Father of oyster biology
Harold Haskin dies at 87

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MIDDLE TOWNSHIP — Harold H. Haskin, the father of oyster biology and an internationally regarded expert on marine mollusks, died at his home here Sunday. He was 87.

Haskin devoted much of his life to studying clams and oysters in the Delaware Bay at Rutgers University’s research laboratory in Bivalve, Cumberland County. In 1991, the lab was renamed Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory in his honor.

Haskin joined the Rutgers faculty in 1946, and was quickly named director of oyster culture. He studied hard clams for Campbell Soup and charted the Delaware Bay bottom for the Navy.

But it was a massive oyster die off in 1957 that changed the future of oystering and altered the direction of Haskin’s research.

A parasite, which Haskin later named MSX, killed as much as 85 percent of oysters in the deep parts of the bay and it later affected oysters to a lesser extent all along the Atlantic coast.

“We’d never seen anything like it anywhere in the world,” Haskin recalled in a 1987 interview with The Press of Atlantic City.

Haskin never completely unraveled the mystery of how MSX kills, but he used selective breeding to develop oyster strains that are resistant to the parasite.

Those resistant strains are used to this day in aquaculture programs from Maine to Virginia, said Susan Ford, a research professor who joined the lab in 1966.

Ford recalled meeting Haskin for the first time. His face was ruddy and his hair was wind blown, because he had just stepped off an oyster boat, and he was dressed in a loud red plaid shirt, chinos and heavy boots.

“He didn’t look at all like I expected a university professor to look like,” Ford said.

He didn’t act like a professor, either, talking easily with oystermen and regulators alike.

“He didn’t try to make things more high faluting than they are,” Ford said. “People trusted him.”

Graduate students called him Hurricane Hal, because he would take them on day-long field trips, no matter how foul the weather.

Generations of his students now work around the world in universities, governments and private industry, Ford said.

“He certainly was an excellent teacher,” she said.

Born Harold Haley in Niagara Falls, N.Y., in 1915, Haskin was orphaned at age 3 when his parents died during the influenza epidemic of 1918. Family acquaintance Frederick L. Haskin adopted the boy and moved to Salem to raise him.

Haskin attended Rutgers, where he studied zoology and spent a summer conducting his first oyster research on Delaware Bay.

“It was like Moses in the bulrushes, a pretty exciting summer, in it’s own way,” he recalled in 1987.

Studying for his doctorate in marine biology at Harvard, he met Peggy, to whom he was married for 60 years.

Immediately after earning his doctorate in 1942, Haskin was called up to serve in the Army during World War II. For five years he trained men and guarded the New Jersey shore.

After his discharge, he studied at Woods Hole, Mass., before returning to teach at his alma mater.

Through the years, his studies included the effects of oil and sewage pollution on mollusks and the effects of dredging, damming and development on the estuarian environment.

Haskin is best known, however, for his research on oyster biology.

“The father of oyster biology is the way he was thought of by us and others,” Ford said.

Haskin is survived by his wife, five children and four grandchildren. A memorial service will be held in the fall.

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