

The Sailing Oystermen of

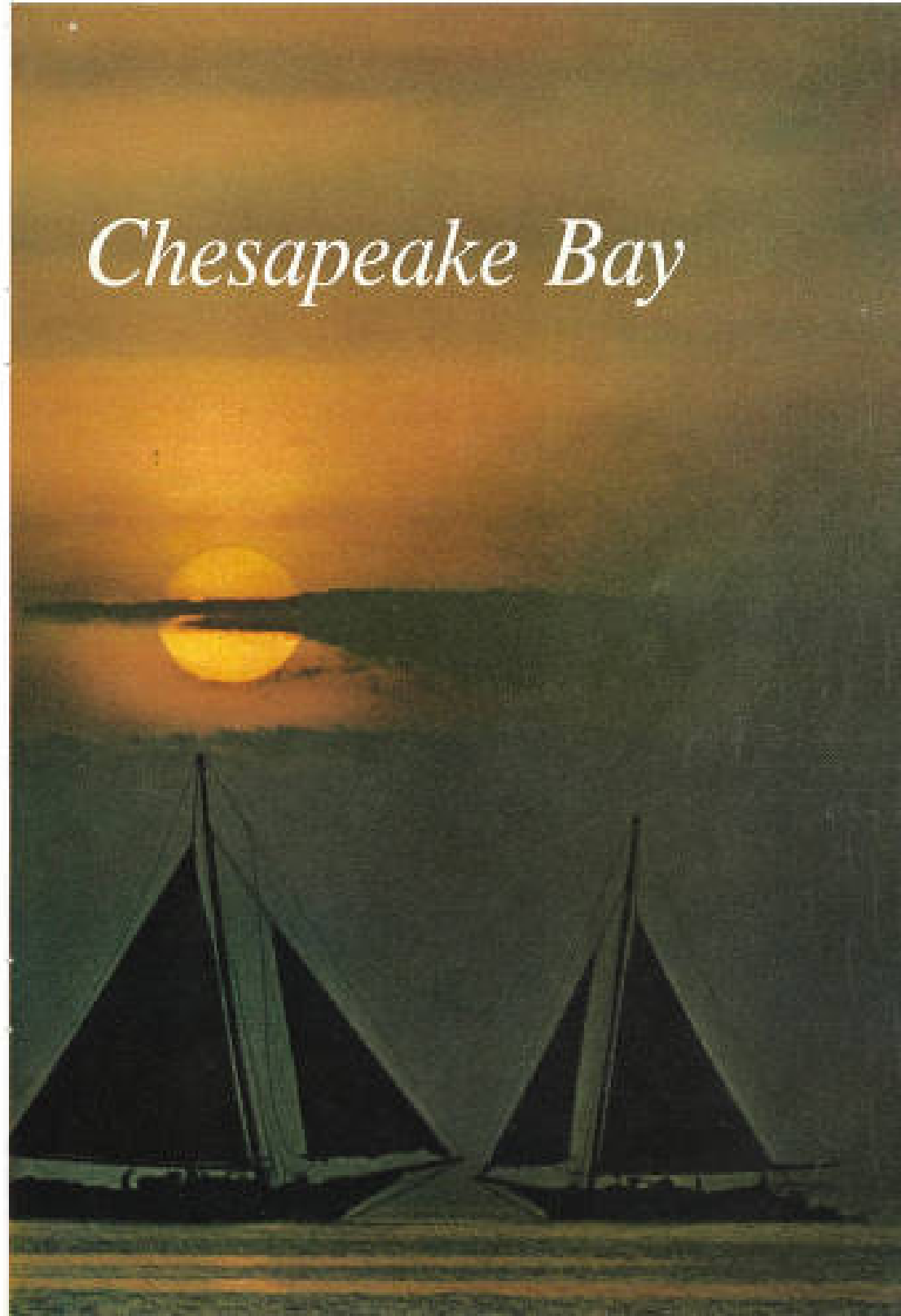
By LUIS MARDEN

Chief, Foreign Editorial Staff

DAWN-ETCHED PHANTOMS from a bygone age, skipjacks dredge for oysters. Until last year, Maryland law decreed that only sailing vessels might take the shellfish from deepwater beds. But the coming of power may toll a knell for these proud survivors of working sail—and for a way of life.

796 PHOTOGRAPH BY LUIS MARDEN © 1988

Chesapeake Bay



*Vessels of a vanishing fleet—the Nation's
last to work under sail—brave winter's
blasts to dredge Maryland oyster beds*

THE WAY I FIGURE IT," said the captain, "most men live in hope and die in despair." He eased the wheel off two spokes. "The trouble with drudgin' with sail, you either got it flat ca'm or it's too much wind. You go to bed at night wonderin' where the wind's gonna be, and you don't know where you gonna make your day's work.

"Days loike this, when it's pretty, we can't work—ain't neither breath in the world. When it's blowin' not fit for a dog to be on the water, you have to go. Yep, there's hardship in the oyster [he pronounced it 'auster'] business.

"But," said Capt. Eldon Willing, squinting at the red disk of the setting sun, "me, I'm loike everyone else. I live in hope. I don't think it's ever been so bad as I couldn't make it."

"Tree of Water" Yields Rich Harvest

On the map of the eastern flank of the United States there grows a mighty tree of water. Resting its broad buttress roots athwart the Virginia Capes, it extends northward for 195 miles, bending to the east as if to resist the winter gales of the Atlantic, and thrusting its gnarled and twisting arms deep into the fertile tidelands of Maryland and Virginia. This is the Bay of the Chesapeake, one of the most fecund bodies of water in the world (maps, page 806).

When that tough and capable Englishman, Capt. John Smith, came to Virginia in 1607, he sailed past Capes Charles and Henry and into "Chesapeack" Bay. He recorded:

"There is but one entrance by Sea into this Country, and that is at the mouth of a very goodly Bay, 18. or 20. myles broad. . . . Within is a country that may haue the prerogatiue over the most pleasant places knowne . . . heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for mans habitation. . . ."

Like others who followed him, John Smith noted particularly the prodigal richness of sea life in the waters of the Bay. Of the exuberance of sea food, the most noteworthy and valuable was the oyster.

On the second day the landing party came

to a place where "the Sauages . . . had made a great fire, and had beene newly a roasting Oysters. . . . We eat some of the Oysters, which were very large and delicate in taste."

The early settlers found the Indians raking oysters from the bottom, and for more than two centuries tonging was the method used by all who sought the Bay's famed shellfish. Even now tongers outnumber dredgers ten to one. But my friend the captain dredged—he said "drudged"—oysters with iron-and-net dredges pulled by his single-masted sailing craft, a skipjack.

"Fifty years ago, when I started in," he said, "sailboats was thick as pine trees out there. I've seen 75 to 100 boats drudgin' the same ground above Sandy Point. They was 500 boats in Tangier Sound alone. Ain't many boats on the Bay now. What boats it is, most of 'em is in the Choptank and at Deal Island.

"Oh my blessèd, there used to be all the austers you want into the Bay then. You could catch thousands of bushels. Now you got to grind down to catch any. They killed the Bay. Caught the bottom and didn't put it back."

When working sail was at its apogee on the Bay, before World War I, perhaps 2,000 licensed vessels, great and small, sailed the waters of the Chesapeake. Of all that fleet of sail, no more than a handful brave the blasts of winter now. Last year only 47 sailing vessels took out licenses to dredge. All were skipjacks; the last round-bottomed sloop and last bugeye are gone. The gallant boats that remain form the only commercial fleet still working under sail in the United States.

Even this vestigial fleet of sailing dredge-boats exists today only because of a Maryland law that prohibits dredging under power on all but two days of the week. From November 1 to March 15, Baymen sail their dredge-boats to and from the oyster "rocks"—bars—or, "if it's no wind," push them with small powerboats rigged astern (page 804). But they must hoist the yawlboats inboard when on the rock, and dredge by wind power alone, except on Mondays and Tuesdays.

"Sail—it's somethin' that gets into you," says Capt. Orville Parks, who like his forebears lives by time-honed seaman's skills. Coaxing *Rosie Parks* to victory in a blustery skipjack race, he tenses for every shift of wind and wave as son Hubert stands by. Of his 72 years, Captain Parks has spent 60 harvesting the Chesapeake's oysters.





KODACHROME AND EXTACHROME (RIGHT) BY

And they continue to dwindle. "Ever' year there's one or two of 'em taken up the creek to die," said the captain (page 819). "Ain't no more workin' skipjacks bein' built. Last one was built in 1956. Won't never be no more."

