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## New DVD Celebrates Harwich's Thompson's Clam Bar

### Hey, Where Ya Going?

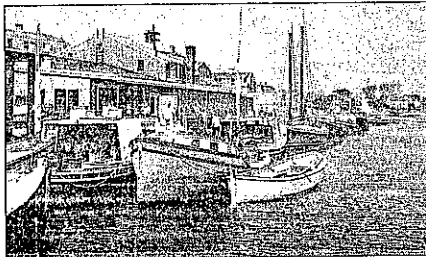
by Alan Pollock

HARWICH PORT — "I'm going to Thompson's Clam Bar, 'cause that's where the tastiest clams are."

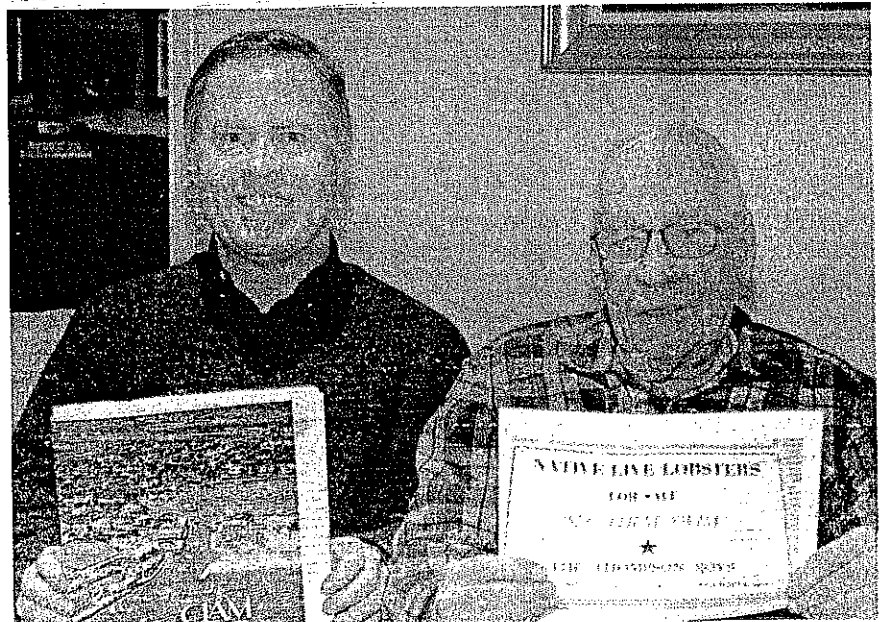
Unless you're relatively new to the Cape, that radio jingle will ring a bell, and maybe conjure up a little nostalgia. It's amazing how many people get wistful remembering the Clam Bar, and it's not because of the oft-repeated radio ads. It's because over 40 years, tens of thousands of employees and endless throngs of patrons passed through the restaurant.

Converted to a private club in the mid-'90s, the Clam Bar is now part of the town's history, but thanks to the efforts of some enthusiastic former employees, that history is coming to life. John Foster of South Harwich, who worked there from 1977 to 1979, has created the website [www.clambarreunion.com](http://www.clambarreunion.com), a message board for fans of the restaurant. Most recently, he's compiled a DVD of home movies and still photos of Thompson's Clam Bar, and is selling copies to raise money for the Harwich Historical Society.

John's connection to Thompson's Clam Bar came from his father, John "King" Foster, who was the restaurant's



The Thompson brothers' dock in 1947, a few years before they opened the Clam Bar. COURTESY BAIRD EATON



John Foster (left) and his father, "King" Foster, both worked at Thompson's Clam Bar. ALAN POLLOCK PHOTO

first clam shucker in 1950. Thompson's dock was originally a place to park cars for the nearby Snow Inn, later a fuel dock and a fish packing house. The Thompsons began by selling chowder and littlenecks, "very low-effort stuff," King recalled. Demand for the fresh seafood was unbelievable. "That's when the Thompsons realized they were sitting on a gold mine," King said.

