

The Story of the Fried Clam

Ninety years ago on July 3rd, 1916, Lawrence "Chubby" Woodman, at the humorous suggestion of a friend, fried up a few clams at his roadside stand in Essex, Massachusetts and this is the rest of the story!



In 1914 Chubby and his wife Bessie opened a small concession stand on Main Street in Essex. On weekends they sold small grocery items, homemade potato chips, and fresh clams that "Chubby" dug himself. At first business was slow but on July 3, 1916 things began to change.

It was on that day in 1916 that a local fisherman named Tarr - his first name long forgotten - was visiting the stand and "Chubby" complained that, "Business was slower than a couple of snails headed uphill." Tarr, while nibbling on some of the tasty home made potato chips - noticed a bucket of clams nearby, pointed at them and jokingly said - "Why don't you fry up some of your clams? If they're as tasty as those potato chips of yours, you'll never have to worry about having enough customers."

Tarr's comment was rewarded with cold stares from two other customers. "That's ridiculous!" said one. The other one remarked,

"Clams have shells." The poor fisherman muttered, "I wasn't serious, it was just a little joke. I know you can't fry clams like chips!"

However, when the three patrons left, "Chubby" and Bessie started to think. What if we did fry up some of the clams and sold them? If by chance they tasted good then "Chubby" would have created a way to increase the demand for his own-shucked clams. "Let's try it," Bessie said as she tossed a slab of lard into the fry pot normally used to make potato chips. So they shucked some clams out of the shell, experimented with different batters and called over some locals to give them a taste. When the overall verdict was "delicious!" they knew they were on to something big. The next day, during the 4th of July parade, "Chubby" and Bessie presented the first fried clam to the citizens of Essex and the Yankee appetite has never been the same since!

A year after the Woodmans experiment a Boston fish market advertised that it was "now equipped to serve the new taste treat - fried clams." And Howard Johnson - owner of a chain of restaurants that at one time had 100 spots across the East Coast - came himself to learn how to fry clams from "Chubby".

On the backside of their wedding certificate, Lawrence and Bessie wrote what they considered to be important family events. The first two lines were the birthdates of their two oldest sons, Wilbur and Henry. The third line was the other important birth date in the family. It read: "We fried the first fried clam - in the town of Essex, July 3, 1916."

Ninety years and five generations later clams are still frying at Woodman's, where it all began.



1916-2006
90 years and still frying

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