GONE TO THE PROM-ISED LAND

A LOST WORLD ONCE EXISTED IN AMAGANSETT, A COLORFUL, CLAMORING COMMUNITY BUILT ON THE HIGH-STAKES SEAFARING PURSUIT OF MENHADEN (OR BUNKER). GLYN VINCENT CHASES GHOSTS AT THE OLD PROMISED LAND FISH FACTORY, TO UNEARTH THE VERY RELEVANT STORY OF THE DISAPPEARANCE—AND RESURRECTION RECENTLY—OF "THE MOST IMPORTANT FISH IN THE SEA."

Last summer, in August, I got a text from a neighbor, Pamela Morgan, who was on the beach in Amagansett with her family for the afternoon. A humpback whale, she wrote, was breaching right off shore. Her grandchildren and scores of beachgoers stood at the water's edge pointing and cheering. Dolphins were also spotted in the area, as well as schools of frenzied bluefish, striped bass, and the odd shark, too. All converged for several weeks close to Long Island's southern shoreline to feast on dense schools of swirling bait fish, called menhaden. "It was amazing. I'd never seen anything like it," Morgan later told me.

Conservationists and scientists like William Wise, director of New York Sea Grant at Stony Brook University, are cheering the resurgence of menhaden because of the vital role they play in the marine ecosystem. "The list of things in the sea that eat menhaden is a long one," he said. "They are a principal species in the overall structure and function of the coastal food web." Some marine ecologists have even dubbed menhaden "the most important fish in the sea."

Menhaden, commonly called bunker by fishermen, are by weight the number-one commercial fishery in the continental U.S. Despite that, this small, bony fish—never seen on a restaurant menu—is hardly known to the public. Anybody who has been to Sag Harbor or Mystic knows about the historic importance of whaling, but mention menhaden and most people draw a blank. Almost no one, other than fishermen, realizes that the menhaden industry was and still is, indirectly, a major force in the East End economy.

Bruce Collins, who is 87, is one of the few who remember the heyday of the Smith Meal fish factory, the last of many menhaden reduction plants at Promised Land, on the eastern end of Amagansett. Promised Land was an important industry hub, which, at its height in the early 1950s, supplied almost half the menhaden catch on the East Coast. "It was a big, big operation. Huge buildings, water tanks, steamers, and all kinds of stuff," Collins says. "They had a lot of people working there."

Collins was a harbor pilot from 1954 to 1960 for Captain Jack Edwards aboard the 150-foot bunker steamer Shinnecock. He was one of hundreds of men who crewed the fleet of bunker boats that brought in millions of fish a day—that is, until the fish ran out and the factory closed in 1968.

Today, Promised Land on the shores of Gardiner's Bay is a kind of natural monument to the menhaden industry's tumultuous history on the East End of Long Island and the leather-faced sea captains and maverick entrepreneurs who made it happen. It's also a reminder of the economic, social, and environmental disruption caused by the fish's repeated disappearances. Were these absences part of a natural cycle or did the industry, as some insiders have said, run itself into the ground?

PIERS THAT MARCHED INTO THE SEA HAVE BEEN REDUCED TO RUST-LACED STUMPS IN THE SAND; BRICK CHIMNEYS RISE IN A MEADOW; AND, BARELY ERECT, IS A DILAPIDATED CLAPBOARD BARRACK THAT ONCE HOUSE SEASONAL LABORERS WHO ARRIVED FROM AS FAR NORTH AS NOVA SCOTIA AND SOUTH AS GEORGIA