The food was always very fresh. Lobsters were rushed

in from Plymouth in an open truck, and the owners had made a pact with the state police allowing the driver to tear up the highway at 70 miles an hour with its important cargo, John said. "The management of the Clam Bar has always been a colorful lot," he said. It wasn't long before Thompson's Clam Bar became the largest seasonal restaurant east of the Mississippi, with traffic lined up all

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the way to Route 28. The huge kitchen cranked out 2,000 meals on some peak summer days. "The scene would be pure chaos," John said.

"The food was great," King said. The seafood was perfectly fresh and the vegetables were grown in Thompson's Field, where the restaurant also had a dormitory for its employees. The menu was affordable for families and the ambiance was the best anywhere: diners sat literally inches from the Wychmere Harbor channel. "You could watch the boats go back and forth," King said. Sometimes it was a little too close to the water.

"Inevitably as you worked your shift, there would be a loud splash," John said with a laugh. But when patrons fell in the harbor, they were in very good hands: many of the employees were also lifeguards, and there was a standing rule that any employee who rescued a patron would get the night off with pay. Consequently, two or three workers usually jumped in to make the save, John said. Patrons sometimes waited an hour and a half for a table, and spent the time drinking cocktails on empty stomachs. "That may have had something to do with people falling into the channel," he quipped.

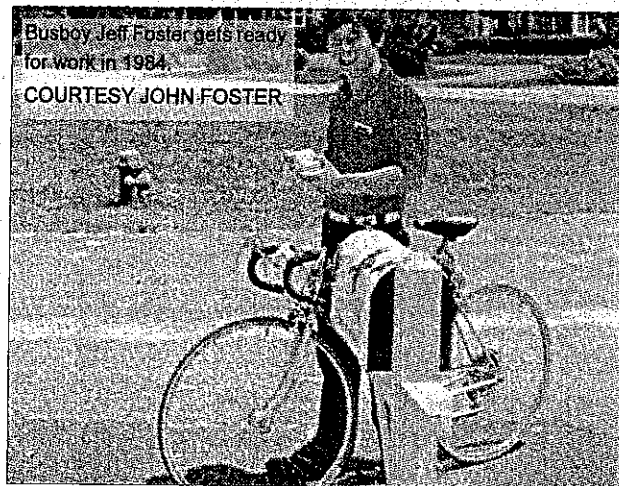
If patrons were having fun, it couldn't compare with the fun had by most of the workers. Despite the hard work and "Dickensian working conditions," John said, the staff played hard and partied regularly. The end-of-the-season parties for Clam Bar employees were notoriously raucous. In 1977, more than 200 people came to the party at Thompson's Field, where there was plenty of drinking and a "flat-out brawl" with police, John recalled. Officers arrested a handful of workers. "We all made these T-shirts, 'Free the Clam Bar Five,'" he quipped.

Actually, John's first experience at the Clam Bar wasn't as an employee. His father bet him and a handful of

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his teenage friends that, for \$5, they wouldn't jump naked from the Clam Bar roof at noontime on a busy day. Suffice it to say that King lost money that day.



and a number of startled patrons had a memorable luncheon show.

Nostalgia among Clam Bar employees runs deep. In his career, John ended up as a representative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce stationed in Istanbul, Turkey, and even there he came across a handful of people who knew about Thompson's Clam Bar, including the U.S. consul there. Among the Clam Bar alumni are college professors, a former Clinton administration official, an Alaska Supreme Court justice and many other professionals. With an estimated 125 wait staff, up to 75 people in the kitchen and all of the other employees, over decades of operation, the number of Clam Bar alums is "easily in the tens of thousands," King said. And many pine for their summers at the Clam Bar.

"They were the summers of their lives," King said. "Even in my case, and that was 50 years ago."

John said he's hoping to put together a reunion for former employees, possibly at the Clam Bar. He admits that he'd love to see the restaurant open to the public again, but in the meantime he'd be satisfied to come together with old friends there. As for the club's new owner, "I would like to show them all the fun we had," John said.

The Thompson's Clam Bar DVD features home movie footage shot by former employee John Quincy. It is available for \$20 at the Harwich Historical Society. For information, to see photos and to hear the famous Clam Bar jingle, visit [www.clambarreunion.com](http://www.clambarreunion.com).