

A Race To the Line

THE WIND was from the south, and it had been a fair day for oystering. Luther Thomas, Isaac Dize, and Ed and Weldon, my brothers, were sitting in a skiff waiting for me to board. I was leaning up against the winder box, still trying to get my nerve back. "Come on, Elmer, it's all over and we are safe," said Ed. "They surely are not going to come down here looking for us."

I told them to go ahead, that I would pole over in a little while. There was another skiff there which I had brought out in the morning. I could hear the children playing on the beach off in the distance, and the cold soft breeze was blowing against my face. We were lucky to be alive, and I told myself I would never push my luck again.

There was a line of skipjacks moored in Cod Harbor. We all had been oystering together during the day. "We were

lucky, you know," said Luther. They were about halfway to the dock, but I could still hear them talking. "We shouldn't have gone over the line for those oysters, Weldon," said Isaac.

Weldon was in no hurry to get back to the dock. Captain Lon Charnock was waiting there for him. I could see Captain Lon pacing back and forth. He appeared to be good and steamed up. "Weldon, you just about got me killed today," said Captain Lon.

"I'm sorry, Lon. We were just trying to get away from those cannon balls from that big gun," said Weldon.

I could not hear everything that was said, but after some discussion, Captain Lon and Weldon left the dock. Weldon had his arm over Lon's shoulder, and they were both laughing about something. After all, Lon had a few oysters, he did not get killed in the process, and we were all just trying to save our own skins. We had a lot to be thankful for. The fleet had drifted across the Maryland line, found a good rock, and could still live to tell about it. This is how it happened on that cold January day.

I awoke to the smell of salt fish cooking downstairs and I knew Ida would soon be up to get me moving. It was still in the early hours of the morning. I was working that winter on my brother's skipjack dredging oysters up near Great Fox Island, which is close to the Maryland-Virginia line. I was running late that morning, so hurriedly I got dressed and went down to eat.

When I walked into the kitchen, the warmth coming from the old wood stove hit me in the face, and it felt mighty good. "You best hurry along, Elmer, and eat," Ida said. "Weldon will leave without you." I ate my fish down. It was

some herring I had caught in the early spring. I put on my heavy coat that was hanging behind the door and rushed out the door. I walked at a brisk pace down to the little dock at Cod Harbor.

When I got there, the skiff Weldon usually used to go back and forth to his vessel was already gone. I could see the lights glowing from the cabins of the other skipjacks moored in the harbor. I knew Weldon was going to have something to say about me being late. He liked to be the first boat to put his dredge overboard. I could see two boats already moving out of the harbor.

I was just about ready to shove off when I heard someone coming down the path. It was Isaac and Luther, the two other hands who worked for Weldon. We had a crew of five, counting the captain. It was a good crew. Isaac and Luther were both good workers and both had arms as big as stovepipes, which were needed in the oyster business. Both men had tonged for a living and had also gotten strong from using those old hand winders drudging for oysters. Fortunately, we were using power dredges by that time.

The dredge was powered by a Hettinger engine. It was one cylinder, and it had two big fly wheels. She was a good dredging boat, and Weldon was a good captain. He could put you on a lump of oysters most anytime, and when we made a lick, you could figure on catching something.

"Hey, Elmer, wait for us," said Luther. "Do you think Weldon is going to be mad?"

"No, we are not that late," I said. I knew Weldon would not be real happy, however.

We all boarded the little skiff. Isaac untied the rope from the bollard there on the dock and jumped down onto the bow seat. I picked up the white oak sculling paddle, that I

had made several winters before from some lumber I had gotten over on the western shore, and shoved out into the harbor. When we arrived to the skipjack, Weldon yelled down to me, "Where have you boys been? Half the fleet has already started up toward Foxes."

Ed, who was the cook, was down in the galley. I could smell the smoke coming from the Shipmate wood cookstove and I could almost taste the cup of coffee I knew Ed was brewing. Coffee always seemed to taste better on those cold winter mornings. It would just solid hit the spot, and Ed would say he made the best pot of coffee around.

After we boarded, Weldon instructed us to hoist the little push boat to the davits. She was about fourteen feet and had an old Victor one-cylinder engine in her. The push boat, or yawl boat as some called it, normally stayed to the davits; but the day before, the old wind died, and things were slick calm on the bay. The only way to get home was for the little push boat to shove us there. We were late getting to the buy boat on that day. After unloading our catch, Weldon had said to leave the boat in the water until the next morning. There was plenty of wind today so we wouldn't be needing it.

There were seven or eight skipjacks working together out of Cod Harbor. We had been dredging up near the Maryland and Virginia line near the bell buoy off of Foxes Islands [Great Fox Island and Little Fox Island] since the season opened in November. We had done fairly well but the last few days things had slacked off, and I figured we would be moving to another spot the next week.

The skipjack, or bateau, was good for dredging oysters because of its shallow draft and wide beam. She had a centerboard, a raking type mast, a leg-of-mutton mainsail,

and a jib. The cabin was aft on her, and there was a flush deck which was helpful with all the weight and strain from the power winch.

Luther, Isaac, and I slacked the ties and hoisted the sail. It was a cold morning, and Weldon had lined up some work for us in the cabin by the warmth of the fire, while he sailed to Foxes. He sent the three of us down to mend the cotton dredge bags, which had been torn while dragging on the bottom. There are rings and s hooks on the bottom part of the bag that drags along the bottom, but sometimes when it scrapes across shells, the bag will get torn. The teeth on the scrape catch the oysters, and the bag holds them in the dredge. I was glad to have a job inside that morning.

