

Activity 2.4

- Grade Level
3-5
- Subject Areas
Art, History, Social Studies, Language Arts
- Duration
One to two 40-minute class sessions
- Setting
Classroom
- Skills
Interpreting, inferring, demonstrating, explaining, creating.
- Vocabulary
Shuck, market, commerce.
- Correlation with NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards for Social Studies
6.1.4.B.4-9, 6.1.4.C.4, 5, 7-9, 14, 15, 18, 6.1.4.D.2, 6.1.8.C.4.b-c

Materials:

- Tin cans
- Drawing paper cut to tin cans
- Crayons, Markers, or Paints
- Glue or Tape

What's in the Can?

Charting the Course

Students will examine photographs of oyster cans from the 1900s and describe the key marketing features shown on the label. Students will then design and construct oyster can labels for their own hypothetical oyster company.

Background

Oysters were originally sold in the shell, but in the late 1920s packing houses developed and oysters were shucked (removed from their shells) and sold in cans. The ability to shuck oysters directly at the site where they were landed greatly reduced freight and handling costs. Within a decade packing houses lined the Maurice River waterfront. Towns like Port Norris, Bivalve, and Shellpile grew as a result of the oyster industry. At the peak of the fishery, Port Norris, had more millionaires per square mile than any other city in the state. This prosperity extended through out the region. In the packing-houses men and women lined long wooden stalls, quickly shucking as many oysters as possible. Many immigrants, primarily African Americans, came from Maryland and Virginia to work in New Jersey's oyster shucking houses. The packing-houses played an important role in shaping the cultural and economic life of New Jersey's Delaware Bay shore region.

The shucked oyster meats were placed in steel buckets and transferred to large steel tubs where they were washed in water. The oysters were then drained, sealed in tin cans, and placed in cold rooms where they awaited shipping. Each packing-house had its own can label. The labels were often fanciful and colorful, rich with descriptions relating to the superiority of the product. Today these tins are prized and sought after by many collectors.

Objectives / Students will be able to:

1. Recognize the significance of towns like Port Norris and Bivalve, NJ as centers for the commercial oyster fishery.
2. Examine and describe oyster can labels from the early 1900s.
3. Discuss how the labels helped oyster marketing.
4. Design and construct oyster can labels for their own hypothetical oyster company.

Procedure / Warm Up

Discuss the significance of oysters to the Delaware Bay Shore region. Explain that oysters were originally sold in the shell, but in the late 1920s packing houses developed and oysters were shucked (removed from their shells) and sold in cans. Show them pictures of oyster cans noting the information that they provided.

The Activity

1. Show students pictures (or the real thing if you have them) of oyster cans. Note: Google image search will offer a wide variety of samples of oyster can images.
2. Ask the students to describe the cans. Ask: What information is given? What features make the product appealing to them? If they were in the market for oysters which would they buy?
3. Hand out art supplies and instruct students to design and illustrate their own oyster can label (Paper should be appropriately sized and cut to be glued onto a gallon tin can or modify for size of available cans).
4. Affix labels to cans using tape or glue.
5. Have students orally present their oyster can labels to the class.

Wrap Up / Have an open discussion about how technological changes, such as the establishment of railroads and canning in the case of oysters, can affect the demand for and on a natural resource. Have students suggest other changes that could impact the resource. Talk about ways that products are marketed including products that students use today.

Assessment / Participation in class discussion. Oyster can label.

Extensions / Invite the folklorist from the Bayshore Discovery Project to visit your class for a presentation on the history of oystering in Delaware Bay.

Select curriculum materials from *Down Jersey Celebrating Our Sense of Place*.



Figure 1: Oyster Can, photograph by James Kirks, courtesy of *Cape May Magazine*.