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Oystering in Kent Narrows, Maryland

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OYSTERING IN KENT NARROWS, MARYLAND

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PREFACE

This thesis is the result of my research and field-work during the 1976-77 Maryland oyster season. My curiosity about the Kent Narrows oystermen actually began, however, during many trips across the Eastern Shore to Maryland's summer mecca, Ocean City. These drives east brought me in contact with many Eastern Shore inhabitants -- watermen, shopkeepers, farmers, and gas station owners. I was always intrigued by their soft-spoken dialect, their honesty, and especially, their hospitality. Research in early 1976 for a bibliography of Eastern Shore folklife material once again brought me in contact with these people. The idea for this thesis naturally followed.

The severity of the winter of 1976-77 drastically disrupted the oyster season. The Chesapeake Bay was so frozen that none of the workboats could leave its berth. During the warm days, when the temperature rose above freezing, the oystermen would come down to their boats to break the ice pressed hard against the wooden hulls. As I spoke with the oystermen around Kent Narrows, Rock Hall, and Tilghman, during those days, I would inevitably ask the question, "Why do you continue to oyster?" I received many answers--"Too old to quit," "Don't know anything else,"

"Nothing else around here to do except this or farm." The answer, however, is really complex. Some of my informants tried easier and sometimes more lucrative work, but still returned to follow the water. In my opinion, the freedom of self-employment, with its corrolaries of working one's own hours and self-limited income, induce many oystermen to stay on the water. Ultimately, in conjunction with the inducement of self-employment, is the feeling, after one has followed the water for a while, that nothing else is quite right.

I owe acknowedgements to many people. The Kent Narrows oystermen, shuckers, and blacksmiths who allowed me on their boats and in their homes, deserve more thanks than I can express here. A special thanks is owed to the librarians at the West Street Branch of the Anne Arundel Library who tracked down many obscure written sources and pulled strings to obtain them for me from all over the United States. Each member of my thesis committee deserves my gratitude for their support and astute criticism. Each of them--Dr. Kenneth Clarke who chaired the committee until his retirement in May 1977, Dr. Lynwood Montell who ultimately chaired it, Dr. Burt Feintuch and Dr. Albert Petersen--helped to make the thesis as strong as it could possibly be. The greatest support came from my wife, Susan, who pursued her career as a registered nurse, kept our home, and never complained as I wandered hither and yon in search of Eastern Shore folklife.

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Center for Intercultural and
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Kent Narrows is one of the many small fishing areas located along the banks of the Chesapeake Bay. The fishing industry located there concentrates on the harvesting and canning of Chesapeake Bay shellfish, specifically oysters, crabs, and clams. This study is concerned with the collection of the traditional elements of the three occupations comprising the oyster harvest at Kent Narrows: (a) handtonging, (b) oyster shucking, and (c) blacksmithing of the oystermen's tools. Although the Kent Narrows oyster industry has developed since the 1930s, many of the traditional tools and work situations were borrowed from other fishing areas of the Bay. Generally they have remained unchanged since that time. An attempt was made to isolate the influences either causing change or stabilizing the traditional elements of the oyster occupations. It was found that the completion of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge in 1952 stimulated the fishing industry at Kent Narrows by improving transportation. Other influences, such as Maryland State Law limiting harvests, have kept the occupations traditionally stable, exemplified by the continued use of handtongs, shucking knives, and other traditional tools.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Along both the western and eastern shores of the Chesapeake Bay lie many small towns and villages. Each of these towns relies almost entirely for survival on the fishing industries that have developed in it. The Chesapeake provides all types of fin and shellfish on which each town is dependent. Collectively these towns comprise the Chesapeake Bay fishing industry, which has existed since the first settlements at Jamestown in Virginia.

The purpose of this study is not to focus on the Chesapeake Bay fishing industry but on one of the small fishing industries that comprises the larger one. It may seem redundant to refer to both systems as industries but the fact is that each village or town is largely autonomous, having its own wharves, processing plants, and markets. However, when politicians, the media, or anyone else refers to the Chesapeake Bay fishing industry, they are actually referring to the composite.

Each small fishing industry along the Bay retains its own identity. Although a comparison of these small industries shows that they have many similar elements, there are also many differences, and it is better to focus on each

industry for its own merits. The purpose of the thesis, then, is to discuss the fishing industry centered at Kent Narrows, a small waterway separating Kent Island from the Maryland Eastern Shore.

The large peninsula comprised of parts of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia is known as the "Eastern Shore," and the "Delmarva Peninsula." Inhabitants of this area, surrounded by the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, usually refer to themselves as being "from the Eastern Shore." The isolation of the Eastern Shore by the Chesapeake Bay has resulted in a population that differs in many social and cultural respects from the populations found on the western shore. Kent Narrows is part of the Eastern Shore and as such shares its culture. There are differences between the culture (and the subsequent traditions) of Kent Narrows and that of the rest of the Eastern Shore. Kent Island is the first stop for tourists and vacationers from the more cosmopolitan western shore after crossing the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. This, in turn, has resulted in varying influences on the Kent Narrows region.

The focus of discussion in this thesis will be on the oyster industry found at Kent Narrows. Although the oyster industry on the Chesapeake Bay has existed for over 200 years, the Kent Narrows oyster industry has developed only since the early 1900s, however, and is essentially the same as those previous to it.

There is an annual cycle of occupations practiced by the Kent Narrows oystermen. In the larger sense, they are

watermen, who are, depending on the season of the year, oystermen. In this thesis they will be referred to as oystermen because it is the specific term they use to identify themselves during the oyster season. They are all, in a larger sense, watermen because they follow the water year round.

There is a very definite cycle of events followed by the watermen around Kent Narrows. All of these events either fit into the seasonal pattern of the region or are prescribed by law. In order to understand how important the Chesapeake Bay is to the watermen, one needs to observe the occupations they pursue each year.

The largest part of the year is spent at oystering around Kent Narrows. Maryland state law stipulates the oyster season runs from September fifteenth of one year to March thirty-first of the next. Sometimes the season is extended if the weather (such as the freeze of 1977) prohibits a large number of working days during the season. Since oystering has the longest season, it generally is the most profitable, although a waterman can often earn a higher per diem wage from crabbing. There are different types of oystering on the Chesapeake Bay--dredging, patent tonging, and handtonging--but handtonging is the only type performed around Kent Narrows.

After the oyster season ends at the end of March each year, there is a general lull during which most of the watermen prepare their boats for the crab season. Some few,

however, begin to trap eels. Eels are used, salted, as bait in the crab pots and on crab trotlines.[1] The eelers use some of their eel for their own crabbing, but most of the eels they sell to crabbers who do not catch eels themselves.[2] Eels are caught in elongated cylindrical traps, using pieces of horseshoe crab for bait. After the traps are emptied each day, the eels are salted and stored in barrels. The eeling season has no legal limits but generally continues through August of each year.

As the end of May begins to draw near, the Kent Narrows watermen will prepare their crabbing apparatus. The few crab potters around the Narrows will start to lay their pots along the shoal waters around Kent Island. The many trotliners will inspect and repair their lines. Sometime during the last week of May or the first two weeks of June, the crabs will "begin to run," that is to say, the crab migration northward from their hibernation in the southern Chesapeake Bay mud will have reached the Kent Narrows area. The Kent Narrows watermen will then harvest crabs through the summer until the crabs begin to migrate south in the fall.

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[1]There are essentially two professional methods used in the Chesapeake Bay for catching crabs. The first, crab potting, uses large square chicken wire boxes into which the crabs are lured and trapped. The second method, trotlining, involves luring the crabs to the water surface using bait attached to long lines. The crabs are then scooped into the boat using a dipnet.

[2]Varley Lang, Follow the Water (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, Publisher, 1961), p. 79.

The only type crabs caught for human consumption in the Chesapeake Bay are the so-called Maryland Blue Crabs.

Generally speaking, the watermen's annual cycle is divisable by two major occupations--oystering and crabbing. When the crab season lets up in late September, those watermen who had not been oystering since September fifteenth will begin.

The only other occupation pursued by the Kent Narrows watermen is fishing, which is done nearly year round, depending on the type of fish running. Fishing is a secondary occupation performed by dragging nets behind the oyster and crab boats, depending on the season. Graph 1 illustrates the annual occupational cycle of the Kent Narrows watermen.

American folklife scholarship is comparatively recent in light of the folklore scholarship based on the collection and study of oral genres during the early twentieth century in America. In recent years, however, American folklife scholars have contributed greatly to the study of material culture. Examples of these contributions are Henry Glassie's Pattern in the Material Culture of the Eastern United States[3] and his Folk Housing in Middle Virginia.[4] More concerned with the processes of production

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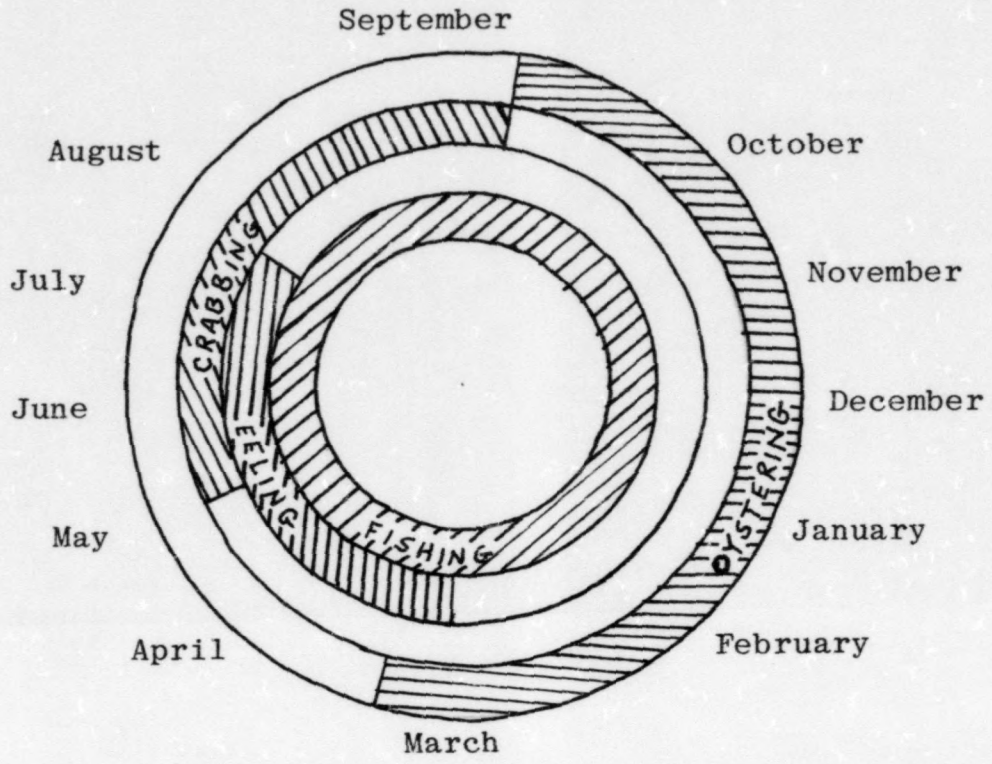
[3]Henry Glassie, Pattern in the Material Culture of the Eastern United States (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1968).

[4]Idem, Folk Housing in Middle Virginia (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1975).



Graph 1. Annual occupational cycle of the Kent Narrows watermen. Not all the watermen pursue each occupation.

and the techniques involved is Michael Owen Jones' The Handmade Object and Its Maker.[5] Additionally, Jones has also demonstrated a concern for the social and cultural contexts in which items are produced. He has written on this subject in several articles, especially "The Study of Traditional Furniture: Review and Preview."[6] Cultural geographers have also pioneered in the area of American material culture. Fred Kniffen, a geographer and material culturalist, was an important contributor to material culture scholarship. He also inspired many of his students toward similar studies. Malcolm Comeaux's Atchafalaya Swamp Life: Settlement and Folk Occupations[7] is a prime example.

European folklife scholars concerned themselves with the collection of folklife long before the Americans. A prime example of this is Sean O'Suilleabhain's A Handbook of Irish Folklore, published in 1942.[8] Additionally, the

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[5]Michael Owen Jones, The Handmade Object and Its Maker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

[6]Idem, "The Study of Traditional Furniture: Review and Preview," Keystone Folklore Quarterly, Winter Issue (1967): 233-245.

[7]Bob F. Perkins, gen. ed., Geoscience and Man (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1972), vol. II: Atchafalaya Swamp Life: Settlement and Folk Occupations, by Malcolm Comeaux.

[8]Sean O'Suilleabhain, A Handbook of Irish Folklore (Dublin: Educational Company of Ireland, 1942).

British journal, Folklife, the Irish journal, Ulster Folklife, and the Danish journal, Tools and Tillage, are modern examples of continued European interest in folklife scholarship.

This thesis followed the examples set by European and American folklife scholars. In particular, the works of Henry Glassie and Michael Owen Jones have been used as guidelines for both fieldwork and research. Although this thesis follows the outline of Comeaux's Atchafalaya Swamp Life: Settlement and Folk Occupations, I have attempted to supplement Comeaux's geographic view with Jones' ideas of identifying the cultural context within which oystermen work. The greatest amount of time has been spent in describing the work and the work situations. This has resulted in the placing of several unique occupations into their environmental and cultural context for presentation. These are: (a) handtonging for oysters, (b) oyster shucking, and (c) blacksmithing.

Chapter II describes the Kent Narrows area geographically and historically. The geography and history of the area play an important role in the successes of and influences on the occupations. Chapter II also contains a short history of the Chesapeake Bay oyster industry.

Chapter III contains the descriptions of and uses of the tools associated with the occupations, especially handtonging. Students of American folklife have concerned

themselves chiefly with the manifestations of the use of tools, in other words, the end product. Thus, American folklife scholarship has produced collections and analyses of folk arts and crafts, but discussion of specialized tools for performance of the craft has been minimal and peripheral. The tools are especially important in the discussion of oyster handtonging since there is no reusable product. Oysters serve only as a source of food. Included in this chapter are the taxonomies of the parts of the various tools with the local names and descriptions of each implement.

Handtonging for oysters requires some years to master because there are several processes and techniques that exist in its performance. Raising the oyster ladened tongs would be a difficult task for the novice oysterman, as would locating the oyster beds on a bay bottom of rocks and debris. Chapter IV, then, is a discussion of the processes and techniques used by the Kent Narrows oystermen. Also discussed are the techniques involved in oyster shucking, that is, the opening of the shells and removal of the oyster meat for canning. As will be explained, this occupation is performed only by the black population surrounding Kent Narrows.

The last chapter discusses some of the exterior influences on the oyster industry at Kent Narrows. The area is presently subject to faster change than at any time in its history due to a population influx from the Baltimore-Washington corridor on the western shore of the Bay. Since

Kent Island is the eastern terminus of the Bay Bridge, the overflow of the expanding western shore population has resulted in land speculation and urbanization in the area. Also discussed are the traditional elements of the oyster industry that contain the industry, allowing it to, so far, remain largely unaltered.

Curiously, although much literature exists about oysters, the Chesapeake Bay, and the Eastern Shore, a detailed study of the oystermen as a folk group or oystering as an occupation, has not been written previous to this thesis. One book, The Oystermen of the Chesapeake,[9] is largely a photographic essay by Robert DeGast, a Baltimore newspaper photographer. DeGast offers about twenty pages of text on oystering. Varley Lang's Follow the Water[10] discusses all the various fishing occupations of the Chesapeake Bay watermen. Beautiful Swimmers,[11] by William Warner, is the most recent book on the Chesapeake. It centers around the crabbing industry, however. All three of these books, plus most other non-biological and non-ecological materials, tend to propagate a "folksy" or "quaint" attitude for both the occupations and the people. One folklorist, George Carey, spent considerable time studying the folklore of the

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[9]Robert DeGast, The Oystermen of the Chesapeake (Camden, Me.: International Marine, 1970).

[10]Lang, Follow the Water. Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, 1961.

[11]William W. Warner, Beautiful Swimmers (Boston-Toronto: Little, Brown, and Co., 1976).