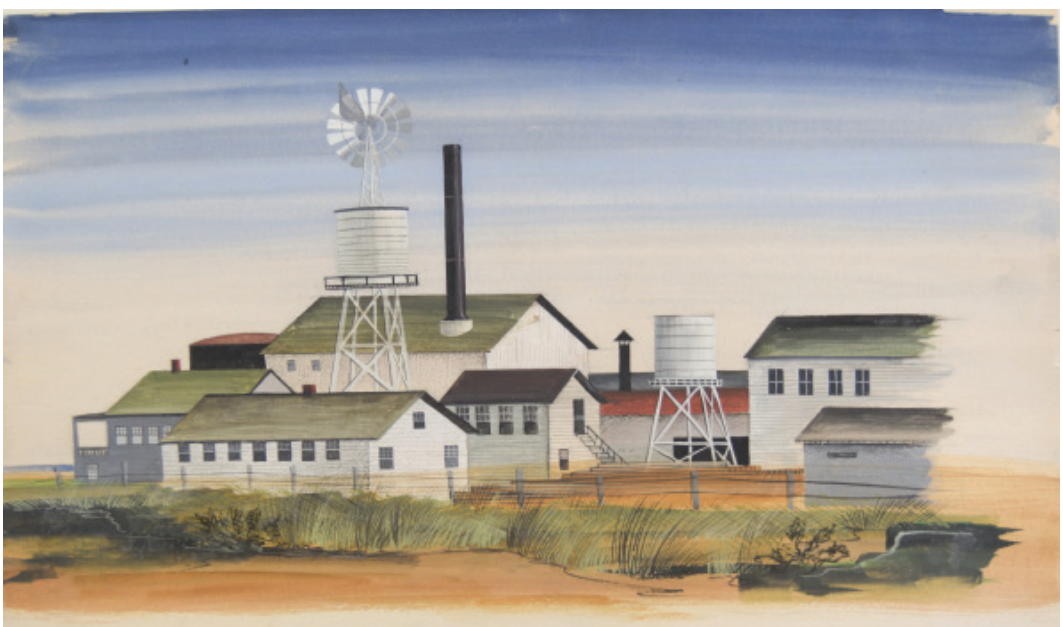
Scattered across a plain of bleached beach grass and lonely cedar trees are remains of the dozen factories and "potworks" going back to menhaden enterprises begun in the mid-19th century. Piers that once marched hundreds of feet into the sea have been reduced to rust-laced stumps in the sand; brick chimneys rise in a meadow; warehouses stand vacant; and, barely erect, is a dilapidated clapboard barrack that once housed the seasonal laborers who arrived from as far north as Nova Scotia and south as Georgia.

A menhaden is a 12- to 15-inch-long, oily fish of the herring family—with a distinguishing beauty mark on its cheek and an alluring brassy luster underwater. It swims with its toothless mouth wide-open, inhaling phytoplankton through raked gills like a dwarf whale. Only it does so in immense, twirling schools of hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions. These tinselly clouds of bunker, filtering water of algae, are important forage for many larger fish: striped bass, bluefish, cod, tuna, and swordfish, as well as cetaceans and birds. That's one reason why the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission felt menhaden needed to be protected and, in 2012, instituted a cap on the commercial harvest of the fish.

The name, menhaden, comes from Native Americans who taught the Pilgrims how to use the fish to fertilize their cornfields. Ever since, menhaden has been used by Americans to make something, from machine oil to chicken feed to omega-3 supplements—developing into a widespread industrial enterprise that has had a greater impact on the American economy than the more glorified and ballyhooed whaling business ever did. The demise of the whales, in fact, precipitated a commercial interest in menhaden.

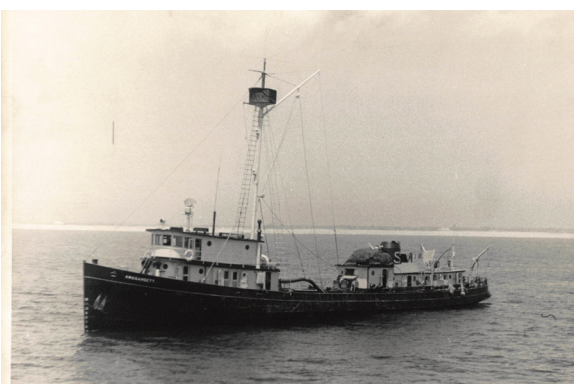
In the late 1860s, seafaring captains including Joshua B. Edwards of Amagansett and George F. Tuthill of Greenport faced a dilemma. They had been aboard ships since they were teenage boys, traveling for years at time, but they were no longer young and, furthermore, the whaling business, centered in the port of Sag Harbor, was dying.

