers and dryers of the 1940s caused pearl buttons to yellow and exfoliate. So, too, another river industry and way of life was lost.(Note 2).

Society and Foodways.

When speaking with the "old timers" in small towns like Chillicothe, people in their 70s and 80s, about food memories, almost all refer to times of greatest stress, the Great Depression. This is the same period in which John Bennett, Herbert Passin and others studied life along the Ohio River in Southern Illinois (see Note 1). There are differences between the Illinois River region and the Ohio, but also some interesting parallels. In Southern Illinois, the researchers defined several ecological zones, each with somewhat different cultural styles, yet each interacting with one another. At the bottom of the Ohio River social heap were people living on the river by fishing, many in "shanty boats." Small farmers, squatters, occupied the riverbanks, making their livings by fishing or farm labor. Along the rich Bottoms were tenant farmers and sharecroppers and farm laborers. Several levels of hills stand above them, living on badly eroded lands as sharecroppers, tenant farmers, or land renters. Only people of German extraction, their way of life different from their "English" neighbors, were more prosperous. The region's town was served as a business center with a permanent, non-agricultural population, and income based party on bootlegging done during Prohibition and not completely dead by 1938-39.

Food was a means of self-identification among the groups. Though most were poor, their staples being potatoes, beans, and pork, there were distinct differences in food prestige. That is, fish was at the bottom of the social scale, scorned as food fit only for the river people, hardly eaten by folks at the “higher” end of the spectrum. Because of changes in American food production, many of the tenant farmers and sharecroppers ate more store bought food than raised their own. Corn meal and flour, even canned vegetables and canned milk were usually purchased. Gardens were sparse among these groups, non-existent in shanty boat life. Only people living on the Bottoms, some of them black, and among the German farmers, were vegetable garden with subsequent canning important. As Thelma Renshaw from New Athens [AY-thens] near St. Louis, related, during World War II people made money for the first time in many years, and after it could not wait to quit eating homemade bread in favor of good “store boughten” white bread. Wonder Bread, that is. So much for authentic farm food. 11

This model has some application to Chillicothe in the first part of the 20th century. Beginning as a center for farm products meant to be sent to external markets. Grain shipping businesses and a bank appeared in its early years, the 1850s, followed by more white-collar businesses. In 1886 the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe ran its tracks nearby, thus linking California to Chicago. Before long, Chillicothe became the railroad’s headquarters and source of much local income (and also was responsible for a small Mexican community dating to 1906). By time the fishing and musseling industries were in full swing, and the Great Depression (1929/30-1940) Chillicothe’s divisions were geographic, social, and economic. On the rivers were the “River People,” who lived in “shanty boats” all along the river. Mainly fishermen, they were despised by the others. Railroaders were those employed by the Santa Fe. By no means were these white collar workers, but ranged from the elite engineers to manual laborers. Many became unionized and thus had an entirely different work ethic than the River People. They were almost entirely dependent on store bought food. On the bluffs and interior were farmers. Many were self-sufficient producing enough grain, legumes, meat and dairy for the market. In the 1880s a large canning company opened in town and buying produce and giving farmers a cash income. Others were less fortunately placed, tenant farmers, though never as poor as the share-croppers of the Ohio River region. Thelma Renshaw describes her father’s life as a share-cropper in the 1930s: they got a four room house, \$1 a day, and all the skim milk they could drink. Almost everything else they grew or reared themselves. And that was a cut above the commercial catfish fishing he had had to be when they were really down and out. Finally, there were the townspeople, the storekeepers, bankers, and artisans who were once familiar sights in small town America. Most of these provided cash wages to the employees of various kinds, especially those who had graduated from the town’s schools. Of these, there was one subset, tavern keepers. All along the river were tavern patronized by fishermen, railroaders, farmers. Some were of more dubious reputation, closer to the River People than to townspeople. Such a place was Marge’s.

