

# BLUE-EYED GIANTS OF BAY FIGHT WIND AND WAVE IN QUEST OF THE DOCILE OYSTER

## Boatmen of South Jersey a Distinctive Type, Honest and Industrious—Town Constable With One Arrest in Twelve Years Might Have Stepped From Pages of a Barrie Masterpiece

"O Oysters, come and walk with us!"  
The Walrus did beseech.  
"A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,  
Along the briny beach;  
We cannot do with more than four,  
To give a hand to each."

The eldest Oyster looked at him,  
But never a word he said;  
The eldest Oyster winked his eye,  
And shook his heavy head—  
Meaning to say he did not choose  
To leave the oyster-bed.

But four young oysters hurried up,  
All eager for the treat;  
Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,  
Their shoes were clean and neat—  
And this was odd, because, you know,  
They hadn't any feet.

**HAIL to the oyster!**  
Subject for gourmands, poets and captains of industry, the docile bivalve has yet to be sung as the symbol and the foundation for a model community and civic virtue.

And yet, a little way up the devious Maurice River, toward Millville, N. J., stands Bivalve, a few scattered huts and the heart of the greatest oystering center of the country.

Folks hear of the quaintness that grows about the life of simple natives whose lot in life is the care of earthy things like sheep or flowers. Folks have ignored too long the picturesque life of the oysterman.

He is as striking as the canniest, dourst native of Barrie's Thrums. He is as strong as an ox, though he wrestles only with the gentle oyster; he is as peaceable as Wearystar, the town constable of Thrums; he is as law abiding as the Little Minister himself.

What there is of social life of the oystermen of Cumberland County is mainly in Port Norris after sundown, or Middletown, but activity during the day is all at Bivalve or Maurice River.

Were it not for the oyster, Bivalve would not exist. Were it not for the oyster, these great bronze men would be out of jobs. Were it not for the oyster, the little shanty homes would be desolated, the struggling families ruined.

Times are "good" or times are "bad," depending solely on the oyster. The oyster at Bivalve is supreme!

Along the wharves of the river are anchored sloops as pretty with their rigging as any sailing craft afloat. Not to count Sunday, every day from the 1st of September through freezing winter to the end of June, these oysters slip down the river into the all-perceptible estuary of the bay and ally Maurice River Cove; and very late afternoon, deck loaded with molluscs, they return with their tired but singing crews. At certain times of the season—notably in late October—the larger boats stay out overnight, returning on the morrow weighted to the rails.

**Great Roughened Men—Yet With Gentle Hearts**

And the crews of these busy craft are gaunt, strong men, with hands knotted like the trunks of oaks, with faces seamed with the icy winds and the storms of the waterways. Great, roughened creatures, with gentle hearts—loved by their admiring children, lords of the women of their bosom.

In Bivalve, or in Maurice River, or in both of these towns, during some part of the day are to be found virtually every oysterman of Salem County. They stand rarely short of six feet. They are a distinct genre. As a rule, their eyes are blue or gray, like the weather, and their hair thick and fair where the sun has not burned it.

Their women have a sturdy comeliness. Down several generations, the industry of oystering has been solely in their hands. Fathers have been oystermen before them, sons will be oystermen after them. And the grueling hardship of their work, the hours upon hours of heart-breaking toil they seem to thrive upon.

And though thousands of oysters are shipped through their hands to points everywhere in the country, they themselves never eat them. Nor do these sailors ever go sailing for the pleasure of it, any more than a tolerable good barkeeper ever drank for the pleasure of it.

It's a curious world, which owns to such quaint places within shadow of the gates of its great cities.

The oystermen of Bivalve would be conspicuous men anywhere. Even with that weather-beaten background of oars and shanks, these strong men are conspicuous—not only the oystermen, but the ticket agent of Bivalve and the storekeeper and the town constable.

George Bailey, the town constable, has been re-elected every year for the past twelve. He lives mostly in a ramshackle boat that he manages by some miraculous power to keep afloat while he bats each into his queer little wicker pots. He seems rather like an accumulation of seaweed blown momentarily into the shape of a man. The only parts of his person untouched by mill-dew are his broken little pipe (as much as his features as his eyebrows) and his constable's star, which he brightens with polish every morning of his life. His one arrest in twelve long years occurred last spring, and it wasn't a case of the person untouched by mill-dew. Somebody had stolen a pair of shoes from the storekeeper's clerk and Bailey gave up his fishing for two days to investigate.