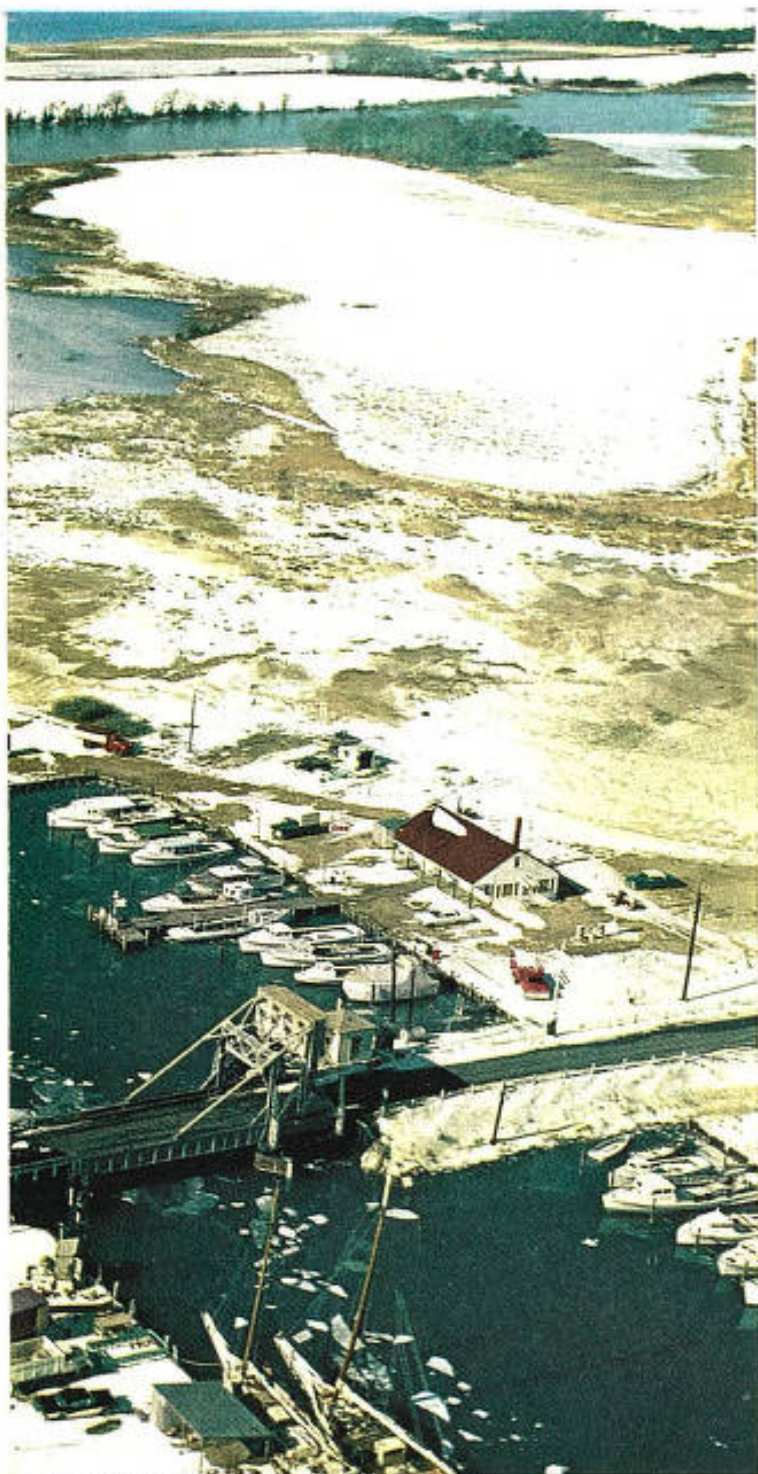
Beds Restocked From Protected Nurseries

Captain Willing's vessel, the *Robert L. Webster*, is nearly 80 feet long from tip of bowsprit to stern—the largest skipjack now afloat. It was spring, and we were dredging for seed oysters. The dredge brought up the young shellfish from protected seed beds for transfer to public water to mature.

Each dredgeboat works two dredges, port

and starboard, attached by steel cables to a winder engine amidships. The captain pulled a cord leading to the winder-engine throttle, a crewman stepped on the clutch, and the dredges wound slowly in. When they reached the rollers at the rails, two men with one practiced easy motion swung each inboard and emptied it. Other crewmen shoveled the oysters into piles fore and aft.

Round and round and back and forth the skipjacks plied, and the hills of oysters rose until the rails were within a few inches of the water. Then the heavily laden boats, clustering like ducklings round a mother, drew alongside a bluff-bowed buy-boat (pages 808-9) to



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER EMORY KRISTOF © N.G.S.

Hard as ice, cold as fear, white winter crusts Knapps Narrows, a thin blade of water that splits Tilghman Island, left, from Maryland's Eastern Shore. Skipjacks shelter here during the oyster-dredging season, November 1 to March 15. Alongside lie the small powerboats of tongers, who work the bottom by hand with scissorlike rakes in depths of 30 feet or less.

"It's the hardest, coldest work in the world," says shipwright Curtis Appelgarth of the oystermen's lot. Capt. Ralph Ruark shovels snow from the skipjack *Wilma Lee* before she sets out for the oyster beds, or "rocks." Oysters grow fat and succulent in winter, after the summer spawning months.

transfer the oysters for planting on the growing grounds, where they would lie undisturbed until at least three inches in size.

When we had discharged our last load, our crew sluiced the decks clean and we turned downbay. We forged steadily down the Eastern Shore, pushed through the windless evening by a snub-nosed yawlboat nudging our stern. To starboard the sun plunged below the horizon in a welter of gold and mauve. The silken surface of the Bay was like a dove's breast, shot with purple lights and flecked with green where cat's-paws flawed the water. Against the saffron afterglow a ragged W of Canada geese flew northward. Through the drumming of the engine their honking *ow! ow! ow!* came faintly down to us.

The skipjack came into being some time after the Civil War, and her origin, like the meaning of her name, is obscure. But soon after her appearance, the V-bottomed vessel's handiness and speed were so apparent that she began to supersede the round-bottomed sloops, bugeyes (two-masted, round-bilge vessels), pungies (broad-beamed keel schooners),



and centerboard schooners that had dredged for oysters since the early 1800's.

Long before the American War for Independence, the Bay shores were known for the excellence of the boats and larger vessels built there. In this primeval forest of giant oak, walnut, cedar, and pine the early Baymen found first-rate shipbuilding timber ready to hand, close to the banks of the Bay's innumerable tributary streams.

The first colonists saw the Bay Indians fishing from "Cannows," each made of a single huge log. Smith wrote: "These they make of

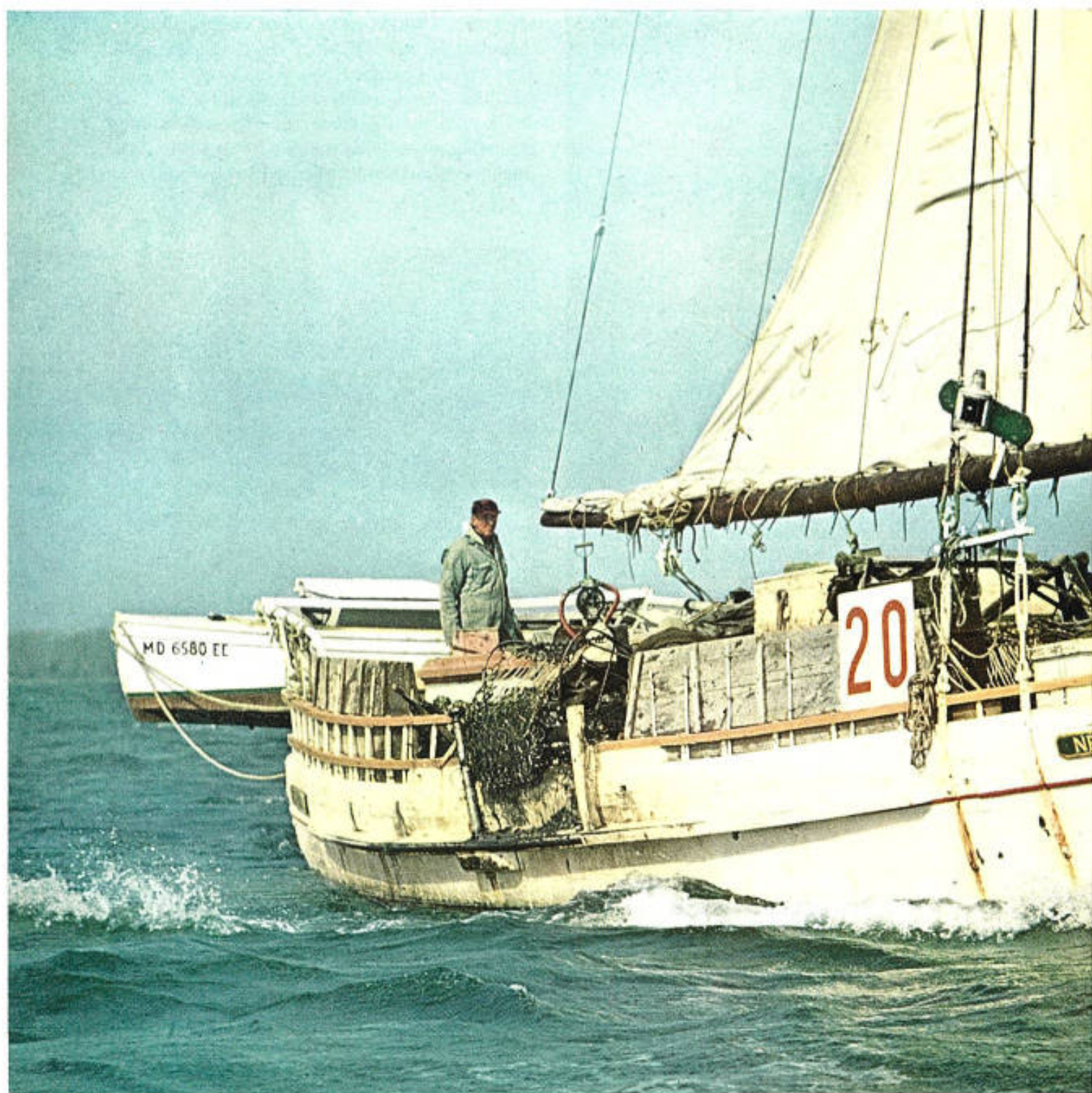
one tree by burning and scratching away the coales with stones and shels, till they haue made it in forme of a Trough. Some of them are . . . fortie or fiftie foote in length. . . ."