Eastern Shore as a professor at the University of Maryland and as Maryland State Folklorist. His work resulted in three books and several articles. The first book, A Faraway Time and Place: Lore of the Eastern Shore,[12] is a general discussion and collection of the various traditional oral genres of the people of the Eastern Shore. The other two books, Maryland Folk Legends and Folk Songs [13] and Maryland Folklore and Folklife,[14] are representations of the folklife of the entire state.

It is my hope that this thesis, centered around the oyster occupations of Kent Narrows, will add significantly to the folklife scholarship of the region.

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[12]George G. Carey, A Faraway Time and Place: Lore of the Eastern Shore (Washington and New York: Robert B. Luce, Inc., 1971).

[13]Idem, Maryland Folk Legends and Folk Songs (Cambridge, Md.: Tidewater Publishers, 1971).

[14]Idem, Maryland Folklore and Folklife (Cambridge, Md.: Tidewater Publishers, 1970).

CHAPTER II

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY OF THE KENT NARROWS AREA

The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in the United States. Containing about 8,100 miles of shoreline, the numerous inner bays and rivers that comprise the shoreline are nearly all sheltered. In addition, the many rivers that empty into the Bay provide nutrients for large populations of shell and fin fish.[1] These large fish populations, combined with the miles of sheltered shoal water in the Bay, have nurtured what is known as the Chesapeake Bay fishing industry. This fishing industry is composed of several smaller industries. All of the men and women who follow the water, except those who work in the packing houses, are considered self-employed by the United States government. Be they crabbers, oystermen, clammers, eelers, or fin fishermen, (or any combination of these) these men all earn their livelihood by working the Chesapeake Bay.

Since the Chesapeake Bay contains the potential for a successful fishing industry, many small fishing

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[1] L. Eugene Cronin, Preface to The Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, by Alice Jane Lippson (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973), p. vii.

settlements have developed along both the western and eastern shores. Especially on the eastern shore side, these settlements remained relatively isolated until recent years when improved transportation and communication dragged them into the twentieth century.

The material culture of Kent Narrows is intimately related to the history and geography of the area and to the oystering activities there. For this reason, this chapter is divided into three sections: (a) a history and description of Chesapeake Bay oystering, (b) the geography of the Kent Narrows area, and (c) the history of Kent Narrows.

History of Oystering on the Chesapeake Bay

The Chesapeake Bay has been a prime area for oysters for centuries. Even before the European landings, the Indians gathered oysters for roasting. This is evidenced by the large number of shells found among kitchen middens along the Bay shore. Lang claims nearly ninety percent of the shore-dwelling Indian diet consisted of shellfish (including crabs, clams, mussels, and oysters).[2]

Upon landing in Virginia, the early settlers depended heavily on oysters for nourishment. In 1607, George Percy wrote:

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[2]Varley Lang, Follow the Water (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, Publisher, 1961), p. 10.

> . . . the exploring party . . . came to a place where [the Indians] had made a great fire and had beene newly a rosting Oysters . . . . We eat some of the Oysters, which were very large and delicate in taste [sic].[3]

How important oysters were to the settlers can be seen in this letter written to the Virginia Company in England by one of the colonists:

> The most evident hope from altogether starving is Oysters, and for the easier getting of them I have agreed for a [canoe] which will cost me six pounds [sic] .[4]

The development of sailing vessels, mostly shallow water craft adapted from the Indian dugout canoes, soon made harvesting oysters an easy task for the results obtained. The Europeans also improved the rakes used by the Indians by pinning the shafts together to make tongs. The use of handtongs has lasted from then until now. With the use of handtongs and log canoes, oyster harvesting became so popular in the Chesapeake region that by the mid-eighteenth century it was an accepted full-time occupation. Lang further indicates that oysters were so plentiful and inexpensive that they remained a staple in the diets of the poor classes throughout most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[5]

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[3]Marion Vernon Brewington, Chesapeake Bay: A Pictorial Maritime History (Cambridge, Md.: Cornell Maritime Press, 1953), p. 171.

[4]Lang, Follow the Water, p. 11.

[5]Ibid., p. 12.

The oyster industry in the Chesapeake was so successful, however, that it nearly destroyed itself. In New England during the late 1700s, the deeper waters of the Atlantic Ocean had mothered the invention of the dredge for harvesting oysters and clams. In a short time, the New England oyster bars were nearly depleted by the sailing dredge boats. Dredges, or scrapes as they are sometimes called, completely clear all the surface matter from the ocean floor. When the dredges clear the floor, even the floor surface necessary for survival of the shellfish is destroyed. The hard surface necessary for oysters to cling to is reduced to soft mud. When the oysters sink into this mud, they literally starve to death, unable to siphon nutrients from the water. With a market to supply, the New England dredgers headed south, depleting the New York and Delaware beds before arriving at the mouth of the Chesapeake around 1800.[6] The dredge (pronounced "drudge" in Eastern Shore dialect) soon caught on with the Chesapeake Bay fishermen, who sold their harvests to the New England market. Virginia outlawed dredges in 1810, as it was believed they damaged the oyster beds beyond the necessary surface for regeneration of oysters. This forced

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[6]Lang, Follow the Water, p. 51. Also in Brewington, Chesapeake Bay: A Pictorial Maritime History, p. 171.

the New England and Virginia dredgers into Maryland waters. Maryland in turn outlawed dredging in 1820.[7]

The oyster market continued to grow, however. Improved road and rail transportation, the development of the oyster packing industry, and the completion of the Chesapeake and Delaware canal increased the oyster market tremendously. With this potential for profit, the oystermen of Somerset County, Maryland, finally prevailed on the Maryland legislature to legalize dredging in that county's waters in 1854. In 1870, Dorchester County, and in 1874 Talbot County, followed suit. Finally, Maryland legalized dredging in all waters over fifteen feet deep. This law was impossible to enforce; and from 1880 to 1890, oyster fishing produced its largest harvests ever. During those years, twelve to eighteen million bushels were taken from the Bay annually.[8] This is in comparison to the present level of between two and three million per year.[9] After the peak eighteen million bushels during the year 1890, production fell to three million and then to one million annually.[10]

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[7]Marion Vernon Brewington, Chesapeake Log Canoes and Bugeyes, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Md: Cornell Maritime Press, 1963), p. 36.

[8]Lang, Follow the Water, p. 53.

[9]Told to me by Tom Weiland, manager and director of the Maryland Waterman's Association, a union of many of the State's watermen.

[10]Lang, Follow the Water, p. 53.

There were two reasons for the depletion of the Maryland oyster beds. First, dredging left no hard surface for immature oysters to attach themselves to in order to grow to maturity. Not only did dredging ruin the beds, but also oyster packers did not return empty shells to the beds, which may have maintained the surface necessary for oyster growth. Second, neither dredgers nor packers culled oysters in order to return immature and undersized oysters to the beds. Just as in New England, succeeding generations of oysters were destroyed before they could mature. Just as Virginia had suspected eighty years earlier, the dredging operations nearly destroyed the Chesapeake Bay oyster beds.

With the Maryland oyster beds virtually near extinction, the State Legislature gradually took steps to protect what was left. Dredging became limited to Somerset, Dorchester, and Talbot counties. An oyster navy was established to supervise the dredgers, some of which had been marauding the handtong oyster bars. It also became illegal for any oysterman to carry either shell or undersize oysters away from the bars from which they were taken. Culling, as this is called, is one of the major factors for the preservation of the oyster industry today.

One other method established by the State for preserving the oysters is the return of shucked oyster shell to areas that have a potential for superior oyster regeneration. The State was somewhat slow in enacting

this measure; in 1953 a statute was passed entitling the State to fifty percent of all shell shucked at each oyster house.[11]

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources has established other criteria for commercial oystermen to follow since depletion of the beds. All of these rules were enacted in order to preserve the oyster industry. For instance, it is illegal to have in one's possession any oyster under three inches in length from hinge to mouth.[12] A daily catch limit has also been imposed on anyone taking oysters from natural bars in the State. Handtong or patent tong (larger, mechanized tongs) boats are limited to twenty-five bushels per man or seventy-five bushels per boat each day. Of course, the limited oyster season, from September to March, has also helped to preserve the oyster beds.[13]

The interrelationships among handtongers, patent tongers, and dredgers has always been sensitive. The handtongers feel the dredgers have an unfair advantage in harvesting the oysters and that they could, if permitted by law, once again reduce the Bay's oyster supply below

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[11] Ibid., p. 55.

[12] Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Commercial Waterman's Handbook (Baltimore, Md.: Maryland Department of Natural Resources, 1976), p. 16.

[13] Ibid., p. 18.

recoverable limits. There is often verbal rivalry among the oystermen. In recent years the State has so controlled the industry that the United States Government has become the butt of unkind remarks, but this was not always the case. During the 1880s, the limitations on dredgers to remain in waters over fifteen feet deep were seldom enforced. Many handtongers took it upon themselves to protect the few oyster beds they were entitled to. What resulted was much bloodshed and violence between these two groups. Dredgers needed the oyster beds limited to the handtongers and often used cannon and rifles to chase the tongers off the bars. One of these events took place in the Chester River:

> . . . Captain Thomas Contee Bowie Howard was put in command of the "McLane" with orders to stop the trouble. He caught the dredge fleet working a tongers' bar in the Chester River. With a voice that could be heard on the western shore, Captain Tom called on the fleet to surrender. The answer was a hail of bullets. Captain Tom rang up full speed ahead and rammed the nearest dredge boat. Backing off he rammed a second, then headed for a third. Every near dredger surrendered and the rest fled.[14]

The "McLane" was a steam powered vessel belonging to the oyster navy and was one of the few boats capable of competing with the sleek dredging schooners. Often the handtongers would take their defense upon themselves. Some legends still exist around Rock Hall of how the handtongers mounted a cannon on a hill overlooking their bars for protection. One night, however, the oyster dredgers came

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[14]Brewington, Chesapeake Bay: A Pictorial Maritime History, p. 173.

and spirited away the cannon. The next day, the bar was filled with dredge boats.[15] In recent years the Marine Police have been successful in controlling poaching of any kind, and the rivalries have become innocuous.

Oystering developed around Kent Narrows in much the same way it developed in other parts of the Bay. However, unlike most landings that had oyster packing houses to buy the oysters, until 1930 the Kent Narrows oystermen either sold their catches to the buy boats that would come onto the bars or ran their catch to the nearest packing house. The buy boats were simply large shallow drafted boats that bought large quantities of oysters to carry to the packing houses. In 1930, W. A. Thomas built a restaurant and packing house on pilings over the Kent Narrows. This was the beginning of the Kent Narrows shellfish industry.[16]

The channel through Kent Narrows is estimated to have been dug about the late 1800s. Before that time the Narrows were shallow enough that they could be crossed by walking at ebb tide. At one point near the south end of the Narrows, there was once a "wading place" shallow enough to be traversed almost at all tides.[17]

Before Thomas' restaurant and packing house was built, there were only two shacks, one on either side of the

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[15]Told to me by Mike Coursey.

[16]Told to me by Herman Stevens.

[17]Told to me by Margaret Schoch, a local historian living in Chester, Maryland.

Narrows. These were owned by two brothers, John and Tom Burger. In 1902, a rail line that terminated at Love Point was laid across the Narrows. This was used by many of the oystermen to carry their day's catch. The oysters were sold to a buyer, who shipped them to Baltimore via the railroad and the Love Point ferry.[18] Herman Stevens can recall five bridges crossing the Narrows in the last seventy years. One was the railroad bridge, and at least three were covered bridges, the last being the present drawbridge.

After the Narrows became deep enough for regular boat traffic, the oyster industry began to improve around the Narrows. Slowly additional packing houses were built. With the completion of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, the new traffic created by this led to the construction of marinas, restaurants, and seafood stores to try to entice tourists into the Narrows area. Compared to forty years ago, Herman Stevens said to me, "today the Narrows looks like a city."

Geography of Kent Narrows

Harvesting oysters in the Chesapeake Bay is very much dependent on the physical environment. The Kent Narrows oystermen are very much aware of their immediate

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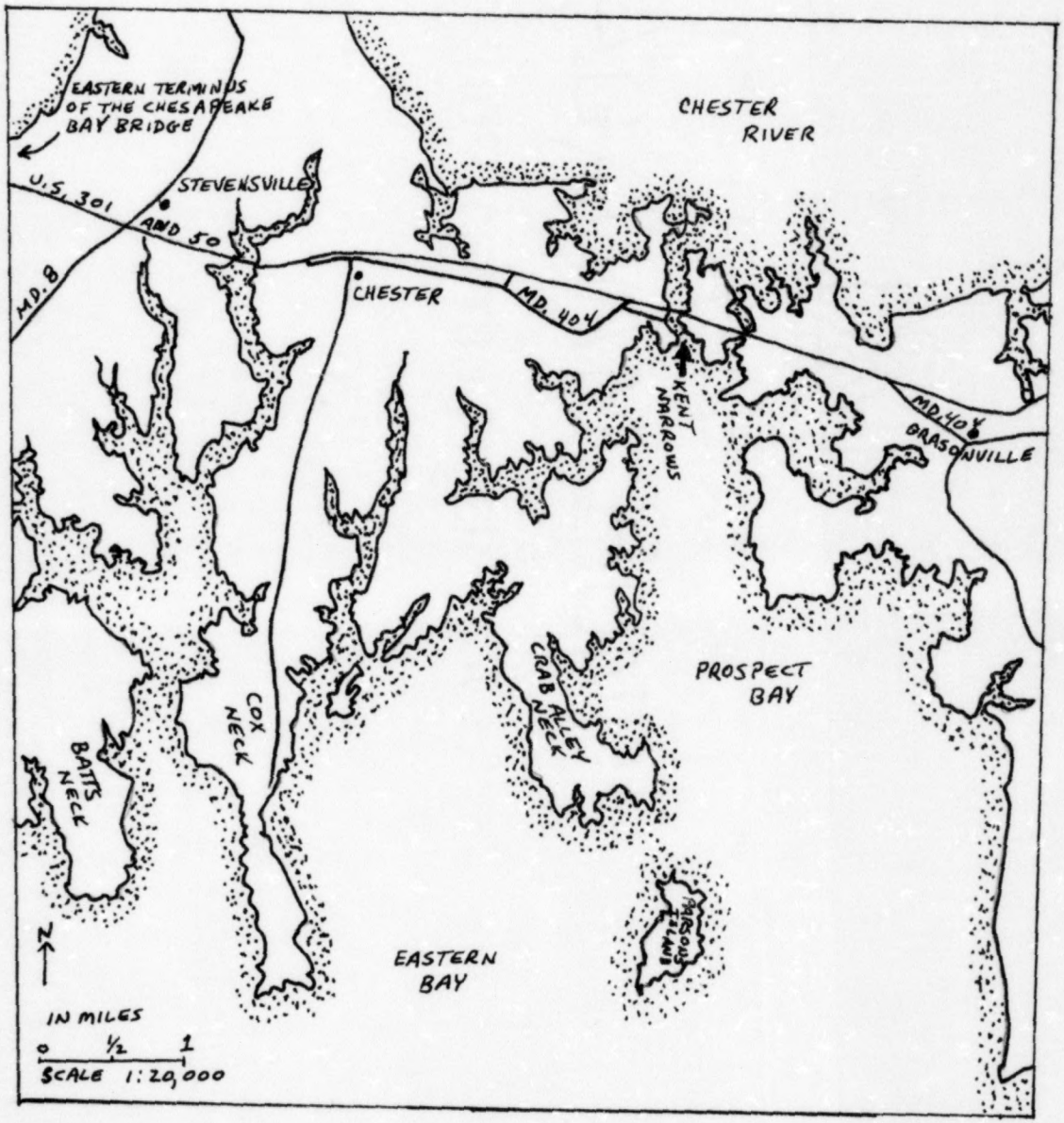
[18]Truitt, Maryland's Oldest Settlement, p. 12. Herman Stevens still remembers the laying of the railroad line. He told me much of the history of the area before I substantiated itwith Truitt.

geography, and it plays an important role in the processes and techniques employed in handtonging. Naturally, being near the oyster beds is of primary importance. Nearly as important, however, is the availability of shelter and protection during inclement weather. As will be shown, the use of landmarks also plays a role in the location of the oyster beds.