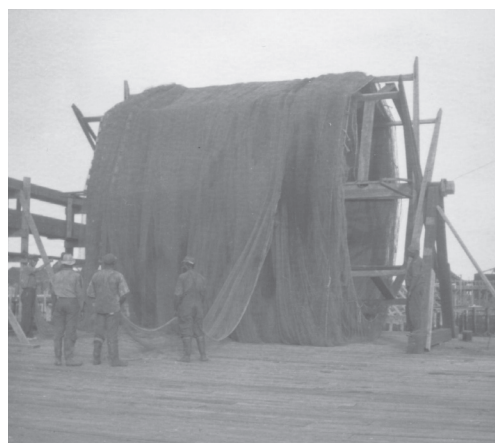
Captain Edwards, married late in



Clockwise from top: *An osprey makes a meal of menhaden; Dennis Jacobsen/Shutterstock. Smith Meal was the last proprietor of the fish factory, which is seen in ruins a 1986 aerial shot by Louise Edwards; East Hampton Star archive. The bunker fishery relied on crewmen from Virginia (left) and Georgia, many whom were migrant workers who followed the fish up and down the coast; Life magazine, 19tk. A 1940s watercolor view of the factory by the late Mabel D'Amico. A selection of her paintings is on display in "Promised Land Remembered" at the Victor D'Amico Institute of Art's Barge Gallery in Napeague. The exhibit runs through June 23.* Previous spread: *Captain E.J. Edwards and his crew with a prize haul, 1920s; East Hampton Star archive.*

The human flow swelled and disappeared in rhythm with the fish stocks. Clockwise from right: *Small houses and barracks fell into ruin after the factory closed for good in 1968; Glynn Vincent photo. Bruce Collins, who recalls well his days on the bunker steamers, getting married; East Hampton Star archive. Hands on the sein—the Northern Neck Chantey Singers, in Virginia, have preserved the old fish-hauling chanteys; Peter Hedlund. A giant sein reel, 1930; from the Montauk Library's Carlton Kelsey Collection. Captain Jack Edwards, in 1979, and the steamer Amagansett, 1920s; East Hampton Star archive.* Center: *Howard Wood—who grew up at Promised Land, became a hoops star, and remains one of East Hampton's most famous sons—with a young cousin in 1993; East Hampton Star archive.*





life, was intent on staying close to his growing family and remaining self-reliant. He passed on his salty grit to his four sons and enlisted his brothers as crew when he gave up the deep-sea whale hunt and went back to harpooning whales from small oar-driven boats launched into the surf off Amagansett. But whales off the beach, plentiful in his youth, were, by that time, scarce.

Tuthill, endowed with a good business sense and with his own family to care for, made the easier switch to the new, thriving enterprise of menhaden reduction—the cooking and pressing of menhaden to extract oil.

For decades, Long Island farmers had used haul seines (weighted nets) to pull out schools of bunker from the shallow water off the beach and, after drying the fish, use them to fertilize their fields. It was a small-scale seasonal operation involving family and neighboring farmers. But the growing industrial demand for fish oil and the invention of a new net, called a purse seine, enabled larger schools of bunker to be caught in deeper water from fishing boats, leading to an entirely other scale of enterprise—with its own problems. The stench of the hundreds of thousands of fish that Tuthill and others were catching and boiling for oil in "pot-works" (cast-iron kettles, or try pots, originally used to render whale blubber) on the shores of Shelter Island had the nascent summer resort community there up in arms. Most pot-works on Shelter island, and along the Peconic, were chased away.

In 1877, Tuthill found himself with a few other captains and businessmen surveying a deserted, mosquito-plagued western corner of Napeague; the Edwards family owned land there. Steps from Gardiner's Bay, they mapped out their futures in a place someone named Promised Land. There are several stories about the name's origination, but according to E.L. Sherrill, III, a merchant marine who wrote about the era, it was Tuthill who, at the suggestion of a workman, first came up with the name and had it written in chalk over the factory door. Regardless who did, the stories share a common idea: the promise of plenty, plenty of fish, jobs, and money.

The area was ideal. It was miles away from the summer colony, and the water on the eastern rim of the bay, often teeming with menhaden, was deep enough for dockage. Smith, Tuthill, Hiram R. Dixon, and others financed and built the first large processing factories, while Captain Edwards and, later, his sons skippered many of the sailing sloops, schooners, and new steamers used to harvest the fish. It wasn't as glorious as whaling, but in a good season a bunker steamer captain could pocket a few thousand dollars.

