

COMMERCIAL FISHING AT CEDAR KEY, LEVY COUNTY, FLORIDA

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Cedar Key is a small, somewhat isolated fishing community located on Way Key in Levy County on the west coast of Florida (Fig. 1). Way Key is surrounded by a number of keys and islands known collectively as the Cedar Keys. It is accessible by sea, air, or by one road, State Highway 24, and its nearest neighboring community, Otter Creek, is 22 miles northeast. According to the 1970 census, the population of Cedar Key was 714. However, Cedar Key was not always so small or isolated.

Sequent Occupance

The first settlement of Cedar Key consisted of a summer resort on Atsena Otie Key in 1842. By 1853 regular steamship lines to the Gulf Coast ports and some foreign countries had been established and all mail coming into the United States from Havana passed through this port. In that same year, State Senator David Yulee began promoting sales of stock in the Florida Railroad which was to run between Fernandina on the east coast and Cedar Key to the west. This railroad was completed in 1861 and operated until 1932.

During the Civil War, Cedar Key had a population of approximately 100, and was home base for several blockade runners. Also, although under federal control from 1862, the mainland area continued throughout the war to supply evaporated sea-water salt to the Confederacy.

After the Civil War, the town prospered because of timbering and commercial fishing and by 1885 had a population of about 5,000. During the great hurricane of 1896, the town on Atsena Otie Key was destroyed. Eventually, all salvageable buildings were moved by barge to the present location on Way Key where they continue to exist today in the form of a small close-knit fishing community.

Economic Trends

The economic history of the area shows a pattern of exploitation and exhaustion of natural resources. A timber boom, which had begun in 1855 when Eberhard Faber bought mixed forest land in the area to supply cedar for pencil factories in New Jersey (Faber and Eagle), continued after the Civil War with shipments of prepared cedar and turpentine. Although the peak timbering period was not until 1885-88, in 1882 one million cubic feet of prepared cedar was shipped from the area. By 1900 the timber had been exhausted, and today the Cedar Keys are almost completely without cedar trees.

It was also during the 1880s that Cedar Key sea products came into demand because of rapid cross-country transit. Greek divers were imported to harvest sponges but the supply was quickly exhausted. Stone crabs (*Menippe mercenaria*), green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), clams (*Mercenaria campechiensis*), and oysters (*Crassostrea virginica*) were also soon depleted.

The Cedar Key oyster is renowned for its flavor, and the state of Florida is trying to rebuild the industry in the area by sponsoring an oyster-planting program in which it supplies the oysters and pays local residents to plant them. Stone crabs seem to have made a comeback on their own.

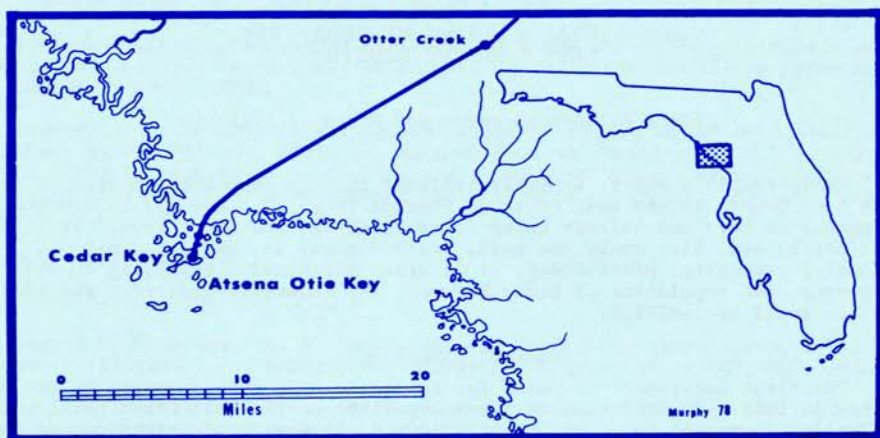


Fig. 1

Sea trout (*Cynoscion nebulosus*) was for many years an important product, and cane-pole fishing for them was profitable. Residents state that at one time a man could catch 200 pounds of fish in a day with hook-and-line, and in the late fifties enough fish were caught in one weekend to pay for a boat and motor.

Today the important products of Cedar Key are blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*), mullet (*Mugil cephalus*), and stone crab. The two varieties of crabs accounted for 57.2 percent of the Levy County seafood landings during the period 1970-72.¹ For the next two-year period, 1973-75, blue crabs accounted for 50 percent of the landings and stone crabs accounted for 4.5 percent.

The Crab Fishery

Crabbing did not come into economic prominence in Cedar Key until after World War II when young men returning from the war began to exploit the new market created by increasing tourist consumption.² During the 1950s blue and stone crab fishing landings increased (Table 1). In 1960 blue crab production peaked and has been declining since then, but continues to be important. Stone crab production, however, has continued to increase except for a market drop in 1966 and 1967. In both cases there has been considerable year-to-year variation.³

The basic method of catching each type of crab is similar. There is much variation in season for stone and blue crabs, and in state regulations governing the taking of each species, as well as type of pots used and distance traveled to catch each species.

