



ON THE WATER

A tale of tongers, dredgers and ‘oyster navies’

by LORRAINE EATON | illustration by TRISHA IRVING

At the apex of oyster season there’s much to dispute. Raw or roasted? Seaside or bayside? Who slurps the last one?

Never mind all that. On and around the Chesapeake Bay, real “oyster wars” raged for a century, complete with cannons, machine-gun fire and Maryland and Virginia “oyster navies” attempting to keep the peace.

The catalyst was something ostreophiles know well: the rich, sensuous flavor of a Chesapeake Bay bivalve. By the 1800s, millions of bushels were being shipped as far as California, Paris and China. In Norfolk alone, workers packed more than 1.3 million bushels, according to an account in *The Norfolk Virginian* newspaper in 1879.

Laws governing who can harvest oysters, where and how, predate the U.S. Constitution. As the industry exploded, so did the ire.

Tongers came first. They plied inlets and creeks aboard shallow-draft skiffs, prying oysters by hand with scissor-like rakes. Later came dredgers, dragging metal baskets behind vastly larger vessels and raising their bounty with mighty winches. Dredging, which can be destructive to oyster colonies, was restricted to deeper parts of the bay at first. But by 1870, as oyster stocks dwindled because of massive demand, dredgers from both states began poaching the shallows, often crossing the state line.

“Plainly put, Maryland and Virginia watermen despised one another,” wrote John R. Wennersten in his book, *The Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay*.

In 1889, an Onancock oyster dealer hired a tugboat to rout poachers from his leased grounds. When the captain spotted a Maryland dredge, he rammed the schooner at midships, and then he rammed it again, sinking the vessel.

This Wild West, maritime mayhem continued well into the 20th century. “NORFOLK TROOPS ORDERED OUT IN OYSTER WAR” blazed the front page of *The Virginian-Pilot* in January 1928, when three National Guard units were dispatched to Mobjack Bay – complete with tents and a field kitchen, and armed with rifles and automatic weapons. Their mission: to restore peace following a night of violence when tongers from Gloucester – allegedly harvesting illegally – fired seven shots at a state patrol boat.

“Only 50 miles from Washington men are shooting at one another,” reported *The Washington Post* in 1947 during the post-war oyster boom. “The night is quiet until suddenly shots snap through the air. Possibly a man is dead, perhaps a boat is taken, but the oyster war will go on the next night and the next.”

For residents of Colonial Beach, on the Virginia side of the Potomac River, cat-and-mouse chases between the oyster-patrol boats and invading dredgers became a spectator sport. One Saturday night in December 1956, hundreds gathered to watch two Maryland police boats and a seaplane chase down Harvey King, a brazen Virginia oysterman caught dredging in Maryland waters. King spotted the law and rocketed off, dumping illicit oysters in his wake and employing an evasion pattern that “would have sparked the envy of men experienced in naval combat,” wrote Wennersten.

At one point during the 90-minute chase, King attempted to ram the seaplane. At another, the Virginia patrol boat attempted to ram the dredger. Maryland police fired rifles and pistols, some poking the dredge, others splattering the shore where spectators crouched behind cars. Miraculously, no one was hurt, but the incident exacerbated the tension between Maryland and Virginia officials.

A few weeks later, a Maryland police boat rammed a Virginia dredger so hard the stern fell off.

The closing chapter of the oyster wars came on a misty morning in 1959 when King was spotted just before dawn dredging oysters in Maryland territory. The Maryland oyster police fired shots at the unarmed boat as it zoomed toward the Virginia shore. One bullet fatally wounded crew member Berkeley Muse, a popular Colonial Beach character.

By then, both states had had enough, and the battle resumed in the legislatures. An agreement was finally reached Dec. 5, 1962, aimed at maintaining peace and regulating the Potomac River fisheries. Signed by President John F. Kennedy, it signaled the end of the Chesapeake Bay oyster wars, although Maryland and Virginia still maintain “oyster navies,” now called marine patrols, to keep law and order on the bay. ■

ON THE WATER

A farewell to socks

by LORRAINE EATON | illustration by WES WATSON

It's February, and thousands of local sailors are feeling constrained—both by the limitations of a landlocked life and by a piece of common clothing.

But right around the spring equinox, we'll gather at yacht clubs, marinas and sail lofts from Norfolk to Annapolis to partake in a Chesapeake Bay tradition that signals winter's end and the beginning of a new sailing season: sock bonfires.

