# Occupational Folklife of New Jersey Harvesters

## by Rita Moonsammy

From makeshift vendor stands, grocery stores, front yards, and backs of trucks are offered the varied fruits of New Jersey harvests: "Jersey 'lopes," "Jersey tomatoes," "Muskrat meats – three pieces $1.00," "Fresh Little Necks," "Raritan Reds," and "Fresh Blues" – all products of the diverse terrain of New Jersey's Coastal Plain.

Along the bays and marshes of the Outer Coastal Plain, trappers and fishermen adjust their lives to the seasonal patterns of wildlife and schedule their days to conform with the tides. On the fertile soils and sandy loams of the Inner Coastal Plain, farmers follow occupational clocks and calendars based on moon cycles and growing seasons. Although their harvests are different, such groups who traditionally make their living off the land and water share some common features in their lives, and their folklore reflects the fact that nature is both their benefactor and their adversary.

Town names like "Bivalve" and "Vineland," and local nicknames like "Muskrat Capital of the World," reflect the natural foundations of these human institutions. When Italian-American farmers around Vineland marked property boundaries with grapevines, they created visible symbols of their relationship to their lands. When trappers along the Maurice River call themselves "mudwallopers," the reference is to the terrain of their activity.

Occupational identity however, may change with the season, when work is geared toward a different harvest. For example, along the Delaware Bay, oystermen long ago discovered that oysters spawn better in the fresher waters near the Delaware River but later grow better in the saltier Bay waters. Their season starts in May, when they dredge up seed oysters, or "oyster plants," from state-owned beds and deposit them on leased grounds in the Bay – one reason why they often call themselves "oyster planters." Through the summer, however, while they wait for their crop to grow, they may fish, farm, or work on the boats. In September, they once again become oystermen, dredging up the bivalves until January.

Similarly, the marshlands that fringe the coast offer many harvests, and, to the mudwalloper who reaps them, many occupations, but always his day is governed by the tides. Muskrat trappers trudge through the muddy meadowlands from December through March. At lowering tides, they set traps along the labyrinth of inlets that weave in and out of the "marsh bunnies'" (muskrats) houses. Come spring, trapper becomes fisherman. He "makes a drift" by letting shad gill nets flow out behind his boat as the flood tide moves up the river. In the fall, about an hour before high tide, he pushes his railbird hunter's boat into the marsh grass and reeds. Sleep is something to be caught between tasks.

During intense work seasons, Sunday necessarily becomes the only day that man's agenda supersedes nature's. When the Delaware Bay dredgeboats worked under sail, due to the work schedule, Thanksgiving had to be observed on Sunday instead of Thursday in Port Norris. At Our Lady of Pompeii Parish in Vineland, the traditional Italian saint's day celebration is held annually on the Sunday after Labor Day, rather than on the actual feast day. It becomes then a celebration of both harvest and belief.

Traditionally, "work socials" were the farmer's answer to man's need for recreation when nature required that he work. When wheat needed threshing and hogs were to be slaughtered, several families joined forces to finish a job while they enjoyed each other's company.

Route 553, Cumberland County. Muskrat fur and meat are "cash" crops for many New Jerseyans who live near wetlands.
Photo by Mary Hufford

Three generations of railbird hunter guides. Local guides push railbird hunters through Maurice River marsh in a boat type specifically constructed for plying the tall marsh grasses where the tiny rails feed.
Photo by—Rita Moonsammy

Although modern technology has drastically changed many such occupations, nature, however capricious, is still in command. The successful farmer or fisherman acquires as much knowledge as he can, both recent and traditional, weighs it against his own experience, discards what he finds useless, and develops his own approach.

Astronomy plays a vital role in planting and harvesting, and the astrological depiction of cycles in *The Farmer's Almanac* finds its way into occupational language: "When the moon shifts, and the sign is in the arm, plant limas. Beans have to come on and set, and under some signs, they'll fall off." The Italian-American maxim that peas planted on St. Giuseppe's Feast Day will flourish represents a synthesis of belief and astronomical systems.

Knowledge of the tides and the behavior of wildlife are important to trappers and fishermen: A trapper might say,

> What makes a big tide is the wind in the East and a full moon. And sometimes there's what we call a 'pogee' tide. 'Apogee,' really, but we say 'pogee.' Has to do with the moon and that sort of thing. The pogee tides don't come in very big, and they don't go out very far. They're like a lazy tide. They don't do much.

The lobsterman's technology is similarly based: the home-made lobster pot with its funnels, "kitchen," where the bait is placed, and "parlor," and the elaborate pound net for fishing are traps dependent upon traditional knowledge of how creatures respond to different stimuli.