Blue crabbing is allowed year-round; however, the peak season is normally December through February. This may vary from year to year. During 1976-77, for example, the peak did not come until May.⁴

State regulations require that a blue crab must be five inches wide and have no egg sac before it can be taken. These conservation regulations are resented by many of the crabbers and ignored by some. During the summer months, when the blue crab is actively moving toward shore and is easier to catch, a large percentage must be thrown back because they are egg-bearing females. This type of crabbing, where only the male crab may be kept, is called "jimmy crabbing" by local residents.⁵

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF FLORIDA COMMERCIAL LANDINGS: LEVY COUNTY

<u>Year</u>	<u>Blue Crab</u>	<u>Stone Crab</u>
1953	500	8,700
1954	5,540	6,910
1955	700	12,568
1956	539,712	15,446
1957	2,262,994*	12,661
1958	2,790,768*	11,135
1959	5,559,296*	49,123
1960	7,126,939*	12,537
1961	6,819,307*	41,256
1962	4,702,489*	98,710
1963	1,194,700	84,100
1964	1,128,537	85,756
1965	2,993,233	31,420
1966	1,943,893	8,826
1967	2,329,050	9,506
1968	1,911,593	35,988
1969	2,070,304	99,486
1970	1,568,375	97,095
1971	1,026,041	100,700
1972	770,124	62,170
1973	514,277	110,060
1974	713,179	88,570
1975	1,987,462	92,042

*Includes crab landings from Dixie and Citrus counties

Source: "Summary of Florida Commercial Landings, 1953-1975"

Blue crab pots are made of poultry wire mesh with a funnel-like entrance made of the same material. These are usually set in relatively shallow water near shore and are identified by an attached styrofoam buoy on which is marked the license number assigned each crabber by the state.

Stone crab season has been limited by a recent law to the months between November 15 and May 15. This law also allows the taking of only one claw (measuring two and three-quarter inches from knuckle to claw), after which the crab must be thrown back. A single claw will be regenerated when the crab molts, but, if both claws are taken, the crab probably will not survive. Since by law either claw may be taken if it is of proper size, it is impossible for the processor to tell if both claws have been taken.

Stone crabbing is done offshore and, although wire pots are sometimes used, the most common traps for stone crabs are made of wood slats. A short length of large-size PVC pipe inserted vertically through the top of the pot provides an easy entrance, but is too slippery for an exit. The floor of the trap is coated with several inches of concrete which has the crabber's license number marked in it. As with the wire pots, this number is also marked on an attached buoy. These pots with rope and floats cost between \$6 and \$10 in 1977, depending on whether the person makes his own or buys them already constructed.

Traditionally, two types of boats have been used for crabbing. The larger type is usually about 25 feet long with a cabin and a centrally located inborn motor. The smaller type is a skiff approximately ten feet in length. Recently, however, another type of boat called a "bird-dog" has come into favor. This is a medium-sized boat with a flat bottom, and an outboard motor which is situated in a well toward the front of the boat so that the operator can sit on the bow and guide the boat. Such boats can run at high speeds in as little as six inches of water. "Bird dogs" are constructed locally and cost approximately \$750.

There are both opponents and proponents of the "bird dog" in Cedar Key. Those in favor of the boat say that because much of the water around the Cedar Keys is shallow, the "bird dog" is an efficient time-saving method of getting from one crabbing area to another. Opponents say that the "bird dogs," along with sport fishermen and airboats, are destroying breeding grounds for aquatic life.

Processing and Marketing

There are presently two fish houses in Cedar Key but no crab-processing plant, although a small amount of processing for sale to tourists is done at one of the fish houses supplying local restaurants. One crab-processing plant did operate in Cedar Key from 1955 until the late sixties but was forced to close because of lack of labor.

Both fish houses now sell their catch to the same processing company, the Gulf Stream Crab Company. This presents problems because the Gulf Stream Crab Company's processing capacity is limited. When they stop buying from fish houses, the crabbers must temporarily stop crabbing.

Catch figures (Table 1) were examined to determine long-range trends. They show some year-to-year variation but no substantial pattern of gain or loss. This may be too short a period for any such pattern to materialize. The year-to-year variation may be explained by such factors as climate, selling price of crabs, and available picking labor.

The demise of the local processing plant has been too recent to determine the effect. The closing of the plant could decrease the number of crabs caught by eliminating that portion of the market. If this were the case, the effect could be beneficial, as more crabs would thus be allowed to mature and reproduce. Conservation laws, if adhered to, could also have a positive effect, but again, they have been enacted only recently. Although the crab, especially the blue crab, is a hardy and prolific creature, it may take years for a pattern to emerge.

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1. F. J. Prochaska and J. C. Cato, *Landings, Values, and Prices in Commercial Fisheries for the Florida West Coast* (Marine Advisory Program), pp. 41, 44.
2. George de Cergueira Leite Zarur, "Seafood Gatherers in Mullet Springs: Economic Rationality and the Social System" (Ph.D. diss., Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, 1975), p. 59.
3. Prochaska and Cato, *Landings*, p. 44.
4. According to an employee of Brown's Cedar Key Fish and Oyster Company, this late season was probably due to the unusually cold winter which he believed caused the crabs to bury themselves.
5. An interesting sidelight is that even before the law was passed limiting the taking of she-crabs to periods when they have no egg sacs, the fish houses would buy only "jimmy crabs" during the summer months (the time when the females have egg sacs) because the "jimmy crab" was fatter and much more profitable to pick. This may partially account for the passage of this conservation regulation.