

by Hank Foglino

*continued from page 13*

those men who risked their lives.

It was difficult to maintain friendly relations with the original inhabitants. The Merokes did not know about “keep off” signs. They had lived unencumbered by boundaries and rules, taking what they needed from nature’s larder. The early settlers purchased some of the land from the Indians, but the contracts were so vague that, for example, the Indians thought this was just a down-payment and more was to follow. To the settlers it was payment in full. The Meroke’s evolution progressed from friendly to helpful, then to misunderstanding, fighting, defeat and near slavery. A writer at the time noted that “The South Side Indians are too worthless to live, but not bad enough to hang”.

In 1853 the 600 inhabitants elected to name the village Freeport. At the time merchant seamen could avoid the dock fees charged in New York and Sag Harbor by sailing through Jones Inlet and unloading in Raynortown. The ships’ captains began calling it Free Port. This was merged into Freeport.

The oyster industry began to thrive shortly after the Civil War. In 1901 a shellfish harvest of more than 3.5 million bushels, mostly oysters, was recorded. A combination of factors brought the industry to an end. Brooklyn’s mushrooming water requirements necessitated the pumping of water from Nassau County. The reduced flow of water into Freeport’s



*Wreck of the Mexico*

waterways dried up some of them. This drastically diminished the supply of fresh water-carrying microscopic nourishment required by the shellfish. Later, sand dredged to build the Wantagh Expressway spilled into the waterways, smothering the oysters and negating any future use of the beds. Finally, the ever-increasing population and ensuing pollution put an end to the oyster industry.

Being very “boat friendly,” Freeport was a major rum running center during prohibition. Rumrunners went in and out with their cargoes and were often chased by the Coast Guard. Both organizations purchased their boats from the Freeport Point Shipyard, founded by Fred and Mirto Scopinich just after World War I. The shipyard moved to East Quogue in the 1960s. Freeporter Al Grover’s family started with a marina and a dealer-

ship in the 1950s. The family built fishing skiffs from the 1970s to about 1990. In 1985, Al Grover and his sons took one of their 26-footers from Nova Scotia to Portugal, marking the first outboard motor crossing of the Atlantic Ocean

Hydroplane racing was a passion of one of Freeport’s inhabitants, Guy Lombardo. Originally from Canada, he migrated to the United States and became a famous band leader. The band played at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City from 1929 to 1959 and their New Year’s Eve broadcast (which continued at the Waldorf Astoria) lasted until 1976. He began racing hydroplanes in 1940, and four years later he won the Red Bank Sweepstakes and the Gold Cup with his 450 hp *Tempo VI*. In 1948, while attempting to recapture the Gold Cup on the Detroit River, his boat overturned while trying to avoid a disabled boat in front of him. The crash resulted in a broken arm. He gave up racing in 1954. In his later years, Guy moved to Freeport, bring *Tempo VI* with him. He invested in a seafood restaurant, which eventually became Guy Lombardo’s East Point House.

So, if you are fond of good boats, fishing and good seafood, look no farther than Freeport, Long Island, New York.

*(I’d like to thank the Freeport Historical Society for their assistance and cooperation in researching this article.)*