Bay Builders Adapted Indian Method

Skilled shipwrights were rare among the early settlers, and the newcomers made their first watercraft partly after the Indians' example, using whole logs to form the hull.

When the Baymen attempted something more ambitious than a "cannow," they chained three logs together, dubbed out the convex

"It's quiet. Listen to the water going by . . ." muses Capt. William Todd. Chill waves slap the stout sides of *Nellie L. Byrd*, outward bound from Cambridge, Maryland. Across her stern



bottom curves with an adz, then turned the logs over to hog out the inside. The "log-built" boats then were fastened with pegs.

As the builders grew more skillful and the watermen demanded larger vessels, they built five-log, seven-log, and even nine-log hulls. The smallest were the famed Chesapeake Bay log canoes, small clipper-bowed, sharp-sterned boats with little freeboard. They carried a sharply raked mast stepped right forward, and sometimes another nearly amidships.

As the light faded from the sky, the captain's voice brought me back to the present.

"We should soight Hooper Strait Loight just at the edge of dark," he said.

In a short while we made out the pale loom of the light against the gathering darkness. As night fell the wind rose, and a short sea slapped against the bow.

"Set the jib, boys," the captain called to the shadowy figures forward, "then h'ist the fores'l." For some reason many Chesapeake skipjack men call their mainsail the foresail. "It ain't no wind, but it's a fa'r wind."

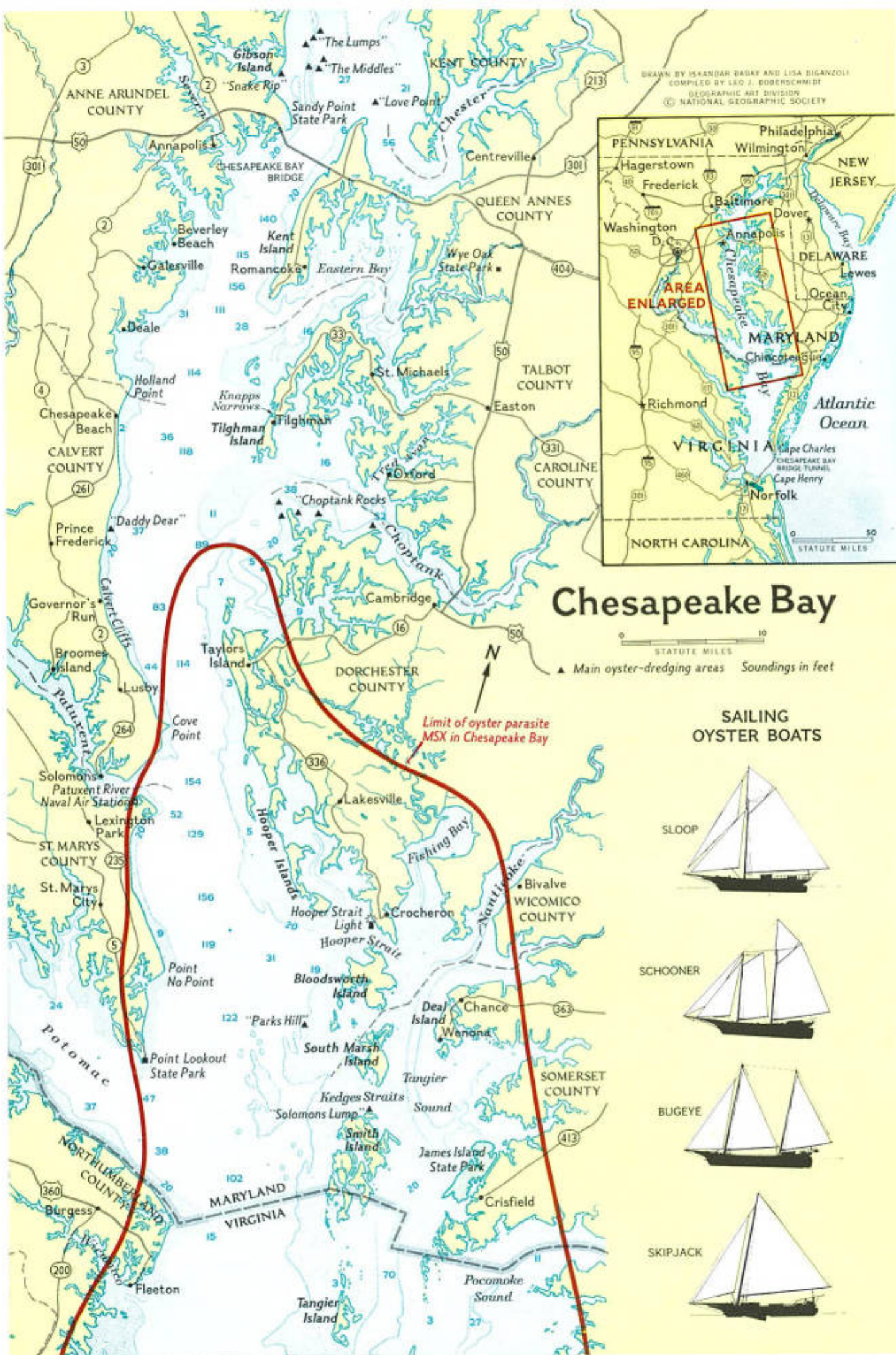
To a rhythmic creak of blocks, first the jib, then the main rose in jerks, blotting out the

hangs a yawlboat, motorized small craft now permitted to nudge sailing workboats across the oyster beds on Mondays and Tuesdays. Other days, oystermen still must laboriously dredge by sail.

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KODACHROME BY JAMES L. AMOS © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY





stars from the horizon upward. The skipjack heeled slightly as the breeze filled the heavy canvas, and the slap under our forefoot became a steady chuckle.

The vessel was homeward bound after more than a month of dredging seed oysters. The extra work had eked out a lean season, and the men were content. One of the crewmen stumbled over a shovel and the captain cried, "Watch it, Jimmy! If you fall overboard we can't stop to pick you up. Get you next year on the way back."

Except for the big rivers, the western side of mid-Chesapeake Bay has few good harbors. The low-lying Eastern Shore, on the other hand, is fretted with water. From the time of the earliest English settlers, this land of water has always been set apart because of its isolation and the sturdy individuality of its inhabitants.* On their long peninsula between the Atlantic and the Chesapeake, the watermen grew independent yet closely knit.

"Well, that's one more season," said the captain. "What do austermen do in the summertime? Some goes crabbin', some grows strawberries, some goes rockin' [catching rockfish], some does nothin' at all—they that's made it."

The breeze was freshening as we neared Deal Island,

*See "Chesapeake Country," by Nathaniel T. Kenney, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, September, 1964.



