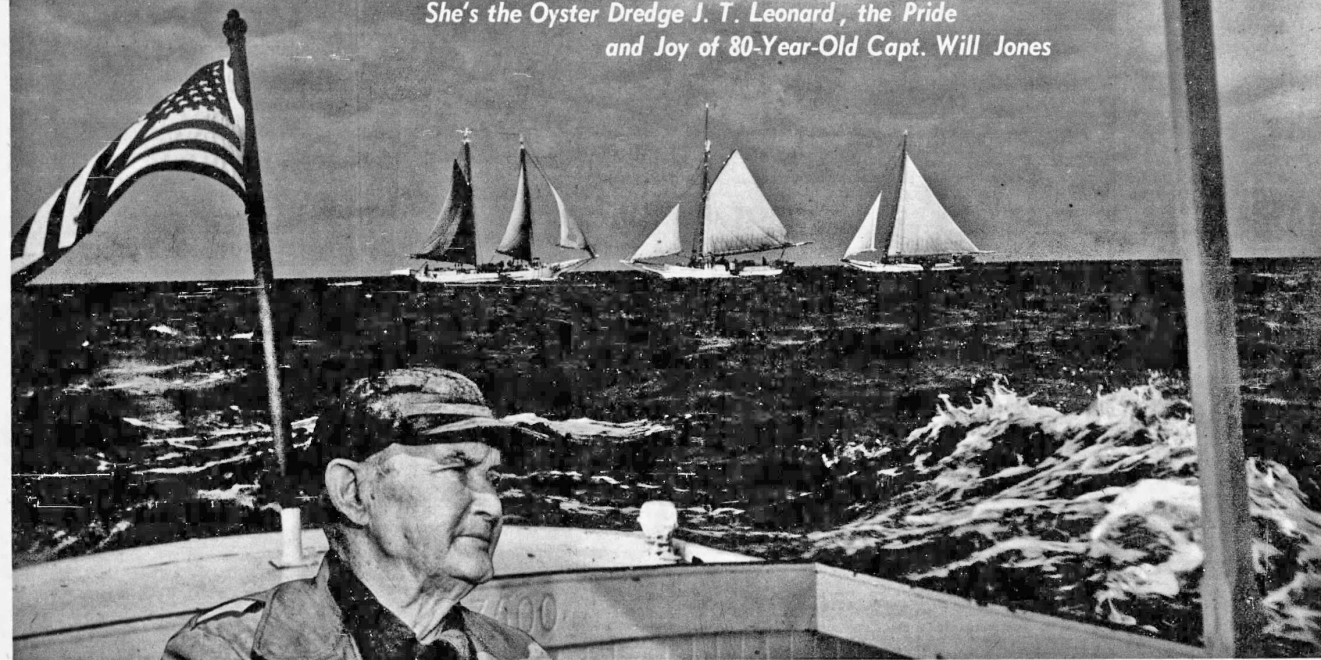


# The Last Working Sloop On The Bay

She's the Oyster Dredge J. T. Leonard, the Pride and Joy of 80-Year-Old Capt. Will Jones



The last working sloop on Maryland waters is the J. T. Leonard, shown above between a schooner, left, and a skipjack. Her owner is Capt. Will Jones, of Cambridge, pictured below at the wheel.

**YOU** can patch up a boat," says Capt. Will Jones, of Cambridge, "but you can't patch up an old man. So I 'spect this will be my last season as an oyster dredger."

Despite his words, all who know this rugged 80-year-old waterman feel that it will take something really drastic to get him away from oystering and from his beloved sloop J. T. Leonard—the last boat of her kind in commercial service on Maryland waters.

Captain Jones is "ounding out half a century as an oyster dredger. Born in Cambridge, the son of a farmer, the soil held little for him; already as a lad he found his way to the water front and became an oyster tonger.

