

Working the Chesapeake

Sailing after oysters

By Robby Robinson

Carol loves oysters. That's why she's with me here on the dock in the chilly post-dawn of a mid-March morning. I love oysters, too, and I've always wanted to explore the realities of the romantic world of "working sail." That's why we're sailing today on *Virginia W.*, one of the 26 skipjacks still dredging for oysters on Chesapeake Bay, one of the boats that make up the fleet that for the last 30 years has been called "the last vestige of working sail in America."

Dan Cox arrives after we do. He's in his early twenties, has hair like dried pine needles, and shyly welcomes us aboard even though he has no idea who we are. We introduce ourselves and take a short tour of the deck.

"It must get pretty rough," I say.

"Sometimes."

"Those are pretty big spray shields," I say, nodding at the four-by-eight sheets of plywood standing on edge by the shrouds.

"Them's oyster boards," he smiles. "For piling up the oysters."

"Oh," I nod, trying to look as though I knew what he meant.

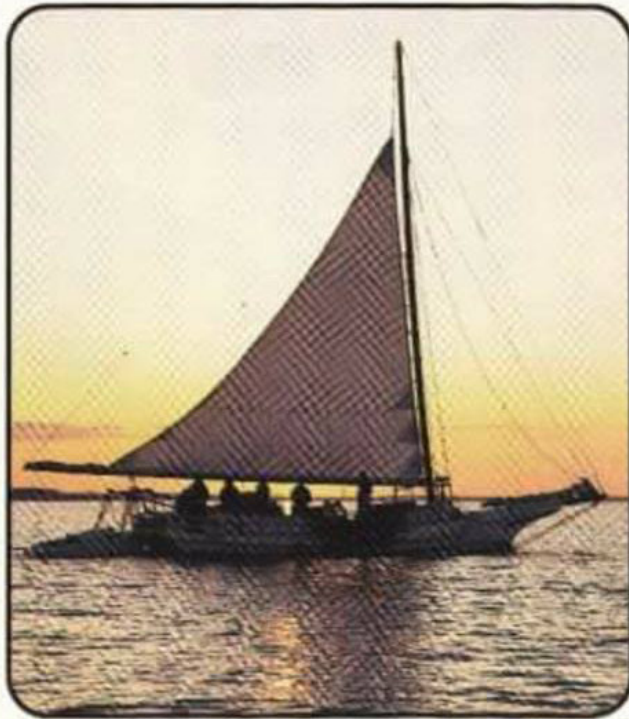
Judith Cockey and Captain Rob Marshall arrive. We shake hands, and I say something like, "SAIL sent me to find out what I could about working sailors."

"Oh," says Bobby (we've already warmed to calling him Bobby), "seems like since the president came here, everyone wants to go skipjack sailing these days."

Carol, Judy, and I go below. We drop our gear, and Judy lights the woodstove. After a while Bobby calls for Judy, and we all go up—it's actually more like out because the cabin is a sitting-headroom shed, dark with just a kerosene lantern and with bench/

bunks built at about deck level.

"Gonna launch the pushboat," says Bobby, and the three crew go through their practiced routine of lowering, spinning, and tethering the pushboat. Heavy-built of cedar, sheathed



against the ice with copper, painted flat white, and looking like a cross between a vintage inboard runabout and a jumbo coffin, the pushboat contains the marinized Ford Falcon engine that gives *Virginia W.* her only auxiliary power.

Judy cooks French toast, Bobby performs his morning ablutions on deck, Dan adjusts the becketts on the winder, and we push ourselves eastward from Tilghman out from our berth in Knapps Narrows across the wide mouth of the Choptank to the "drudging" grounds at the mouth of the Tred Avon River.

"Those are becketts?" I ask Dan.

He shows Carol and me how to lay the becket, a 2-foot length of light nylon line, on the winder drum, take up about three turns of the 1/2-inch wire rope, and then tie a square knot around the three turns of cable.

"That's how we control how much cable we let out. There's no brake on the winder. The first becket is what holds the drudge. Bobby might tell us to take out a becket or two if it gets deeper. If we hit a snag, the becketts break. That lets you know something's wrong. Snag a leeward drudge when it's blowing, and you've got big problems."

