

They harvest ocean floor during middle of winter

CHESAPEAKE BEACH, MD. — While most land agriculture ends with the harvest before winter sets in, it's quite a bit different for harvesting in aquaculture — underwater farming.

The underwater harvesting of oysters only begins about November 1 and continues until March 15.

And just like their counterparts on land, these "ocean farmers" begin their day during pre-dawn hours. Instead of climbing onto a tractor self-propelled combine, these sailor/farmers use a Y-bottom sloop, the skipjack, traditional workboat of the oyster dredger.

One of these is the "Dee of St. Mary's," a 56-footer working the Maryland western shoreline of the Chesapeake Bay.

The six-man crew has completed its pre-dawn work, which starts around 4 a.m., readying the boat for a day of oyster dredging — "drudgin for arsters." The crew calls this graceful craft a "drudge boat," which doesn't describe the way the vessel with its tall single mast, huge mainsail, small jib sail and long needle bow hugs the water and skims lightly over the Bay.

Francis Goddard, 48, of Piney Point, Md., built the Dee by "rack of eye," or without written plans, in the fine old tradition of skipjack builders. He followed the formula watermen have handed down through generations. The boom is the length of the boat, the mast is the length of the boat plus the beam, and the bowsprit is the length of the beam.

While still in port, the Dee's cabin provides an island of warmth and light in the cold, clear darkness. The cook is preparing hotcakes, slab bacon, fried eggs and coffee — lots of coffee.

A diesel-powered yawl pushes the skipjack out of the harbor as dawn breaks. By the time it reaches "Old Rock," the oyster bed to be dredged, the sun is up. Dredging can be done only from sunup to sundown and on most days it takes that long to make the 150-bushel limit.

Before dredging can begin, the yawl is hoisted to ride behind the stern; the skipjack must depend entirely on the wind. Maryland conservation measures permit only sail-driven vessels to dredge the deep water for oysters, although watermen may use the yawl for dredging on two "push-days" per week — each Monday and Tuesday.

The work begins immediately. Captain Clyde Evans, a venerated 70-year-old waterman from the Eastern Shore with 53 years of following the water, handles the wheel and serves as the resident adviser. Skipper Jack Russell, 37, owner of the Dee, is a new breed of waterman. The Advisory Commission, and a college graduate, Russell, nonetheless, calls Captain Clyde the "sage".

Captain Clyde sold his own skipjack after the 1978-79 oyster dredging season with the intention of retiring, but Russell persuaded him to spend another winter on the water helping him get his start.

And as Captain Clyde said, "When you've followed the water all your life and you've got it in your blood, it's hard to give it up."

Captain Clyde gives the signal and the hydraulic dredges are lowered. Two men work one dredge on each side of the boat. The skipjack pulls the dredges across the oyster rock and Captain Clyde can tell by the wind and the pull of the dredges when it's time to bring them up. He yells "ho" and the dredges are hoisted.

Made of rope and chain with



Midwinter harvesting is done by sleek sailing ships, skipjacks, which pull their dredges across the oyster beds of the Chesapeake Bay. Their number has decreased from more than 1500 at the turn of the century to only about 30 today.

teeth for scraping the bottom, each dredge is lifted by two men, and its treasure dumped on deck. If the wind is strong, the dredges immediately are dropped back in the water.

The men quickly cull the oysters from the shells and other debris. Some of them like to sit on their haunches for this work, others kneel, and some stand bent over from the waist and throw the oysters behind them as if they are centering a football. They say it depends on where you want it to "git you" — in the back or in the knees.

When Captain Clyde finds an area he wants to work, Russell puts down buoys at each end of the run to provide a general guide to the good "licks."

However, this morning two skipjacks from the Eastern Shore sail over to the western side of work "Old Rock." Apparently they've heard the Dee is doing well there. Not wanting to share the bounty with competitors, Captain Clyde moves off a bit, finding the licks not so good. The other two skipjacks take positions nearby and work the same area — moving back and forth — performing the centuries-old water ballet of workboats under sail.

After hearing a comment on the sparseness of the licks, crew member Francis Cullison, a 31-year-old waterman from St. George's Island on the western shore who has been oystering since he was 12 years old, says,

"Captain Clyde'll find us some arsters soon as them drudge boats leave."

And he's right. After a couple of hours the other skipjacks go back to the Eastern Shore where they

know the oyster rocks, and the Dee's licks improve.

By 9:30 a.m., Russell has shucked "a mess of arsters" and crew member John Wright has whipped up a big batch of oyster stew and a pot of bean soup. When it seems by midmorning that the Dee has the whole Bay to itself and a good oyster rock below, the water goes "dish ca'm" — calm as a dish.

"Ain't neither breath," Cullison says and that means the sails won't move the dredges.

The one dredge in the water is enough to anchor the boat. It is quiet and beautiful on the Bay, but time's-a-wasting and they may have to push the skipjack back to the harbor with another day lost to the weather.

"Don't bother me none," crew member Bob Walker, 47, says, "Everything out here depends on the weather and you gotta accept that."

Around noon a breeze begins to stir — enough to work one dredge at a time — and a little later a good wind blows for sailing. The dredges do gown and come up full.

"Right good lick," Russell says. "Right smart of arsters. Right smart of shells, too," he laughs.

They work without stopping until 5 p.m. when it's time to head back to shore. The crew sails home on a stiff breeze, takes down the sails and pushes the skipjack into harbor with the yawl. Twelve hours, six men, and a "mighty fine rig" have brought in 80 bushels of the fattest oysters in the Bay.

"I don't have to make a lot of money for this to be satisfying," Russell says.

"It's a good life — an independent life. It's my life, that's all."

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ROSEMONT, Ill. — Six new American Dairy Association radio commercials for milk went on the air February 16. They will be heard in approximately 75 percent of the U.S. through May.

Two of the new spots are musical, presenting milk's good taste in both a 60-second and 30-second version of a Milk's The One theme song. In four new humorous commercials, the "Cows of America" once again present Great Moments in History, starring famous figures from America's past.

Babe Ruth and Thomas Edison are interviewed in the two 30-second "Great Moments" spots. Ruth reveals that he was motivated to become home run

king because he wanted to "run home" for a glass of milk. Edison is trying to iron out a few problems with his new invention—a mechanical cow. In one of the 60-second spots, George Washington makes the troops wait to cross the Delaware while he makes sure he has enough milk for the trip. In the other, Benjamin Franklin tries to convince a nosey neighbor kid that he invented milk.

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