BY THE 1880S, MORE THAN 400 BUNKER BOATS, AT LEAST TWO TIMES THE SIZE OF THE WHALING FLEET, CRUISED THE COAST BEACHES SCOOPING UP TENS OF MILLIONS OF POUNDS OF FISH. THE ENTREPRENEURS WHO MADE FORTUNES FROM MENHADEN WERE DESCRIBED IN THE PRESS AS A NEW "BONY-FISH ARISTOCRACY"

The start of Promised Land's menhaden industry was auspicious. By 1882, a local historian named William S. Pelletreau was writing about the transformation of the area: "A tract of worthless sand beach . . . what was once desolate and uninhabited is now a village of 'fish factories' as they are called, and a business has sprung up involving over $500,000 capital and affording business for hundreds of men," he wrote. Promised Land soon had its own post office and, in 1895, the Long Island Rail Road added a spur to the factories. Its rusted lines and not-yet-rotted railway ties can still be followed through the eerie, lunar landscape of Napeague park.

The menhaden boom—newspapers called it an "oil mania"—was not limited to eastern Long Island. The demand for menhaden oil (used in tanneries, also to lubricate machinery and dilute paint) had spurred the construction of nearly 100 fish factories along the East Coast, from Maine to Virginia. By the 1880s, more than 400 bunker boats, at least two times the size of the whaling fleet, cruised the coast beaches scooping up tens of millions of pounds of fish in their nets. Tuthill and others like him making fortunes from menhaden were described in the press as the new "bony-fish aristocracy." They built mansions. Tuthill became president of a bank.

Years of plenty, though, were followed by years when the fish were harder to find, and sometimes they disappeared altogether. In the early 1890s, Promised Land companies consolidated; some operations closed altogether. In 1898, Tuthill, along with the two other remaining owners at Promised Land, cashed out and sold their factories to a new British conglomerate, backed by Standard Oil, called the American Fisheries Company. The very next year, 1899, the run of fish was reported to have "played out" and the largest factory—updated with electricity, telephones, and new screw presses—burned down. The steamers were laid up and the crews sent home. Before long, the American Fisheries Company went out of business. "Two many steamers," some workers were heard to grumble. "It will take years before there will be any fish again."

Similar booms and busts followed. Over the next 25 years factories at Promised Land were built and abandoned and rebuilt again, some operating for

THERE WAS DEBATE, TOO, ON THE EAST END OF LONG ISLAND. BUT MUCH OF IT HAD TO DO WITH THE ANNOYING ODOR—"THE SMELL OF MONEY," FACTORY WORKERS CALLED IT—THAT SPEWED DOWNWIND FROM PROMISED LAND TOWARD THE DEVON YACHT CLUB

only a season or two, before they closed down for good. Sea Grant's William Wise, who is writing a monograph on the development of New York fisheries, said the crashes were due, in part, to market forces like the demand and price of menhaden oil, as well as perilously thin profit margins that disappeared altogether when the fish went scarce.

Echoes of today's struggles over fishing stocks and governmental regulation of the commercial catch can be heard in the story of menhaden's cycles of abundance and famine. "Menhaden is probably more abundant than almost any other fish up and down the East Coast," Wise said. "But it does go through some natural variation." Weather patterns, changing currents, and fluctuating water temperatures affect menhaden reproduction and population. So does the commercial harvesting of the fish. "I don't care how big the menhaden population is, you can't just take several hundred million to a billion pounds out of it for four or five years running and expect it to not react and respond to those kinds of losses in the population," he said.

In Maine, in the late 1870s, the decimation of menhaden by a fleet of 300 bunker boats set off riots among the local fishermen, who blamed overfishing of bunker for the disappearance of the cod, striped bass, and other fish they relied on to keep their own families fed. As H. Bruce Franklin wrote in his book "The Most Important Fish in The Sea," the bunker industry, in turn, called the idea of overfishing "nonsense," arguing that the menhaden population was so large it was "practically inexhaustible." But in Maine, by 1879, there were no fish to be found and the state banned the menhaden industry outright.

In 1882, in New Jersey, locals threatened to fire cannon at the bunker fleet, prompting the legislature to prohibit bunker steamers off the Jersey Shore. The governor vetoed the bill, however, and it took another 100 years of rancorous debate, ending in 2001, for the state to finally enact a ban.

There was debate, too, on the East End of Long Island. But much of it had to do with the annoying odor—"the smell of money," factory workers called it—that spewed downwind from Promised Land toward the Devon Yacht Club. Arguments about sustainability and the causes of declines in fish population were largely confined to opinion pieces in the local newspapers.