Kent Island is the largest island in the Chesapeake Bay. It is located about 150 miles north of the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, almost directly east from Annapolis. It is bordered on the northeast by the Chester River, on the south by Prospect and Eastern bays, and on the west by the Chesapeake. The small waterway joining the Chester River and Prospect Bay and separating Kent Island from the mainland Eastern Shore is the Kent Narrows (map 1). The lower half of Kent Island forms a land mass that separates Eastern and Prospect Bays from the Chesapeake. These two smaller bays and the Chester River are the areas predominantly fished by the Kent Narrows oystermen. There are also numerous creeks and streams around the area such as Cox and Warehouse creeks. All of these are included as part of the Kent Narrows handtonging area. In some years, due to depletion of oysters or lack of growth to legal size on the Kent Narrows' bars, the handtongers may travel as far as Tilghman Island, twenty miles to the south, or the Potomac River, sixty miles away on the western shore of the Chesapeake, in order to harvest. During these



Map 1. Map of Kent Narrows showing the main roads connecting the island with the Eastern Shore mainland. The small road off Route 404 at the Narrows leads to the inlet where most of the watermen keep their boats.

years, the oystermen will leave their boats at a port near the oyster area and drive home daily or on weekends. Some of the older oystermen in the area remember when they used to stay overnight on their open-decked boats in the dead of winter. This usually occurred before motors were placed in boats, and sailing was both hazardous and slow. Map 2 indicates the names and locations of some of the bars generally fished by the Kent Narrows oystermen. The map was adapted from a base map prepared by the Coast and Geodetic Survey for the Department of Tidewater Fisheries, Maryland.

The Kent Narrows forms a near perfect haven for the small deadrise[19] boats used by the watermen. Protected by land on nearly all sides, the narrows has served as a port only during this century. A natural channel dredged by tide and current between the Chester River and Prospect Bay has been deep enough for boats only in recent years. Since the original natural channel was formed, however, it has been kept open by regular dredging. Some sailors consider the shallow sides of the Narrows a hazard for deep-drafted boats. Compared to the unsheltered western shore of Kent Island, the Narrows are relatively safer for the competent navigator.

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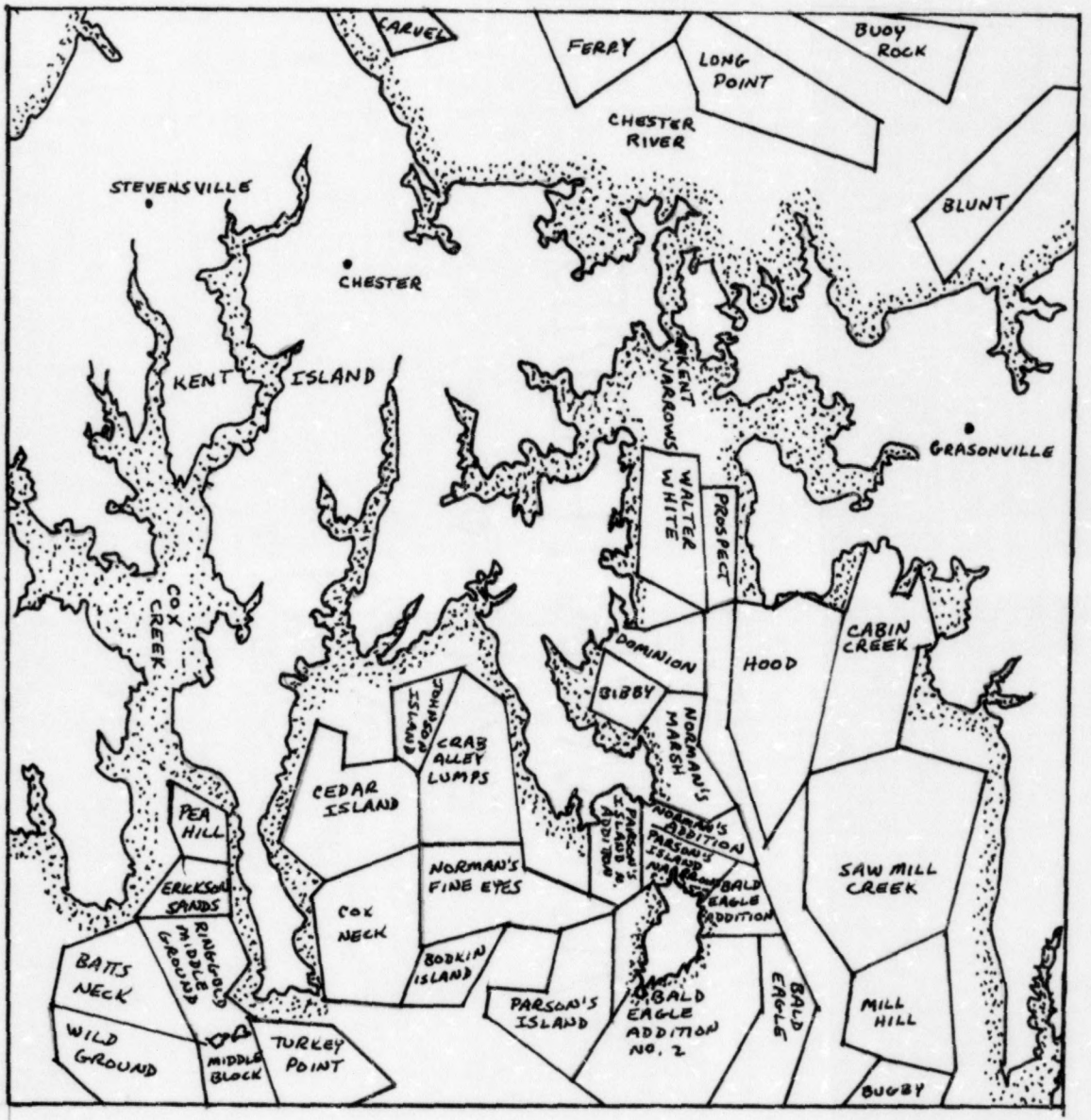
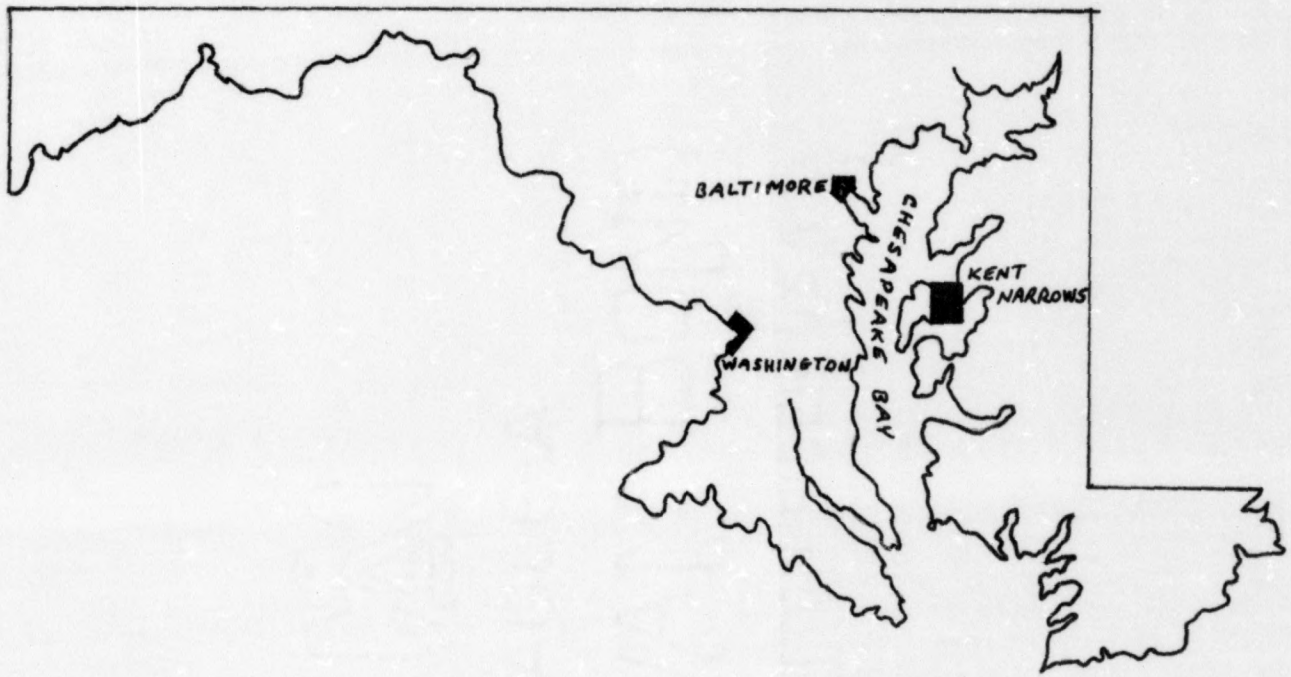
[19]Further discussion of the deadrise workboats is contained in Chapter Three.



Map 2. Names and locations of oyster bars generally fished by the Kent Narrows oystermen.

Note: Adapted from a base map prepared by the Coast and Geodetic Survey for the Department of Tidewater Fisheries, Maryland, Chart No. 7.



Map 3. Maryland showing location of Kent Narrows.

The eastern side of the Narrows holds five of the eight seafood packing houses located in the area. Interspersed with these are several restaurants, boatyards, and fish stores. The packing houses also formerly maintained a large number of shanties for the oyster shuckers to live in during the oyster season. Very few of these are left since the Queen Anne's County Health Department condemned them during the last ten years. The eastern side of the Narrows is still locally known as the "marsh," since up until recent years it was marshland. The first restaurant at the Narrows was built on pilings over the marsh and then filled underneath with sand and oyster shell. This restaurant, built around 1930 by W. A. Thomas, also had a small oyster packing addition to it.[20] Eventually, since that time, the marsh has slowly filled up with oyster shell and sand blown from the channel dredging operations. Some of the packing houses are built entirely on the oyster shell discarded from the other packing houses and then deposited behind bulkheads. Even the parking lots and some of the roads are oyster shell, evidence of the primary sources of livelihood around the Narrows area.

The western shore of the Narrows is an altogether different story. North of the Route 50 bridge that divides the Narrows lies the Piney Narrows Marina, a retail outlet

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[20]Related to me by Herman Stevens.

for sailing and motorized pleasure craft. South of the bridge lies the small inlet maintained by Queen Anne's County for the Kent Narrows workboats (see Photo 1). There is very little evidence of marshland on the western side, as it has been filled with topsoil rather than shell and sand. It is in this area that the Kent Narrows oystermen maintain their boats.

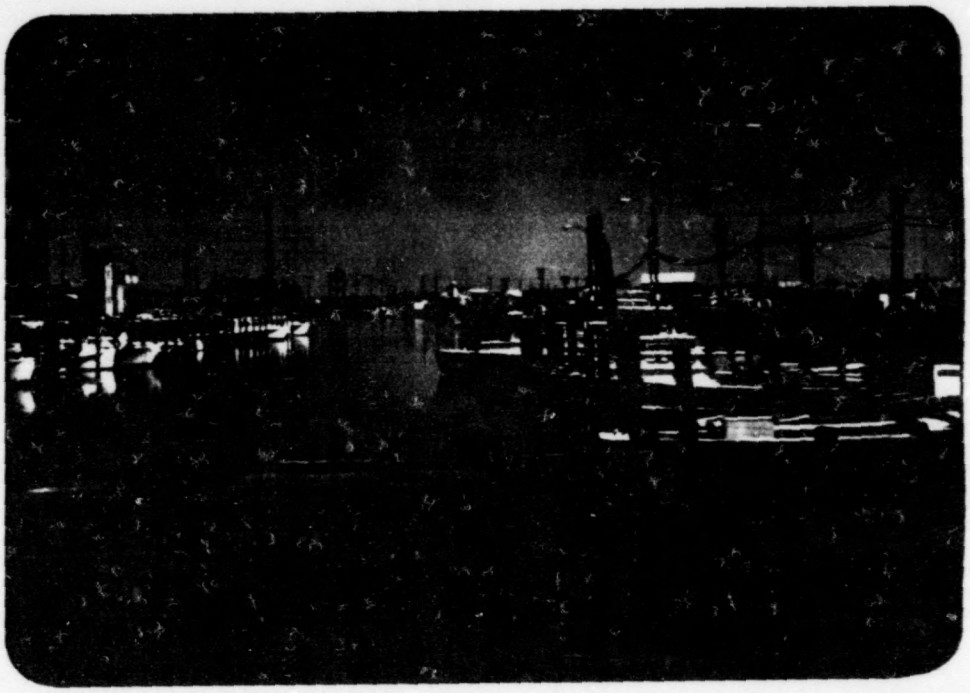

Photo 1. View of the small workboat inlet at Kent Narrows maintained by Queen Anne's County. (Photo by author)

Nearly all of the Kent Narrows oystermen live in or around Chester, Dominion, or Stevensville, on Kent Island. Some others live in Grasonville, on the mainland. Politically, the area is part of Queen Anne's County, comprising election districts Four and Five.

Map 1 also indicates the various main roads that traverse the Kent Narrows area. Most of the roads, such as Routes 8 and 404, once connected the ferries from Baltimore and Annapolis with the rest of the Eastern Shore. In 1952, with the completion of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge (formally the William Preston Lane Memorial Bridge), and the construction of Route 50/301, the Kent Narrows area became the first stop for those travelling east from the western shore of the Bay. The Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Route 50/301 may be the greatest single factor contributing to cultural change in the Kent Narrows area. Further discussion of this will be in the last chapter.

The geography under the water is as important to the oystermen as the geography of the land. As mentioned, Map 2 indicates the various oyster bars frequented by the Kent Narrows oystermen. The United States Coast and Geodetic Survey has prepared a series of maps of the oyster bars in the Chesapeake Bay. Each of these maps contains the names, size, and location of the oyster bars. The Kent Narrows oysterman rarely uses these maps, however.

Any area known as a "hill" or shallow spot could be considered potentially an oyster bar. Many oyster boats contain sonar devices for determining the depth and range of shallow water. An oral tradition exists beyond the use of maps and instruments among the Kent Narrows oystermen, however. Very rarely are the names of the bars on the Geodetic Survey maps mentioned by the oystermen in routine

conversation. More often, the oystermen will tong the "spot off Cabin Creek" or "that hill above Cedar Point." The location of the bars is often passed from father to son or by similar kinship or friendship relations. An oysterman may know the names of most of the bars in one area but not in another. For instance, Lester Lee told me the names of nearly every bar in the Chester River, where he rarely tongs but often crabs or eels. When asked about the Eastern and Prospect Bays' bars, though, he said he was not very familiar with them, although he handtongs these bars more than any other.

Eastern and Prospect Bays and the mouth of the Chester River have large variations in depths. The two bays range in depth from thirty-five feet to less than one foot. The Chester River channel averages over fifty feet deep, with one to three foot depths in shoal water. Not coincidentally, the oyster bars indicated by the Coast and Geodetic Survey in these areas all lie in water between eleven and twenty-two feet deep. Handtongs range from fourteen to thirty feet in length. Tongs longer than thirty feet are often unmanageable, so although oysters may lie in deeper water, only the illegal (for this area) mechanical tongs could harvest the deep oysters. Due to erosion, the one to three foot shoal waters surround the land masses. Usually between one-half and one mile off shore the shoal

water immediately drops to the greater depths.[21] The Kent Narrows oystermen are aware of the significance of these fluctuations of depth, although they rarely use charts or maps. The use of sonar only clarifies what will popularly be known anyway. Finally, when an oysterman feels he is over a bar, he usually just lowers a pair of tongs to determine whether the depth is suitable to work over.