KODACHROMES BY LUIS MARDEN (RIGHT), BATES LITTLEHALES (CENTER) AND JAMES L. AMOS © N.G.S.

Hardy captains of a vanishing breed: Eldon Wil-ling (above) captains the biggest skipjack still dredg- ing, the *Robert L. Webster*, nearly 80 feet from bow- sprit to stern. Smoke from the cigar of his brother Bunk tells which way the wind blows. Bill Jones (right center) knows the Bay so well he often navigates with- out a compass. Rugged face of Loudy Horner (top) belies his other calling—Methodist Church lay leader.



"Mighty tree of water," the author calls the Chesapeake Bay and, like a tree, it supports multitudinous life—including MSX, or *Minchinia nelsoni*, a microscopic parasite that thrives on oysters. Once 2,000 sloops, schooners, bugeyes, and skipjacks sailed the Bay; in 1966-67 only 47 skipjacks remained to dredge in Maryland waters. Virginia, which shares the Chesapeake, does not require dredging by sail.



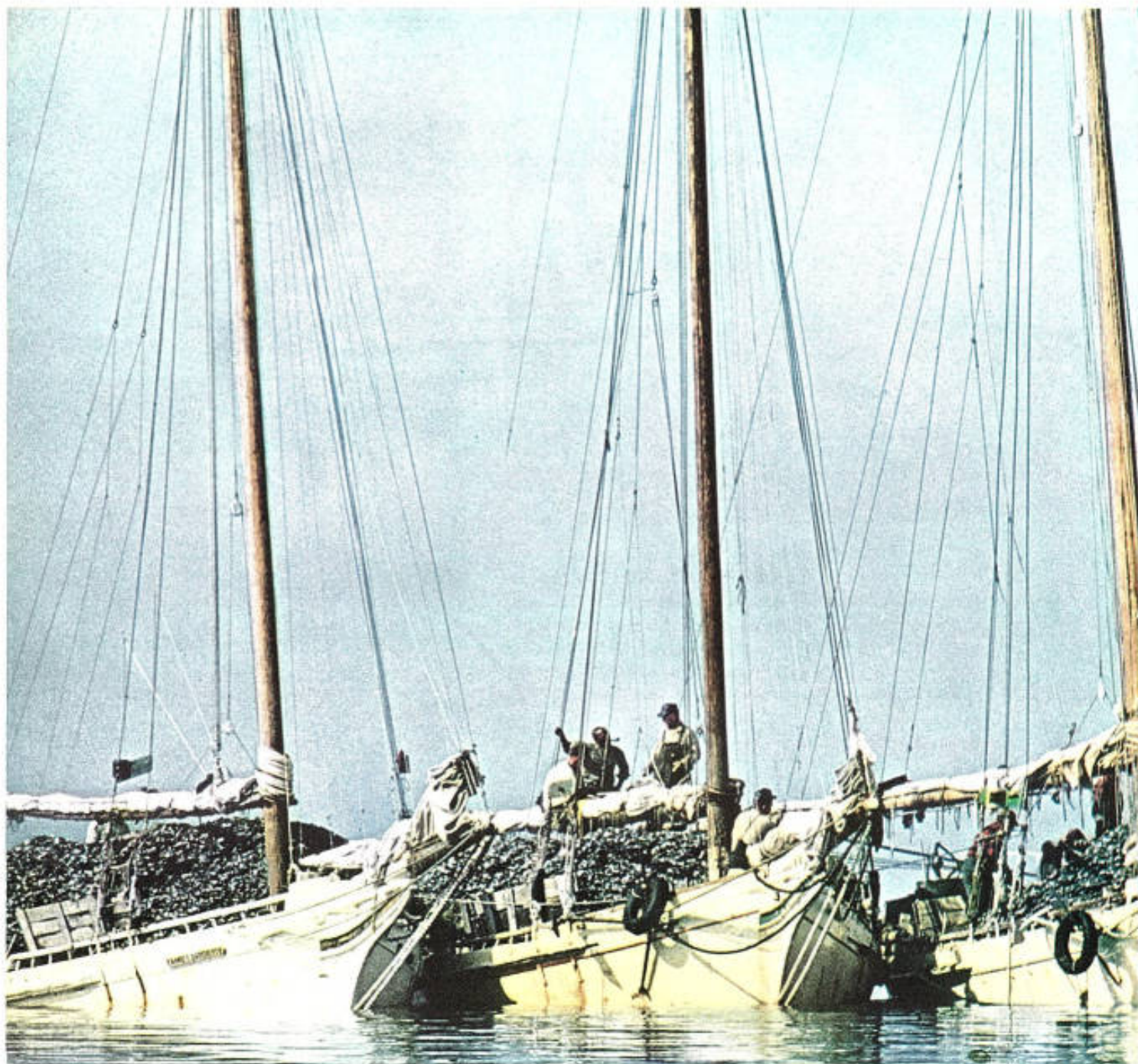
Strong third hand of the oysterman, the culling hammer provides a three-inch scale to determine oysters of "keeper" size. It also knocks off rocks or separates oysters that stick together.

Heaven on the half shell for oyster fanciers lies ready for the tasting after a shucking knife has pried open the plump Chesapeake bivalves.



Piled high with oysters, skipjacks raft up to a buy-boat that will seed the immature shellfish in protected beds. The state pays dredgers and carrier for off-season transplanting. In three to four years the oysters grow to harvesting size (above). Last winter they brought \$3 to \$6 a bushel.

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our destination. A quick red flasher pulsed on our starboard hand; we turned hard left, and ghosted slowly into a berth outboard of three other skipjacks. After tying up, we stepped from vessel to vessel to the sandy foreshore.

In the morning I looked round the little basin. Skipjacks were all around the *Webster*, rafted three and four deep, side by side and held apart by auto-tire fenders. Some had hoisted their sails to dry, and they hung in white and buff folds against the deep-blue sky.

Within an oyster's throw stood the white wooden houses of Wenona. Gray weather-board crab-packing houses and wooden holding boxes floating in rows lined the waterfront. Like all oyster communities on the Bay, Wenona is a crab town in summer.

On the screen door of the little general store and post office I read a sign: "Please

leave your whiskey and beer outside." The deeply pious Methodists of Deal Island are, almost to a man, teetotalers.

Inside, the captains sat on long benches and talked shop. Above the men's heads a hand-lettered sign read: "We don't care to hear your nasty vulgar jokes thank you."

Quiet Talk of Oyster Beds and Boats

"These austers on Daddy Dear was right heavy; they'd shuck seven points [pints] to the bushel."

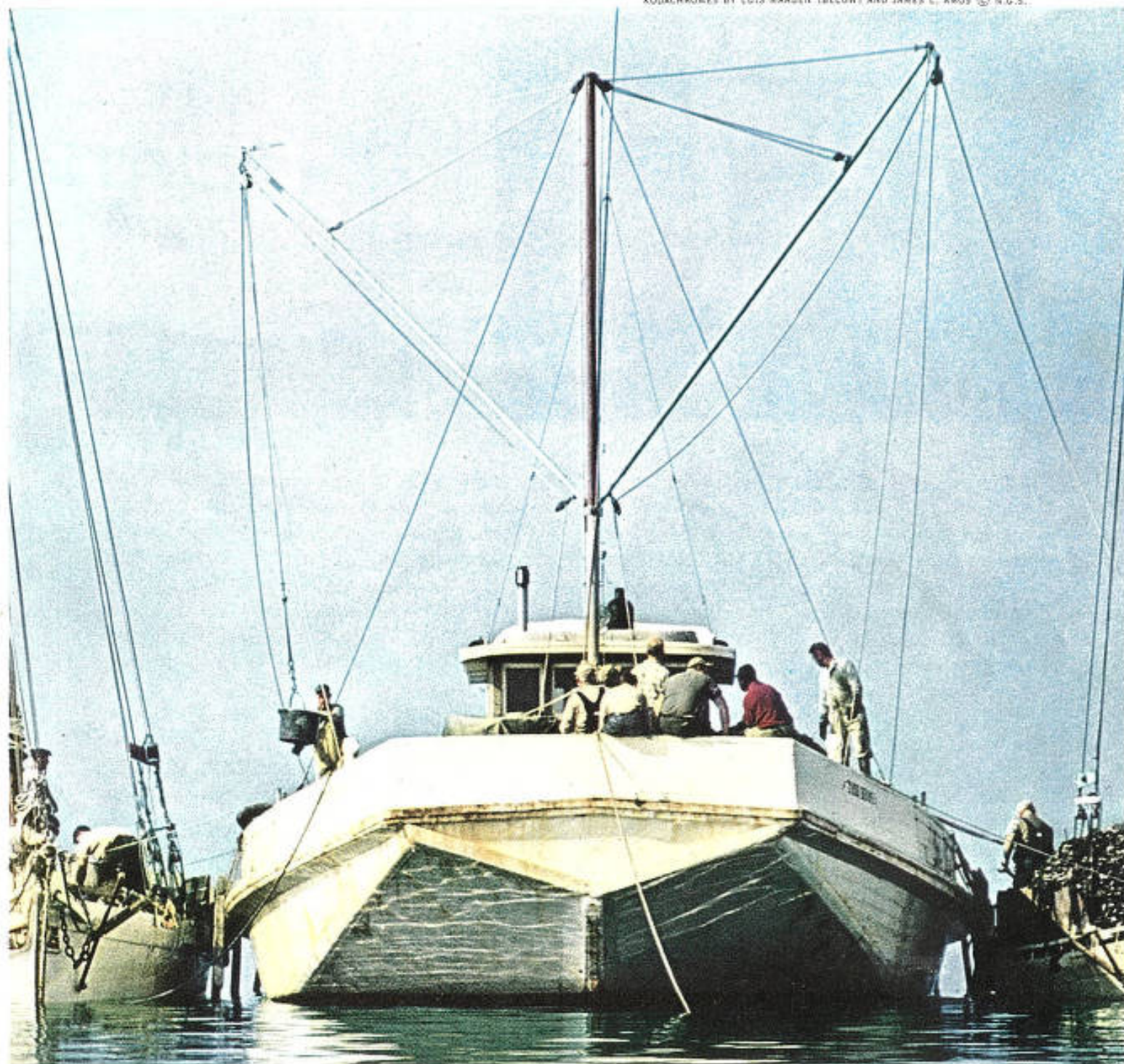
"Fish is nothin' plentiful; we been havin' right smart o' trout, but no hardheads."