The shenanigans started in 1978, in the wake of a snowy Annapolis winter, when boatbuilder Bob Turner stripped off his pair and burned them, inviting his fellow workers to do the same. Us boaters, we do love a party, and more than 40 years later, the tradition has spread to Alabama, New England, the Pacific Northwest and even landlocked Pennsylvania.

Sometimes the events feature great oration and other times we just toss the socks in on the way to the bar. Some are fundraisers; some plain old fun. Occasionally, oysters are involved.

I've been constrained since December, when I eased my catamaran *Watch This!* into a high-walled concrete slip barely wide enough to hold her. I had stretched out the sailing season as far as I could, hoping for a few fall days with wind and warmth and without the Chesapeake Bay's infamous square waves—when the height and the interval are equal.

This was one of them, but instead of sailing west and into the Bay, it was my turn to ease east and into the slings of a travel lift, an apparatus that hoisted my boat up and out of the water and then transported her ever so slowly across a parking lot, over some railroad tracks and into a boatyard where she's been spending the winter "on the hard."

I've been shipwrecked in my living room ever since, an archipelago of charts, boating magazines and parts catalogues strewn across my ottoman, waiting out the winter. Right now, there's a whole universe of stranded sailors in Tidewater. Some, like me, grew up gripping a tiller. For others, water lust came later in life.

Our winter plight is evident in marinas where bare-masted boats loll in their slips. Along the Bay and Atlantic Ocean beaches, Hobie cats hunker in sand dunes. Boatyards are tiled with vessels undergoing repairs in anticipation of a new season.

For now, though, we're stranded indoors and dreaming of regattas, nights at anchor, dock parties and sundowners, imagining the spring day when we head back out on the Bay, the thwack of wind as it fills the mainsail, water wooshing along the hull and the sun and the wind in our faces. And, of course, no socks. ■





ON THE WATER

Gunkholing, the ultimate social distancing

by LORRAINE EATON | illustration by WES WATSON

In the wake of a weekend sailing cruise gone awry, a list lit up my phone, a riskiness ranking of 37 daily activities during these pandemic times from haircuts to concerts to the safest of all, opening the mail.

Obviously, the members of the Texas Medical Association who developed the list weren't sailors. Otherwise opening the mail would have dropped to No. 2, bested by a way more fun activity and one for which the Chesapeake Bay is famous; gunkholing.

Gunkholing is the boaters' equivalent of leaving the trail and pushing deep into the woods to find a secret spot to make camp. The quirky term comes from the often-muddy bottoms of the out-of-the-way tidal creeks, coves and crannies that lure intrepid boaters to go where no boater has gone before.

The Bay's 11,000 miles of crinkled coastline offers plenty of possibilities, secluded places to set the anchor, cocooned from the wind, and where it's silent save the musical tinkle of tidal waves tapping the hull – the ultimate social distancing.

To nose into these sanctuaries requires knowledge of tide, water depth, absolute certainty of your vessel's draft and a measure of derring-do. Sailboats, with underwater fins called keels that can reach 5 feet or more below the water, are at a disadvantage to motorboats, which generally have shallower drafts. Depth soundings on nautical charts aren't always accurate as channels and shoals shift during storms. And a boat's depth finder only indicates how deep the water is where you are, not what's lurking a few feet ahead. All that

makes running aground a nerve-wracking possibility.

That wasn't a deterrent a few weeks back when an uncooperative wind had us south of a planned anchorage on the north shore of the York River. With late-afternoon storms in the forecast, we decided to go gunkholing on the Back River instead.

At the approach, a gorgeous stretch of deserted sandy beach beckoned, but with hardly enough water to get anywhere near it. Instead, we followed red and green channel markers into the mouth of the river, past the entrance to a small marina at Dandy Point and inched our way into the quiet, tree-lined southern branch, called Harris River.

We pressed on. Moving. Ever. So. Slowly.

The depth dropped from 6 feet to 4 – just enough for us to squeak by with our 3-foot, 9-inch draft. Suddenly, we were in 7 feet of water and hoping we could press on to find a hidey-hole ahead. The depth then dropped to 5, then up to 6. Then a dull thud.

Running aground triggers a sickly feeling in the gut. For a tense moment, time stands still. But it's the risk gunkholers take in search of serenity.

That day, we eased away from those shallows and nosed up another couple of Back River branches but found nothing to keep us there. So, we sailed on home, tying up at the dock before the impending storms. Although we didn't find the ultimate spot that day, take note, Texans! Our gunkholing adventure packed way more fun than a trip to the mailbox. ■