Virginia Smith was born on a farm in nearby Elmwood, Illinois and has lived in Chillicothe all her life, as does her family. Married three times, she says that she “never married the others, and wouldn’t do it again.” Her step father the biggest fisherman between Peoria (10-12 miles south) and Henry (10-12 miles north). His name was “Kokomo” Roberts, so named because he had been a baseball player who was so good that “he whipped everyone butts.” Kokomo was the name of a

stellar professional baseball player of the era. Roberts' was one of the few fisheries to survive into the 1960s.

Not just what people eat but how they get it is a social denominator. Virginia's mother owned a tavern called Marge's. During Prohibition (1919-1932) her mother took to bootlegging in order to feed her children. "There was always someone with 15 cents for whiskey or a dime for beer." Her mother made home brew, and got the first retail license after Repeal at a cost of \$20. Virginia remembers when three officials from Pabst Brewing Co., a large brewery south of town, came in and told her to keep bootlegging because her stuff was so good that they didn't want to spoil it. It could be, she adds, that the brewers knew that Al Capone used to come down to Chillicothe on his houseboat and stopped in for a quick one at Marge's. "Wives were always angry with Marge," Virginia continues, "because there they would be with 6 or 7 kids at home waiting for husbands who stopped at the 'evil' tavern to have a drink or two."

Virginia's mother came from a farm family, her step father was a fisherman, so she knew both societies and Marge's was a place where they met. River people, she declares, were always second class citizens. They had the lowest paying, dirtiest job, they stunk, and they were often dishonest. Railroaders were never dirty and looked down upon the river people. There was always conflict between the river people, the railroaders, and the town people ... and sometime the Mexicans who worked in agriculture and railroads. The river guys got into fights all the time because "banging heads meant nothing to them." Fights often broke out this way: when the fishermen done for the day, they headed to Marge's where they drank whiskey shots with beer chasers. They sat around the pot bellied stove and were pretty quiet. Then the railroad men came in, would have a few, then they'd comment on how bad the rivermen smelled, comments were exchanged, and soon a fight broke out. Virginia says that almost always the railroad men were sorry they ever came in. For instance her uncle George Neal, a real character, was a riverman who was always drinking and fighting. He was short but really powerful from pulling seine nets, and was never beaten on a fight. (Fishermen usually described orally and in newspaper accounts as thickest and strong.). But he never learned to swim.

Jimmy Mattox reinforces the idea of River People's perceived dishonesty. Many of the river people were market hunters, meaning, poachers. One family, the Hamms were notorious, They would kill ducks, can them with peaches, and sell them in Chicago in the 1930s. (Evidently this was a popular item). The Hamms killed many, thousands. One day, Virginia and others remember that they killed several thousand in one day using shrapnel in their shotguns. It was during migration season, this being the famous Mississippi Flyway. The Hamms often hung out on an island in the river, Grand Island, for their illegal activities, like pirates.

Houseboat, or "Shanty boat" life flourished along the Illinois River from the 1890s to the 1930s. They were literally flat bottoms, low in the water with cabins set on them. The "house" might have had several rooms with the most basic furnishings, such as a stove, table and chairs and a bed. A federal researcher described one thusly:

"The exterior of this houseboat is nicely painted. The inside walls are sealed, though unpainted. All the four rooms were furnished

like an ordinary cottage: linoleum on the floors, a kitchen range, a polished table, a stand made of walnut, an iron bed covered with an attractive spread, an air-tight heater, a rocking chair, and dining chairs. One window was filled with plants and vines. Dainty drapes were at the one-panel windows. Small framed pictures were one the walls. Everything was neat and very clean.”¹²

Most Shanty boat dwellers made every effort to eat the same kinds of foods as landed people. Partly because of its low prestige value, few would admit to being serious piscophages. Shellfish were especially abhorred. Perhaps because fish were so abundant, or so easily caught those who lived on them were thought lazy, and thus not part of American social norms. The quote below is telling in this regard. Since most of the Shanty boaters worked (hard) for cash they had some disposable income to spend on store foods. By 1890s and thereafter commercially produced goods were available everywhere. Nor could cooking facilities on Shanty boats have been sophisticated. A stove meant not a bake oven, but small wood-fired thing used only for stovetop cookery: frying pan and boiling. Nonetheless, Virginia Smith says she and others associated with the river ate lots of fish, the land dwellers only on Friday.