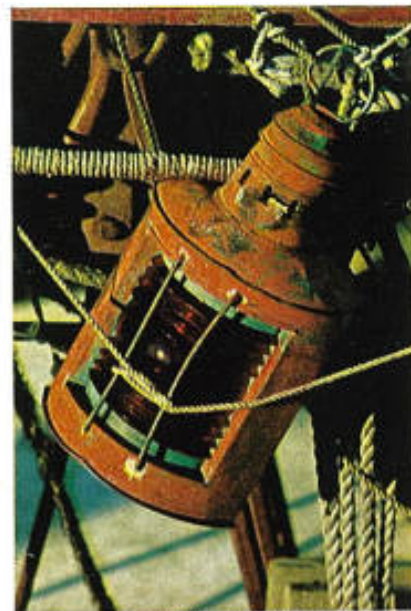
"Oh my blessèd but she was tender. A little green flaw comin', she'd jump. When we jibed her, her deck'd come level with the water."

"Course she won't sail as fast. Them old boats is sobby. New wood's lighter."

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KODACHROMES BY LUIS MARDEN (BELOW) AND JAMES L. AMOS © N.G.S.





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In the 1966-67 season, beginning on November 1, 1966, Maryland first permitted oyster dredgers to "push"—dredge with power—on two days of each week, but limited each boat to 100 bushels a day. I asked the captains what they thought of the new law.

"I was sorry to see it come," said one. "I figure a man can only handle so many austers, no matter how you bring 'em up. But it's saved our life. You can work to weather, not depend on the wind. You get those two good days, and they'll overbalance the other three if they're bad."

"That's roight. We lose two, three days a week because it's no breeze, not countin' the times when the Bay's froze up. It's no way in the world you can make a livin' thataway."

"Well, I loike drudgin' under sail. I'd rather do it than eat, and that's the truth."

Said Capt. Clifton Webster of the *Maggie*

Lee (page 813), a man whom his colleagues describe as "one of the finest captains it is":

"Five hundred sail in this sound 45 years ago. The captains has died, the owners has died, the boats has died. Young people don't want to go into it, and I don't blame 'em. I raise my hand to the Master, last year I paid my crew as little as \$13 a week; in a good week, they might make \$150.

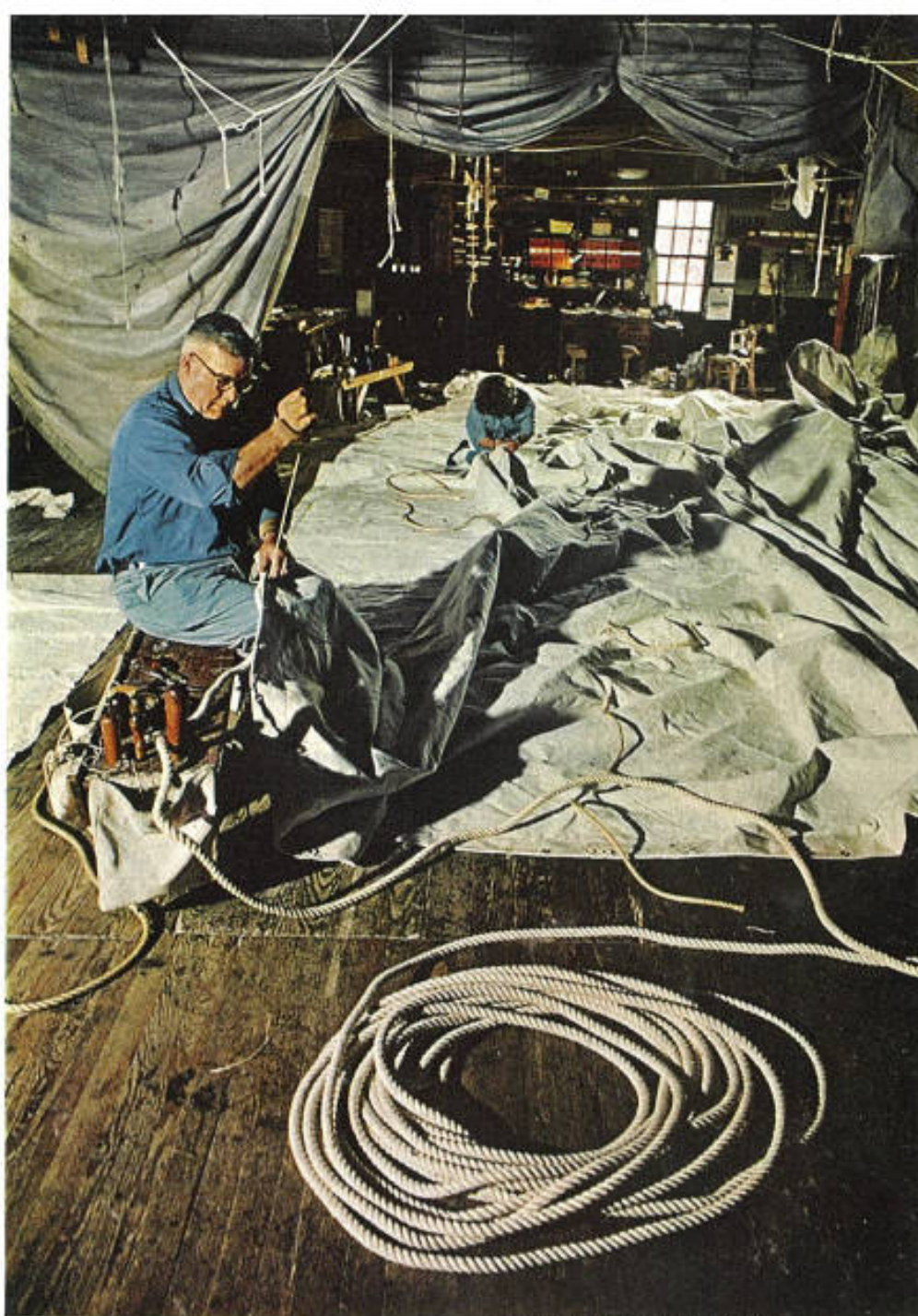
"In the old days austers was 25 cents a bushel, they was so plentiful. Even as late as 1948 to 1950 the boat'd make \$1,200 a week. She was loaded from the bowsplit on back. Thirty cents on each dollar went for the boat—upkeep and all; the rest we divided six ways. Some boats and captains takes half, the crew gets the other half.

"Then the cull law, that tells you how big a auster's got to be, was changed from two-and-a-half to three inches. Prices went up right

Chain-bag dredge, showered by sparks from an arc welder, undergoes repairs at Cambridge, Maryland. Unseen rocks and snags often bend or break the frame and its bag, as watermen call the metal net. Fully laden, it holds five bushels of oysters.

Old-time gear still finds use aboard sailing oystermen. Red running light, fueled with kerosene, identifies the boat's port, or left, side to other vessels after dark. Steam-bent hoops of hickory, like curtain rings, hold the mainsail to its loblolly pine mast.