There is an abundance of weather lore among harvesters, for a farmer can see his year's earnings washed away by torrential rains, or a fisherman can lose his life on stormy waters. Thus, while the fisherman keeps close check on marine weather forecasts, he will still take note of "sundog clouds," or scan the heavens for the "mackerel skies and mare's tails" that "make lofty ships fly low sails."

Stories of good harvests, and close calls, reflect the harvester's view of this life as one full of risks. Many stories celebrate occasions of winning a gamble through wily skill and persistence. Such is this story from a lobsterman, Bill Richardson of Keyport, New Jersey:

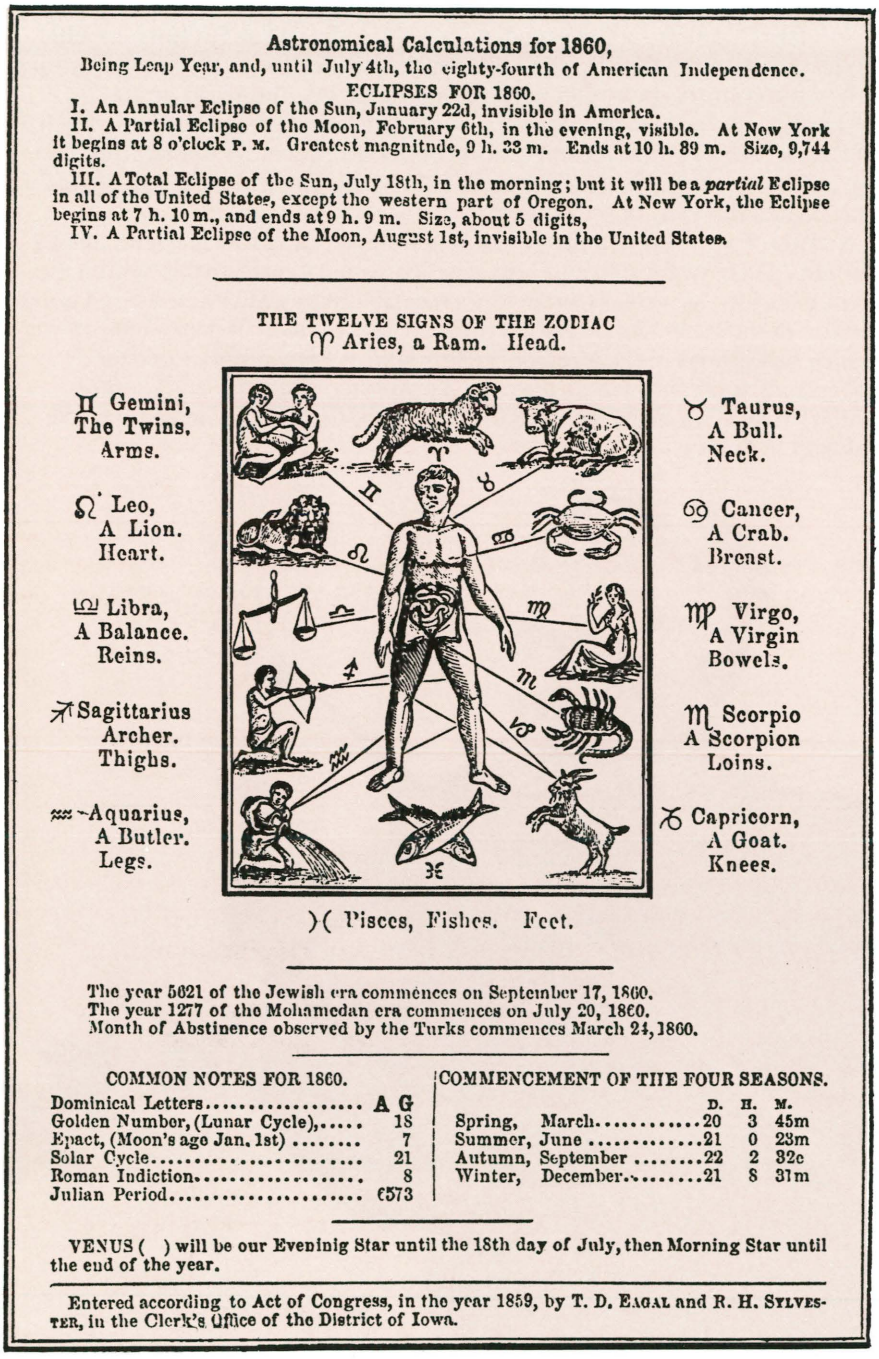
> The biggest day I ever had offshore, I went out and we had one line. And it blowed up and got late. It was supposed to be lifted like today, and we had to leave it over. So, naturally, the next morning out, you'd lift that line first. So we lifted over a barrel of lobsters in that. Then we went out to where we were going to have this day's work. And we lifted this line and had over a barrel on that!
>
> Well, then I went down on the south end, and we lifted that line and got over a barrel on that line! I said, "John, over a thousand today!" And he said to the other fellow, "Hear that, Frank? He's talking through his hat again." But I knew if the north and south were good, everything in between was, too. So, we lifted that line and grabbed the end line. Just as good! They were just as good all the way through!

