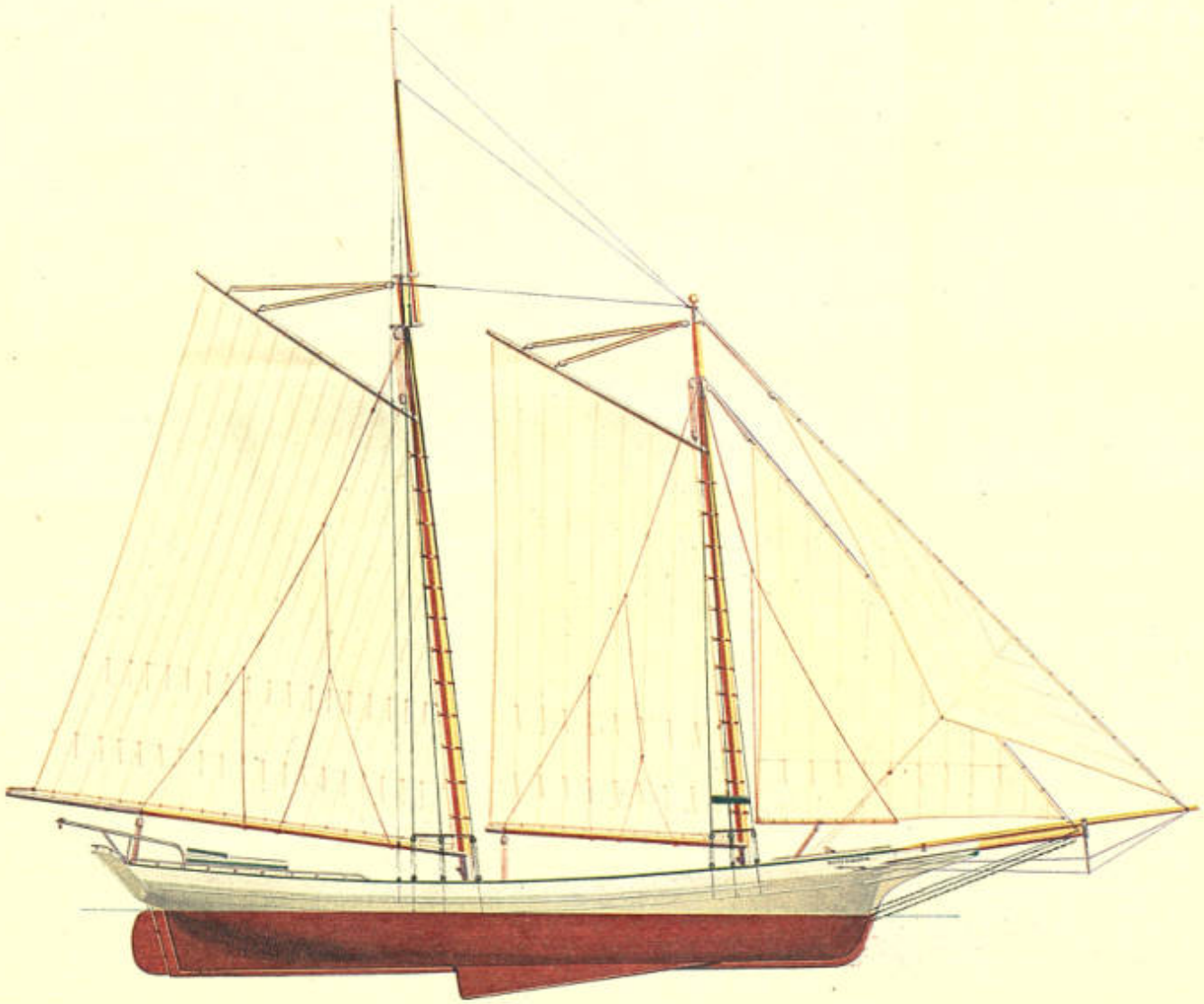
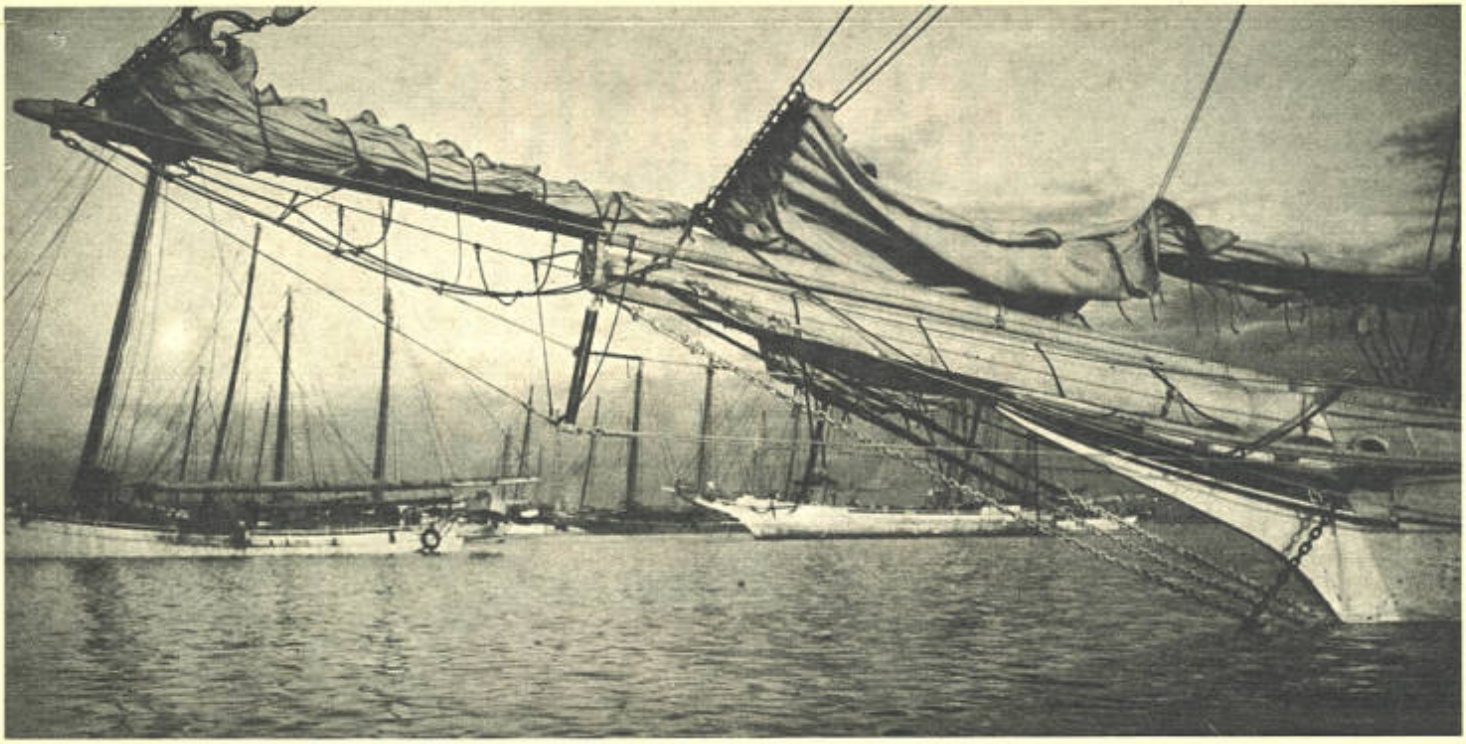
THE SUN MAGAZINE