Stitch by stitch, sails take shape in Henry Brown's loft at Wenona on Deal Island. His family has made workboat sails since 1870. Today, still using tools nearly as old as sail itself, Mr. Brown tailors jibs and mainsails from heavy cotton canvas that grows scarcer each year, since modern yachts use Dacron. Here he sews reinforcing rope along a mainsail's three edges—the luff, foot, and leech. For a new suit of sails that should last four or five winters, the owner pays \$550 to \$1,000.



KODACHROME BY EMORY KRISTOF © M.G.S.

good, we got as high as \$7.50 a bushel. But we only caught 40 bushels a day, when we got through throwin' back the mud, rocks, and small austers. Then MSX came along. We had a right prosperous little island, but we gettin' close to a ghost town now. Let me tell you, honey, MSX has finished us down here, just as sure as go-to-be-hung." Watermen use terms of endearment for emphasis.

Oyster Blight Invades the Bay

The captain referred to an oyster blight that in 1957 appeared in Delaware Bay, worked along the coast, and since 1959 has been creeping insidiously northward in Chesapeake Bay.

At first the biologists could not identify the micro-organism, so they tagged it MSX—Multinucleate Sphere X. Now they know it as *Minchinia nelsoni*. The protozoan parasite

that kills the oysters requires a salinity of 15 parts per thousand, and thus rivers like the Choptank and the Potomac, and the upper part of the Bay, are so far free of MSX (map, page 806). But several years of unusual drought have allowed the salinity to increase in northern waters, and slowly the micro-organism has seeped up the Bay. Tangier Sound is almost devoid of catchable oysters, and the Deal Island and Smith Island men must go out into the more boisterous waters of the Bay itself to make a living.

I said I had heard that in the old days some captains at the end of the season would take a crewman and "pay him off with the boom."

"I've heerd tell about it," said one. "Some captains would go ashore in Balt'm'r and go into a saloon where they was foreigners. The captain would get the foreigners drunk, and take 'em down to his boat and throw the lines

off and sail away. It was shanghaiin', pure and simple.

"Some captains would pay 'em off decent, but I heerd tell some would tell the green man, 'Here, get on top of that cabin and sweep 'er off,' and when the man was up there, the captain, he'd jibe her [throw the helm over in a following wind], and the boom would swing hard over and knock the man into the water.

"Most of 'em couldn't swim, and anyway it was too freezin' cold to swim. They was mostly tramps, didn't have no relatives or nothin', and no one missed 'em.

"The cap'n would write it down in his log, 'Blackie lost overboard, got drowned.' But one Blackie fooled 'em. He swam ashore. Somehow he got to Balt'm'r, and reported to the police. They took the captain and tried him; the story is that they hanged him. Then there was no more shanghaiin'. But that was all before my time."

One of the captains knocked out his pipe, and said, "Guess I'll go home. Strawberries gettin' ripe and nobody to take care of 'em." That broke up the session.

Skipjacks Sail On as Yachts

Off and on through one summer I sailed my Alberg 30 sloop *Bounty* along the Eastern Shore and talked to oystermen and boatbuilders. At Oxford, on the Tred Avon River near where it flows into the broad mouth of the Choptank, I visited Curtis Applegarth, a third-generation waterman who builds yachts on the skipjack pattern.

"They started building skipjacks in the 1880's," said Mr. Applegarth. "They were plank boats and flat-bottomed. To make them sail closer to the wind and come about more easily, the Baymen built in dead rise—gave them a V-bottom. They had a centerboard that could be raised or lowered through a slot, so they could work in shallow water."

Mr. Applegarth put down his plane. "Skipjacks have no outside ballast; they put a couple o' tons of fieldstone inside. Some of the old-timers would go to an old graveyard and get some marble slabs that would fit nice, y' know, and stuff them underneath of the bunks. I'll bet if you pulled up the bunks of old skipjacks, you'd still find tombstones."

Howard Chapelle, the noted naval architect and Smithsonian Institution authority on marine history, once told me that he is nearly certain that the first skipjack launched in Cambridge, on the Eastern Shore, was built about 1886 with timber left over from a schooner. Named *Eva*, she was originally bugeye-rigged, with three sails.

The last round-bottomed sloop of the oyster fleet, the *J. T. Leonard*, worked out of Cambridge until 1966, when she was retired to the Maritime Museum in St. Michaels. Built in 1882, she was the oldest vessel of the oystering fleet.

Captain "Went on the Water" at 12

On the deck of one of the newest, the skipjack *Rosie Parks*, I talked with her captain, Orville Parks, who sails the *Rosie* to victory in nearly every race he enters (page 801).

Said the captain, "I never had much school-in'. My father had a big family, and my mother died when I was six. There was four boys left, and he married again and there was five girls more. Made nine head." He smiled. "Most watermen always managed to keep one on deck and one in the hold.

"When I was 12 years old I wanted to leave school, because I only got to go when I wasn't out with my father. I'd know parts of the book, but other parts I wouldn't know nothin' in it, so I told my father, 'Let me go on the water.' I've been out here ever since.

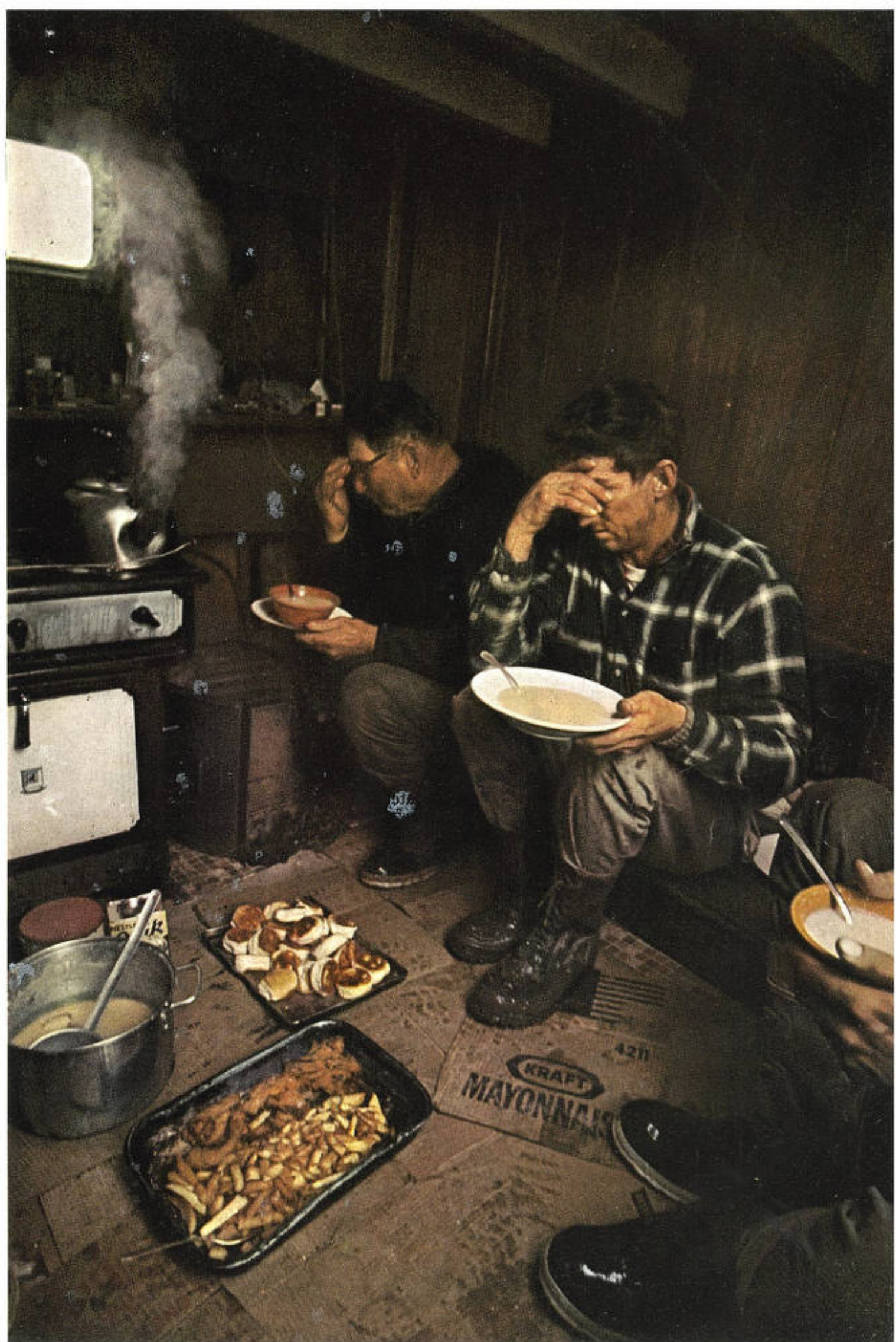
"The old-timers sure knew how to sail a boat. We don't sail boats like they did. When I was a boy, if I'd git up and run for'ard to draw away the jib when my father was racin', he'd throw anythin' handy at me. I had to crawl for'ard, so's not to hold back the wind. He was just a sailor, that was all."