The winder sits snarly in the middle of the deck. It's the last day of the winter-long season, but the cable doesn't seem to have any meathooks or frays in it. A wooden box shields the six-cylinder winder engine; a smokestack with muffler juts up amidships; the yard-long wire reels are supported by an angle-iron frame with twin cranes that hold the blocks that take the cable from the reel to the drudge. It's not the sort of assembly that makes you want to snuggle up to it. It is the type of finger eater that keeps crewmen awake. Bobby has run a long string from

the winder throttle aft so that he can work both the winder and the ship's wheel.

Carol and I stroll aft. One foot on the wheel. Bobby is eating his French toast.

"How long you been doing this?" I ask.

"I'm real new at it. I grew up on Tilghman, but I was always more of a fisherman than anything else. I used to hate the drudge boats, raking up the bottom. Then I got into hand tonging and I hated 'em worse. Doug Fluharty and I opened a packing house. About that time a fellow from up your way, name of Tim Stearn, he came in here on a little schooner and started livin' here, and then he found this old drudge boat in the mud.

"Well, he didn't have much money, but he was the sort of guy that when

Bob Oatman



Bob Dozier

We worked alongside *Maggie Lee*. One of her crewmen guides the cable past her chine with his pole while another winds the drudge onto her rollers

he gets an idea to do somethin', he is just plain goin' to do it. When he said he was going to rebuild that old wreck, people were saying that it was a thousand-to-one shot that he'd ever do it. Now, if he come in here with the remains of Noah's ark, I'd back him. With *Virginia W.* he started from worse than nothing. He didn't know that much about skipjacks, but he learned quick. He'd have friends over all the time to work on the boat. It seemed like everybody got into it. I used to give him fish every now and then and check on him, but when he finally got her all done—new sides, new decks, new bottom, new wind-er—he didn't have any money at all, and he asked us if we wanted a half-share in the boat. It seemed like a good deal, so we went with him.

"Anyway, he worked the boat some, and then he asked me to crew. From fishing and hand-tonging I knew the bottom better than he did, and we made a pretty good team. But he wanted to go on cruising, so he sold me the boat, and I've been working her four seasons before this one. I'm still the least experienced captain working out of Tilghman."

The sun is well up. The breeze is, too, about 12 to 14 from the northwest. I haven't noticed it getting any warmer. Carol and I are bundled up, though, and enjoying the Eastern Shore panorama: bare trees, empty beaches, and sun-sparkled water. The man-made things we can see are agreeable.

There is a white-topped stake in the water ahead. "That's the boundary," says Bobby.

Up go main and jib, aboard comes the pushboat, and we're broad-reaching at what must be 6 knots. I am surprised when Bobby calls for a reef

in the main and a double reef in the jib. I help Judy and Dan put them in, Carol tends the jibsheet, and I wonder the whole time about why we need reefs. The breeze isn't heeling us much at all. Maybe these working sailors are just used to going slow.

We are the first boat to the grounds. Bobby tries a couple of licks, looking for oysters. I figure out before too long that a lick is a course, or more precisely, a line—a sort of plow furrow over the bottom. Bobby knows where the oyster bar is. What he is trying to find is a section of the bar where the oysters are thicker.

We beam-reach toward the bar, headed northeast. "Heave winnard," Bobby says, matter-of-factly.

Dan throws the port drudge.

We sail about 20 yards before we feel the pull as the drudge sets. Our speed goes from about 4 to about 2.

"Ho."

Judy heaves the leeward drudge. Like the windward one, it takes cable

out from the winder until the cable fetches taut on the first becket. We sail on. Virginia W. shakes a bit and seems to lean into the drudges. We pick up some speed. One minute, two, the winder motor revs twice and Dan engages the weather drum. On her own, Judy waits for the windward drum to start in, then she winds on the leeward side. Up onto the sheer rollers, steered by the side rollers, both drudges arrive almost at the same time. Judy and Dan work together on the windward drudge, tipping it up over the roller and spilling it onto deck. Then they move together to empty the other one.

"Ready about."

Carol and I are watching from aft. There doesn't seem to be anything to do. Judy goes forward. Dan spreads the catch out on the deck. Bobby tacks the boat. Virginia W. heads back on the reciprocal of the course she has just sailed.

"Winnard . . . ho," and the drudges are reset.