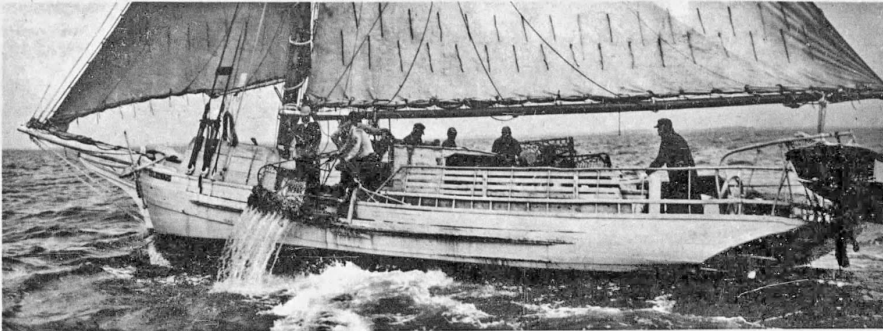
When he was about 30 years old he cast his eyes in the direction of the numerous sailing craft engaged in oyster dredging and though, he would try that.

Two days on a dredger convinced him that there was no profit in working on someone else's boat. So he purchased the skipjack Roxy Anderson and became captain of his own vessel.

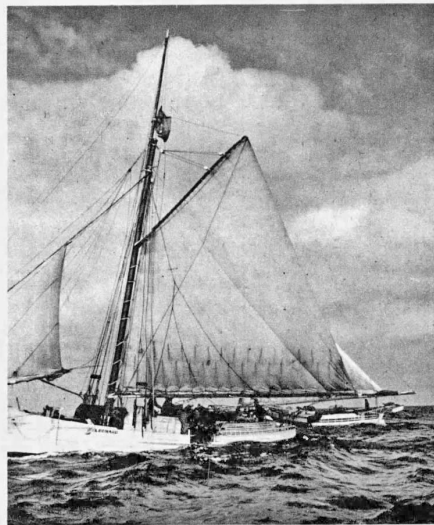
HE was to own two more skipjacks before he came into possession of the sloop J. T. Leonard. But with the Leonard there started a partnership that has lasted more than 35 years.

When Captain Jones first acquired this boat there were a number of commercial gaff-rigged, topsail sloops on the Chesapeake. But only the Leonard remains on the bay today as an example of that type.

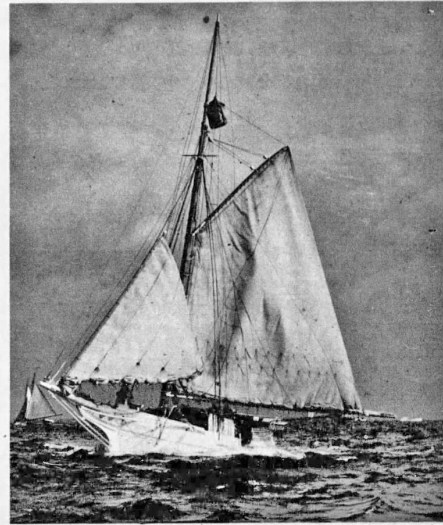
It was probably the smart appearance and lofty rig of the sloop that first attracted the captain to the Leonard. And only a sincere, seamanlike devotion to the vessel made him guide her through the decades of grueling



The Leonard was built in Dorchester county in 1882. She is 45 feet long. Captain Jones has owned her for 35 years, using her for oyster dredging. Here the dredge is being brought up after a run across Stone Rocks, off Sharps Island in the bay.



There once were many of the gaff-rigged, topsail sloops on the bay, but the others have been changed to skipjack rig.



Captain Jones considers the sloop an easier boat to handle than the skipjack, but likes it, too, for old time's sake.

Story By Robert H. Burgess Photos by A. Aubrey Bodine

labor over Maryland's oyster beds.

The J. T. Leonard, 45 feet in length, was built in 1882 in Dorchester county. She is next to the oldest vessel in the oyster-dredging fleet—exceeded in age only by the Mollie E. Leonard, which was built on Taylors Island one year earlier. The latter vessel originally carried the gaff mainsail and topmast, but these have been replaced by the sharp-headed skipjack rig.