Menhaden entrepreneurs like the Tuthills believed in the bunker's return and persevered. In 1911, with bunker back in the water, George W. and Nathaniel Tuthill built and financed a new factory at Promised Land, the Triton Fertilizer and Oil company. Likewise, the Edwards Brothers Company opened up a boat basin and provisions store adjoining the Triton operation. Other descendants of Joshua Edwards skippered large bunker boats, including the Ocean View and the Elizabeth Edwards, off and on, through the late 1920s.

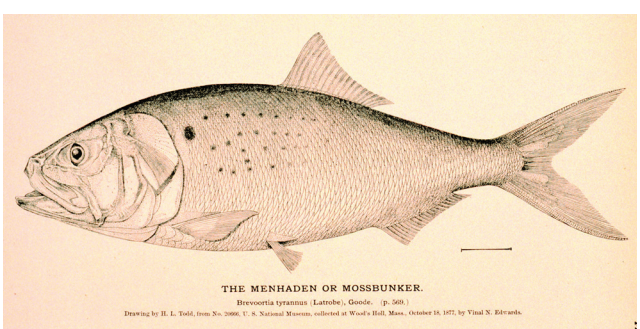
It was a competitive and dangerous occupation. The Triton factory employed other sea captains; the Hayes factory, nearby, had a fleet of over 20 ships. Crews and captains were usually paid according to how many fish were caught. The work was hard, the weather unpredictable. Boats were engulfed in fog, foundered on shoals, capsized under heavy loads. The hurricane of 1938 sank the Ocean View, and her six crew members were drowned.

Typically, a boat fished five or six days a week. It took anywhere from a few hours to two days to fill the hold. Underway, the captain, mate, and striker climbed the mast to the crow's nest some 65 feet above the deck to scan the water for the shadowy, purple-colored schools. Once they'd been spotted, the captain ordered two smaller "purse boats" lowered into the water. Each purser carried a crew between 12 to 24 men and half the purse net. The boats laid the net in the water (corks kept it afloat) as they split up and surrounded the school. The purse crews drew the net tight and pulled it up by hand, laden with thousands of fish, inch by inch to the surface, as the pilot ship drew close. As soon as the fish were hoisted into the hold, the ship set out to again chase down another school of bunker.

It was a grueling routine that the African-American crews overcame by singing chanteys—songs about their homes and families down south in Virginia or North Carolina that carried far off across the water.

In 1927 and 1928, the fishing got so slow the Edwards family's two steamers were the only ones left working for the Promised Land factory. In 1929, there were not enough menhaden to finish the season. The Edwardses again laid up their boats. For several years, the Promised Land factory was idle, gathering weeds. "The industry is apparently done," Everett J. Edwards wrote in 1932.

A year later, though, Gilbert P. Smith and J. Howard Smith, based in Port Monmouth, New Jersey, bought the Promised Land plant and rehired the Edwards family to be their captains. Over the next decade, the Smiths, who had acquired a small empire of old menhaden factories along the coast, upgraded their plants and modernized their growing fleet. By the late 1940s, after World War II, Smith Meal and its



Clockwise from top left: *An L.I.R.R. spur once ran through the eerie landscape of Promised Land to the factory. Scattered by the shore are the remains of a disappeared community and industry; Glyn Vincent. Another of Mabel D'Amico's remarkable watercolors of Promised Land from the 1940s; collection of the Victor D'Amico Institute of Art. The fish that all the fuss is about. An old warehouse building rusts to dust; Glyn Vincent.*

affiliates became the dominant menhaden processing conglomerate along the eastern seaboard. They continued to increase their catch into the mid-1950s. In 1956, the North Atlantic menhaden catch reached a peak of 98,500 metric tons of fish (over 2 billion pounds)—an astounding number far beyond the catch of earlier boom times.

The new Smith ships, with powerful engines and refrigerated holds, could travel long distances. "We fished all the way from Maine down to Delaware, depending on where the fish were," Collins says. "First year I was there we were still hauling the nets in by hand from wooden purse boats." But with new equipment—radar, fish finders, vacuum hoses, and hydraulic power blocks—Collins says, the process of finding and loading fish became "much more efficient and quick."

Crucially, as schools dissipated and scattered further off shore, spotter planes were introduced capable of scanning hundreds of square miles of ocean for fish. "The plane would call down and say, 'There's a place with fish that's 15 steamer lengths to your starboard side,' and talk directly to the purse boats."