Judy and Dan cull through the shells on hands and knees. When they get an oyster, it's a quick flip to send it bouncing off the oysterboards. The keepers mount up slowly. Shells, crabs, garbage, and mud get pushed toward the rail and then swept back overboard onto the bed.

"Twenty-five," Judy says.

"Fourteen and a whole lot of shell," Dan says.

The winder revs twice, and Judy starts in with the starboard drudge.

I figure 39 oysters will keep me going for a while with a shucking knife. I ask Bobby how we're doing.

"There's a lick here where we've been counting forty and fifty to the drudge. It's near the end of the bar, so I started a little toward the edge. That's why we got so much shell. I'll work back into the river on these next couple of licks. We'll find her."

And we did, half an hour later.

We start counting 35 or so on both sides. Bobby drops a pot as a range mark at either end of his lick. Culling takes longer when there are oysters, so while Bobby holds Virginia W. on the good lick, we help Judy and Dan pick and sort through what the drudges dumped on the oaken culling boards in her waist.

It takes some experience to cull quickly through the dead shells and mudders for the live oysters. When you find one it's a thrill, though, like

The skipjack

When the prohibition on oystering in Maryland waters was lifted in 1865, most of the boats that rushed into the oyster fishery were sloops. Round-bottomed, gaff-headed, "apple-cheeked in the bows," they were the finest flower of the workboats derived, over the centuries, from the Dutch *sloop*, the French *chaloupe*, and the English *shallop*. With the opening of the oyster beds, the number of sloops built on Chesapeake Bay jumped from 19 to a high of 122 in 1885.

By the turn of the century, the tall, fast sloops had nearly vanished from the Chesapeake oyster grounds. Taking their place were skipjacks. The name derived from the watermen's term for the triangular rig that was replacing the gaff-headed mainsail, hallmark of the working sloops. Developments of the crab skiffs and *bateaux* of the Chesapeake tributaries, the skipjacks were virtually flat-bottomed, box-built, herring-bone-planked centerboarders. By the 1920s, more than 1,000 skipjacks were registered to work the Chesapeake oyster beds.

They could be built of local lumber by a good house carpenter, and because of their simple triangular mainsails, they could be handled easily. They were very well suited to their work. Triangular sails are much simpler to reef than gaffed sails, the stability of the beamy, flattish-bottomed hulls added to their power, and the increased deck room that came with added beam provided more space to pile oysters. Skipjacks also sport mainmasts with an eye-catching angle of rake. The mast angle supports the long leech dictated by their long booms.

increases stability by increasing the relative size of the lower portion of the mainsail, and places the main halyard directly over the main hold, which is good for handling cargo.

Today the Maryland Department of Natural Resources regulates most of the Chesapeake oyster grounds. It apportions the oyster-bearing portions of the bay floor among oystermen, be they hand-tongers, patent-tongers, divers, or dredgers.

The dredge boats are not allowed to use conventional power. Their five-month season is broken into a roughly equal number of "push" and "sail" days. On push days they use the relatively efficient power of the inboard engines in the pushboats that all the skipjacks carry. "If they let us use regular engines," says Capt. Rob Marshall of Virginia W., "I suppose there might be some that would dredge with their sails up but really use their motors. Even a warden can tell that when we've got our pushboat in the davits, we're sailing."

