

My Time Aboard Skipjacks

By Michael A. Rawl

12/18/2014



Even under the protection of Blackwalnut Point, the waves in the Choptank River were building in the cold gusting 25-knot northwest wind. As the oyster dredges came aboard, the Skipjack *Stanley Norman* came through the wind and settled in on a starboard tack. The snow made it possible to see the wind, the snowflakes swirling in the vacuum created by the canvas airfoil on the backside of the sails. The order to “let ‘em go” returning the oyster dredges to the water came from Captain Ed Farley barely audible over the din of wind, waves and drone of the dredge winder engine in the center of the deck of this mud covered, scuffed up nearly 100 year old sailing vessel. I cleared the oysters, shells, rocks and mud from my part of the deck.

I turned my attention to the quarterdeck as a lightning bolt burned its way through the heavy snow squall. The flash and immediate BOOM made Capt. Ed raise his eyebrows, with an inaudible boyish chuckle that always made me laugh. His head tilted into the wind hiding his face under the brim of his cap and hooded jacket. Ed stood there with one gloved hand on the polished spokes of the cast iron ship’s wheel, which keeping the boat on its course, in the other a cup of coffee.

We were there to make money and would persevere as long as we could. Most of the other boats that even dared to venture out, had already run for the “Narrows” and called it a day. Barely a mile off the beach, there was no land in sight through the hazy filter of snow. Downwind and abeam of us the only thing I could see was the Skipjack *Kathryn* also still working, her beautiful bow rising up out of the water exposing nearly half her barn red, round bottom as she came about for another lick. The wind was freshening, the waves making it hard to keep the dredges on the bottom of the Choptank River.

Another tack towards home and the Captain held his hand up in a fist to signal holding the dredges. He eased out the main sail and it relieved the

pressure on the old wooden boat, it let her relax like a thoroughbred as it crosses the finish line and she headed home through the huge snowflakes. Another crash of lightening and thunder was like a signal calling it a day at only 9 o'clock in the morning. I looked back over the stern and amazingly the *Kathryn* had come about again, turning away from us, her dredges splashing into the ice cold greenish gray bay water, disappearing into the snow squall.

Kathryn built in Crisfield Maryland in 1901, with her respected Captain, Russell Dize and crew were always the last to quit. The old workboat was heavily built, unusually fore and aft planked, with a round or "soft chine" hull. The Skipjack *Kathryn* was well maintained and the high-liner of the fleet.



This memory was burned into my brain and as we sailed for home I told myself "This is what I'm here for, not the money REMEMBER THIS DAY" and I have, along with lots of memories of the men and dredge boats I had the privilege to sail amongst.

I came to Tilghman Island, Maryland in late October 1983 after delivering a boat to St Thomas in the US Virgin Islands. I had left the warm, sunny tropical paradise to try and get aboard a Skipjack or "Dredge Boat" on the Chesapeake Bay. The Skipjacks were the last remaining commercial sailing fleet in America. Most of these wooden boats were nearly 100 years old and a berth on them was not easy for a "Greenhorn" and mainlander to get . A guy could make \$150 to \$200 a day for going out breaking his back and freezing his ass off, scraping the famous Chesapeake oyster off the bottom of the bay. Sure it could be some long hard cold physically demanding days but it sure beat working for wages. I needed the money, but I had a feeling that this remnant of the past was not going to last

forever and I wanted to be a part of it, to experience a living piece of the history. I was to find out how right I was a few years later.