Shanty boat residents varied: some were year-round houseboat residents, others seasonal migrants, or seasonal river workers. As one former dweller, Dale Ward, put it:

“Cabin boats, people lived on cabin boats. They thought maybe it was a kind of utopia. This came as near as anything I know of. They had one family or more living on a cabin boat. It might have been a big one, nice with two rooms, you know, that they fixed up. And they fished on the river. They might have stopped and had a garden on the levee. Keep a sow and some little pigs. And they had the fish all the time. They had easy livin'. Maybe had a garden up there. They'd drive a stand pipe for water. And, of course, there was plenty of wood. There was a lot of driftwood on the bays, you know. If the wood got scarce, they moved off.”¹³

Mobility, and freedom, prized by Ward, was the reason for Shanty boat people's lower prestige. Because they weren't part of the networks of land based church, and social organizations, they were outsiders, even though they might have come originally from farms or towns. Besides, as fishermen, they probably “stank.”

Most Shanty boat dwellers owned their boats, but almost never the land on which they moored. Some were squatters, hence all the more scorned. Fishing and musseling were the major activities. “Shanty boats had the advantage over land-based homes of being tax-free, low-rent, and portable to move to where there was work or harvesting opportunities. This was important for fishermen and musselers, and for many others, especially during the Depression, when the number of people on the river increased after farms began to fail and industrial jobs were lost. Another advantage of the houseboat was that one could not get flooded out, with possessions damaged, as many Illinois River inhabitants did in high flood years.”¹⁴

The Great Depression drove people to the Shanty boats, in much the same way as on the Ohio River. Virginia Smith knew at least ten families who lived in them. Most of the families who lived in them came from farms, but during the dry years of the Great Depression people were driven off their farms. They fought to keep them, but failed because the drought and dust storms were so great. She can picture even now the large mounds of dry earth piled up against farm fences. (The Dust Bowl, usually thought of as covering the Great Plains of the American west, actually began in the Midwest in 1931.).

Hungry and broke people took to the river boats. Of course, there were people already there, so population swelled. The only food available in the early years of the Depression were fish. People ate fish before, but it was *déclassé* fare for except on Friday nights for Catholics or festive cookouts. The original Shanty boat dwellers far preferred eating what dry land people ate: pork, beef, potatoes, beans, and sweets. But poverty made fish-eating a necessity. One might think that consuming one's cash crop was not an attractive prospect, but in 1931 many dry land farmers destroyed crops and farm animals because they could not get anything like a fair market price for them. A major fishery at Meredosia at the same time had to horde its catch in large tanks for the same reason. Virginia Smith well recalls farmers bringing their slaughtered animals in to her mother's tavern to be cooked up for the poor.

"People were lucky to even be eating back then," Virginia recollects. "When FDR got in my mother got food from the government for free, 100 lb flour, or cornmeal, and the like, and she cooked it at the tavern for free lunches and dinners, for the poor. Many of the poorest were the river people, so they came to Marge's –where on Saturday nights there was always some conflict. Or folks could go to Mrs. Webb's. This estimable lady once cooked at Prairie Shores (the automobile club and club for the well-to-do including politicians and Al Capone) owned Webb's Inn which was famous for its fried chicken dinners (chicken not a commodity as it is today, but a Sunday dinner). Fish and pork were cheap and that's what people got. She received free food from the government and cooked for the poor, river dwellers, too: People could just walk in and get a free lunch, especially after 1933.

When people were really hungry Marge's and Mrs. Webb and others resorted to something they would never think of eating: clam (mussel) soups and stews. This was truly food for the poor but Virginia says that the dishes were really good. "Just throw them in the pot with some carrots or whatever vegetables you have, add some salt and maybe pepper and cook them down." The original settlers of Chillicothe, from New England, would surely have recognized such dishes.