History of Kent Narrows

Kent Island was settled in 1631 as an extension of the successful Jamestown Colony in Virginia. William Claiborne, the founder of Kent Island, recognized the potential of an expanded fur and corn trade, which was being stifled by the intransigence of local Indian tribes. Surveying the upper Chesapeake, he acquired license to deal with the various tribes there. Proximity to these Indians, combined with the necessity of fertile land for the raising of crops for export, were the important factors in his selection of the island for settlement. He chose the name Kent for his birthplace in England.[22]

Upon landing on the island, Claiborne immediately struck up trade with the Monoponsons and other neighboring Indian tribes. Additional settlers were brought in and

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[21]United States Department of Commerce, Nautical Chart 12271: Maryland Chesapeake Bay; Eastern Bay and South River (Washington: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 1977).

[22]Reginald V. Truitt, Kent Island: Maryland's Oldest Settlement (Stevensville, Md.: The Women of Christ Church, 1965), p. 4.

the island began to prosper. Between 1631 and 1634 the island accumulated coopers, shipbuilders, millwrights, sailors, traders, carpenters, and a few indentured servants and slaves. Cargoes of lumber, fur, and tobacco were exported from the island. Continued replacement of settlers was necessary as the original settlers migrated to the mainland Eastern Shore. By 1634, the island was well on its way to commercial success.

About the same time, George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore, was granted by the King of England a large tract of land extending from the Potomac River to a horizontal line due west from a point approximately fifty miles south of Philadelphia. Baltimore's intentions were to make this territory a haven for Catholics fleeing from repression in England. He named it Terra Maria in honor of Queen Mary.[23]

Claiborne felt his loyalty belonged to Jamestown, and vigorously opposed the Maryland grant and the attempts by Baltimore's agents to bring it under their rule. Claiborne managed to hold the island three times, first by possession of settlement, and twice by repossession. Claiborne's argument in his favor was that the land had already been cultivated. As such, the King was not entitled to grant it to anyone. Baltimore, however, was much more influential in the King's court, and the island was finally brought under Baltimore's rule part of Maryland.

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[23]Ibid., p. 6.

Claiborne's influence on the island has remained, despite Lord Baltimore, to this day. The Eastern Shore, and especially the Kent area, remains a protestant stronghold in the midst of what is a large Catholic population in the state.[24]

Since Claiborne's surrender of the island to Baltimore, the history of the area has remained uncontroversial. The area was pro-American during the Revolutionary War. There is evidence of harsh treatment of Tories. The area, like the rest of Maryland, fought for the Union during the Civil War.[25]

Much of the history of the Chesapeake Bay focuses on the variety and importance of water transportation. This is no less true for the Kent area. The proximity of the Kent area to Baltimore, Annapolis, and the northern Chesapeake made it a major terminal for traffic and trade to the Eastern Shore. Despite this location as a crossroads of trade, Kent Island (especially the Kent Narrows area) remained sparsely inhabited until the early twentieth century. A few roads leading from the ferry terminals at Matapeake and Love Point, plus a railroad line to Love Point, were all that connected the area to the larger cities of the Eastern Shore mainland. Some towns, like

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[24]Ibid., p. 10.

[25]Charles B. Clark, The Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., Inc., 1950), p. 1064.

Centreville, developed simply because they were a day's journey inland from the ferry terminal.[26]

Presently the Kent area is undergoing rapid change. The completion of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge in 1952 began an era of industrialization, communication, and transportation that had never been seen on the Eastern Shore. The eastern terminus of the bridge is located on Kent Island about one mile west from Stevensville. Kent Island thus became the first stop on the Eastern Shore for people following the "Ocean Highway," Route 50, or the alternate north-south highway, Route 301. The bridge also made the Kent area a feasible alternative for people wanting a more rural life style, which is rapidly diminishing in the Baltimore-Washington Corridon on the western shore. This trend has resulted in a 100 percent population increase in the area in the last ten years.[27] Land which was once held by families for generations has become more valuable on the real estate market, and waterfront property now sells for $25,000 an acre.

There is a keen awareness on the part of the Kent Narrows oystermen of the effects of the population influx. Captain Lester Lee said to me, "Honey, there was a time I knew everyone on this island; wasn't no more than five hundred people lived here." Another time I asked Lester's son,

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[26]Related to me by Captain Mike Coursey, a retired Kent Narrows oysterman.

[27]Queen Anne's County, Maryland, Comprehensive Master Plan (Centreville, MD.: Queen Anne's County Planning and Zoning Commission, 1965), following page three.

Wendell, also an oysterman, if an economic increase would accompany the new population. "It doesn't matter," he replied, "any money coming in goes right back out." Indeed, the area has only one small shopping center, several liquor and general stores, and gas stations that largely accommodate the resort traffic. Oystermen and their families travel either to Easton, Centreville, or the western shore to shop. Coincidentally, the area supports no less than fifteen real estate agencies, most of them based in cities outside the Kent area. In any event, few of the oystermen own any of the land involved in the real estate speculation. Until the population influx, the island was primarily farmland. The bulk of the indigenous population (43.3 percent) was involved in agricultural occupations, mostly tobacco farming.[28] It is these farmers who own the land wanted by the real estate speculators.

It is difficult to predict what the future holds for the Kent area. The immediate appeal for speculators is the development of housing projects of various statuses. Large fast food chains such as McDonalds and Burger Chef are also interested in franchises to serve the tourist and resort traffic passing through the area. In any event, although the life style of the Kent Narrows people will probably continue changing, their feelings are that future progress does not necessarily mean improvement in their condition.

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[28]Ibid., Table 13.

CHAPTER III

THE TOOLS OF THE KENT NARROWS OYSTERMEN

It has been noted by some philosophers that the use of tools is the essence of mankind's ability to reason.[1] Although some animals use tools, man is the only animal capable of design, use, and re-use of tools for specific purposes. Tools are the extensions of man's hands and have enabled him to expand the limits of his perception.

American folklife students, in contrast to the Europeans, have concerned themselves chiefly with the manifestations of the use of tools. In other words, the end product has been the primary subject of most American folklife scholarship. In recent years, however, this view toward the end product has begun to change. Being dissatisfied with the collection and analysis of folk arts and crafts, some folklorists have begun discussion of the implements and processes of production. What has developed is a view toward the entire situation in which the manufacture of a product takes place.[2] From this point of view,

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[1]Paul Carus, The Philosophy of the Tool (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1893), p. 2.

[2]Michael Owen Jones, "The Study of Traditional Furniture: Review and Preview," Keystone Folklore Quarterly (Winter Issue 1967): 233-234.

scholarship concerned with the context of production is just as important as scholarship concerned only with the end product. Handtonging for oysters is an economic activity incorporating tools and processes traditional to the Chesapeake Bay watermen. As such, it deserves study despite its lack of a final artifact or product. This chapter will be concerned with the tools of the Kent Narrows oyster industry.

The Handtongers

Boats

Various kinds of boats have been used for harvesting oysters in the Chesapeake Bay. Originally, the Indian dugout canoe served this purpose.[3] It was improved by the European settlers by binding several logs together, hollowing out, and adding a sail. To this day, these type boats are known as three-, five-, and seven-log canoes, depending on the number used in their construction. Very few of these boats exist today, although they were constructed into the 1940s.

Early in the twentieth century, the use of motors became widespread. Motors, plus design influence by Coast Guard and Navy launches on maneuvers in the Bay, brought about the development of the Chesapeake Bay deadrise workboat. The deadrise, as it is regionally known, is basically a shoal vee-bottom power launch. Its name is a carry over

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[3]Brewington, Chesapeake Log Canoes and Bugeyes, p. 3.

from deadrise bateau, an early type of flat-bottomed sailing vessel used on the Bay. The term deadrise is actually a corruption of the lanyard deadeyes used on the bateaus at the turn of the bilge (widest part of the boat frame) and the actual deadrise of any boat--which is the angle formed by an imaginary line from the waterline at the turn of the bilge to the keel. This angle is not uniform on all the Chesapeake Bay deadrise workboats but the name, nevertheless, persists to this day.[4]

Most of the Kent Narrows oystermen have bought their boats second hand from other watermen or boatyards in the area. Although they maintain the boats themselves, nearly all repair work is done by local marinas. Presently, there are very few deadrise boats being made, although an oysterman may order one specially built.

There are two reasons for the success of the deadrise as a Chesapeake workboat. First, the shallow draft, two to three feet, of the boats allows them to maneuver in water shallow enough to be dangerous for other boats. A drawback to the shallow draft of the deadrises is that the boats are not capable of great speed due to the lack of streamlining. The boats are generally thirty to forty-five feet in length. Wave crests in the Chesapeake Bay average about ten feet apart. Any boat thirty feet or longer, then, will always be riding at least two wave

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[4]Told to me by Mr. R. J. (Jim) Holt, Director of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, St. Michael's Maryland.

crests. This tends to stabilize the boat while handtonging. An interesting and pertinent feature of the deadrise boats relative to handtonging is the unusually wide washboards. When handtonging, it is sometimes difficult to maintain one's footing and balance while standing along the rails. The wide washboards, twelve to eighteen inches, allows greater stability for the handtonger while working (See Photo 3 on page 45).

Handtongs

Possibly, the tool that epitomizes the philosophy of the extension of the hand is the tongs. The construction of the human hand, thumb facing fingers, with the ability to grasp, is the perfect model of the form and function of tongs. By incorporating this concept into the design of their tools, oystermen have gained the ability to reach through an alien environment in order to produce a marketable item.

The first ancestors of the contemporary handtongs were long-tined rakes made from forked sticks. Used by the shore dwelling Indians of the Chesapeake Bay, this design was borrowed by the early settlers, who converted the wooden rake head to iron. The method of harvesting involved raking a pile of oysters together and then raising them from the water on the long tines.[5] Present day handtongs are derived

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[5]Brewington, Chesapeake Log Canoes and Bugeyes, p. 92.

basically by combining two rakes and pinning the shafts together. The tines are curved inward to form a basket when they are closed. To this day handtongs are often referred to as rakes around Kent Narrows and on other parts of the Bay.

Handtongs are composed of two shafts (handles) to which the rake heads are attached. The shafts are flat on the inside but curved on the outer surface to fit the palm of the hand. A well made pair of shafts will lie smoothly together when not in use, indicative of their ease in handling when being used. Shafts range in length from twelve or fourteen to thirty-five feet, although pairs over thirty feet are rare. Most handtongers carry three or four pairs of rakes of varying lengths for different water depths. The shafts are pinned together by a wooden peg or brass hinge exactly one-fourth of the total length of the shafts from the heads. Attached to the bottom of the shafts are the basket-shaped rake heads.

Handtongs are usually made in two stages--the heads and the shafts. Some blacksmiths, such as Leslie Phillips, of Tilghman, make only the heads. Some carpenters, such as Arthur Mason, of McDaniel, make only the shafts. Still others, like Kirby Bryan, of Grasonville, make both the heads and the shafts. The blacksmiths make distinctions described below among the parts of the tongheads, although the carpenters refer to the shafts only as shafts. Generally, the oystermen themselves assemble the shafts and heads to their

functional state. Often the shafts will break or wear out, in which case the oysterman will replace them himself. Sometimes, however, a blacksmith will buy shafts from a woodworker and assemble them to his heads. These he will sell complete.

The shank is the center part of the rakeheads. It is an iron or steel bar bent to form the basket shape of the heads, with a tongue for attaching to the shaft bottoms. The shank forms the center of the basket. Attached to the lower curve of the shank is the toothbar, a long bar to which the tines are welded. At either end of the toothbar is welded a rounded endpiece. The curve of the endpieces coincides with the curve of the shank. Three-eighths inch rods are welded to the shank and endpieces, following the curve. These rods, called wires, radiate from the shank to the endpieces to complete the basket (see Photo 2). Oystermen buy tongheads by the number of teeth on each side. Thus an oysterman could have fourteen-, sixteen-, or eighteen-toothed tongheads. Although in other parts of the Bay handtongers differentiate between tooth sizes for use on rocky or sandy bottom oyster beds, the Kent Narrows oystermen do not make this distinction.

Similar to handtongs, but smaller, are nippers. Nippers function like handtongs but are used to raise only one oyster at a time. These are used primarily in shallow water, such as ebb tide, as the shafts are ten feet in length or less. The heads of the nippers consist of four

to eight teeth about five inches long.[6] The nipper heads do not have the basket shape of handtongs; they only grasp the oyster for raising. Nippers are primarily used to gather oysters for private consumption.

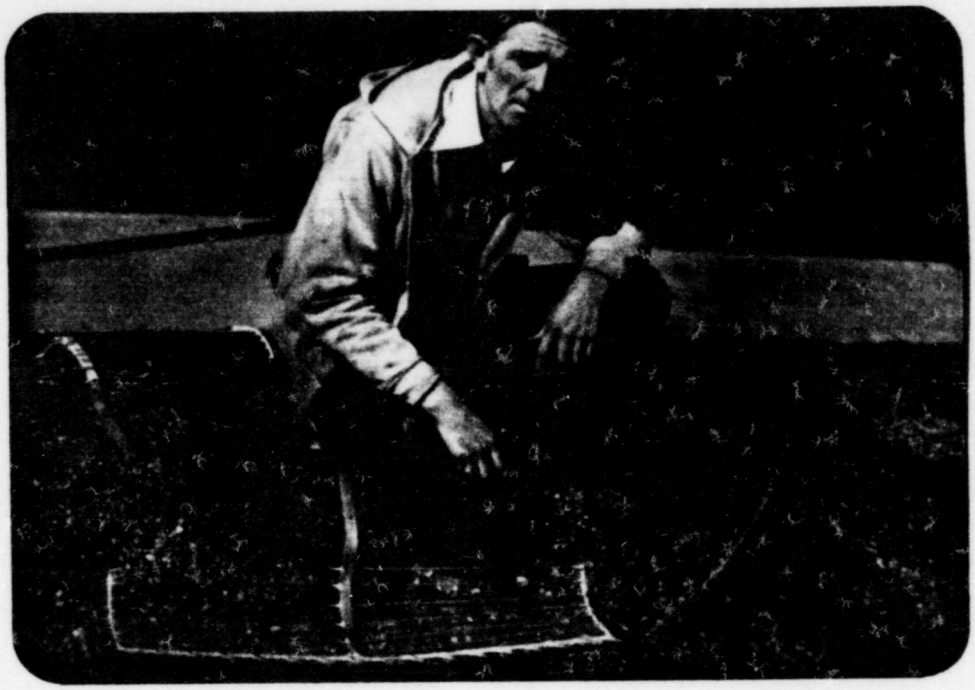

Photo 2. Blacksmith Leslie Phillips, of Tilghman, with a pair of his handtong heads. The curved bar in the center of the heads is the shank. (Photo by author)

Culling Tools

Athwartship of every handtonging deadrise boat lies the culling board. Opened at either end, the culling board is used to sort (cull) the legal (three inches or larger) oysters from the rock, sand, and shell raised from the bottom with the tongs. Along the edges of many culling

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[6]Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Directory of Maryland Manufacturers, 7th ed. (Annapolis, Maryland Department of Economic and Community Development, 1975), p. vi.

boards can be seen three inch grooves for measuring the oysters. These grooves are seldom used, as one informant told me, "if it's anywhere near three inches, it's a good oyster." Most of the Kent Narrows oystermen make their culling boards from two or three wide planks, with two-by-fours nailed to the sides. Sometimes the sides will be rounded at each end. Sometimes, too, the culling board will have sheet metal nailed to the surface for ease in sliding the excess shell and rock overboard.

Since oysters cling to a hard surface as "spat,"[7] undersized oysters, rock, and shell must be broken away from the market size oysters. For this purpose, the culling hammer is used. Designed specifically for culling, the head is used to break loose rock and shell while the blade side is used to scrape off small oysters. Often a culling hammer will have a pin welded to the shaft three inches from the head. This, like the notch on the culling board, serves as a measure for legal size oysters (see Photo 4).

These three tools--handtongs, culling board, and culling hammer--are the basic tools carried on the Kent Narrows' deadrise boats when the oystermen are working.

Miscellaneous Tools and Clothing

An additional tool used by less than half of the Kent Narrows oystermen is the sounding pole. This is simply a

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[7]"Spat" is the regional term for immature oysters clinging to bottom matter such as rocks and shells.

three-fourths-inch wide wooden pole which is thrust to the bottom of the Bay. The pole not only determines the depth of the water but also some oystermen claim they can "feel" oysters with it. Most handtongers simply use their handtongs for determining water depth.