I spent a week hanging around and sleeping in my van near the oyster shucking houses amid mountains of fishy half shells, I would be up at 4am to stand on the docks that lined the Narrows, the small channel that separated Tilghman Island from the rest of the Eastern Shore of Maryland and the world. Captain after captain had repeatedly turned me down for being a "Greenhorn" a man with no experience on board Skipjack. Day after day I tried, only to be left standing with my foul weather gear in hand watching these boats head out to work. Then one cold foggy pre dawn morning, at the western end of the Narrows I was standing in front of a small skipjack talking to the skipper as each crew member arrived grumbling their way aboard the work boat. The *the little skipjack's* push boat or "Yawl Boat" engine's exhaust flappers were rhythmically clacking away as it warmed up for a day's work. Everyone was aboard but one tardy crewmember. The Captain cursed vowing to leave, proclaiming that this was the last time he'd wait for him. He cocked his head at me and with a sort of disgusted surrender said "OK Hoss we'll give you a try" I climbed aboard and was greeted somewhat indifferently by its sleepy local crew. Two of the guys were the Captain's sons, one being the obvious first mate or second in charge and now my deck boss who assigned me a spot on the starboard side of the boat to work in front of him. We tossed of the ragged dock lines and idled out into the darkness. "Just watch me and do what I say," said the Captain as he simultaneously spun the wheel and pushed the throttle on the yawl boat, shoving the boat into the racing tide of the channel. I saw a rat jump overboard and swim back to shore preferring that to going with us and thought "Who's idea was this anyway" as we headed out into the fog towards Poplar Island just to west of us.

Under the power of the "Yawl Boat" that was nosed into a "V" shaped, car tire lined wooden block bolted to the transom. The "Yawl Boat" is like a tugboat, a little specially built craft secured to the stern of a Skipjack who's only function is to push the "Dredge Boat", it is the only auxiliary propulsion allowed on a Skipjack. The Yawl boat would more than likely sink if the block and tackle that secured it to its master were let go. It is no more than an engine, usually removed from an automobile, with a little boat built around it. It's an ingenious contraption that can be pulled from side to side to help maneuver in tight quarters, making the Skipjack one of the most maneuverable vessels I have ever operated. The yawl boat, one of the heaviest things ever invented by mankind. When not in use, it is hauled out of the water by a pair of gut wrenching block and tackle that are suspended from steel davits that hang out over the stern. Besides being another thing to torture the crew with, when hauled up on the davits this is visual proof that the vessel is under sail power. This is mandated by an archaic rule that applies to only Skipjacks, except for Mondays or a "push day" when you can

push the boat with it while fishing. If you ever wondered why Mondays are always windy and the rest of the week it is calm this is the reason.

The little forty-foot Skipjack headed out in the pre sunrise fog guided only by a depth sounder and our captain's lifetime of local knowledge working there. This Captain was Tilghman Island born and bred here and knew the bottom of the bay like the back of his hand. In a short time, with a nod from the Captain, the two dredges were gently slipped overboard with a practiced silence I didn't yet understand. The dredges hit the bottom of the bay and the Captain slightly nudged the yawl boats throttle. The crewman in front of me was facing forward, his practiced hand resting on the cable as he felt the dredges progress over the seabed. He nodded positively at the Captain, who then pulled a string that was tied to the deck winders throttle. My crewmate then reached over to the winch and pushed down the handle and the cable started to come in slowly. As the "winder" motor strained under the load, it came in slowly and quietly until it reached a horizontal rusted steel roller mounted to the boats bulwark. I was urged to grab it and we gently and stealthily helped it aboard. The steel dredge's twine and chain-mail basket was full of the biggest oysters I have ever, to this day seen and was dumped on deck by us with two hand held steel rings. We repeated this for about a half hour putting nearly a boatload or "limit" of oysters on deck. The Captain ordered us to hold the dredges as he pushed the boat out into the mist farther away from shore. This has been going on for centuries on the Chesapeake Bay.

We continued out until the sun came up when we worked some "legal ground" covering the huge beautiful oysters with more "run of the market ones" in a sort of veneer that kept a secret of where we had been. In an hour we were loaded full or "limited out" for the day. We sat anchored on one of the dredges as one of the crew prepared a breakfast of bacon and eggs boiled in residual grease with very strong coffee. We all went below to eat and I was informed that that spot where had found those monster oysters was "over the line and in hand tonging ground" but it was too deep for the Tongers to get to, the reason for their unusual size. We waited a reasonable amount of time to help keep our secret as I listened to stories from the Captain and crew, which they related to me cheerfully, glad to have some new ears to tell them to.