World War II ended Shanty boat life. War industries soaked up all available labor. Money saved during years of rationing went directly into new land housing after the war. With factories such as Caterpillar in nearby Peoria, large breweries and even the world's largest whisky distiller, also in Peoria, the old river life ended. It could hardly have gone on anyway given the imminent death of a once great river.

If there were a natural Riverworld Cuisine, excluding store bought foods, what would it be? Certainly fish, not carp, but the "better" sort such as bass and definitely catfish. Turtles were also part of the diet, maybe of higher status than fish because its flesh was considered to me "meat."

Jimmy Mattox tells how they were captured. Big ones could be found, “as big as washtubs.” They were caught in traps that look like boxes, just baited with meat. The only good turtles are snappers. Soft shelled turtles are not. Snapping turtles are still caught and eaten, Jimmy’s uncle one such hunter. The way to get them was to stick a pole into soft mud along the banks. When the snapper grabbed on it was a simple matter of pulling them out—using iron hooks to grapple them. Mostly hunting was done in the autumn when they settled in to hibernate and before the mud froze. There are said to be seven kinds of meat in a turtle, from its flesh to internal organs. These might be indistinguishable when properly fried up.

Since it was hard to fish in the winter, river folks hunted and trapped. Mink (inedible), raccoons, muskrats, possums and beaver were all on the menu, the latter giving up its tail to the table. The preferred cooking method would be to roll the meat in cornmeal and then fry it, normally in lard.

Waterfowl were always on the menu, though Jay Close relates that he once got a mud hen, that’s a coot, and brought it to his mother to cook. She did and it was so foul that he never hunted for duck again.

Pork, beef when possible, potatoes, beans (often), and perhaps some greens would have made up the Shanty boat diet, with the exception of beef, similar to that other Shanty boat culture across the state on Ohio River.

Note 1. In the late 1930s a team of anthropologists from the University of Chicago studied the society of a small Illinois town and its region along the Ohio River, actually near Metropolis or Cave-in-Rock. (1) The ways of life the team described in the Great Depression have long disappeared. In many ways, these studies mirror another riverside region, Chillicothe, located on the broad Illinois River. This paper uses some of the materials and conclusions from the Southern Illinois study.

Note 2. Mussel harvesting resumed in the 1960s to provide the shell implant or "nucleus" for producing cultured pearls grown in Japan. Commercial harvesting continues in the Mississippi River and some of its tributaries, but is currently prohibited in the Illinois River except for one short harvest season. Over seven-million pounds of mussels, valued at over six-million dollars, were harvested in 1990. Jimmy Maddox recalls barges laden with shells worth a million dollars rolling down the river and he knows some current musselers.

1. John W. Bennett, Harvey I. Smith, Herbert Passin, “Food and Culture in Southern Illinois-A Preliminary Report,” American Sociological Review, Vol 7, No 5 (Oct., 1942), 645-660;
Herbert Passin, “Culture Change in Southern Illinois,” Rural Sociology, Vol 7, No 3 (Sept., 1942), 303-317.

2. Interview with Virginia Smith, Chillicothe, IL, June, 2005.

3. Jack L. Bradley (ed.), The History of Chillicothe, Illinois (Chillicothe, IL: the Chillicothe Historical Society, 1995), 52.
4. Records of fishing and musseling along with some oral histories can be found at the Illinois Museums and Illinois Natural Resources website: www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb.
5. Interview with Jimmy Mattox, Chillicothe, IL, June, 2005.
6. <http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb>.
7. Chillicothe Bulletin, Friday, April 3, 1893. Put out a call for a meeting to protest Chicago's plan to build a sanitary canal: "Chicago wants to unload its garbage into the Illinois" thus hurting "the Valley people."
8. www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb.
11. Interview with Jay Close, Chillicothe, IL, July 2005.
10. Ibid.
11. Interview with Thelma Renshaw, New Athens, IL, August, 2002.
12. <http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/transportation/boats/houseboats.html>
13. Dale Ward, Oral History, 07/17/1981. .
<http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/transportation/boats/houseboats.html>
14. Ibid.