Sunday | THE SUN BALTIMORE, MD. | APRIL 16, 1972



BAY SCHOONERS

The schooner Smith K. Martin was built in Pocomoke City in 1899. This illustration is by Melbourne Smith.



Graceful headrigging of the Mattie F. Dean, built in Madison, Md., in 1884, is evident in 1937 photo in Annapolis harbor.

THE BAY SCHOONERS

MANY OF SMALLER ONES WERE BUILT FOR OYSTER DREDGING

By ERIC STEINLEIN

THE years between 1860 and 1930 saw the rise and fall of the centerboard schooner as the major freight carrier in the Chesapeake trade. Though the centerboard or "drop keel" had been developed about 1800, the need for its use was not compelling until about 1860.

By that time siltation of tributaries, caused by years of intensive farming and lumbering, had begun to restrict the movement of deep draft vessels in the upper reaches of most of the rivers of the Chesapeake Bay.

The last keel pungy schooners were built in 1884; these were the Amanda Lewis and, appropriately, the Twilight. The centerboard schooner could float in 2 or 3 feet less water and could carry more freight on the same over-all length. Speed was less, but also less important, for fast freight had begun to move by rail.

Bay schooners, as they were commonly known, came in sizes from 40-odd feet up. Many of the smaller ones were built for oyster dredging and designed to have a customhouse tonnage just less than 10, which was the upper limit under state law, for craft dredging oysters in the Choptank and other rivers.

Those built for freighting and registered in the coasting trade ranged from about 20 tons register up to 222, which was the tonnage of the Harriet C. Whitehead, the largest two-master in the later days of the trade. The Whitehead was built in Connecticut, thus she was not a Bay schooner.

The sailing freight trade lasted longer on the Chesapeake than anywhere else. Schooners were sold in the Bay area from New England and New York in the last days of the trade.

The tonnage given is register, or customhouse tonnage, arrived at by dividing cubic feet of internal capacity by 100. Actual carrying capacity in tons of 2,000 pounds is much higher. Smith K. Martin would carry over 100 tons deadweight on a net register of 33 tons. The Maine carried about 300 tons on a net register of 181.

Many of the schooners built for dredging oysters were used in the freight trade during the summer. Others were built for special trades such as the "run boats," which were fast schooners that transported oysters from the dredging schooners in the lower Potomac to the Baltimore market, and the lumber carriers that ran between Carolina ports and Washington, Baltimore and Philadelphia.