**Would Not Let Sons Follow Oyster Business**

There comes occasionally to Bivalve Captain Elmer Bateman, man and boy, thirty years a sailor on the coast, and Harry McDonald, his very faithful mate. There is a little melancholy settled there more than two centuries ago. Captain Elmer is now a shipper, but his son, Captain Albert Amos Pepper, clean-lined, handsome fellow, still in his twenties, has command of a boat. A grandson, Byron Amos Pepper, waits to succeed him.

**Village Sherlock Holmes—Demonstrates Theories**

"Well, sir," said Bailey proudly, "I examined pretty nigh all places in this town and I went 'round starin' in folks' eyes to see if they looked guilty like. I settled in my mind it was a certain man what done it and nothin' could tell me it wa'n't. Well, sir, I waited my time and tery soon I saw this here stranger come down the road with a suitcase, like he was fixin' to get out of town."

"Well, sir, I walks up to him and looks him square in the eye and I says: 'See here,' I says, 'I seen'n you got likker in that there grip.' 'No, sir,' he says, 'that don't prove it.' I says, 'Let's have a look in the bag.'"

"Well, sir, he had that grip open quicker'n you'd think and the shoes was right in the middle of it."

"Give them up, in the name of the law," I says, and took 'em right back to the man they belonged to."

Another imposing figure is that of Captain J. C. Caperton, called, according to Maurice River custom, "Cap'n Joel," one of the larger shippers. Whether because of the number of sloops that he owns, or because of his native dignity, or because he has charge of all foraging between Maurice River and Bivalve, he is a person of great influence. His opinion is respectfully solicited before any great matter is decided. His views as regards weather—here where weather has a paramount importance—are taken as oracular.

Still another is "Cap'n Amos," or more explicitly, Captain Amos Pepper, of towering figure, and dark impassive eyes. His speech is the superlative of courtly gravity. "Cap'n Amos" is the oldest oysterman of the river and the only one with a personal recollection of the celebrated Centennial gale. His family is one of the oldest of these very old families. Dutch folk who settled there more than two centuries ago. Captain Amos is now a shipper, but his son, Captain Albert Amos Pepper, clean-lined, handsome fellow, still in his twenties, has command of a boat. A grandson, Byron Amos Pepper, waits to succeed him.

There is also the hostess of the Maurice River House who provides astonishing dinners on tables protected by oil-cloth and who subsists with varying patience each day to an hour of banter, and the storekeeper who is local preacher, and whose convictions will not allow him to sell cigarettes.

The visitor will find many to tell him that the life of the oysterman is a paltry reward, comfort made possible only after one is too old to enjoy them. But one senses this to be but speciously felt and looks for a proof in the comfortable white homes of Port Norris with their vine-screened porches, their gardens and their self-conscious garages.

A man's front yard may be arable and his back yard sterile. So it is that the prospect for oysters and never for

reared banks up to Millville. All this is the "oyster country," though the oysters themselves inhabit not the river, but the bay.

**One Industry Affords Hundreds Employment**

The few scattered hundreds of people who live herabouts subsist directly or indirectly upon the industry. There is a little half-hearted farming, hardly noticeable from the roads; berry patches are frequent sights about the shores, which end sometimes with broken heads.

The old practice of "crimping," which has given the oyster captains of the Chesapeake shore such fantastic reputations, seems to have been un-



Modern methods of (onging oysters. Big scoop lands them by the bushel on deck of oyster boats. Circle inset shows George Bailey, town constable of Bivalve, N. J., who holds unusual record of one arrest in twelve years.



Captain Amos Pepper, his son Walter and his grandson, Byron Amos. "Cap'n Amos" is the oldest oysterman along Maurice River.

known in New Jersey, though "oyster piracy" was no phenomenon.

This reason for the non-appearance of any large port crew lies, but a much better reason was the peculiarly concentrated little shanty along the river, subsidiary, like everything else, to oystering. An efficient oyster boat costs from \$2,000 to \$35,000, and as many as five of them may belong to a single owner.

The comparative morality of the oystermen of Delaware Bay possibly helped considerably toward their gradual ascendancy over the short-time oystermen of the Chesapeake.

Winding out from the head of Maurice River and into the great cove one finds, rising above the gray waters of the bay irregular and seemingly endless lines of small, tin-hulled, or, perhaps sometimes of brass not dead at all. So it is, all across the coast from the light-houses that run either arm of the flat land, and it seems all over the bay, even across to the Delaware shore.

**"Claim Jumping" Calls For Severe Punishment**

These are "stake" and mark the holdings of the various oystermen, not though the stakes are in appearance almost precisely alike, to confuse one pair for another's, upon the system, a term in jail for the captain and his crew.

