An Editorial Memorandum on Clams

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James Francis Davis, or J. Frank Davis, as he was known to the FWP, was born in the fishing port of New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1870. In the early twentieth century he worked in a variety of jobs for leading Boston newspapers, including theater critic, political writer, city editor, and managing editor. In 1910 he retired as a result of an injury and moved to San Antonio, Texas. From there he became a playwright and had several successes, including Gold in the Hills *and* The Ladder, *which ran on Broadway from 1926 to 1927. He also wrote short stories and magazine serialized stories, most of which were set in Texas, for which he was made an honorary Texas Ranger. He became the state supervisor for the Texas Writers' Project. But when he heard that the state writers' project for his home state, Massachusetts, was disintegrating and might not be contributing to* America Eats, *he sent a memo on what he saw as the two essential New England foods: clams and beans.*

Davis died of a heart attack in May 1942, on the same day that the Federal Writers' Project officially ended.

The one food that most defines New England and sets it apart from the rest of North America is clams. It is the only place on the Atlantic coast of North America

where clams are more valued than oysters. And this has been so since long before those first Pilgrims scratched at the sand for bivalves because they didn't know how to fish. Most of the Indians who lived on the North Atlantic coast, not only in New England, ate clams and collected the shells of the ones New Englanders call quahogs, which they valued for their splash of purple and used to make purple-and-white beads, strung together in different lengths for different values and called "wampum." The currency was so sound that European settlers continued to trade in wampum and even produced it. In fact, clamshell wampum became easier to produce with the introduction of the European drill.

The European settlers also ate clams. William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth colony, described in his journal starving men in 1623 scratching at the sand trying to find clams to eat. One died of starvation while looking for clams.

There are two types of clams commonly eaten in New England: Mya arenaria *and* Mercenaria mercenaria. Mya arenaria, *the soft-shell clam, is by far the more important in New England, though of lesser importance most other places. It is found as far north as the Arctic and as far south as Cape Hatteras, but nowhere is it as loved as in New England, and New Englanders find it hard to believe that a good one can be found anywhere else. It is sometimes called an Ipswich clam for the bay on the northern coast of Cape Ann, which is where some of the best are found. They are frequently called steamers because steaming and then following a near ritual of rolling the black membrane off the neck, washing the individual clam in clam broth, and finally dipping it in butter, all done with a*

thumb and index finger, is the popular way of eating them. As popular are fried steamers, which is one of the rare traditional New England dishes involving frying. Steamers are also the traditional clam of New England clam chowder. All three dishes have remained as popular as they were in the time of America Eats, *though frozen food and fast food companies have introduced an atrocity called the clam strip for fried clams. Often made of squid, the clam strip has no belly, the soft central part of the clam, the size and plumpness of which is key to rating the quality of a good clam.*

The Mercenaria mercenaria, *the hard-shell clam, is mostly eaten raw. It comes in three sizes. The smallest are littlenecks. Long Islanders irritate New Englanders by insisting that the name comes from Littleneck Bay, Long Island. New Englanders, who tend to regard Long Island and most of New York in much the same way that the Romans viewed the tribes to the north, argue with logic that it is unlikely that they would have accepted a Long Island name for one of their traditional foods. They point out that littlenecks are found in a part of Ipswich Bay known as "Little Neck." Middle-sized hard-shells, also usually eaten raw, are called cherrystones and no one seems annoyed that this may come from Cherrystone Creek, Virginia. The largest ones, not generally eaten raw but thrown into chowder, are the quahogs, an authentic name from the Narragansett,* poquaûhock, *and in common English language usage in New England since at least the mid-eighteenth century.*

The clambake, as prepared at its best, has almost vanished; only a few experts now make them, for private parties and

at considerable expense (the last one I had, a dozen years ago, cost about $12 per person for about a hundred guests, I was told, and doubtless would cost more today).

The very earliest bakes contained nothing but clams, but as they developed, especially in Rhode Island, other contents were added. At Massachusetts shore resorts the clams are likely to be steamed; at Rhode Island resorts they probably will come out of a bake; but even at the Rhode Island places all the shore dinner "fixin's" except the clams are cooked on kitchen ranges, and have been for at least fifty years—the complete bake has never been practical for the feeding of great numbers.

In a proper Rhode Island clambake nothing comes off a stove but the clam chowder for the first course. The most elaborate one I ever ate included clams, quahogs, oysters, fish, lobsters, crabs, sweet potatoes, sweet corn, chicken, sausages, and tripe. As everything has to come out done at exactly the same moment, and as the time necessary for cooking the different contents varied very greatly, a high degree of skill and experience went into the timing of when each article was added.

Your story, I imagine, will go into the Rhode Island clambake as it used to be, and occasionally is now: The hole in the ground with stones covering the bottom; the wood fire burned on top of the stones until they are so hot that they will crackle at the sprinkling of water; the embers brushed off; a layer of wet seaweed; the clams; more wet seaweed covered with a tarpaulin or canvas spiked down all around to keep in the steam; quick openings and closings to put in other ingredients, the fish, chicken and similar contents sewed into cheesecloth so as not to be touched by seaweed or ashes, the sweet corn in its husks; the final triumphant opening with everything properly cooked and ready to serve. (The chowder—absent of course when no stove is handy—is served about ten minutes before the bake is opened. The traditional dessert is watermelon.)

When you write about clams, readers outside New England will be confused unless it is made clear that the clam in New England is not the same as the clam in, say, Maryland, where Little Necks on the half shell have helped to make Baltimore famous. The Little Neck, when grown, is still a clam south of New England, but in New England he is—and always was, even when he was called a Little Neck—a quahog. Outsiders frequently call New England clams "soft clams," and the Standard Dictionary says that the quahog is a "round clam," both of which are ridiculous to any true seaside Yankee. He will tell you, anywhere along the coast from Maine to Connecticut, that "a clam is a clam and a quahog is a quahog."

You probably will be saying something about clam chowder, and you may or may not know that there always has been a considerable difference between the—so-called—Massachusetts and Rhode Island clam chowders, with bitter debates as to their relative merits. As I was born in Massachusetts but once was press agent for a Rhode Island shore resort (where 6,000 clambake eaters each pleasant Sunday was the season's average) I take no sides. Both factions speak with equal scorn of "clam chowder, Coney Island style." (Incidentally, a lot of people think a good clam chowder is even better the second day, warmed up.)