Captain Parks may have the fastest skipjack on the Bay. I asked him her top speed.

"Oh, I suppose she'll do 12 or 13 knots in a stiff breeze. Mostly, if a drudgeboat goes 10 knots, she'll be all out, though.

"This power business? Here in Dorchester County we voted against it. In the Choptank River, thank the good Lord, we don't have the MSX disease, and we've got right good o' austers. So we don't want no drudgin' with power to scrape the bottom down to nothin'."

"We thank Thee, O Lord, for Thy bounty," recites Capt. Clifton Webster, left, and the *Maggie Lee's* crew as they bow their heads in grace. To satisfy appetites sharpened by icy air and hard work, the cook feeds them lunch of bean soup, fried chicken, French fried potatoes, and baked biscuits fresh from the oven. Sometimes he serves oysters.



On the Tred Avon River in Oxford, at a laboratory of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I heard the other side of the question.

"Our archaic oyster fishery is dying out because we're still largely working on a virgin crop and depleting the natural stock," said a marine biologist. "We ought to farm the oyster. The question is: How much are the taxpayers willing to pay to support today's oystermen, among them a few who like to sail?"

"Maryland has to use tax revenue to transplant small seed oysters from protected areas to public water, where the oystermen can take them when they've reached legal size. I say let the fishermen work the self-maintaining areas, those that produce abundantly. But those places that can't replenish themselves, let's lease to oyster farmers.

"The Maryland oyster catch declined from a high of nearly 15,000,000 bushels in 1885 to only a tenth that amount in certain years since 1930. Today we have one-third the oyster-producing areas we had at the turn of the century—though last year the seeding showed its effect, and the take was the biggest since 1940-41, some 3,000,000 bushels." Of that amount, the dredgeboats took only 10 percent, the tongers the remainder.

"What about the R months?" I asked.

"Technically that does not apply to the

American oyster, *Crassostrea virginica*. The custom of not eating oysters in months without an R originated in England, where they have the round oyster, *Ostrea edulis*. The English oyster keeps the young within the mantle cavity for some time; the shells form early, so the oyster tastes gritty during the summer months. Our oysters discharge their eggs directly into the water. Then the larvae attach themselves to bottom debris; that is what we mean when we say there is a 'strike' of spat. But it's just as well to observe the R tradition, because it protects the oysters during the spawning months.

"Every year, the State of Maryland makes conditions favorable for the spat—the newborn oysters—by dumping 5,000,000 bushels of clean shell near the brood oysters. Then at the end of the season the state employs the oystermen to dredge up the shells, which are now covered with little seed oysters, and move them to a place in open water where they can grow to maturity. It takes three to four years to produce a three-inch oyster."

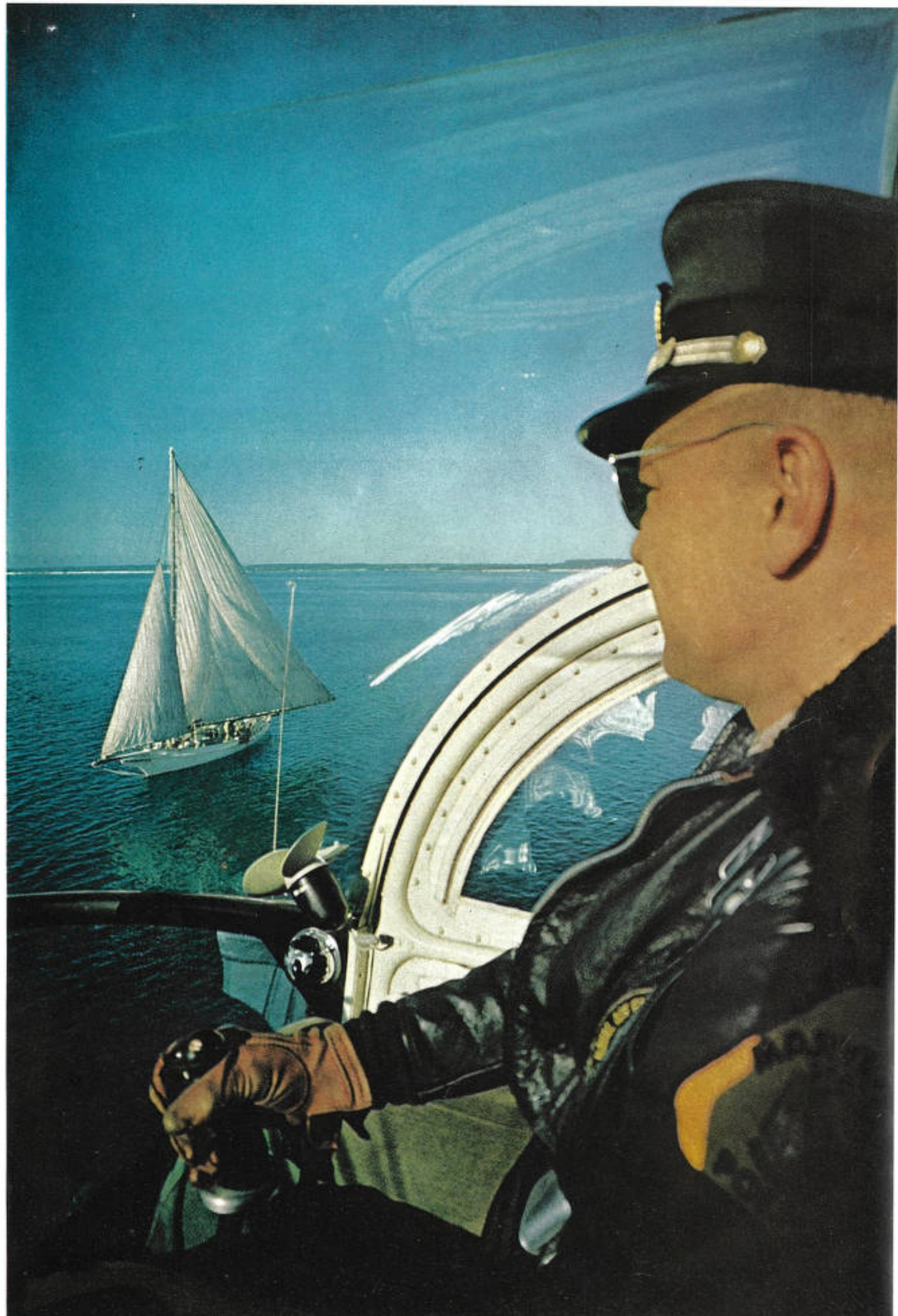
The hot summer days flowed one into the other; the blue crabs shed their armor, mated, and were taken up by the traps of the Baymen. As the days drew into autumn, the winds hauled to the nor'west. In a thin, dark lattice against the yellow dawn, the great geese came

"A good lick, captain," drawls a crewman as a winch winds home oysters by the dredgeful. Watermen must show great skill in scouring the bottom. If their skipjack sails too fast, the dredge refuses to bite; too slow, and it snags on the bottom. Reefed sails control the speed. For easy identification by water police, each vessel bears a number visible for a mile or more.

High eye of the law, helicopter-borne Inspector C. J. Robey of the Maryland Marine Police sees that dredgers do not use power except on Mondays and Tuesdays, work off-limit beds, or keep undersize oysters. Ninety police boats also patrol the Bay.



KODACHROMES BY EMORY KRISTOF © N.G.S.





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H. ROBBINS HOLLYDAY (BELOW); KODACHROME BY LUIS MARDEN © N.G.S.



Five hundred years of combined experience makes for nostalgic reminiscing by veteran captains of sail. Here on a pier at the village of Chance, they recall bristling storms, bitter cold, and oyster rocks with names like Love Point, Tea Table, Snake Rip, and Daddy Dear. Off season, many skippers raise strawberries or trap Maryland's famous blue crabs.