"So," he said, " 'Cap, we better go. We got no more baskets, no boxes, got no nothin'. No place to put them." I said, "Don't you worry about putting them. I'll find a place to put them."

So, I got plenty of potato sacks. Hot weather, I always carry plenty of potato sacks. I had plenty of ice because I anticipated a pretty good lift that day. So I put them wet bags down and I throwed that ice down on the bottom, and I said, "We're ready now. Throw them right down in there." We got the last line, and we had them right up to the top of the engine box and the edge of the boat.

We come in and I said, "Tell me we ain't got a thousand." They said, "I doubt it, Cap. It takes a lot of lobster." And we come in, and we put out, and we had a thousand and thirty-eight pounds! And that was the biggest day I ever had.

As can be seen, in the composition of the lifestyle and lore of New Jersey harvesters, man and nature are the co-authors.



**Astronomical Calculations for 1860,**

Being Leap Year, and, until July 4th, the eighty-fourth of American Independence.

ECLIPSES FOR 1860.

I. An Annular Eclipse of the Sun, January 22d, invisible in America.

II. A Partial Eclipse of the Moon, February 6th, in the evening, visible. At New York it begins at 8 o'clock P. M. Greatest magnitude, 9 h. 33 m. Ends at 10 h. 89 m. Size, 9,744 digits.

III. A Total Eclipse of the Sun, July 18th, in the morning; but it will be a *partial* Eclipse in all of the United States, except the western part of Oregon. At New York, the Eclipse begins at 7 h. 10 m., and ends at 9 h. 9 m. Size, about 5 digits,

IV. A Partial Eclipse of the Moon, August 1st, invisible in the United States.

THE TWELVE SIGNS OF THE ZODIAC

♈ Aries, a Ram. Head.

♊ Gemini, The Twins. Arms.

♉ Taurus, A Bull. Neck.

♌ Leo, A Lion. Heart.

♋ Cancer, A Crab. Breast.

♎ Libra, A Balance. Reins.

♍ Virgo, A Virgin Bowels.

♐ Sagittarius Archer. Thighs.

♏ Scorpio A Scorpion Loins.

♒ Aquarius, A Butler. Legs.

♑ Capricorn, A Goat. Knees.

)( Pisces, Fishes. Feet.

The year 5621 of the Jewish era commences on September 17, 1860.
The year 1277 of the Mohamedan era commences on July 20, 1860.
Month of Abstinence observed by the Turks commences March 24, 1860.

COMMON NOTES FOR 1860.

| | |
|---|---|
| Dominical Letters | A G |
| Golden Number, (Lunar Cycle) | 18 |
| Epact, (Moon's age Jan. 1st) | 7 |
| Solar Cycle | 21 |
| Roman Indiction | 8 |
| Julian Period | 6573 |

COMMENCEMENT OF THE FOUR SEASONS.

| | D. | H. | M. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Spring, March | 20 | 3 | 45m |
| Summer, June | 21 | 0 | 23m |
| Autumn, September | 22 | 2 | 32e |
| Winter, December | 21 | 8 | 31m |

VENUS ( ) will be our Evening Star until the 18th day of July, then Morning Star until the end of the year.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1859, by T. D. EAGAL and R. H. SYLVESTER, in the Clerk's Office of the District of Iowa.

A depiction of the zodiac from the 19th century farmer's almanac. The phases of the moon as well as the moon's place in the zodiac have long been used as a guide for planting crops.
Photo Courtesy of 19th century Farmer's Almanac

*Rita Moonsammy is Folk Arts Coordinator at the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. She conducted fieldwork in the Delaware Bay Region for the National Endowment for the Arts/New Jersey State Council on the Arts Folk Artists-in-Education Program.*

*Suggested reading*

Federal Writers' Project. *Stories of New Jersey: Its Significant Places, People, and Activities.* New York: M. Barrows and Company, 1938.

Rolfs, Donald H. *Under Sail: The Dredgeboats of Delaware Bay.* Millville: The Wheaton Historical Association, 1971.

Schmidt, Hubert G. *Agriculture in New Jersey: A Three-Hundred Year History.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1973.

Weygandt, Cornelius. *Down Jersey: Folks and Their Jobs, Pine Barrens, Salt Marsh and Sea Islands.* New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1940.