Various heavy objects are used to anchor boats over the oyster bars on the Chesapeake. Often an automobile engine block serves this purpose. Among the Kent Narrows oystermen, however, the grapnel is the primary tool used for anchoring. As will be seen in the following chapter, anchoring is considered very important for boat position while handtonging.

Because of the cold weather during the oyster season--usually September 15 to March 31--apparel is crucial. The Kent Narrows oystermen wear layers of clothing, usually two or three shirts under a coat. As they warm to the work, layers can be shed for personal comfort.

Rubber gloves and boots are worn to keep water off the hands and legs while tonging. The rubber gloves have become popular only in recent years. Before them, heavy wool gloves were worn, which were not as water resistant. Cotton gloves have been and still are used while culling the oysters. Only one cotton glove is used to cull, while the other hand holds the culling hammer. The glove wears out after a few hours use, then the other glove is worn upside down on the culling hand until it too wears out.

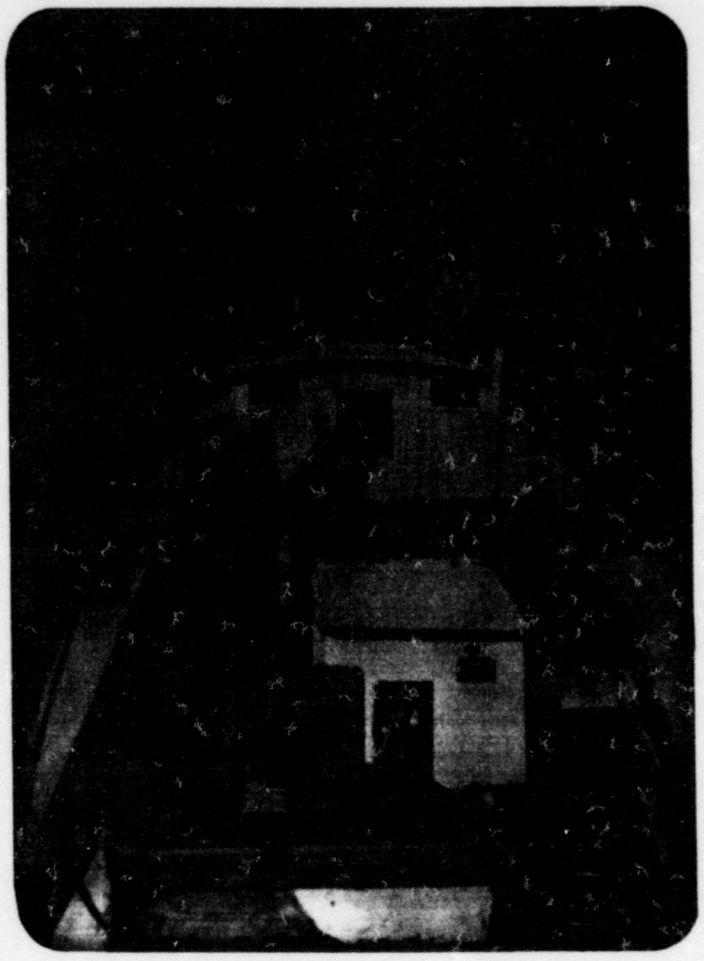

Photo 3. "Deadrise" boat showing handtongs and culling board. The shafts of the handtongs hang over the stern and are nearly twice as long as the length seen here. (Photo by author)

Some oystermen wear rubber aprons to keep water off their clothing while culling, but the more proficient cullers can work all day without an apron and still remain comfortably dry.

The Oyster Shuckers

Shucking Tools

The shucking knife is the basic tool necessary for opening oysters, either commercially or privately. Averaging about six inches in length, the shucking knife consists of a dull, two-sided blade, rounded at the point, with a wooden handle (see Photo 5). The handle is designed to fit into the palm of the hand so that forward pressure can be applied to the point. Like the culling hammer, the shucking knife is generally useless for any other purpose.

Shucking oysters for packing is one of the basic occupations of the oyster industry. The work is low paying, monotonous, and at times, incredibly dirty. Some of the oyster packing houses around Kent Narrows have upgraded their working conditions, others have not. There is now a trend now toward mechanization of shucking, although no machine has been found to successfully open the oyster without ruining or leaving shell in the meat. There is a machine, however, which grinds a small opening in the shell for greater ease in inserting the shucking knife. The use of this machine has increased production, and it may have the effect of enticing some of the younger shuckers back into the packing

houses. Very few of the older shuckers bother with this additional step in the process (see the following chapter), but nearly all the younger shuckers do. Because of the dearth of shuckers in Maryland, the State is funding projects to design other machines to increase the shucking process. So far none have been successful.[8]

Tonghead Making Tools

Most of the basic blacksmith tools are used when constructing tongheads. In the various blacksmith shops around the Kent Narrows area, anvils, trip (drop) hammers, ball peen hammers, and forges can be seen. There are, however, some specialized tools for making tongheads. Kirby Bryan, of Grasonville, told me, "you can't buy tools to make the tongheads, you have to make them all by yourself." What he meant was that the templates used to bend and shape the steel for the shank, and the mold for placing the tines on the toothbar, are all handmade. Each blacksmith around Kent Narrows makes his own templates. Because of this, individual style can often be used to determine the maker of a particular pair of heads. Kirby Bryan, for instance, wraps the center of the wires around a rivet driven through the shank of the tongheads. So far as I could determine, he is the only tong maker in the area using this style. Many of the oystermen in the area can also tell who made a particular pair of tongheads by their style.

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[8]Told to me by Arthur Jones, manager at United Shellfish Company, Grasonville.

Photo 4. Culling Hammer. Note three inch space between head and pin used for measuring for legal size oysters. (Photo by author)

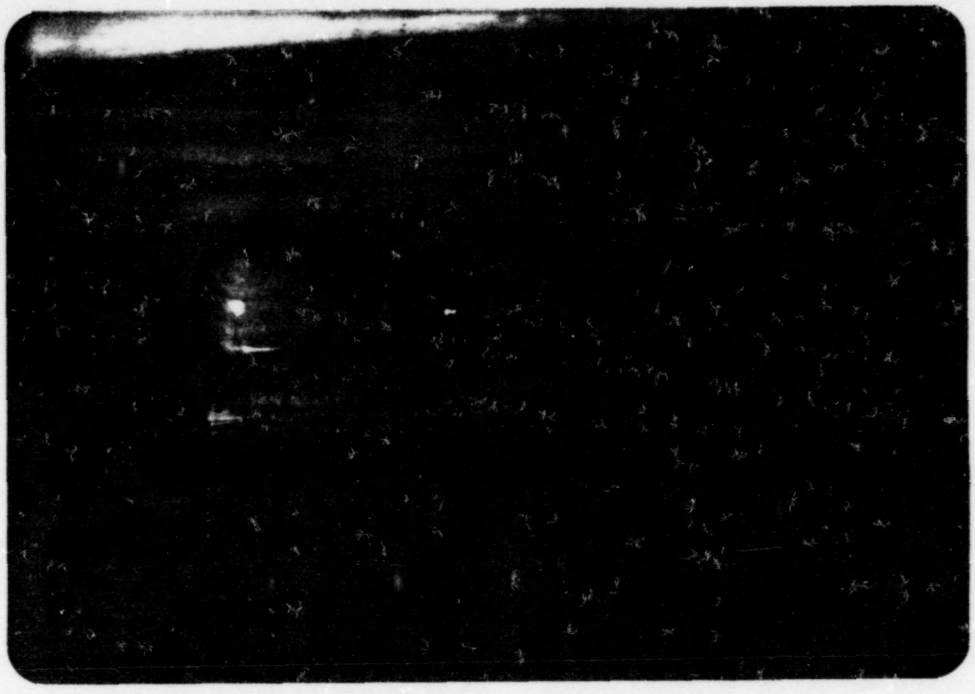

Photo 5. Shucking Knife. (Photo by author)

CHAPTER IV

PROCEDURES AND TECHNIQUES OF OYSTERING IN KENT NARROWS

In his article on traditional furniture, Michael Owen Jones discusses how it is equally important to "describe the actual sequence of events in constructing a piece of furniture, including equipment used, length of time for each process, division of labor, and the traditional name for each step in construction."[1] Whereas the previous chapter discussed the tools utilized by the Kent Narrows oyster industry, this chapter will deal with the situations in which they are employed. There are also some situations during the working day in which no tools are used, but manual skills necessary for the success of the harvest are demonstrated. These, too, will be discussed in this chapter.

The chapter will be broken down into two areas--handtonging and shucking. Blacksmithing the handtongs will not be discussed because the techniques used in making the tong heads is similar to any other type of blacksmithing. The templates are placed in the hardy hole at the heel of

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[1]Michael Owen Jones, "The Study of Traditional Furniture," pp. 236-237.

the anvil, and the steel is then hammered into shape over the template.[2] The pieces are then welded together to complete the tongheads, which are then mounted on the tongshafts.

Shucking oysters commercially is almost as simple as smithing the tongheads, but the tools and techniques are not found in any other folk occupation. (Two other folk occupations in Maryland--crab picking and clam shucking--are similar to oyster shucking in a general sense. However, the tools used and the processes followed differ from oyster shucking.)

The Handtongers

Handtonging for oysters involves a series of processes, each process requiring the skill derived from several years of working on the Bay. All of the techniques used by the Kent Narrows oystermen are learned during an informal apprenticeship, usually two years, during which the beginner is taught by an experienced waterman. More often than not oystering is taught by father to son, older to younger brother, uncle to nephew, or some other close kinship relationship. I discovered one case in which an oysterman accepted an unrelated person on to his boat to learn oystering. Mike Dicus began working on Wendell Lee's

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[2]For example, see The Village Blacksmith by Aldren A. Watson, The Colonial Craftsman by Carl Bridenbaugh, or Hammer and Tongs: Blacksmithery Down the Ages by Garry Hogg. The Kent Narrows blacksmiths generally use the same tools and techniques as described in these and many other texts on the subject.

boat in the fall of 1975. Wendell, on the other hand, was taught by his father, Lester Lee. Captain Lester has five sons, three of whom were taught by him and still follow the water. This year Captain Lester's grandson began working on the same boat as his father and grandfather.

There is no published documentation of the techniques used to handtong oysters. Any person wanting to learn to oyster must be taught by someone who knows how to do it. The apprenticeship is particularly important if one wants to be commercially successful at oystering. Such information as the location of the oyster beds, procedures for raising the handtongs, and the vernacular idioms is always transmitted from one oysterman to another. As will be seen, there are also many traditional customs that are part of the oyster industry around Kent Narrows.

The division of labor in the Kent Narrows oyster occupations is not well defined. There are specialized tasks, but each person boarding a workboat in the morning is expected to be able to perform all of them. Women generally only cull, but there are stories circulated by the oystermen of women who handtong. None of the oystermen could name any women handtongers. On some boats, older men are taken on only to cull. Herman Stevens was a handtonger for over fifty years. Now, at 87, he culls on his neighbors' boats, working as many days a week as weather will allow.

At the end of the working day, the captain of the workboat bargains with the buyers for the oysters. All members of the crew must agree with the selling arrangements the captain makes.

Each working day during the oyster season every Kent Narrows oysterman is concerned with the production of oysters. These are his marketable items. In order to achieve this goal, a sequence of events is followed. The best way to study the processes and techniques of the Kent Narrows oyster industry is to observe this sequence of events.

Locating the Oyster Beds

Maryland State Law prohibits the taking of oysters between sunset and sunrise during the oyster season. For this reason, the working day of the Kent Narrows oysterman usually begins just before dawn, around six a.m. Leaving the Kent Narrows inlet in the deadrise workboats, the oystermen head for the various oyster bars around Prospect and Eastern Bays, and the Chester River. It is a matter of pride with some of the oystermen to be first over the bars at sunrise. Most of the oystermen work together, and one usually sees between four and twelve boats working the same area each day.

The decision of which beds to work each day is discussed each afternoon and the morning before going out. Often this topic can be heard at Holly's restaurant, a local

watermen's hangout. The final decision on which beds to harvest is made by the captain, with some discussion among the crew.

Sometimes it is the captain's decision to try a new harvesting area, especially if the previous day's catch was smaller than expected. No charts or maps are used to find the new beds; the oystermen rely on a combination of memory and oral communication. During his apprenticeship, each oysterman becomes familiar with the locations of various oyster bars. He learns to distinguish the more productive from the less productive bars. Using his memory of the bars, the oysterman will listen to the captains of other boats discuss the bars each day. He will make his decision accordingly. Sometimes he will tong a new bar in the morning, just to see if it is productive, without the consideration of other oystermen's experiences.

The Kent Narrows oystermen are as secretive about very productive bars as they are talkative of the average bars. When the crewmen work a bar that is unusually productive, they will mark it for the next day, and hope their return following the catch will be unheralded.

Lang has indicated that after a day over a productive bar, Chesapeake Bay oystermen use a technique called "getting marks" to locate the same area the next day. The tonger will "take his marks" at every cardinal point on the compass. "He lines up a farm house on shore with a big pine tree, a silo with a barn, a break in . . .

[some] woods with a water tower . . . ."[3] The following day the tonger will use these references in order to rework the same area. The Kent Narrows oystermen, however, leave a marker afloat over the area to be returned to the next day. Because of their desire to keep a good bar to themselves, they will float an inconspicuous object, which appears to be adrift. For instance, one day Wendell Lee and Mike Dicus pointed to a glove they had anchored over a bar the day before. To the unknowledgable person it looked adrift, although it was firmly anchored to the Bay bottom. Some Kent Narrows oystermen will occasionally raise an object drifting over the bars just to make sure it is not anchored. There is no loyalty among the oystermen when it comes to harvesting. They believe everything on the Bay bottom belongs to the man who raises it.

Once the Kent Narrows oystermen are over the oyster bars they will indicate their starting point by heaving a pair of handtongs overboard. The heads rest on the bottom while the shafts protrude above the water line. They serve as a reference as the boat drifts during the day.

Anchoring Over the Oyster Bars

Anchoring a deadrise boat properly over an oyster bar is considered crucial by the Kent Narrows oystermen. This is because stability of the boat needs to be maintained despite wind, tide, and current. Control of the

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[3]Lang, Follow the Water, pp. 35-36.

boat is achieved by anchoring off the bow. The object is to have the anchor (grapnel) pull the boat into the wind so the wind gets into the "sharp part"--the bow. As long as the bow of the boat faces into the wind, there will be very little drift to port or starboard. This allows the tonger to work directly off the side of the boat without having to compensate for drift. His tongs can be dropped straight down, and he will not have to lean over the water, nor will the boat ride over the tongs. Around the Chesapeake, various oystermen anchor either off the bow or off the stern, depending on what community they belong to. The principle and the results remain the same despite which end the boat is anchored from. Anchoring from the bow is a Kent Narrows oystering tradition. When queried about the reason for anchoring off the bow, Mike Coursey told me, "we catch more oysters that way."

As each side of the boat is worked, from bow to stern, one of the handtongers might say to the culler or the tonger working the starboard side, "give me some string," meaning that the other man should let out about twenty feet or so of anchor line. The boat will then slowly drift back as the tongers work. In this way the tongers make sure they are not overworking one spot, or neglecting another.

Another means for controlling the deadrise, not having anything to do with the anchor, is known locally as poling. When poling, the tonger uses his tongs to push

the boat forward against the wind, or to port or starboard. This method is used most often when many tongers are working the same bed and the boats have a tendency to drift together.

Handtonging

Once the boat is positioned over the oyster bar, the men begin work by lowering a pair of handtongs over each side into the water. Deadrise boats are nearly always worked from forward to aft, sometimes from the bow back, but more often from just behind the cabin to the stern.

Standing on the washboard, the tonger will "feel" with the handtongs for oysters on the bottom. Some of the Kent Narrows oystermen claim to be able to distinguish rock and shell from live oysters with the handtongs. This is what Lang refers to as "an extreme instance of tactual extension." Like the Kent Narrows oystermen, Lang feels that the tongs not only extend the hands, but:

> Through twenty feet of wooden shafts and a steel rake at the end of it, oystermen extend the nerves of their hands and "feel" the ground.[4]

Most of the younger Kent Narrows oystermen do not possess this ability, although some hope to gain it someday.