TWO other vessels still active on the bay were originally sloops—the Henry W. Ruark and the Rebecca T. Ruark—built at Taylors Island in 1884 and 1886, respectively. They likewise sail now under the reduced sail plan of the skipjack, but their saucy "apple bows" and round bilges reveal their original type.

One may wonder why Cap-

tain Jones never converted his sloop to the skipjack rig that most men find cheaper to maintain and easier to handle. Well, he says the sloop handles best, and during moderate winds the high, extra sail area does permit the Leonard to pull its heavy dredges over the bottom with greater effect than a skipjack would have.

But another reason for the captain's stand, probably, is simply a desire to retain a flavor of the past in the gaff rig.

Captain Jones has four sons, all of whom have dredged oysters at one time. William, Jr., no longer sails but he has an interest in the bugeye J. C. Armiger and the skipjacks Fulton T. Mister, S. J. Bennett, and Lottie Bell, all hailing from Cambridge. Leslie, for twenty years, has been sailing on the

J. T. Leonard with his father, Russell and Reginald are land-bound in Cambridge.

Like all skippers of dredging craft, Captain Jones steers and directs operations on his sloop. He has a crew of six men who tend the dredges, cull oysters, and handle sail. One of these is the cook, but helps on deck when work is slack in the galley.

THE Leonard normally dredges in the Choptank River. Early Monday morning she and the rest of the Cambridge fleet leave that port for the lower Choptank. They dredge from sunrise to sunset on weekdays, putting into the nearby harbors of Irish Creek, Castle Haven, or Black Walnut Cove in the evenings or during bad weather.

After the day's work on Fridays the boats head back to Cambridge for the week end.

Captain Jones finds the life

of dredgers today much better than it was half a century ago when most of the dredging craft were owned by seafood packers, storekeepers, and livery stable men.

NOW a majority of the vessels are owned by the skippers, and the crews work on shares instead of being hired merely for their labor.

And the fare nowadays surpasses that of the past. On the range of the Leonard are prepared fresh roast pork, stewed chicken, beef, bean soup, puddings, and hot biscuits. A three-gallon coffee pot is kept on the stove the entire working day.

The Leonard has been kind to Captain Jones. His most serious mishap with her occurred about fifteen years ago while dredging in the bay off Tolchester. The mast carried away. But no

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# The Last Sloop

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one was injured and within several days, repairs made, the vessel was at work again.

With the skipjack *Lena Louise*, on an April day in about 1910, the captain had had a closer call. He and his one crewman were caught in the middle of the broad Choptank, shortly after dark, by a sudden squall. They had a little warning of it, and they reefed their sails, but that was not enough. When the squall struck, it turned the *Lena Louise* completely over.

Despite the fact that he could swim, the captain's crewman lost his life. Captain Jones, who could not swim, was tossed onto the bottom of the overturned boat, and succeeded in clinging there for a couple of hours until a passing bay steamer saw his plight and rescued him.

**T**HERE was a time when the *Leonard* worked at freighting wheat from the farms of Dorchester county to the Baltimore grain elevators. And many times she came up to Long Dock loaded to capacity with 3,500 watermelons. But there is no longer such work for her or the other dredging craft in summer.

At the end of the dredging season the *Leonard* is laid up in Cambridge Creek. Her sails are removed, and a coat of white paint is given the upper hull, deck and fittings as a preservative. Every September or October her bottom is painted.

But the next layup time is a long way off. And until March 15, when it comes, there will be many cold, blustery days for the *Leonard* to face. Captain Jones, while steering his sloop, will have ample time to ponder over his plans for the future.

But even though he may now contemplate retiring, the Choptank dredgers feel certain they will see him and his archaic boat again next year, still pulling dredges over Todds Point Stone Pile, Lighthouse Middles, Diamond Rock and other oyster grounds near the mouth of the Choptank.



"Do you think it's possible to fall in love with a whole class at once?"