We headed back to shore and tied up at the dock from which we had departed and where I assume the rat awaited us. We "put the oysters out" bushel by bushel calling out a "tally" for every fifth bushel until all of them rode their way up a rubber conveyor belt into the back of an enclosed truck that wasted no time heading to market. The Captain came to me and said "the jobs yours if you want it, be here at 4am tomorrow". I was elated as he handed me over \$200 and told me to "keep whatever happens on this boat to myself". To which I replied, "what boat?" Getting the biggest smile of the

day from him. I had a job! So happy to have gotten aboard, now it was time for me to back it up. Most of the crew when finished for the day disappeared as quickly as possible usually heading straight for the nearest tavern. I made it a point to stay and help the Captain repair dredges or to take care of some of the myriad of things he is usually solely responsible for. I spent the next couple of months on board with this family and quickly absorbed the skills needed to lose my Greenhorn status.



Christmas came and so did a hard winter freeze, which kept the boats in port unable to navigate in a solid layer of ice on the Chesapeake and ending my job aboard *Esther F.*

I took some oysters across the Bay Bridge and spent the holidays with my family. A thaw in January drew me back on the docks my job on *Esther F* went to a member of their family in need of work. I was looking for another boat but now with some experience and acquaintances I landed a job aboard the Skipjack *Stanley Norman* with Captain Ed Farley. Captain Farley was a new breed of oysterman; he had bought and rebuilt this Skipjack. Ed was a Yankee boat builder who had come to love this way of life, we formed a friendship and I spent the rest of the year aboard the *Stanley Norman*.

In the spring we participated in "Spatting" a state sponsored seeding program. This paid boats to dredge oyster shell covered in new oyster spawn off productive oyster beds. We spread them like seed to other played out areas hoping to create new and/or better oyster beds to work on. These were long days of filling the boat to near dangerous loads, moving the shell either close by or on monotonous runs up or down the bay. When this was complete the oyster season ended. This was the beginning of a love affair with these muddy old beautiful sailing vessels.

That summer I went to Long Island NY to run a charter sailing operation in Montauk, ironically on a Chesapeake Bay Three Sail Bateau the same hull design as the Skipjack but having two masts. I enthusiastically returned in September to Tilghman Island for another year of oyster dredging preferring the oysters to tourists. I had found a home and work

that I loved. I had a dream of purchasing a working Skipjack and making it my life. It had captured my attention but nearly broke my heart as the next year unfolded.

A drought had been in progress in the mid Atlantic region for several years and the past summer proved to be no different. When we returned to the oyster beds the next fall we found what had been reported to be true. The trend of the drought had increased the salinity of the bay so significantly that the salty ocean water encroached on this delicate estuary with the unknown effect of introducing a sea borne parasite named MSX, along with lowered oxygen levels from pollution it was in the process of killing the oysters in the bay. We would go out to previously prolific oyster beds only to haul aboard dredges full of dead oysters. Day after day the scene worsened until it was impossible to make a day's pay, it was a disheartening thing to watch this industry come to an end. The Skipjacks, their owners, crew and local businesses suffered in an already struggling economy. I reluctantly had to leave and go ashore to work for wages, disappointing Captain Ed, the look on his face when I told them this is something I will never forget.

The oysters have made somewhat of a comeback, but many of these old vessels did not. Thanks to some dedicated people, there are a few Skipjacks being used today in museums, environmental educational programs and tourism businesses. You might see a few working the bay today but the heyday is just a memory to some of us lucky enough to have been there.

If you live in the Chesapeake Bay region and have a chance to take a ride on a Skipjack you should, it will help keep it alive and give you a glimpse into this beautiful part of American history.

