

Off We Went aTonging

THE LEAVES WERE CHANGING colors on the trees. Fall had arrived. The sky was clear but there was a good sailing wind. Ed, my brother, and I were getting ready to go off tonging oysters on the Potomac River. This would be the first year that just Ed and I would go off together. Usually, my daddy, Willie Crockett, and my brothers would dredge for oysters around Tangier and take their catch to the docks in Washington to sell, but this year daddy had sold his boat. She was an old bateau called the *H. G. Alexander*, named after a doctor, and could carry 550 bushels of oysters in her hold. This year we were to go out on our own.

I kissed the wife good-bye and told the children to behave themselves. I wouldn't be seeing them any more until Christmas. I hoped we would catch some oysters so

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that we could have a fine dinner and buy a few gifts. I hoped we would also have enough money to last until spring. However, you never know working on the water.

I went down to the little ditch where my old barcat was docked and checked over our gear. I had done this the day before but I did it again just to be safe. It would be awhile before we would be home again and money would certainly be tight. Ed was coming down the narrow lane whistling a tune. "Elmer, they told me at the store that the gun you ordered arrived and they say it is some kind of pretty."

"By golly, thank you, Ed. I'll just be a minute. I want to go pick her up before we go," I said.

I had been waiting for her to come and was glad the gun came before we left. If we didn't catch any oysters, at least I could kill us a goose to eat. She was a brand new ten-gauge Ithica shotgun and one fine gunning gun. My daddy, who was running a store there on Tangier, ordered it wholesale for me, but even at that, she still cost sixty-five dollars.

When I got to the store, everyone was looking at my gun. They were all admiring it. I still owed some money on it, but daddy knew I might need that gun, so, he let me take it. By golly, was she pretty. When I got back to the boat, Ed set sail for the Potomac and I, like a little boy, took my new gun in the house and just looked her over.

Ed and I sailed on down to the Potomac and started tonging for oysters. Each day it just seemed to get worse and worse. What little bit of money we were making was being used up for the little bit of food we were eating. Finally, Ed said, "We've got five weeks left before Christmas. If we don't do something soon, there will be no Christmas at our houses, and we'll starve until spring."

"Ed, do you remember sometimes in March, When we were on the *H. G. Alexander*, daddy would go over to a small town on the Rappahannock River to sell some seed oysters?"

"Sure, you mean Urbanna. Daddy would sell those oysters to Walter Hurley. He had a little canoe he called the *J. W.* and would take our small oysters that we caught over near that steamboat dock at Remlik and put them on some of his oyster ground. Boy, he was paying good money for them back then," Ed said.

"I've been told there is some fine oystering over there, and it would be a fine place to stay until Christmas. Why don't we try it over there? We sure aren't doing anything over here," I said.

"Sounds good to me," Ed said. "It can't be any worse than what we've been doing."

So, we set sail for the Rappahannock River. When we got to Urbanna, there were oyster boats everywhere. They were lined up at Hurley's dock. When we pulled up to the dock, I went inside and talked to Boyd Hurley, and he agreed to buy our oysters. Hurley and his father, Walter Boyd, owned and operated the oyster house there on Urbanna Creek.

Hurley said, "You, boys, know you need at least twenty-foot shafts on your tongs, if you plan on catching any oysters around here. If you have been oystering over on the Potomac, you probably have been using sixteen-foot shafts, and I can tell you right now you're going to starve over here, too. That is if you don't get long shafts."

I told him he was right. We were using sixteen-foot shafts and asked who around had the long shaft tongs for sale.

He told us that the man to go see in town was Otho Smith. I asked if he would give tick (credit). He said he did not know.

Ed and I went back to the boat. That night we decided to go ahead and try our sixteen-footers because neither of us had a penny, and we figured there would be no tick.

The next morning we went out with all the other boats and got what we thought was a good place on the public rock. Sure enough, we could not touch the bottom. We moved here and there, but it did not do any good. Finally, we just pulled up our tongs and watched the other oystermen. They looked to be doing pretty good. "We've got to get us some of those twenty-footers," I said.

"Where are you planning on getting the money to pay for them?" Ed asked.

"I don't know, but let's go on to the dock and talk to Otho Smith. Maybe, he will give us some tick."

Many times later I was to see Captain Smith sailing up and down the Bay. He was the captain and owner of the schooner, the *Kate H. Tilghman*, but this was to be the first time I had met him.

He had a little place there on the shore where he had some tongs for sale. Ed and I went in and looked around. The tongs were leaning up against the wall. They had good long shafts on them, but the heads were wider than an "old steering paddle." I knew it would be hard to hold on to the oysters, if you could get hold of them.

A man was sitting there at a table. I said, "Mr. Smith, do you have any tongs for sale?"

He pointed over to the wall and said, "Five dollars and fifty cents a pair."

I told him we didn't have any money and asked for tick. Well, we talked for awhile, and he told us about a storekeeper there in town who might be able to help us. The store was called Haywood's Store, and Mr. Haywood was the proprietor.

It was a white clapboard building and had a dock behind it that we could pull our boats up to. At that time there were three or four women clerks there to wait on customers. We walked in and asked for Mr. Haywood. He was a short man and very pleasant to talk to. I told him our problem; if we didn't get those tongs, we couldn't catch a thing. We talked for awhile, and finally he said he would lend us the money if we would put up something for collateral. Well, there was not much that Ed and I had of any value except my brand new gunning gun. I hated the thought of putting it up, but I made Mr. Haywood promise he would hold on to it until I had the money to repay him. He told me he would not sell the gun.

I went down to the boat and got the gun out of the cabin. I looked it over real good before I took it up to the store. When I got back, Mr. Haywood was waiting. He looked at the gun and knew right then it was worth more than the eleven dollars it took for two sets of tongs. He pulled out eleven dollars and gave it to me. I told him I would be back for my gun. I hoped I would make enough money tonging to get it back before I went back to Tangier.

Ed took the eleven dollars down to Otho Smith and bought two sets of tongs with twenty-foot shafts on them. The next day we went on out with the other boats. We had about five weeks left before Christmas. Ed and I some kind of wanted to catch some oysters. If we did not, it would be a sad homecoming when we got back to Tangier.

We worked hard the next five weeks. Boyd Hurley was paying twenty-five cents for a bushel then. That was not too bad money. At the end of the five weeks, Ed had made thirteen dollars and I had made eleven dollars. We decided to leave my gun at Haywood's and come back when I had

some money to get it back. Just a few days before Christmas we set sail for home. We were happy. We both had a little money in our pockets.

The day before we arrived home. We stopped over at Balls Creek, below Reedville near Dameron Marsh, and got two cords of wood to last the rest of the winter. It cost two dollars and fifty cents a cord. I was happy. There was enough money there to get some presents for Christmas and to feed the family until spring. Ed and I had done all right.

It was a year later that I sailed back to Urbanna and went to Haywood's Store looking for my gun. Sure enough, by golly, my gun was still there. Mr. Haywood was a man of his word. He said he would not sell it, and he didn't. I gave him the eleven dollars which I owed him, and he gave me back my ten-gauge. She went on to kill many a duck and goose.

The next year Ed and I oystered the Rappahannock again, and we did real good.