RUN boats relieved the dredging schooners of the run to market, so oystering went on constantly throughout the 8 months. Dredges seldom tied up at a wharf, transferring their catch to the run boat while at anchor. There was some truth in the story that this was done, in many cases, to prevent the escape of a shanghaied crew.

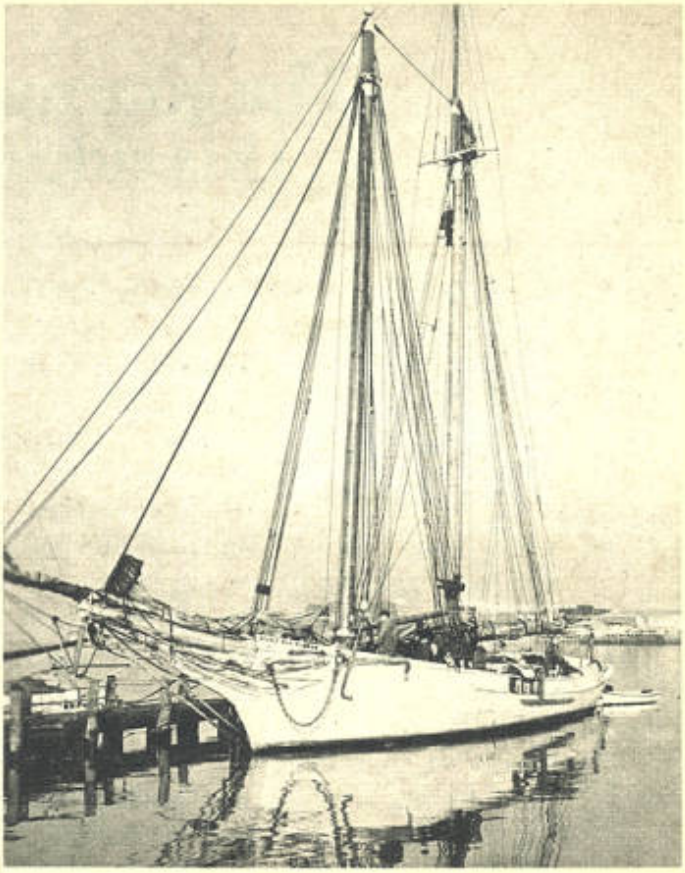
Schooners in the freighting trade carried much the same cargoes as now carried by railroads and trucks; coal, oil, lumber, cement, salt, grain, potatoes, tomatoes and fruit. Their voyages were mostly in the Chesapeake and Delaware bays, with some trips coastwise to New

Continued on Page 7

BAY SCHOONERS

Continued from Page 5

the Martin put to sea from a port in the Carolinas and was never seen again



York, New England and the islands of the Caribbean.

About 1890 there were nearly 16,000 sailing vessels under the American flag. Coasting vessels made up about three-fourths of the tonnage of our merchant fleet. Estimating from the *Register of Merchant Vessels* for that year, it appears that between 2,000 and 3,000 of them had been built on the Chesapeake.

In many small towns of the Bay country, shipbuilding and related industries were the main source of income. Ownership of vessels was divided into as many as 64 shares, which were traded regularly. They produced income from 5 to 20 per cent for their owners, and sometimes losses, just as corporate shares do today.

Designers and builders were numerous, some turning out one schooner a year, and others as many as one every 60 to 90 days. Design varied greatly and exact sister ships were rare. Each builder had his own style and his product reflected his personality. Sailing vessels could be identified at a distance by the "cut of their jib."

Smith K. Martin was built by James E. Tull at Pocomoke City in 1899 and was typical of her class. She was less elaborate in the details of her carving and decoration than other schooners still working in the 1930's. The Fannie Insley, built at Church Creek in 1883, and the Mattie F. Dean, built at Madison in 1884, carried all or most of their gilded and brightly painted trailboards, billet heads, and stern board decorations until their last days, as well as their light sail rig of main topmast and flying jib boom. Most of their sisters were by then more than a little raddled and ragged.

IN late 1940, the writer found himself in the midst of a fleet of 11 old schooners off Bloody Point, most of them bound for Baltimore with a fair wind. The thought that never again might that many commercial sails be seen together again is still remembered.

Sailing freight schooners were often caused to congregate by the weather. Strong northerly winds or a failing wind at evening would see the anchorage behind Point Lookout in the Potomac, called Cornfield Harbor, fill up with vessels waiting for a "slant."

Smith K. Martin, when owned by Capt. Levin Kelly, of Eastport, during her last years, developed a tourist trade out of Annapolis. During the summer months, Captain Kelly used to take Boy Scout troops for a week's sail around the Bay. Sometimes Girl Scouts were the cargo and crew. Captain Kelly said the girls made good crews and took orders better than the boys.

About 1938, the Martin was sold to owners who took over her one-man crew and sailed south. She put to sea from a port in the Carolinas and was never seen again.

The Bay schooner Minnie May Kirwan, right, was built in Whitehaven, on the Wicomico River, in 1882. The Ida B. Conway, below, formerly the William Layton, was built on Nanticoke River.