Once a tonger "feels" oysters (or rock and shell) on the bottom, he will take a "grab" with the handtongs. A grab is the opening, scraping along the bottom, and closing of the rakes. A good grab will at least partially fill the

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[4]Ibid., p. 39.

basket-like heads. Raising this a little off the bottom, the tonger now has the option to raise the tongs into the boat, or slide the tongs aft for another grab. With each grab, the tonger will carry the bottom material from the previous grab until he fills the tongheads (see Photo 6).

When the tongheads are sufficiently full to be raised into the boat, the tonger begins lifting with a hand over hand motion along the shafts. Raising the heavy tongs (sometimes fifty pounds or more when the heads are full) requires both balance and skill. Performed properly, a tonger can save himself considerable strain. The inexperienced tonger, on the other hand, will wear himself out rapidly unless he understands the proper way to raise the tongs. The proper technique is to allow the buoyancy of the water to bear the weight of the tongs for as long as possible. When the shafts are nearly out of the water, the hand closest to the stern serves as a pivot on which the shafts are swung. The weight of the long shafts counterbalance the weight of the full tongheads. The shafts slowly lowered to horizontal at about hip level, and the tongheads are then swung over the culling board, opened, and emptied (see Photo 7). Very few of the Kent Narrows oystermen acknowledge this technique. Careful examination of the good tongers, however, reveals that this method is used consistently.

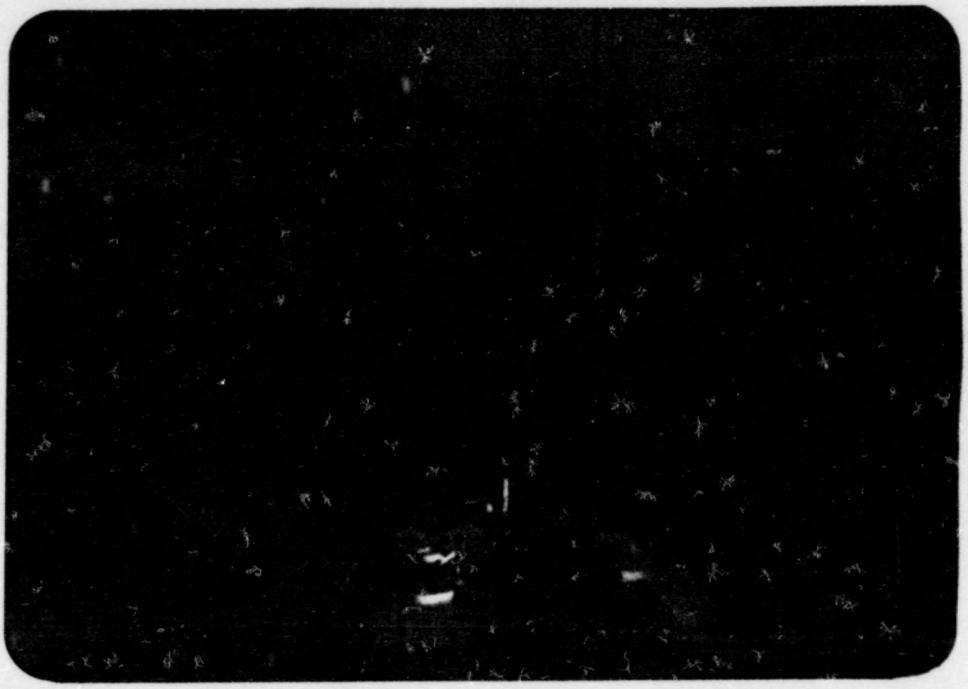

Photo 6. Oystermen working the handtongs. Tonger on right is making a "grab." Tonger on the left is using hand over hand motion for raising handtongs into boat. (Photo by author)

The raising of the tongs and emptying of the contents into the culling board is known as a "lick." A good lick will have many legal size oysters and very little bottom trash (empty shell and rock). When a handtonger continuously raises good licks so as to fill his limit quickly (twenty-five bushels per man per day) he is said to "be on a pile." Very rarely are piles of oysters found. More over, my informants feel, three to eight legal size oysters among the bottom trash constitutes a good lick.

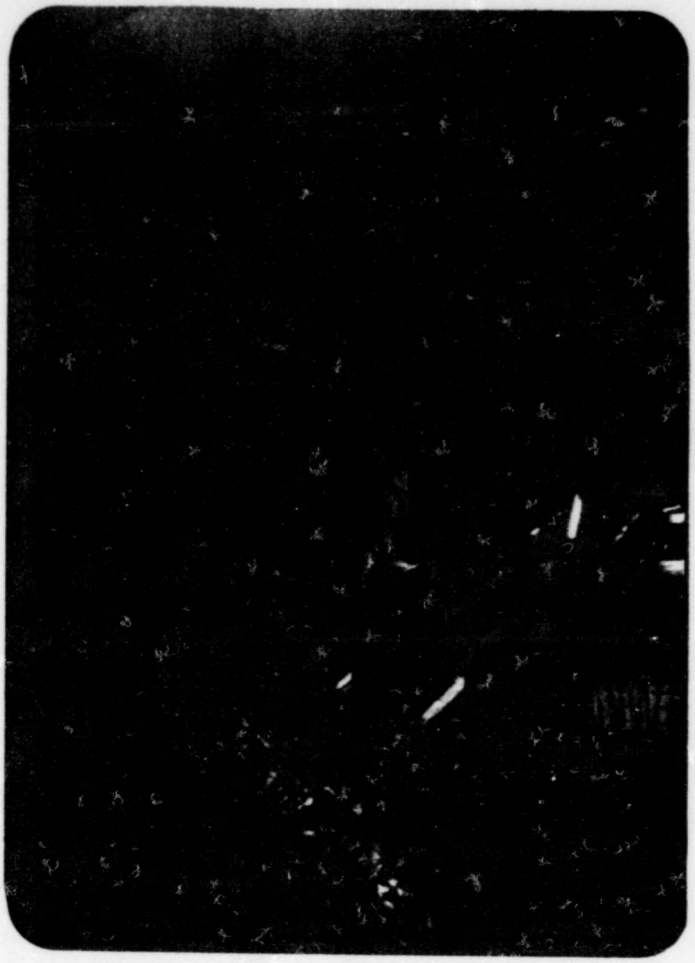

Photo 7. Kent Narrows oysterman emptying handtongs onto culling board. (Photo by author)

Culling

Most of the Kent Narrows oyster boats carry at least two men to work each day. Both men will handtong until the culling board is full, and then each will work one side of the culling board until it is once again empty. Culling is very time consuming, and must be performed over the oyster bar as required by Maryland State law. In order to save time, some boats will carry a third man specifically to cull and control the anchor line. Although culling is considered one of the most menial tasks by the handtongers, they realize it is essential. Often an older man, no

longer able to raise the handtongs, will serve as culler on a boat.

Despite the menial nature of culling, it requires some skill to master. To the untrained eye, piles of bottom trash are undistinguishable from oysters; even close inspection by some will fail to reveal which are oysters and which are not. One also has to recognize or measure those oysters that are legal (three inches from hinge to mouth) sized or better from the smaller oysters.

Standing forward of the culling board while holding the culling hammer, the culler begins to sort through the rock, shell, and oysters that have been tonged from the Bay bottom. The culler's free hand slides a small pile toward the open end of the board and begins to separate the shell and rock from oysters, one at a time. Since oysters cling to rock and shell, the culling hammer is used to remove anything from the legal sized oysters. The "good" oysters are thrown over the front of the culling board into a pile on the boat deck (see Photo 8).

Slowly, as the day progresses, the pile of marketable oysters begins to build. Since each boat is allowed twenty-five bushels per man, a two-man boat is allowed to take in only fifty bushels while a three-man boat is allowed to harvest seventy-five bushels. This is important since ninety percent of the gross profits are shared evenly by the crew. The boat captain earns his share plus the additional ten percent for boat maintenance. Those boats

with two tongers and a culler usually have to stay on the water an hour or two longer each day in order to fulfill their need for additional bushels. After accumulating twenty-five bushels per man, or staying on the water for six or seven hours, the Kent Narrows oystermen head for market.

Photo 8. Culler separating oysters from bottom trash. This pile is almost entirely shell, illustrating the difficulty in determining marketable oysters from the worthless bottom material. (Photo by author)

Selling the Oysters

Three methods are used by the Chesapeake Bay oystermen for landing their catches--selling to buyboats, to trucks, or to the local restaurants and packing houses in their area.

Buyboats are, basically, large deadrise boats with the cabin built astern of midships. DeGast reports that there are various kinds of other boats that serve as buyboats on the Chesapeake, such as scows, converted bugeyes, and former schooners.[5] Once extremely popular on the Bay, buyboats have suffered at the hands of the faster, more efficient truck lines carrying oysters to East Coast cities. Up until the 1950s, buyboats were most popular among watermen because they came up to the workboats on the oyster bars. When there were still many sailing workboats on the Bay, this saved the tongers the long sail across the Bay to Annapolis or Baltimore or south to Crisfield to market their oysters.[6]

In recent years buyboats have been replaced largely by motor freight from the various Eastern Shore landings. Trucks can travel quickly to markets in Baltimore, Wilmington, and Philadelphia. They also provide a harborside buyer for the oystermen, once again eliminating the long daily ride across the Bay to market. There are drawbacks to this method, however. Oystermen can usually get a higher per bushel price for their oysters if they travel to the markets in Annapolis or Baltimore. The trucker/buyer also risks paying the oystermen a price on the Eastern Shore and then not being able to earn a profit for himself in

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[5]Robert DeGast, The Oystermen of the Chesapeake (Camden, Me.: International Marine, 1970), last page of chapter "The Boats."

[6]Lang, Follow the Water, p. 17.

the markets. Generally, though, the market and wholesale prices are watched closely and most parties concerned are satisfied.

Sometimes, depending on the market prices of oysters, tongers may decide to sell their daily catch to a local restaurant or packing house. Kent Narrows has five packing houses, a fish market, and several restaurants, all along or near the shoreline. The recent migration of people from the western shore has resulted in the opening of several new restaurants along Route 50, in driving distance from the Narrows. By catering to these establishments, the tongers can demand a slightly higher price for their oysters by "cutting out the middleman," the truckers and buyboats. This direct sell method may prove the most efficient method for the Kent Narrows oystermen, especially if the anticipated increase in population becomes reality.

The decision as to which type of landing to be used each day--truck, buyboat, or local establishment--is usually dependent on the demand and price of oysters. Packing houses and restaurants have a limited demand for oysters. Although they may pay the highest wholesale price for oysters, the tonger risks not being able to sell any or all his oysters to them. Trucks, on the other hand, pay a slightly reduced wholesale price, but the tonger can usually depend on selling his whole day's catch. In these cases, the trucker takes the risk of not getting the highest price or not selling all the oysters he buys to the markets.

The public demand for Chesapeake Bay oysters fluctuates with the seasons, resulting in variations in the wholesale prices. The peak season for retail oyster sales is during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. At that time, wholesale prices are naturally at their highest. (Christmas oyster sales brought fifteen dollars a bushel in Kent Narrows in 1976, according to Wendell Lee.) The price declines after that time until the end of March, when it is about half the holiday price. Oyster price is always dependent on quality. Small, misshapen oysters usually found in the Eastern Shore rivers command a much lesser price than the larger, meatier oysters found in the open waters of the Bay.

After deciding whether to sell "to truck" or to one of the local establishments, the Kent Narrows oystermen tie up their boat along the bulkheads on the eastern side of the Narrows nearest their buyer. The bulkheads serve as docks for several of the packing houses located there. A large oyster shell parking lot just south of the packing houses serves the trucks that come to the Narrows to buy from the oystermen. Usually there will be one or two Marine Police patrolling the area to ensure that the oystermen are not keeping oysters under the three-inch limit.

When selling their oysters, the oystermen have to consider price, time of year, distance to market, and Marine Police if the oystermen have hedged on the law a little that day. Most oystermen around Kent Narrows

maintain a loyalty to one or two buyers until they feel they have been cheated or betrayed. Some of the buyers are relatives or friends of the oystermen, in which case a mutual agreement nearly always exists. Other of the Kent Narrows oystermen will risk changing markets each day in the hopes of a better price. No matter which avenue is chosen, the Kent Narrows oystermen always manage to sell the oysters they harvest.

Communication between the buyers and the oystermen is minimal until after the transactions have taken place. A quick exchange of prices and bushels to be sold begins and ends the conversation and the bargaining.

Once the deal is made, the oystermen begin to transfer the oysters from the boat to shore. Maryland State law stipulates that the Maryland "oyster bushel" be the wholesale measure for selling oysters. These measures are large iron or steel buckets, shaped like a standard bushel basket, containing holes in the bottom through which water escapes. The actual size of the Maryland oyster bushel is one and three-tenths the official United States bushel.[7]

At this point in the oyster exchange, a conflict of interest develops between the buyer and the oystermen. As Lang says:

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[7]Lang, Follow the Water, p. 17.

> The buyer wants as many oysters in the bucket as possible; after all, he is paying for them. The oysterman has every intention of shoveling in as few oysters as he can; he has worked all day for those oysters.[8]

Around the Kent Narrows, however, this does not seem to be the case. The oysters are shoveled into the bucket gently, but not gingerly. Although other areas of the Bay maintain legends and stories of the oystermen's ability to shovel as few oysters as possible into the bucket, these stories do not appear to exist around the Narrows, nor do any of the oystermen in the Narrows seem to know anyone with a reputation for this kind of shoveling.

Traditionally, the highest number used in the oyster transactions is five. Every group of five bushels that leaves the boat (five Maryland bushels, a bucketful) is known as a tally. The oystermen in Kent Narrows indicate a tally by placing an oyster on the washboards. Lang indicates that Chesapeake Bay oystermen record tallies in a book kept by the tally keeper, who is generally a crew member.[9] Actually, the method used to keep track of the number of bushels from each boat varies from area to area. DeGast shows a photograph in his book, The Oystermen of the Chesapeake, of tally keeping by writing on a wooden plank.[10] There is no reference to where this is done, however.

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[8]Ibid., p. 18.

[9]Ibid., p. 19.

[10]DeGast, Oystermen of the Chesapeake, pages are unnumbered.

In Kent Narrows, the oysters are shoveled into the Maryland bushel and hoisted by pullies onto the landing. After hoisting five bushels, the captain of the boat shouts "tally," and places an oyster on the washboard. The buyer acknowledges this some way. After the second five bushels the captain yells "tally two," and places a second oyster on the washboard. This continues until all the oysters have been landed, at which point the captain shouts the number of bushels short of a tally and the expression "and all." For example, if three bushels are left in the boat after the previous tally, the captain will shout, after landing these three, "three and all." By using this method of counting, the oystermen never have to count over five until they combine the total tallies and extra bushels at the end of the landing. For the single oysterman, the legal limit in Maryland per day is twenty-five bushels, so actually he may never count over five all day.

The method of keeping count of total bushels landed by placing an oyster on the washboards keeps with the oysterman's tradition of never writing any part of the transaction down. All transactions are cash. The oystermen do not concern themselves with checks or bookkeeping during the work day. Writing is too difficult when it is raining, snowing, or blowing. There is no use in making the Internal Revenue Service's job any easier, either, by having records of the cash flow.

The Kent Narrows oystermen work a long day. Most are on the water by sunrise. After six or seven hours of handtonging, the leisurely ride to the landings is quiet and pensive. After selling the oysters, many of the oystermen drive over to Holly's restaurant for discussion of the day's events and tomorrow's plans. By this time the oysters have been sent to market or are being kept cool until the next day, when the shuckers will begin work.