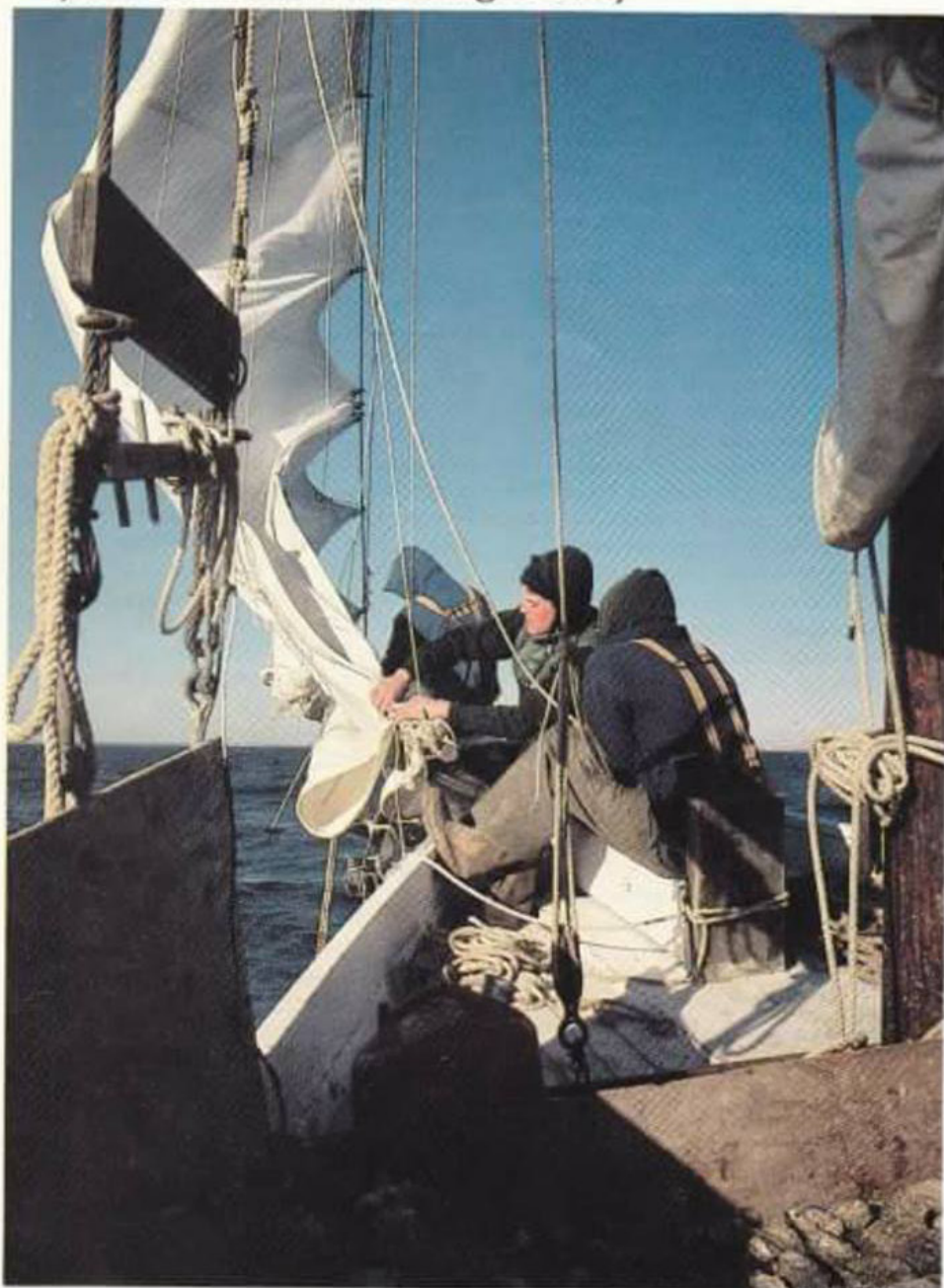
State regulations have protected the oyster grounds from overfishing and preserved the skipjack. But the oysters of Chesapeake Bay are now a threatened resource, and if the oysters go, the skipjacks will go.

Until they do, from November to March the men and women of the fleet will work the bay in the elaborate, time-honored, and taxing pursuit of sailing after oysters.
—R.R.



Illustration by Richard Schlecht

"A skipjack needs flat sails so she can hold a lick close to the wind and pull with power," says Bobby. "And she should tack nice. Losing your tack means losing money"



Carol Robinson

To maintain steady drudging speed, we need to reef and shake out frequently

catching a fish or digging up a clam. I don't imagine Judy or Dan feel much of the same excitement on this last day of their five-month season that Carol and I do, and they are an easy three times faster, but it still feels good to bounce seven live ones off the board and add to the pile.

Later we decide to sail to another ground.

"Bobby," I ask, "how good a sailor do you have to be to go oystering?"

"Well, I'd never sailed 'til I got the boat. I don't think I'd win many races over in Annapolis, but there's a lot to sailing and oystering. The main thing is being able to hold your lick. The ideal lick is on a beam reach, but how often do you get that? Even then, if the tide's running with the wind, you have a real hard time holding up against it. I recut my sails to make them flatter and make her point bet-

ter, and that's made a big difference.

