

ROCK POINT OYSTER CO, INC. By David Steele

Rock Point Oyster Company originated through the purchase of the Pearl Oyster Company by E.N. Steele and John Barnes in 1922. The previous owners raised Olympia oysters and brought in and planted eastern oysters and held them on their beds, selling them in the shell. At the same time, they had been experimenting with growing an oyster from Japan which had not previously been grown in Washington successfully. Rock Point holdings also included tidelands acquired c. 1905 in south Puget Sound on Oyster Bay, originally used for Olympia oyster culture.

By 1924, when proven that the Japanese oyster could be grown here, seed was commercially imported and planted on the beds in Samish Bay. At that time, there were holdings of about 600 acres in Samish Bay and were the sole importer of Japanese seed for the first six years. In 1928, the business was incorporated as the Rock Point Oyster Company, Inc., and markets were being expanded into California in the early 1930's. After East Coast oysters were found to be polluted in several market areas, the U.S. Public Health Service adopted a cooperative certification program with state health agencies. This resulted in Rock Point Oyster Company becoming certified as Washington Certificate Number 1.

In 1929, E.N. Steele wrote "The Rock Point Oyster Co., Inc. has given the trade name to their product of "Rock Point Oysters". They have adopted a trade mark showing an oyster shell laying up against a vast rock point which projects into the waters of Samish Bay, and the waves dashing against the rocks give it the breath of the sea, while the life-buoy and the rope surrounding this picture give it the significance of meaning a large, fresh, native grown oyster, to supply the people of the west coast with an oyster grown at home rather than one that has been shipped some three thousand miles from the far eastern states. Thus another industry has been started and developed in the west, and the west made less dependent upon eastern resources."



By the late 1930's, production had reached a high of 70,000 gallons, but market prices were at a very low point. The production at that time had shifted in a large part to an additional 200 plus acres acquired on the West side of Samish Bay.

When war broke out in 1941 seed was no longer available from Japan. Oysters were then transplanted from Hood Canal and Dabob Bay, where some natural settings of seed had occurred. E. N. Steele purchased 200 acres of tidelands in Tarboo Bay (at the head of Dabob Bay) on June 22, 1943. After the war, Richard Steele managed the operations in Samish and Tarboo Bays until 2007. The Samish Bay farm was expanded to approximately 1,300 acres and subsequently sold to Taylor United c. 1993. Currently, Rock Point Oyster Company still owns the Tarboo Bay farm, which is co-managed by Earl and David Steele. Production is mostly ground culture from natural set Pacific oysters (shellstock and transplant) and manila clams with some additional remote setting of pacific oyster seed.

E. N. Steele was an early Olympia oyster farmer on Oyster Bay property acquired c. 1905 through a trade for legal services he provided. He was one of the original organizers of the Olympia Oyster Growers Association, formed 9/22/1905 and was Secretary for over 35 years. E.N., as he was known by many, also authored a book titled “The Rise and Decline of the Olympia Oyster”. He was present during the decision to form another organization based around the Japanese oyster in August 1930. The North Pacific Oyster Growers Association was formed to assist in marketing overproduction from a young industry. The Japanese oyster was renamed the Pacific oyster and a variety of marketing efforts undertaken. The organization changed names in 1935 to the Pacific Coast Oyster Growers Association, which later incorporated in 1948. E. N. Steele was president of that organization from 1933-1945.



Tarboo Bay farm

The 2nd generation: Richard Steele also worked very hard on solving many of the industry problems over the years, including marketing, early seed production modernization, and pulp mill pollution reduction. He was on the PCOGA board for many years and also served as president. His sisters, Margaret Ervest owns Salty Dog Seafood, Inc. and Bonnie Lindsay owns Kitterman Clam and Oyster Company. Their current holdings encompass the original Rock Point Oyster Company property on Oyster Bay.

The 3rd generation: David and Earl Steele currently manage the Tarboo Bay farm. David has been on the PCSGA board since 2007 and is the current President. The 4th generation, comprised of April Hamilton, Lee Steele and Emmett Steele are Rock Point Oyster Company board members.

David is a Professional Land Surveyor and worked for the Dept. of Natural Resources from 1974-2011. During that time, he surveyed thousands of acres across the state and later worked as the State Surveyor in Olympia. At the same time, he was a Rock Point Oyster Company board member and active in company issues, such as the Tribal shellfish litigation. In 2007, he became fully engaged in co-management of the corporation and felt it important to contribute time to the PCSGA and to avoid being a free-rider as was once described by E. N. Steele in his book, “The Immigrant (Pacific) Oyster”. This is a problem in our organization now; as it was many decades ago and David wanted to contribute, much as his family had in the past.