The natural wonder of the landholder why this does not happen every day clears a little when it is explained that the whole bay had been put to a most careful survey, and that a man with sufficient sense to be in charge of a ship is presumed to have enough to know his own part of the water.

The difficulty is largely in early spring after the ice has melted, most of the stakes, and may once meet by planted in precisely the same place. The process of "claiming" is simply to

pushing them over the side of the boat into the soft bed of the bay until they stick.

These holdings or "stake" range in the main from ten to a hundred acres, though the largest of them are more than 200 acres. More than one 100-acre, of course, may be leased to a single person or firm, and there are some whose holdings run above 2,000 acres.

**Monopoly System Is Well Guarded Against**

It was also announced that, though lease would be granted to present holders, no further leases would be given to individuals living outside the State or to firms incorporated elsewhere.

This was done, it was said, to prevent monopoly, threatened at that time by certain groups of Philadelphia oystermen.

The oystermen were far from being uniform in approval of the law. Many of them who wished to retire were prevented from selling their holdings outside of the State and declared the law

to be unconstitutional, since it restricted interstate commerce. Others protested that monopoly was even more imminent, because nothing was needed now but political patronage to secure it.

Some of the smaller oystermen declared that the State itself had no right to lease the oyster beds; that they were public property and should be free for all to dredge in, just as all were free to cruise in the bay.

Nevertheless the law remained, and is still the law under which the industry is conducted.

Each year the commission designates three of the sloops as oyster boats. This means that the crews give over dredging altogether and devote themselves to watching for poachers and violators of the "rough cut" law, for which they are duly compensated by the State.

Arrived between its rightful pair of stakes the sloop begins dredging. The engine is slowed to a hardly perceptible movement. The dredge, a triangular iron net resembling somewhat an old-fashioned street-car fender, is connected by a cable to a great iron sloop amidship and lowered over the side. Perhaps a bit of fo'c's'le is raised to steady the boat, or, if the wind is right, the engine may be altogether suppressed and the boat procecd by sail power alone.

The dredge scurries along the bed of the cove or bay gathering up the oysters. The central engine that turns the sloop is started. In a moment the connection that winds the sloop is made and the dredge comes clanking up the side. Two men seize it and empty its contents upon the deck. Other men on their knees pick up the oysters one by one and tap them with a hammer. Those oysters that give a flat sound are kept and those that sound hollow are thrown back into the water. This is called "rough cutting" an examination ordered by law. At any time during or after the dredging the police boat may see fit to inspect the haul. They tap the shells for themselves and if 10 per cent or more of the oysters on deck are found "hard," that is to say, insufficiently developed, the captain is liable to a severe penalty.

The oystermen are constantly complaining that the percentage is far too small; that the most painstaking captain cannot make his "rough cut" so meticulous that a day will not come when the percentage of "hards" will be slightly more than ten. The maximum, they say, should be fixed at least at twenty. The case is certainly not one whose merits can be decided by an outsider, but an outside is encouraged to observe the facts; that practically every oyster captain, even one of accredited integrity, sailing in the cove or in the bay, has been at some time or another caught by the "rough cut" law, and that prosecution has never been brought against a shellfish commissioner, no matter how extensive his operations in the oyster beds.

**This Year's "Harvest" May Be Worth \$5,000,000**

Last year a little more than \$4,000,000 worth of oysters were carried in the shell over these roads from Bivalve and Maurice River. Last year was an average year, while some it may run as well above \$5,000,000. In the peak of the oyster season—late autumn and early winter the average shipment is about sixty carloads a day, though it often runs to ninety.

A single shipper may get rid of more than a million oysters in a week, though the exports for this space of time are more often within a few hundred thousand.

It should be understood that legal possession of the oyster changes four times or often in the process of its removal from the bed and its transfer to some table. Some of the shippers have their own boats and dredges, but more frequently they buy the oysters from the sloop captains as they are brought alongside the wharf. The rate is so much a thousand and the oysters are counted by the captain and his crew with one oyster thrown into an open basket to tally the hundreds. This works to the hand and some with immeasurable rapidity. Three or four are taken in one clutch, and for a skilled oysterman the count of a thousand is the work of less than five minutes.

At late afternoon in mid-season the wharves are the scene of a bustling, contrasting queerly with the law aspect of the country. Perhaps 200 men may be counting out yesterday's haul and 200 more dumping the counted oysters into bags or onto the barge in the freight cars. Sometimes there are hundreds of captains and shipper on the head of the wharf, but one of whole the town constable has time to do but bait his ever-ready

Task of sorting oysters for market not a pleasant one, especially when the temperature is below freezing point.



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