The Oyster Shuckers

Shuckers

Opening the oyster shell in order to remove the meat is known as shucking. In restaurants, seafood stores, and raw oyster bars, this service is provided by cooks and servitors in order to aid customers. On the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, there are people who shuck oysters for mass commercial consumption. Large food industries, such as those that make soups and stews, buy quantities of oyster meat that has already been removed from the shell. These companies buy the shucked oyster meat from the numerous oyster packing houses along both shores of the Chesapeake. The bulk of oysters caught in Maryland is bought and processed by these packing houses. The five packing houses that lie along Kent Narrows serve these same purposes. The largest Kent Narrows packing house, United Seafood Company, maintains a small fleet of trucks for transporting oyster meat as far as Wilmington

and Philadelphia, western Virginia, and the Carolinas. It is in these packing houses that the professional oyster shuckers work.[11]

A shroud of controversy surrounds the Kent Narrows packing houses. Many of the Kent Narrows people are hesitant to talk about the packing industry at the Narrows. One packing house owner refused to speak with me about the packing houses, indicating the Baltimore and Washington newspapers had nearly put him out of business. (A check of these newspapers' libraries, however, failed to reveal any articles directly concerned with the Kent Narrows packing house industry.) All of the other packing house owners and managers were more accommodating.

The controversy surrounding the Kent Narrows packing houses involves the entirely black labor force employed as shuckers in the houses. When the Kent Narrows oyster industry began to develop in the early part of this century, the packing houses built a number of shanties for the migrant shuckers to occupy during the oyster season (see Photo 9). In the late 1960s, the Queen Anne's County Health Department began to condemn many of these dwellings for violations of health code statutes. At about the same time the health department began to demand improved hygiene and working conditions for the shuckers in the packing plants. Some of the plants improved their facilities while others remained the same.

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[11]Told to me by Arthur Jones, manager at United Shellfish Company, Grasonville.

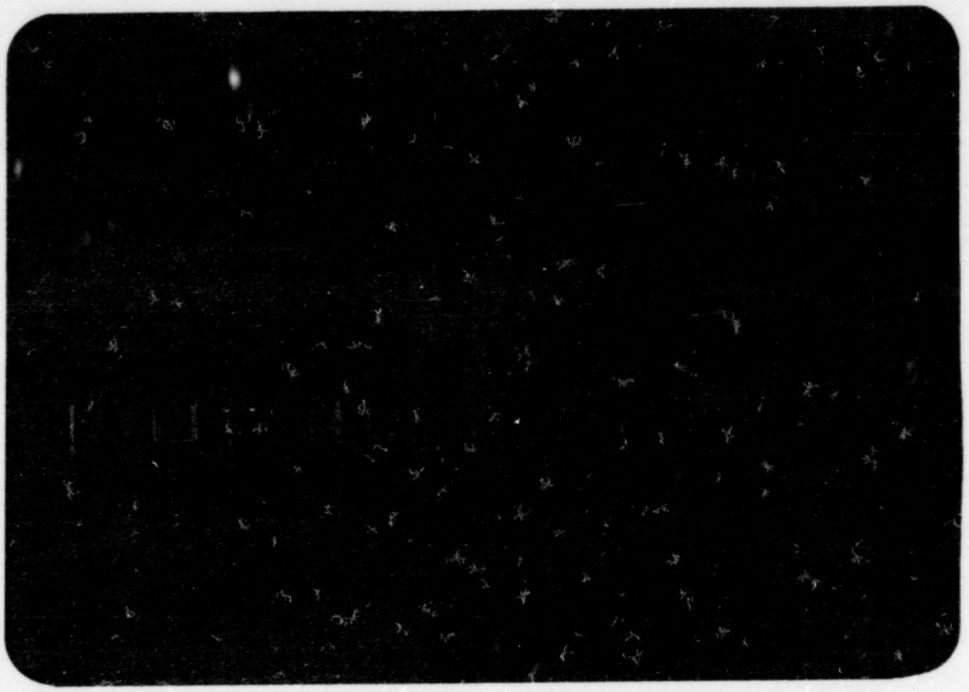

Photo 9. Shanties built and maintained by the packing houses at Kent Narrows. The migrant oyster shuckers lived in these during the oyster season, until they were closed by the Queen Anne's County Health Department. (Photo by author)

United Seafood Company has improved its oyster shucking room by replacing the old wooden tables with stainless steel and aluminum ones and by the use of conveyor belts to bring in oysters and remove the empty shell. Some of the smaller houses still use wooden tables. They also still use wheelbarrows for moving oysters and shell, allowing the shuckers to remain standing in piles of shell to their knees until it is removed. The closing of the company-owned housing has caused a reduction in the labor force around Kent Narrows. The owners now have to pay a higher wage in order to lure shuckers from farther away. The combination of these factors--improvement of conditions, lack of substantial labor force, higher wages, and possibility of an all black labor force working for an all white

management--has caused this sensitivity to discussion of the situation.

There are about two hundred oyster shuckers around Kent Narrows. The largest plants employ between forty and fifty shuckers during the busy season. The smaller plants employ about twenty to thirty during this time. As the demand for oysters diminishes after the winter holidays, the companies begin to reduce their labor forces. By late March, only about half of the original number of shuckers remain.

Like the Kent Narrows handtongers, the shuckers' day begins between six and seven a.m. Early in the oyster season, until the holiday rush is over, the shuckers work until two in the afternoon. After the holiday rush, the workday begins about seven a.m. and continues until about two or until the day's supply of oysters is exhausted, whichever is earlier.

Depending on the packing house, the oysters are brought to the shuckers by conveyor belt or wheelbarrow. These oysters, purchased the previous day and kept cool overnight, are in metal baskets attached to the conveyor, or in bushel baskets in the wheelbarrows. The shuckers empty as many oysters as they need from the baskets and begin work. To the left of each shucker are several small buckets into which is placed the oyster meat. (Oyster meat is graded according to size and quality; each bucket contains a different grade of meat.)

The electric grinders used by the younger shuckers are to the right of each worker.

Each shucker goes through a series of motions when opening and emptying the oyster. The shuckers using the electric grinders have this additional step in the series. The older shuckers, using only the shucking knife, tend to have greater speed, but they work much harder.

The sequence begins when the shucker takes an oyster into his free hand, placing the oyster's hinge against the palm. If the shucker uses the grinder, the oyster's "mouth" is placed against the wheel. This shears off enough shell to leave a small opening for the insertion of the shucking knife. The shuckers who do not use the grinder place the oyster against the table top, or on a small block of wood. Grasping the oyster firmly, the shucker inserts the knife between the upper and lower shells. This ability to open oysters using only the shucking knife is learned through experience. It is not an easy task. Tremendous pressure is placed on the shell from the arms and chest of the shucker. After several hours of shucking this way the arms become fatigued and the chest tends to ache. Even those shuckers adept at finding "the right spot" to insert the shucking knife grow tired after a few hours of shucking. Some of the shuckers around Kent Narrows have grown to feel that this shucking style results in chest problems in the older people, although I found no scientific evidence to substantiate this.

After inserting the knife into the shell, the shucker thrusts it to the hilt, twisting the knife from side to side. The powerful muscle that binds the oyster shell needs to be severed before the oyster will separate. Proficient shuckers find and sever this "heart" of the oyster with the first thrust. The shuckers' capabilities are determined among their peers by their ability to sever the "heart" as quickly as possible.

Once the "heart" is cut from both sides of the shell the oyster is separated, and the meat is scraped into one of the meat buckets. The shell halves are discarded, and the sequence begins over again. The whole sequence rarely takes longer than ten seconds.

In Kent Narrows, oyster shuckers are paid by piecework, according to weight. When a bucket becomes filled with meat, the shucker carries it to be washed and weighed. The weight is then recorded on a tally sheet, according to grade of meat. In this way each shucker keeps track of his production for the day. In Kent Narrows, the shuckers are paid in cash for their work at the end of the day. The best shuckers can earn between twenty-five and thirty-five dollars per day, depending on the quality and size of the oysters.[12]

After the oyster meat is weighed and washed, it is drained and packed in one and five gallon metal cans. These

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[12]Told to me by Arthur Jones.

in turn are packed in wooden crates and surrounded with crushed ice. This method of packing for shipment has remained the same since 1910 when the United States Food and Drug Administration forced the change from packing oysters directly in hardwood barrels. These barrels were shipped un-iced, and spoilage was widespread.[13]

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[13]E. B. Watkins, "Oyster Shucking by Candlelight," Baltimore Sunday Sun Magazine, 21 March 1976, pp. 36-37.

CHAPTER V

INFLUENCES ON THE KENT NARROWS OYSTER INDUSTRY

Folklorists have often considered the causes of variation and transmission of folklore and folklife. Some of the earliest theories of folklore scholarship such as the historical-geographical theory, were concerned with the behavior of folklore over space and time. In recent years, folklore scholars such as Henry Glassie and Michael Owen Jones have begun to note those influences on folklife materials that cause change in their form or function.[1] It is now clearly understood that items of folklore and folklife, including material culture, are influenced by many factors. The interaction and effects of these factors on folklore and folklife are so complicated that the scholar is naturally hard-pressed to determine the exact relationships that exist. For instance, in the case of the Kent Narrows area, prior to the construction of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, the area was very slow in changing. After the bridge was completed, improved transportation altered some of the traditional methods of shipping the oysters to market. The question here would be whether the completion

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[1]For instance, Henry Glassie's Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (1968) and Michael Owen Jones' The Handmade Object and Its Maker (1975).

of the bridge or the improved transportation caused the changes in shipping practices. The situation is actually more complicated than this, since the completion of the bridge actually was the singlemost factor improving the transportation.

Because of situations similar to this, most folklore scholars have accordingly limited their concern to the effects of only certain factors on form or function.[2] Aside from being concerned with the influences causing change on folklore and folklife, folklorists should also note those that cause folklore and folklife to remain the same. Especially as the United States becomes more cosmopolitan, change is nearly absolute, and those things that remain traditional to a folk group become the exception rather than the rule.

The Kent Narrows oyster industry is presently subject to faster change than at anytime in its history. There are a number of influences causing the oystermen and shuckers to alter their traditional ways of following their occupations. But this change is minimal in comparison to the change that can be seen in the occupations immediately surrounding the Kent Narrows oystermen, such as agriculture. More important is the consistency which remains in the oyster industry despite the rapid change surrounding the oystermen. This chapter will view some of the

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[2]For instance, Jones' The Handmade Object and Its Maker cites social and psychological influences on the craftsman's work.

influences that are causing change in the oyster occupations at Kent Narrows. It will include discussion of some of the influences that are causing the Kent Narrows oyster occupations to remain stable.

Influences Causing Change

Before 1952, when the Chesapeake Bay Bridge was completed, the Eastern Shore was largely isolated. The only means of transportation across the Chesapeake was by boat (there were several ferries along both shores of the Bay) or by wheeled vehicles travelling north, crossing the Susquehanna River at the top of the Bay, and then travelling south. Because of these limited means, travel across the Bay was generally reserved for business and trade. There was also a small tourist industry developing along the Maryland Atlantic seaboard, at the southeast corner. The greatest single cause of change to the Kent Narrows oyster industry has been the completion of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge instigating the improved transportation and communications systems which caused further change on the Eastern Shore.

It is easy to speak of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge as being the primary source of change on the Eastern Shore, and in most conversations with the Kent Narrows oystermen, they will often refer to the bridge as the cause of change. More accurately, the Chesapeake Bay Bridge serves as a catalyst for other sources of change to the Kent Narrows

oyster industry. There is little doubt that the present trends in the oyster industry would not have occurred as abruptly without the completion of the bridge.

Although the Kent Narrows oyster industry existed for some years before the completion of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, the bridge improved truck transportation for the oyster products from the Narrows. Not coincidentally, five of the eight oyster packing houses in the area were built since 1952--B. and S. Fisheries, 1954; Carnabuci Seafoods, 1952; H. W. Harris Seafood, Inc., 1963; Islander's Seafoods, Inc., 1962; and United Shellfish Company, 1960.[3] With the increase of buyers at the Narrows the (shuckhouses and the trucks) there has been also an increase in watermen who purchase oyster licenses each year.[4] Not only has improved transportation help to develop the Kent Narrows oyster industry very rapidly,but it also continues to help the industry prosper and grow.

The addition of the new oyster packing houses since 1952 has in itself brought about change in the oyster industry. The packing houses have expanded the oyster market for Kent Narrows to parts of western Maryland and Virginia and have increased sales to all areas by the use of marketing techniques. Because of this increase in sales, the use of machinery to shuck oysters is becoming more and

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[3]Maryland Department of Economic and Community Development, Directory, p. 222.

[4]Told to me by Bill Brey of the National Marine Fisheries Service, Easton, Md.

more commonplace. As noted in Chapters III and IV, the use of conveyors for bringing oysters in and out of the shucking rooms has replaced the traditional wheelbarrows and bushel baskets. The procedures and techniques used by shuckers for years using only a shucking knife are being replaced by the use of the electric grinder, used by nearly all the young oyster shuckers. In the future, if the Maryland State Government is successful in designing and implementing an oyster shucking machine, the traditional oyster shucking occupations may disappear.

One folk population in Kent Narrows has already been scattered by the Queen Anne's County Health Department. The oyster shuckers who used to reside in the shanties, either as migrants for part of the year or permanently, have been forced to move from their substandard housing. The Health Department is also forcing the packing houses to modernize their equipment to bring it in line with Health Department standards. Stainless steel and aluminum are quickly replacing the wood used for tables and barrels in the packing houses.

There is one other major influence causing change on the Kent Narrows oyster industry. The expanding population in the Baltimore-Washington corridor has begun to creep onto Kent Island and past the Narrows to parts of the mainland. Although at this time this influence has mainly affected the farmers of the area, it is likely that businesses in the area will begin to cater to this more cosmopolitan market. Land speculation in the area has already resulted in increased

prices per acre--presently about twenty-five thousand dollars for waterfront property. As the people who can afford to pay for the land move into the area, there is evidence that the indigenous population will change from agricultural and seafood occupations to sales and marketing jobs. Although the area has resisted for some time, the following want-ad is one of the many manifestations of this change:

> Hardee's of Stevensville. Now accepting applications for Cooks, Cashiers & Food Handlers for all shifts incldg breakfast . . . . Apply in person at the Unit at Kent Island Shpg Ctr, on US 301 & Hwy 50 . . . . Mon June 20 thru Sun. June 26 [sic].[5]

Whether or not the influence of the western shore will result in a reduced labor force for the oyster industry is difficult to assess. The men who follow the water for oysters learned their trade from the generations before them. As Henry Glassie has pointed out:

> Increasingly in the future, . . . each individual will have available two possibilities for cultural deviation: one progressively oriented, the other conservatively oriented.[6]

Probably the Kent Narrows oyster industry will follow two directions in the future. The conservatively oriented hand-tongers will remain relatively unchanged in the pursuit of their occupation. The oyster shucking occupations, however, will have to change in order to maintain a labor pool. Unless the packing houses increase wages and continue bringing in new machinery, most of the shuckers will be lured away by

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[5] Annapolis Evening Capitol, 16 June 1977, p. 17.

[6] Glassie, Pattern, p. 4.

the less tedious work now developing all around the Kent Narrows.

It can be seen now that a series of trends have brought drastic change to the Kent Narrows area and to the oyster industry maintained there. First, the completion of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge joining the western and eastern shores of the bay improved transportation and communications between both shores. Next, the improved transportation added impetus to an already thriving oyster industry around the Narrows. But with the improved transportation, communication and economy, came tourists and an increase in the population. This in turn produced an alternate market for businesses in the Kent Narrows area. Increased business began to drain the packing houses labor pool, resulting in a trend toward improved conditions for labor. There was also some government interference in the packing house conditions via the Queen Anne's County Health Department. The latest trend now is the increase in population brought about by the expanding population in the Baltimore-Washington corridor on the western shore of the Chesapeake. Through all of this, only the shucking occupations of the oyster industry have manifested variation in large contrast to the traditional pursuits of the handtongers in the area. As will be shown in the next section, the oystermen themselves have so far withstood much of the change brought about by these influences.

Stabilizing Influences

Somewhat more complicated than the reasons why the Kent Narrows area and its people are changing are the reasons why the handtonging and blacksmithing occupations, as related to the watermen, are changing only slightly. Every year, from September until March, the Kent Narrows handtongers work the water in much the same way as the previous generations of handtongers before them. Like the influences that cause change, the stabilizing influences equally work hand in hand.