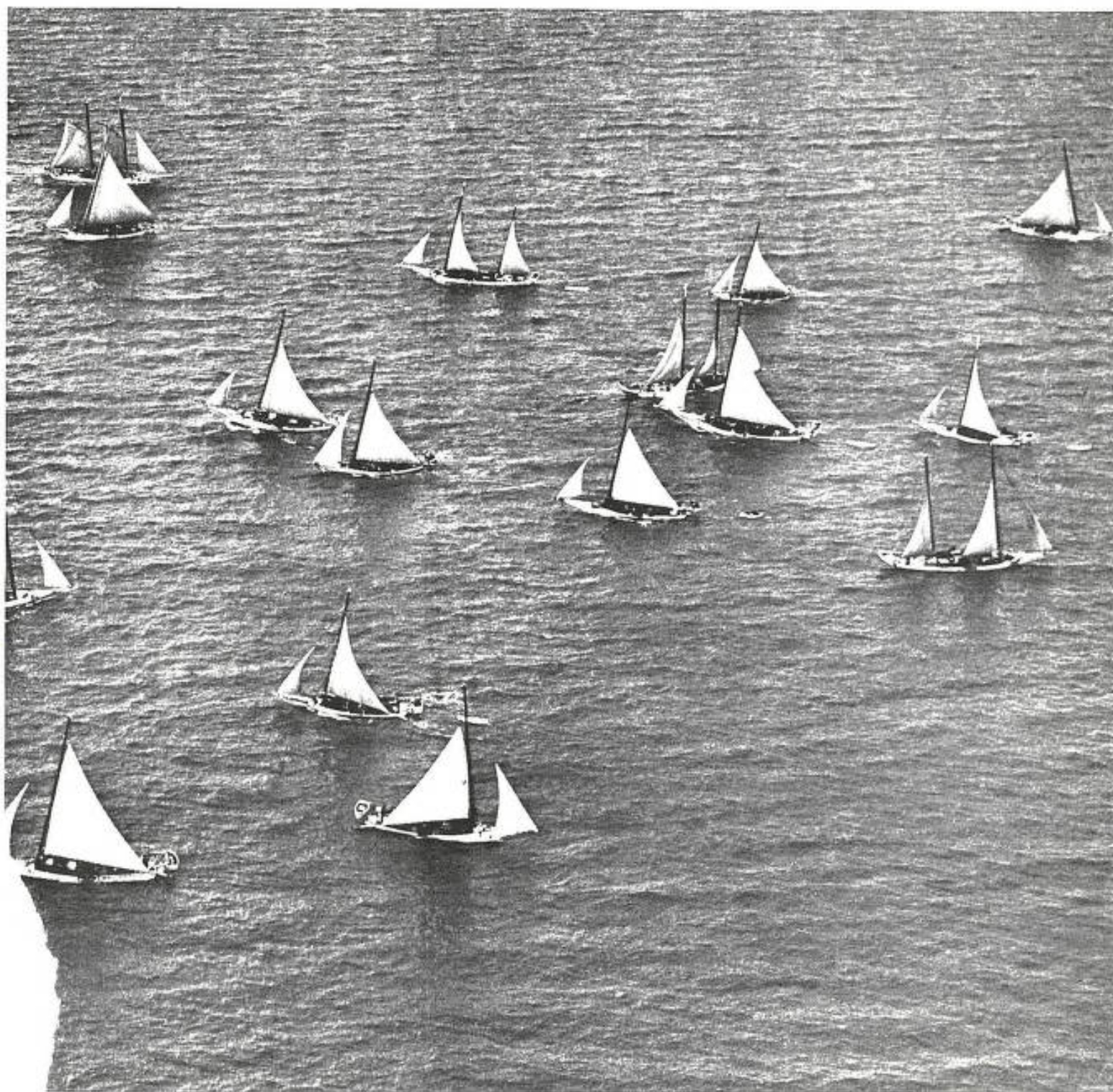
Scene from the past: White wings lifted, a bevy of oyster boats crowds a rock in the 1930's. Half a century earlier, close to 15,000,000 bushels were taken from the Maryland waters in one season; the 1966-67 catch, best in 26 years, totaled only 3,000,000 bushels.

down from the north and settled on the sheltered bays with a noise like distant applause. The first frosts rimed the wheat stubble, and in the rising winds the nodding masts of the skipjacks beckoned at their moorings. It was once again the time of the oyster.

The winds of winter are heavy winds. Cold air is denser than warm, and a 15-mile breeze in January has a lot more weight than the same breeze in summer.

The sky was leaden and the water like pewter as the skipjack *Rosie Parks* sailed out of Cambridge. Even the waves slapping against our bows had a wintry sound. The great mainsail bellied to the quartering breeze, and soon we were pitching in a short, steep sea.

Shallow waters enclosed by land have only one way to go in a blow—up. Unlike the open ocean, shoal water can get rough very quickly. And the sudden Bay squalls have caught many an unwary yachtsman and some watermen.



"I remember a time I was drudgin' with an uncle, years ago," said Captain Parks. "We had the deck piled so high we was top-heavy. It blew us a gale nor'west, a real blusterous wind. My uncle started for his oilskins, but before he could get 'em on, she rolled over. One man had gone for'ard to take in the jib, and when she went over, he kept walkin' as she turned around and when she was bottom up, there he was straddlin' the bow, holdin' a cigarette in his hand. 'Say,' he says, 'does anyone got a dry match?'"

"One February before the war," the captain continued, "a lot of us was drudgin' in the Choptank in a fog. We couldn't see nothin', but all of a sudden we heard somethin' a-roarin'. We thought it was some kind of engine, but it was the wind. It came out of nowhere and it hit us. I had a good crew and we got our sails off before she struck. But two boats capsized and ever' man on 'em was lost. Nine head in all. The wind only lasted ten minutes, that's all it lasted.

"I'll never forget it—72 miles an hour, an' we never saw it comin'! The men that follows the water today, if they didn't have good judgment and study the weather, plenty of times it would be bad. Once in a while you get caught and y' have to go with it."

Reefing Sails Controls Dredging Speed

We were over the oyster bar and the captain called out, "All right, boys, reef 'er down." The crew let jib and main down part way and tied rows of dangling rope ends round the tucks (page 814), reducing the sail area.

"That's the onliest speed control we got," said the captain. "That's why we got four reef bands on each sail, gives us four speeds.

"If you sail too fast over a rock, you float your drudges, and they don't hit bottom. If you go too slow, they get hung up."

The captain thrust a long sounding pole over the side and poked the bottom with it.

"You can tell by the way the pole feels if you're over austers," he said. "A captain's got to see the rock in his mind just like you look down on your table to see what's there to eat. I can take a place of austers not much bigger than the top of a barrel and I can sail up and drop my drudge right on it."

The captain signaled and the crew dropped both dredges, port and starboard, into the Bay. The skipjack slowed a bit as tension came on the vibrating cables dragging the dredges. The captain reached out and hooked a boathook round one of the taut cables.

"You can feel the bottom thisaway," he said. "If it's real smooth, you over mud. If she's bumpin', you on hard bog or austers. We try to find the edge; that's where the big austers is. I guess they get more to eat on the edge, because they always fatter there than the ones up on the hill in the middle of the rock."

"Lickin' About" Brings a "Fair Jag"

When the dredges came up and the crew had culled out the legal three-inch oysters, the portside man called out, "That was a good lick, captain, we got thirty-two."

"Thirty-two! When I think of the bushels o' big austers we used t' drudge up. Looked like a mountain o' shells on the deck.

"We just broadcastin' now. That means we keep sailin' and drop the drudge down almost anywhere. When we find the edge of the rock, we do what we call lickin' about. Drop the drudges down for a lick, come about with the boat, and drop 'em agin, like plowin' a field."

The sky darkened and the cold grew sharper, and the pile of legal oysters grew.

"Well," said the captain, "looks like we'll make a fair jag. Austers look thicker than either year yet." The wind freshened and the captain took a deep breath.

"There's no comparison between sail and power," he said. "Take this boat, put an engine in her, sit on a box sniffin' that old grease and push into the Bay; turn one way, let go, heave and wind in. The same thing, day after day, whether it's blowin' or ca'm. I wouldn't like it. This way, standin' at the wheel with a breeze on your face and the sails flappin' . . . It's somethin' that gets into you, you can't get it out of your bones overnight.

"No, sir, if it comes to drudgin' with power, I'll go home and get on relief. For sixty years now I've been drove hard and put away wet, and if it comes to that I'll just set there and do neither thing in the world with the rest of 'em."

I doubt that he would.

THE END

"Ever' year there's one or two taken up the creek to die," lament watermen of proud old craft such as this skipjack abandoned in Man Gut, a Deal Island backwater. Before mooring her for the last time, the owner salvaged all gear; tides and winds finish the hulk off. She epitomizes the fate awaiting others in the Nation's last commercial sailing fleet.