We headed on out toward Foxes with several other boats that were also running late. As deckhands, Luther, Isaac, and I were responsible for reefing the sail, furling the sail at the end of the day, keeping the decks washed, and shoveling oysters into the tubs onto the buy boats. When you had two hundred fifty bushels of oysters, that could be a real job. Our main job, however, was culling oysters. Ed would also come out of the cabin to help. It would take all four of us to cull, especially when there was plenty of wind.

Weldon would steer the boat and run the dredge. Ed, as I said, was the cook. He stayed below except when culling and did not have to shovel the oysters at the end of the day, which was the best part of being the cook.

Ed was fixing some breakfast on this morning. I told him I had already eaten some salt fish at home, and he said, "Yep, now I know why you were late."

When we were away from home aboard ship, for breakfast we would eat cheese, eggs, and bacon, and always there

was a big jug of molasses to pour over the biscuits. For dinner we would usually have beans, that had been simmering all morning, or something similar that would stick by you. In the evenings for supper we might have a good piece of stew beef or sometimes Ed would cook up a good mess of oysters. He would also mix together some rice and raisins. When you are just about starving from working like a mule all day most anything tasted pretty good.

I took some food up to Weldon, while the others ate in the cabin. The food was bought by the cook, and the cost was split evenly between the five of us. The captain paid for the gas to run the dredge. You didn't make a lot of money and the work was hard, but it was a good, free life. The boat got a third of what was sold, and the rest was split between the five of us. This meant for every \$100 taken in, I would make \$13.33. It was not many days when we would catch a \$100 worth of oysters. When you are getting only forty or fifty cents a bushel it takes a lot of bushels to make any money to amount to anything.

"We've been lucky, Elmer. The oysters have been close to home this year," said Weldon. "Things have been slackening up. We might have to try the western shore next week."

"I figured that, brother," I said. "Maybe, we will hit a good lump today."

When we arrived at the rock, there were already two boats working. Luther and Isaac were working on a dredge bag getting it attached to the dredge. The wind was picking up, and Weldon told me to single reef the sails. Ed gave me a hand, and we tied each line through the eye bolts on the boom. We used a hard knot and then a bow. It was similar to the way a shoe is tied, but there is only one bow. The knot

can easily and quickly be untied. I didn't know it then, but I would be glad later that the knots would come loose with just a pull.

Weldon worked the winder and steered the vessel throughout the morning. We weren't catching much, and I could tell the other boys weren't doing much either. The wind was blowing us toward the bell buoy which is right on the Maryland-Virginia line. I yelled over to Weldon, "It looks like a couple of the boats are getting near the line." The Maryland line comes down and forms a rectangle that cuts right across Cedar Straits. I could tell if the fleet kept working and the wind stayed in the same direction, we all would end up in Maryland.

Weldon and the other captains kept working, and finally we ended up over the line. We were catching some oysters which made it even worse. No one wanted to leave. Isaac yelled over to Weldon, "We better not stay over here long." It was against the law for us to be over there, and there was a stiff penalty if we were caught.

We were steady working. Weldon dropped the dredge down to the bottom to make a lick, and suddenly a loud noise came from the direction of Crisfield. Luther yelled, "It's the Maryland police." I could see a powerboat coming towards us. Weldon screamed, "Let the sail go, Elmer." I ran to the boom and shook it out in full rap, and all of us swayed the sail up.

"By golly, they're shooting at us," said Luther.

"They're not aiming at us," said Weldon. Just after he made the statement a ball hit close to the boat.

We were the last boat because of our dredge having been on the bottom, and it took a little time to get it up. After the cannonball hit close-by, all of us but Weldon were flat on our

stomachs on the workdeck. It was a race to the state line. The police boat was under power, but we had a good wind, and don't think those old skipjacks couldn't move along with a decent wind. The wind was coming straight up the Bay which meant we had to tack. The line, however, was such that we were going straight towards it on the tack. If the line had not been where it was, we surely would have been caught.

The police were steady shooting at us. I looked up and saw Luther flat on the deck with his arms over his head. There was an open lid on the winder box, and suddenly the wind knocked it closed. It sounded like the ball had hit the boat. Luther jumped up and ran to the cabin screaming.

Weldon was a good sailor, as good as any on Tangier, and during the chase our boat overtook Captain Lon's vessel. We passed him on the windward side which knocked the wind out of his sail, and his old boat slowed right down. When we all finally got to the line without getting shot, Captain Lon yelled over to us, "You fellows fixed me when you came by to the windward."

It was some time before all of us were up and moving around. Isaac was still on his stomach for most of the way home. The winder box lid had scared poor Luther nearly to death. Weldon was silent, and I was still shook up.

When we got back to Cod Harbor, there was a buy boat waiting for our oysters. The talk on all the skipjacks was about the race to the line. We all knew we were mighty lucky, by golly. I honestly do not think they were actually trying to hit us, but for sure, they were coming close.

We didn't catch many oysters that day. But over the years, I did catch a lot using the dredge. The most was during World War II when I caught 323 bushels in five and

Barcat Skipper

three-quarters hours. I was the captain of a boat then, and we got sixty-two and one-half cents per bushel. I thought I was a rich man. I've spent many a day on the old skipjacks dredging oysters, but the day we had to race to the Maryland-Virginia line is one I'll never forget.