The primary and most crucial stabilizing influence on the Kent Narrows oyster handtonging occupations are the Maryland laws limiting the oystermen (as discussed in Chapter II). Since Maryland statutes prohibit the use of mechanical devices such as dredges and patent tongs in the Eastern and Prospect Bays, and the Chester River, if a Kent Narrows oysterman wanted to use these types of equipment, he would have to travel to the deeper, less protected waters of the Chesapeake. The use of dredges and patent tongs also require larger boats to support the added weight and larger catches resulting from the devices. This is a crucial point. The economic situation of the Kent Narrows oystermen would require a large cash outlay in order to purchase and maintain the boats and equipment used in dredging or patent tonging. Dredging in Maryland waters is limited to Somerset, Dorchester, and Talbot County waters. Except for Talbot County, these waters are a good ride from Kent Narrows, especially since dredging is also limited to sailing vessels.

Similarly, although patent tonging is done from deadrise boats like the ones found in Kent Narrows, this type of oyster harvesting requires a good deal of travel each day that would not necessarily make the added catch financially advantageous.

In contrast to dredging and patent tonging, the Kent Narrows oystermen have a small cash outlay for their equipment and can legally harvest oysters on the bars in the protected waters surrounding the Kent Narrows inlet. The smaller deadrise boats--thirty to forty feet in length--used by the Kent Narrows oystermen afford less working hold space for the daily catch. However, since Maryland law limits the daily oyster catch to twenty-five bushels per man, these boats usually provide ample room.

Maryland law, then, is one of the primary stabilizing influences on the Kent Narrows oyster handtongers. The law in interaction with the local geography and economy creates a strong framework in which the daily traditional performance of the handtongers can operate. But this framework leaves little room for change. There are still other influences that stabilize the traditional performance of the occupation however.

The tools used by the Kent Narrows handtongers, the boats, handtongs, culling board, and culling hammers, are by and large the perfect equipment for the job. Over the last 300 years, the tools have developed to serve the oystermen, the State laws, the underwater geography of the

Chesapeake, and to work in harmony with the environment. Attempts at mechanization have had to be controlled. Dredges and patent tongs too easily depleted the oyster crop or adversely effected reproduction by the oysters. Handtongs, on the other hand, by their nature, limit the oyster harvest each day. They work best in depths from twelve to twenty-five feet, often too shallow for the dredges and patent tongs. The culling boards and culling hammers, like most tools designed for specific crafts, allow for ease in separating the oysters over the beds. Lastly, the deadrise boats have evolved to work best in the waters of the Chesapeake. The shoal vee-bottom of the deadrise boats, combined with the overall length of over thirty feet, help to stabilize the workboats in the water. These tools demonstrate man's adaptation to his environment, whether it be physical or legal. The tools have developed through various stages (such as the early rakes used by the first settlers), through greater technological advances (such as the dredges), and ultimately returned to a more functional state (wide use combined with legal conservation). This is not to say that the manual processes utilizing these tools are better than those utilizing the technologically more advanced ones. Rather, it is an indication that there are economic activities utilizing tools that technology may not be able to improve. It can be seen, though, that the tools used by the Kent Narrows oystermen are a stabilizing influence simply because attempts to improve them have

failed. The oystermen will continue to use their traditional tools because nothing yet developed serves the purpose as well.[7]

One other stabilizing influence on the Kent Narrows oystermen is the heritage of oystering passed on from generation to generation. The oystermen believe that their particular methods of oystering are the proper ways of harvesting. The tradition of anchoring off the bow of the boat is a good example of this. In some areas along the Eastern Shore, some oystermen anchor from the stern. They believe they catch more oysters that way. The Kent Narrows oystermen, however, believe that anchoring from the bow produces a better catch. This idea, and similar ones, have been passed from generation to generation as far back as any of my informants can remember. The community of watermen sustains many of these traditonal beliefs. This past spring, Wendell Lee was making plans to begin the crab season by purchasing several hundred crab pots--a type of trap used in many areas along the Chesapeake. Most of the Kent Narrows watermen have been trotliners for crabs[8] for generations. When Wendell announced his intentions, he was treated with dismay by most and scorn by some of the watermen. He was also told often that he probably would not succeed. The same situation has occurred during the oyster

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[7]It should be noted that the tools used by the Kent Narrows oystermen developed on the Chesapeake Bay long before the oyster industry in the Narrows became prosperous.

[8]Trotlining is a method used whereby crabs are lured to the water surface by bait attached to long lines. The crabs are then scooped into the boat using dipnets.

season. When an oysterman accumulates enough funds to purchase a boat and patent tongs, he may look toward this less back-breaking work although he would need to travel into the Bay in order to harvest the oysters. The ridicule and contempt he would receive from his peers more often than not would change his mind. One oysterman went so far as to purchase the forty-five foot boat this past winter. He converted it to an ice breaker for several months, then began handtonging with the rest of the Kent Narrows oystermen in early February when the ice began to melt. His new patent tongs are still lying unused in his backyard. This conservative attitude toward maintaining the traditional occupations is typical of many areas on the Eastern Shore, but especially so around Kent Narrows.

The blacksmiths around Kent Narrows continue the tradition of handtong making largely because the market still exists. The blacksmiths, however, maintain their particular styles (such as Bryan Kirby's style of riveting the wires to the shank) because most of the oystermen will not switch to a different style after being satisfied with the present one. Many handtongers told me they used particular blacksmith's tongs "because they hold up." Many handtongers demand certain construction features of their handtongs such as longer teeth or a rounder basket. For this reason they will deal with an individual blacksmith because he will alter the handtongs to fit their needs. The blacksmiths are beginning to change from handtools to electric

tools in manufacturing the handtongs. Although they are members of the same communities as the handtongers, it seems that the use of electric equipment in this case has been sanctioned by the community. The electric tools perform a better job than the handtools, and, as such, have been accepted.

Several folklorists have espoused the concept of community sanctioned behavior although it has been bandied about more often by anthropologists.[9] Michael Owen Jones, in his book The Handmade Object and Its Maker, implies the idea by indicating that the subject of his study, a chairmaker, feels awkward in and to some degree rebels from any social pressure. Jones tries to determine the community standards of chairmaking by showing pictures of furniture made by this chairmaker in the community to other chairmakers in the same region of eastern Kentucky. The chairmakers could often determine the maker of each chair by its style, but at the same time they were critical of deviations in the accepted standards as being uncomfortable or ostentatious:

> In this area most chairs made in the past or in the present are rather plain or simple in appearance; their simplicity facilitates their primary purpose of use and corresponds with the values of many people in regard to home furnishings --the absence of ostentatiousness and the striving to obtain status symbols and objects for prestige enhancement.[10]

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[9]Cultural anthropologists have nearly always concerned themselves with the community control over individual behavior. Two prolific anthropologists on this subject are Margaret Mead and Bronislav Malinowski.

[10]Jones, The Handmade Object, p. 35.

Although the design and construction of handtongs may not qualify as art in the sense that Jones means, the same attitudes or community standards apply to the construction and use of the handtongs. In other words, the blacksmith needs to maintain the community standards for that object. Handtongs with ornate shafts or gilt heads would not sell to the Kent Narrows oystermen and hence are not made. This same reasoning would also apply to the oystermen's unwillingness to accept patent tonging. Although the concept of community sanctioning of behavior and its manifestations is more abstract than the effects of the law, economy, and geography, it is still a distinct stabilizing influence on the Kent Narrows oyster industry.

It can be seen that there are at least six strong stabilizing influences on the traditional aspects of the Kent Narrows oyster occupations. Three of these influences work very strongly in formulating a framework in which the daily performance of the economic activities can operate. This interaction of the Maryland State laws, the economy, and the immediate geography of the area allow the Kent Narrows oystermen very little variation in the performance of their occupations.

Besides this interaction between Maryland law, economy, and geography, there are other stabilizing influences on the Kent Narrows oyster occupations. The evolution of the tools used by the Kent Narrows oystermen has occurred over the last three hundred years along both

shores of the Chesapeake Bay. In the early part of this century these tools were used to establish the oyster industry in Kent Narrows. They are still used because no other tools have developed that serve their purposes as well. Two examples of this are the deadrise workboats and the handtongs. These tools are the result of adaptation to the environment. As such, the interaction of the tools (their function) with the environment serves as another stabilizing influence on the Kent Narrows oyster industry.

The final stabilizing influence discussed in this paper is what Glassie called the conservatively oriented nature of the people. There is a certain mode of behavior expected from each member of the community in the performance of oyster handtonging. This behavior is learned through the community and is passed on from generation to generation just as learning the traditional occupations is passed on. Deviation from this mode, such as attempts at patent tonging, is discouraged. In this way the processes and techniques used in the performance of handtonging is preserved.

Conclusions

Although the Kent Narrows oyster industry, especially the oyster packing occupations, may become subject to commercialism over the next few years, it is unlikely that the traditional aspects of the industry will change. The intense urbanization presently going on in the area is the

result of population spread from the western shore. Thus, the agricultural occupations have been and will continue to be the targets of land speculators. The oystermen, on the other hand, will continue to handtong since Maryland State law and the economic situation in the main preclude changes in the oyster industry.

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INFORMANTS AND ORAL SOURCES

Bill Brey, of the National Marine Fisheries Service in Easton, Md., maintains detailed records of the licensing of the watermen. His office can effectively estimate such information as annual and daily oyster harvests, number of registered boats for political and geographic areas, and the number of oystermen at work each season.

Kirby Bryan, of Grasonville, was born in 1909 across the street from the house in which he presently lives. Except for a two-year stint in the United States Navy, he has always lived in Grasonville. He was an oysterman until 1957 when he became a carpenter and blacksmith, specializing in the construction of oyster handtongs. He claims to be completely self-taught, as he never served either a carpenter or blacksmith apprenticeship.

Capt. J. W. "Mike" Coursey, of Chester, has lived on Kent Island all of his sixty-four years. He began oystering and crabbing with his father when he was eleven or twelve years old and continued, on and off, until he was fifty-five. He began to work the cross

Chesapeake ferries when he was twenty-one, piloting the Annapolis-Claiborne Ferry for many years. He also piloted the Annapolis-Matapeake Ferry until the Chesapeake Bay Bridge opened in 1952. He began oystering again at that time but gave it up soon after in order to work the tourist excursion boats from Baltimore to the Tolchester Amusement Park near Rock Hall on the Eastern Shore. Eventually he piloted tugboats between Baltimore and Norfolk, Virginia. He has been retired for the last eight years.

Mike Dicus, at twenty-five, is one of the youngest watermen in the Kent Narrows area. Not originally from Kent Island, he was raised in Glen Burnie, near Baltimore, until his parents moved to the Eastern Shore six years ago. Mike worked as a mechanic after high school but began working as a waterman for Wendell Lee in 1975.

R. J. (Jim) Holt, Director of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, Md., has an extensive knowledge of the history of the water vessels of the Chesapeake Bay.

Arthur Jones, who is in his early sixties, has lived his entire life in and around Grasonville. Presently he is a manager at United Shellfish Company.

Unusually inventive, Arthur has contributed to the design of the conveyors and other paraphernalia used in the shucking occupations at Kent Narrows. When the Queen Anne's Health Department closed the shanties occupied by the shuckers at Kent Narrows, Arthur drove a bus throughout the area in order to bring shuckers to work.

Capt. Lester Lee, of Chester, Md., was born on Kent Island in 1910. He began to oyster and crab when he was about seven or eight with his father, working until late fall when he would go to school until early spring. When he was thirteen, he bought an eighteen foot workboat from his uncle for thirty-five dollars. After his mother died, he supported his four sisters for several years. After he married, he bought a twenty-eight foot boat he named in honor of his wife Mary. Soon after he had a more modern thirty-five foot workboat made which he kept for thirty-five years. Although he no longer handtongs, Captain Lester goes out every day on his present boat, Mertz, with his grandson, Gary Lee, who tongs while Lester culls.

Captain Lester is the subject of the chapter, "Lester Lee and the Chicken Neckers," in William Warner's Beautiful Swimmers. As such, he is a local personality, speaking at colleges, meetings, and has had several television appearances.

Capt. Wendell Lee, thirty-seven, is one of Lester Lee's four sons who are watermen. Living in Chester, Capt. Wendell began to crab and oyster after he finished high school. He quit for a while to drive a truck for an Annapolis utilities company but gave up after a year to return to oystering.

Leslie Phillips, of Tilghman, was a waterman for many years before he took advantage of the opportunity to buy the blacksmith shop he now owns. He smiths all types of shellfish harvesting equipment, including the oyster dredges, whose use is limited to the sailing vessels in the waters of Talbot, Somerset, and Dorchester Counties in Maryland.

Margaret Schoch is a local historian living in Chester. She has an extensive knowledge of Kent Island history, especially the early twentieth century. Much of this knowledge she has gleaned from oral sources in the area.

Captain Herman Stevens still culls oysters, despite his eighty-seven years, every day on an oyster workboat run by one of his neighbors. He has lived on Kent Island all his life and has a tremendous memory of its history, reaching back to the late 1800s. He began oystering at the age of nine when he culled for his father. He often sold his oysters to the

now nearly extinct buyboats on the Chesapeake. He has many stories about his youth on Kent Island.

John Turner is owner and manager of McNasby Oyster Company in Annapolis. Mr. Turner is knowledgeable of the oyster occupations, including the traditions of the shuckers. He understands the oyster market well enough to explain past occurrences and predict future trends.

Tom Weiland is the Director of the Maryland Waterman's Association in Annapolis. Although much of his information is biased towards the oystermen, he has a background in management and maintains much current information on the oyster and crab industries.

GLOSSARY

Buyboat: Vessels once used to carry harvested oysters from the workboats to the landings, usually Baltimore or Annapolis, no longer common.

Cull: The act of separating legal size oysters from bottom matter.

Culling board: Large board fitted athwartship of workboats on which oysters are culled.

Culling hammer: Tool used to break loose bottom matter from legal size oysters.

Deadrise: Regional term for the boats used by the Chesapeake Bay watermen.

Delmarva Peninsula: Area composed of parts of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia, bounded by the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay.

Dredge: Mechanical device used to harvest oysters by scraping the Bay bottom. Legal for use only in Talbot, Somerset, and Dorchester counties in Maryland by sailing vessels.

Eastern Shore: Regional term for the Delmarva Peninsula.

Grab: The act of opening and closing handtongs on the Bay bottom. See also "lick."

Handtongs: Two basket-shaped toothed rakes at bottom of pivoted wooden shafts used to harvest oysters.

Hill: See oyster bar.

Lick: Raised handtongs, full of bottom matter; the act of raising handtongs is known as "taking a lick."

Mark: Any land-based item such as a house or grove of trees used in combination by the oystermen as sights in order to return to the same area the following day.

Nippers: Tool used to raise single oysters, similar to but smaller than handtongs.

Oyster bar: Any underwater surface on which oysters are found.

Oyster bushel: Quantity established by Maryland statute equal to 1 3/10 standard bushel.

Packing house: Any Chesapeake Bay seafood processing plant. See shucking house.

Patent tongs: Mechanical tongs much larger than handtongs used for harvesting oysters. Only legal for use in Maryland waters over fifteen feet in depth.

Pile: Unusually large harvest of legal size oysters. If on any given day an oysterman is fortunate enough to catch his legal limit in a few hours, he is said to be "on a pile."

Poling: The act of using handtongs to push a boat to port or starboard.

Rakeheads: See tongheads.

Shafts: The long wooden handles of handtongs.

Shuck: The act of opening an oyster.

Shucking house: Any seafood processing plant maintaining an area for packing shucked oyster meat.

Shucking knife: Tool used for opening oysters.

Sounding pole: Long wooden shaft used to measure water depth.

Tally: Regional term for five bushels of oysters.

Tongheads: Steel basket-shaped rakes attached to wooden shafts to form handtongs.

Washboard: Broad plank attached to the sides of a boat to reduce water splash. On a deadrise workboat, the washboards are unusually wide in order to facilitate walking about while using handtongs.

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