The plants, too, were being tweaked to maximize output. In the 1950s, Steve Clarke, a grandson of the Smith brothers who now owns Greenport Yacht and Shipbuilding, did summer work inside the Promised Land factory, where millions of fish were rendered a day. "It was all steam-driven," Clarke says, "four boilers for a total of 5,000 horsepower generating a major amount of heat to process the fish."

The boats often came in at night; two shifts of workers were required to keep the factory going 24 hours. Men, thigh deep in a box of fish, unloaded the boats with vacuum hoses. Others manned the conveyor belts carrying the fish, the electric presses, the boilers, and the scrap shed. Burlap bags packed with 70 pounds of fertilizer were hurled onto trucks and trains. There were electricians, machinists, office workers, people in the provisions store and the mess hall.

Howard Wood, East Hampton High School's most legendary basketball hero, was born and raised at Promised Land. He describes the plant as "a little city of its own." Howard's father, James, had come up from Georgia looking for work in the early 1950s and stayed on. The Woods lived in a house they shared with another African-American family a few yards from the railroad spur. Nearby were the barracks for the seasonal workers; they slept in three-tiered bunks, with horsehair mattresses and wooden neck rests for pillows.

To Wood, watching the boats come in as a child, it seemed there were always enough fish arriving to keep the factory working at full-tilt, but management was becoming concerned again by the late 1950s. The spotter planes were flying further to track down ever-smaller schools of fish. Steve Clarke says that in 1959 he was asked to fill in on a boat that was short of crew. "The only reason I got the job is because the fishing was so poor and they were about to tie the boat up," he says.

Clarke, like Collins, relished fishing and the sea and didn't reflect much, at the time, about the effects of commercial harvesting on the bunker population. "All through history there are times when they are rare and then they come back," Clarke says. For him, as for many commercial fishermen, the ebb and flow of bunker was simply part of a natural cycle. As Collins put it, "That's just the way fishing is."

As it was, the bunker count collapsed in the 1960s. By 1968, the menhaden catch in the North Atlantic had plummeted about 98 percent from its peak in 1956 to 1,800 metric tons. On Long Island, the catch cratered from 85 million pounds in 1960 to 5 million in 1967.

In 1968, the factory at Promised Land was closed for good. James Wood stayed on as caretaker for four years. Howard, by then, was on the basketball team at the high school, headed eventually for the N.B.A. He remembers the long walk home at night after practice. He'd slip through the gate, past the looming abandoned factory buildings, under the winter stars. "We were the last ones there. Nobody else, just us," he said.

In the 50 years since Promised Land's closing, the bunker industry has survived, but not here. As the fish ran out in the North Atlantic and mid-Atlantic, the industry moved steadily south and into the Gulf of Mexico. The decline of Atlantic menhaden was such that eventually every East Coast state except Virginia banned purse-seine fishing for menhaden (although bunker can be fished in limited amounts for bait in the Peconic, and other inshore areas).

The Smiths eventually sold all their industry assets, donating land in Napeague and Hither Hills to what is now a state park. Today, there is only one major menhaden processing company left in the U.S., Omega Protein, based in Reedville, Virginia. Omega has turned to the Trump administration and the Virginia Legislature to help it fight the regulations of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, particularly in the Chesapeake Bay area, an important menhaden nursery, claiming its fleet has a negligible effect on bunker populations. The company believes there are so many menhaden they will be here forever. Just like the buffalo. ✷

Fish factories weren't only found at Promised Land. This one was at Cape Gardiner (or Cape Gerard)—where Gerard Drive is now, in Springs. It was called the Deep Hole factory, and it was established by Benjamin Payne in 1875, only to burn to the ground 20 years later. Fresh water was pumped to the factory from a windmill across Accabonac Harbor. East Hampton Star archive.

ECHOES OF TODAY'S STRUGGLES OVER FISHING STOCKS AND GOVERNMENTAL REGULATION OF THE COMMERCIAL CATCH CAN BE HEARD IN THE STORY OF MENHADEN'S CYCLES OF ABUNDANCE AND FAMINE. "I DON'T CARE HOW BIG THE MENHADEN POPULATION IS," WISE SAYS, "YOU CAN'T JUST TAKE SEVERAL HUNDRED MILLION POUNDS OUT OF IT FOR FOUR OR FIVE YEARS RUNNING AND EXPECT IT TO NOT REACT"