"Of course, you have to control the speed of the boat. If you don't have enough power, the drudges will stop you. If you're going too fast, the drudge may skip over the bottom or bury and snag. We use the reefs to control our speed. And then the boats sometimes won't carry through a tack. You have to take a crewman to stand by the jib to back it or you'll lose a lot of time. And when you're catching oysters, like the man says, time is money. The more good licks you have, the more you take to the bank.

"But there's a lot more to it than sailing. You should be able to tell by feeling the cables whether you're catching oysters before you count. And the crew's important. Anyone slouches in the crew, or the skipper slouches, especially, you hurt the whole boat. You know we work on shares. We're a small boat. *Virginia W.* is only thirty-nine feet on the deck. But that way we can work with a small crew, and we can make more money, sometimes, than the big guys. They catch more oysters, but they take out more shares.

"Used to be people thought the drudge-boat crews were the scum of the earth. I've been real lucky. Judy's been to college at the agricultural school at University of Maryland. Dan's been with me since I started. I'd trust either one of them to take the boat out if I was sick or something.

"I try to be optimistic about most everything, but I'm worried about the way things are going in the bay. I read somewhere that the best harvest they ever had here, sometime back around 1880, was fifteen million bushels. This year I think they predict a million one or a million point two for this season that's ending today.

"There's a lot of problems. There's MSX and Dermo. They're different diseases, but they both are killing oysters. When I started five years ago, the harvest was twice what it will be this year. The bay's losing its oxygen. Right over there by that point's an oyster bar in thirty feet of water. The oysters there died two years ago because the water that deep doesn't have oxygen enough to keep them alive anymore. The eelgrass is all gone. When I was a kid, it used to be so thick you'd think about walking on it. It's been killed somehow, from either chemical runoff from fertilizers or polluters or maybe a disease. Eel-



Carol Robinson

At the packing house dock, we bushel the oysters to count them and then off-load our catch. Pier-head prices have risen with recent lean harvests

grass puts oxygen in the water. I talk to the guys from the research station over Oxford every chance I get. They don't have any more answers than I do. People are talking more and more about leasing the beds. We can't pay for the equipment and all that would take. It would be big corporations running the beds. I don't like that thought at all."

We reach the grounds off the lower end of Tilghman. Five, six, seven licks and we're counting in the teens.

"Come here, Carol," says Bobby. "Sail us onto some oysters."

Carol sails a lick slightly to the south of our last one.

"Twenty... twenty-eight."

"That's more like it. Come about and then fall off just a bit."

With a single drudge out, for better speed, Carol sails the new lick.

"Thirty-one."

"Not bad. You want to let the old man try?"

I take the wheel and bring Virginia W. about. She answers slowly even though we have 4 knots of way. Bobby trims the main for the tack to spank her around, and we make it without having to back the jib. I feel her power as she fills away, but there is surprisingly little helm. I say so.

"That has something to do with skipjack proportions," Bobby answers. "The rule is the mast should be the same length as the boat overall, and the boom is the same as the length on deck. The distance from the stem to the end of the bowsprit is the same as the beam. I don't know where they got that, but that's the formula."

"Seems to work," I say, and the more I sail Virginia W., the more I mean it.

We don't count many oysters on my licks, but it is amazing to me that she can pull two huge drudges and still maintain the ideal drudging speed of 2½ to 3 knots in 10 knots of dying northwester.

"We're not getting rich doing this," Bobby says. "Let's go home."

There are obviously oysters still down there. I'm surprised at first. I

stand clear of the wheel as Judy takes over and then take her place on the davit falls, launching the pushboat. We douse and furl the sails, shovel the oysters into four piles, and we're almost to Knapps Narrows. It is barely noon, but I feel as though I've been at sea for years. I have to wonder what a long day in January must feel like.

"This is no easy way to make a buck," I say to Dan.

"Yeah. Gets in your blood, though."

At the packing house Dan and Judy bushel up our catch. Twenty-one, says the buyer. We cast off and run back to our dock. I wonder about the half-bushel of loose ones strewn on the deck. As Bobby, Carol, Dan, and I hoist the pushboat and clean up, Judy sits shucking. Dan joins her. Carol and I take a stab at shucking a few, and before the lunchtime crowd clears out of the Bay Hundred restaurant across the cut, the last oysters of the sail-drudging season are in the pot and stewing.

"I must admit that this was one of your better ideas," Carol says.

