

Belgium

Continued From Page 12

bottom, and there are no jetties as obstacles.

Now one-half hour before actually riding their horses into the water, the fishermen drive down Oostduinkerke's Avenue Leopold II (perpendicular to the shore), each perched on his wagon, led by his fishing horse. (Before 1960, fishermen rode down to the beach astride their animals, not in carts.)

Famous for their enormous strength, Brabant and Hainaut horses are used to draw the nets through the resistant water, over the sand's bumpy surface. A horse is first trained for fishing at the age of 4, and he is retired from fishing when he is 8 or 9 years old. The salt mist is pervasive, and even before the horses reach the beach, their shaggy hoofs are heavily beaded with this corrosive humidity. The fishermen of Oostduinkerke continue to plunge into the sea as a passionate hobby. Among them, shrimp fishing is much more than a pastime, more than an income supplement. (They all are retired or have full-time jobs elsewhere.) Eddy D'Hulster, a fisherman, explained: "I fish as long as there is a shrimp in the water. Fishing is in my blood."

At the end of Avenue Leopold II, the fishermen — there are seven regulars — drive their wagons across the sidewalk and boardwalk, across the dry beach and across about 30 yards of shallow water, up to a sand bar where they unhitch their horses and park their wagons. Children who have scrambled on board the wagons for a jostling ride wade waist-deep into the sea. Although in publicity photos the fishermen often sport sou'wester hats, year round they usually only wear simple knitted navy or brown sock-type wool caps. Each fisherman straddles his horse on a special triangular wooden saddle that hugs the horse's back, protected, under the saddle with a small oriental rug. A basket is hung from each side of the horse.

The last wooden saddle artisan, named Borgonie, died just after World War II. Now, like Eddy D'Hulster, most fishermen use an inherited saddle. A leather saddle would be quickly eaten away by repeated submersion in the salt water. Each halter is also made of wood, lovingly lined with straw to protect the horse's flesh. The net pulled by the horses has holes at least a half-inch big — to be sporting, but also to keep from pulling in too much weight at a time. When a horse is in full stride, he is in the water up to the top of his legs, with belly submerged, and almost all of the tail well under the waves. From either side of him, a rope drags back, attached to wooden planks that hold the mouth of the net open, like a V. As the horse walks forward, the sea pushes against the planks, and the net naturally opens. The fishermen ride their wading horses back and forth parallel to the shoreline. The seagulls that circle in gluttonous admiration above the booty of shrimp accumulating in the nets are merely an amusing annoyance and seldom descend. But surfboards with sails are a menace to these equestrian fishermen; Roland Vanbillemont told how horrible it was to have three such wind-surfers

knock him and his horse down into the water.

Each fisherman periodically interrupts his dragging to empty his nets into the baskets slung over his horse. Earlier in this century, boys with mules would be hired to take these baskets home, where the shrimp would be boiled and cleaned as quickly as possible. Since the first shrimp to reach the fish market would fetch the highest prices, each fisherman wanted his catch to be en route even before he got home.

It is said that gray shrimp taste best with the lingering flavor of seaweed and sea saltwater, when eaten still warm after just having been boiled. Salt is added to cold water, which is brought up to a boil.

At Oostduinkerke's National Fishery Museum (filled with models of old-fashioned clipper ships and modern high-tech fishing rigs), Marcel Vermoote, a retired fisherman, explained, referring to beer, that "although the fishermen are buddies between the pints, they are rivals on the beach."

Into the fog these cantankerous fishermen plunge, and partly from the wet depths of their imaginations, some tall tales are born. The number of pounds caught might get increased between the weighing and the boiling — and most often in the telling.

But some hefty adventures really have befallen these men of the sea. Henri Durant recalled that he was once lost in the fog. While trying to follow a bell and siren that are usually sounded to give boats and fishermen a clear landmark on a fog-shrouded shore, he got farther from the beach, so that his horse was sometimes swimming with him astride. Since objects tend to look bigger in a fog, his wagon, waiting on a nearby sandbar, looked like a boat. But after six hours, he was finally able to clamber back onto the beach.

VISITORS to Oostduinkerke can enjoy the local shrimp at take-out stands along the main street and the boardwalk: one-fifth of a pound for \$2.50.

Outside of Oostduinkerke, Belgium is chockablock with good seafood restaurants. One also boast excellent gray shrimp from the North Sea. In Brussels, Place Ste.-Catherine (near the Bourse) is a fish market edged in many diminutive good fish restaurants. Near Place Ste.-Catherine, the Méditerranée (44 Rue des Char-treux) serves excellent gray shrimp at an astonishingly good quality-price ratio. Not far from Brussels' Grand-Place, the "Ilot Sacré" is a network of restored 17th-century alleys and cobblestone back streets also well known for good seafood restaurants. Here, Scheltema (7 Rue des Dominicains), adorned with art nouveau cut glass and sinewy brasswork, serves up exquisite fish and seafood, although a tad costly.

In Oostduinkerke, on the next to last weekend of each June, a small-scale shrimp festival has been held since 1949 with shrimp fishing contests for adults on horseback and for children who drag nets on foot. Little dramatic pageants about the sea round out the thoroughly marine atmosphere, and a shrimp parade closes the afternoon. ■