

20,000 CARLOADS OF FISH SHIPPED BY OKEECHOBEE

This Year's Catches Netted
Four Houses There
\$600,000.

A COMING SECTION

One-Time Everglades Now
Thriving Industrial
Center.

BY GEORGE L. BRADLEY,

News Editor of The Herald.

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OKEECHOBEE, May 26.—A very few years ago this section of the state was part of a vast neglected empire of swampland of no use to man whatever. Conquered now and harnessed, thousands of acres of it are under cultivation; industries are springing up and before many more years it promises to be serving the whole country with foodstuffs. The same persistent spirit that has been responsible for the rapid development and building up of other parts of Florida is deeply rooted here among its people, and their progress cannot be impeded.

Headquarters for Region.

The country surrounding Okeechobee and the lake is alive with those who have realized and demonstrated the possibilities that lie here. This city, at the upper end of Lake Okeechobee, is the natural headquarters for the region. It is the shipping point of a great fishing industry that supplies the inland now with five to six million pounds of fish a year. Four large ranches on which 50,000 head of cattle and 4,000 sheep are grazing are located to the north and west. Down the southeastern shore of the lake in the Pahokee region there are truck farms that raise everything from beans to bananas and ship from Montreal to California. Then, to the north and east of here, there are three large turpentine camps that ship turpentine and rosin by the carload.

Just one thing stands in the way of unlimited development right now—the need of better transportation—and it is believed that this will be overcome shortly. The most urgent need is for a railroad that will penetrate the heart of this area, and the proposed Miami-Okeechobee branch will fill that want.

The Fish "Got Wise."

The extent of the fishing industry is indeed amazing. During the season that closed May 1 more than 20,000 carloads of catfish were shipped. The reason there were not 30,000 carloads was because more fish refused to be caught. So the fishermen called it only an ordinary season. The demand was there and so were the fish, but capturing them was another thing. Some of the fishermen will tell you that fish have almost human intelligence; that when they see a seine they hit straight for the rock reefs, where there's no catching them. Others say they scoot for the grass or hide in the canals. In fact, there are a score of reasons why more fish weren't hauled out of the lake this year, and the main one is that they just didn't land in the nets. Cats are the principal food fish taken. A few bass, bream and croppie get mixed up in every boat load, and so they are dressed, simply because they were unfortunate enough to get tangled up with the regular prey.

Four Fisheries in City.

Four fish houses operate in Okeechobee. They are: the United Fisheries, a local concern, of which B. A. Howard is president, and C. R. Booth secretary and treasurer and general manager; the Everglades, also local, of which J. B. Bird is president and manager, and in which J. H. and E. O. Upthegrove are interested; Booth's, a national house, which operates in other parts of the country; and the Standard, also with a number of other houses.

This year's fish crop, it is estimated, was worth \$600,000 to the dealers. For the catching the fishermen received between \$350,000 and \$400,000.

There are about 500 fishermen working Lake Okeechobee, and they require

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about as many boats. The men live in houseboats along the shore of the lake allotted to them by the companies. Each houseboat is assigned to one man, who gathers his own crew of fishermen to work for him, usually four besides himself. Seines a thousand yards long with a four-inch mesh are used. Some of the independent ones fish with trot lines to which are attached hundreds of hooks baited with shad chopped up into small pieces. They regularly make large hauls. Lake Okeechobee is 65 miles long by 45 miles wide, and the whole of it is worked during the eight-month season—September to May. The other four months, while the fish are spawning, is the closed season by law.

Big Catches Are Made.

The lake is shallow, but is so large that the boats disappear from sight on it. In stormy weather it becomes exceedingly choppy, and a foreboding wind or an ugly sky sends the men scurrying to shore, for a stiff gale occasionally tips over a boat or two far out.

It is not every day that a boat returns with a bottom full of fish. Large hauls are considered fishermen's luck, and there may not be more than one or two by each crew in one season, but a couple of them put the men on easy street for awhile. One of these big catches may be from 15,000 to 25,000 pounds a haul. The record catch in a seine is 33,000 pounds. Probably a season's record is 135,000 pounds, which was turned in by one fisherman.

The pay of a fisherman is five cents a pound to the crew, or a cent a man where there are five. At the fish houses the boss fisherman receives seven cents, and out of his two cents profit over all (he also sets aside one cent a pound of the five cents paid the crew) he pays for his net, which he buys from the fish house for around \$600, the gasoline and oil and the maintenance of the boats given him. In a good season a fisherman will make on an average \$200, with the boss running as high sometimes as \$300 a month.

Practically the only two points of shipment from Okeechobee are St. Louis and Kansas City. Ice-packed barrels go out by the carload by freight and smaller shipments by express. The shipments are quickly handled and go through inside a week.