

# 'Combining' Oysters

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catching must be by sail power). Here, the water was about 17 feet deep. The dredges were pulled along about 10 minutes. First mate Earl said, "You fellows help here." Four husky farmers pulled on each rope, a few grunts were let out, and up she came.

The catch was dumped on deck. Black shelled critters were all grown over with snail-like things called mussels. The dredge was tossed over again and soon hauled up — a good catch this time, what the fisher folk call the real "Ostrea Virginica."

The captain whipped out an oyster knife and cut one open. He revealed the vital organs, the grey oyster blood, and the oyster pump.

The captain explained that oysters live by pumping water through their bodies, as much as 35 gallons a day, and feeding on minute organisms filtered from the water (therefore, polluted water is a no-no).

The shellfish, called "Ostrea Virginica," makes an interesting creature. This bivalve mollusk is first male, then switches to female. The female deposits the eggs in the water, and the male sends out the sperm. When the young start to grow, they form shells and settle to the bottom. Here they attach to rocks or to other oysters, usually in 15-20 feet of water.

The temperature must be 68 to 70 degrees. All spawning is in the summer when no harvesting is allowed. At that time they also have a salty taste. They grow about an inch a year, mature at three years, and maximum fertility is 4 to 7 years.

It takes about six dozen large oysters to make a bushel, worth about \$55. Each waterman lays claim to his own oyster bed, and woe to those who intrude.

The last oyster war was three

years ago. At that time, a trespassing oyster catcher was shot down by gunfire. Years ago, dueling over oyster beds was common.

And oysters purify the water. S. M. Saake set two glass aquariums on the cabin roof, poured sea water in both, and put a half dozen oysters in the one. Two hours later, as the passengers stepped off the boat, it was easily seen that the water in the oyster aquarium was much clearer.

A little motorboat drew up on the starboard aft. "Are these your oyster beds?" asked one of the boat's hands. The captain replied, "No, this is a tour, we're not catching. All the catch is dumped back in. Who's the waterman, anyway?"

That was the Maryland State Biologist, Christ Jody. He kept checking the oyster growth, the silt levels, and the underwater grasses.

The oyster boat's speed was about 4 knots (or 6 mph) heading south toward Talley's Point.

S. M. Saake got ready to take a mud sample. A clam, shell-like device was dropped overboard, and a double handful of mud was pulled up and dumped on the deck.

He said, "If this stinks, we know there is excess nutrients coming down the rivers. This takes the oxygen out of the water, then the oysters can't grow."

The passengers smelled the black gook, which had a manure scent. Could it have been the heifer manure spread by a farmer upstate just before that cloudburst on June 19?

Nancy took the helm and brought the boat around, heading toward Kent Island. Off the port bow lie a large freighter waiting to enter Baltimore Harbor. The captain said the wait may cost as much as \$10,000 a day.

Why all this fuss about save the Chesapeake? Well, it flows almost

past Washington, D.C.,'s front door. Some believe that a lot of congress members and representatives boat and fish in the Chesapeake, and they want it clean. If tax dollars are doled out for any watershed program, they want to see results.

And how does this affect us along the lowly Pequea Creek, 80 nautical miles from the Chesapeake? Well it's part of the Susquehanna River Basin, which drains 13 million acres and is home to 3 million people. And this basin supplies 50 percent of the Bay's fresh water. So the cleanup should begin right here at home.

Saake gave the farmers a little enlightenment. He said that about half of the sediment is plain dirt. And 40 percent of that came 20 years ago when hurricane Agnes and its high swift water carried all that into the Chesapeake. A portion of the nutrients, mainly nitrogen and phosphorus, comes from the farms.

(All the fence rows that farms had 70 or so years ago held a lot of runoff in check, but they are gone now.)

Some nitrogen comes from lightning storms and some comes from engine emissions. And there is a lot of development runoff.

Suddenly the droning of the engine quit. Passengers glanced aft and saw the captain checking the engine using his fishing net pole like a stethoscope. What was the problem? It was making a clicking sound. He added a quart of oil and stepped back into the deck. The motor was started again and the boat began to move.

It was soon high noon, way past dinner time, and stomachs were growling.

Since all ate at an early hour, thoughts were, "when do we eat?"



Ron Saake explains the life cycle of the oyster to attentive Lancaster Countians.

Soon they were heading up the Severin River.

The Captain shouted, "Lower the main sail!" First mate Earl took the rope off, the cleat tacklings creaked, and down came the canvas. All hands lined up along the boom to help furl it up. Then the gasket was passed up and rolled out over the sail and made fast. The

Jib sail came down, and the boom was lowered.

The boat entered the harbor. The captain said this is ego alley. New boat owners like to strut back and forth to show off their boats.

Now came the best show of seamanship, turning and docking the 58-foot boat in the 130-foot wide

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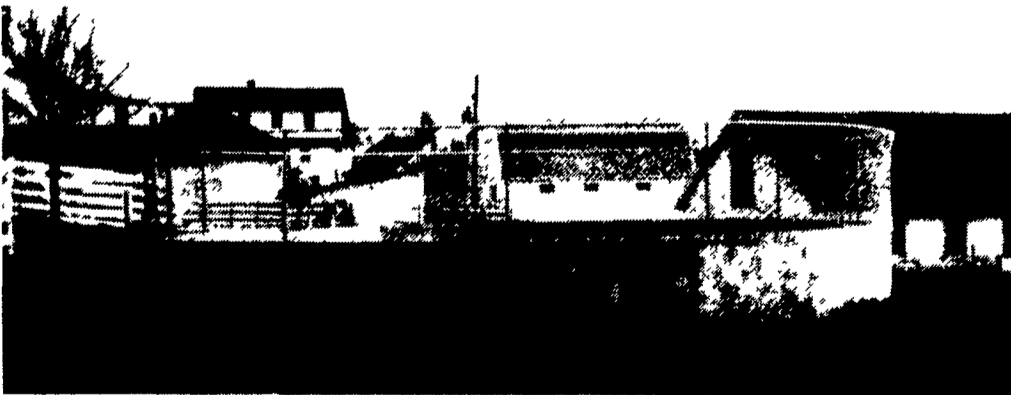
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