On The Job...

OYSTER MAN — Charles "Bud" Coursey, one of the veteran oyster captains on the Delaware Bay, displays a compass from the ship, "The H.W. Sockwell," which he headed. He recently retired because of health reasons. (Photo by Ralph)

Coursey Back On Solid Ground

By KATHY MASCIOLI

It must seem strange to Charles "Bud" Coursey to spend his days on solid ground.

The Port Norris resident, who now spends most of his time at his Dragston Road home was born on a boat, and, from the time he was 16 years old, worked every day on a boat.

Bud Coursey recently retired as a captain of the oyster boat, "The Howard W. Sockwell," which runs out of the Bivalve Packing Company. "...health forced him off the water and into his ...de's off the job now. But his absence is sorely felt by his fellow captains and harvesters, who could rattle off stories about one of the Delaware Bay's longest seafaring companions.

"He was one of the few black captains on the water," his wife, Cecelia, boasted while Bud shrugged off her proud comments. "There were three at the time he was working in the whole state and one of them was his brother-in-law."

Bud's career showed promise before he even began working on a boat at the age of 16.

(Continued on Page 3, Col. 3)

'Bud' Coursey Is Back On Solid Ground

(Continued from Page 1)

"He was born on a boat called the "Saint Mary," born right on the water," Cecelia said. Although born in Maine where offshore fishing is a chief occupation, "I moved here to live and then I started working on a boat," he said.

By 17, he was mate on the "Sockwell" and, after working for several years, he captained a small rowboat with six crew members. The rowboat at the time was called the "Manny."

Just before the Sockwell's captain, Herb Sockwell, died, Bud moved up to the captain's position on the large sailboat-turned-diesel-powered-vessel. His father had at that time died from carbon monoxide that spurted from an exploded oil stove on the oyster boat he captained.

He remained on the 70-year-old boat, harvesting and planting oyster beds usually with a crew of 10 or 12 men. His memories of the changing industry and the stories other oystermen could tell of the Coursey days could fill a dozen dredges.

"They called him a water fool because he stayed out there, even in storms and fog, when everyone else came back in," Cecelia proclaimed.

Cecelia told of the times when Bud would lead other boats out of the fog and into the dock. "Oh," Bud shrugged, "in the fog, we came in side by side." "But you'd go right in there," Cecelia reminded. "Sometimes he'd go right in by himself. There was many a tale about the way Coursey used to stay out there on the water."

In those times, oystermen would plant seeds on 20-acre plots and wait three years before they were harvested. When harvested, the crew would sort the good oysters from the bad before they were sent to the shucking house.

In those times, Bud Coursey reflected, boats were powered by the wind and sails and 700 to 800 bushels per day were harvested. Crew members would dredge the bay bottom, taking the sea crops from its watery home.

It was in that same era that Charles married Cecelia and took home oysters to teach her how to shuck them in their kitchen. Cecelia had been shucking oysters regularly at the Bivalve Packing Company for 22 years.

But the veteran oyster couple admitted, it's not the same as it was years ago.

Bud remembered the days the captains converted their sailing vessels into diesel-powered ships. Almost all these old ships are still being used in the business, the oldest being the "Cashier," which is almost 110 years old.

Then came the invention of the culling machine, a cage cylinder that turns and sorts the oysters. Bud said some men lost their jobs to the quicker sorting machines.

"You need less manpower," he said. "I used to have eight to twelve men on my boat. Now I used four."

The harvest has changed also, Bud said, from the days of the 800-bushel-per-day harvest.

A virus known as MSX wiped out an estimated 97 per cent of the oysters in the Delaware Bay, putting many oystermen out of jobs, cutting down work at shucking houses and jooting a once-prosperous industry.

"The blight didn't affect me too much," Bud said. "The group I worked for with the Bivalve Packing Company, they used to catch other peoples' oysters and I would bring them back to Bivalve."

He paused and shook his head. "The oysters died so bad," he continued. "We only got 200 bushels per day. A lot of the oystermen went other places to get jobs. Some worked with clams and some went to Point Pleasant and worked up there."

The blight is still affecting the industry, for those who remember the pre-1958 prosperous harvests.

"You used to make good money shucking at one time," Cecelia, who only works part-time now, said. "At one time you could make $40 to $50 per day. Now, if you make $20 per day, that's good."

The blight has also made oystermen uneasy and eager to harvest oysters in less than one year, rather than wait the three years as was done before.

"They don't take any chances with them now," he said. "But the oysters are not living like they used to. They're catching them so fast that they're not given a chance to grow."

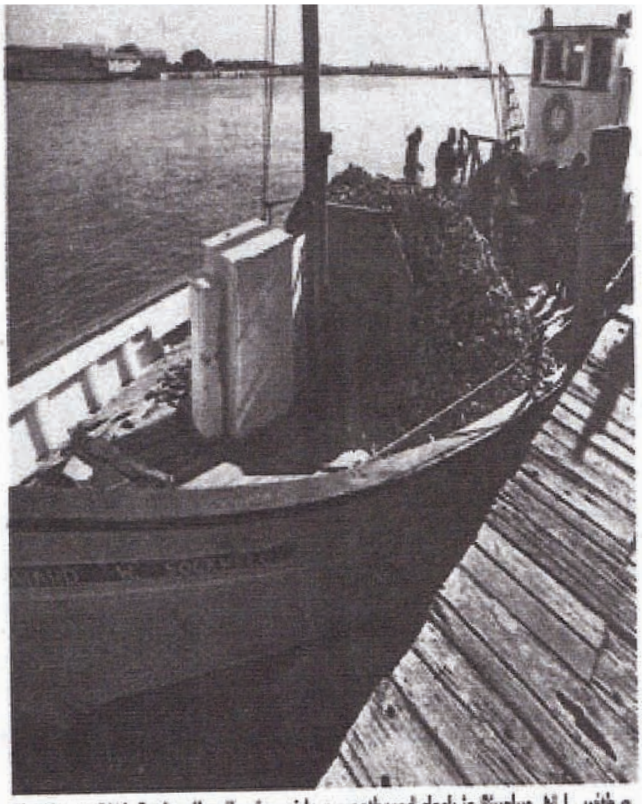
The oyster industry involves long, hard work, Bud said, and perhaps that's why not many young people are following in their fathers' footsteps. Bud has one son, Mario, involved in the industry and an older son working on a clamboat, but not many other young people have expressed an interest.

Even with the changes, the Courseys still appreciate the goodness of the sea crops and its effect on their lives.

"We always said oysters were God's gift to man," Cecelia said. "They were here even before man was here."

was going out."

Dawn lights up the bay and the Sockwell is suddenly in a crazy-quilt of saplings that seem to grow out of the bay floor. As far as the eye can see, saplings shorn of their lower branches spring upward at crazy angles. Young trees are cut down and brought here at the beginning of the season to mark the corners of each grower's area. There is rarely a case of unauthorized harvesting from another's area.



The Howard W. Sockwell pulls alongside a weathered dock in Bivalve, N.J., with a day's catch of oysters. New Jersey ranks seventh in U.S. oyster production.

Bud Coursey slows the engine now and scans the horizon for the trees that mark the 27-acre bottom his crew will be working today.

The crew, now clad in warm woollens covered by rubber waders with foam cushions at the knees, comes forward and the captain lowers the Sockwell's two dredges to the shell-laden bottom. It is now almost 7 o'clock. Except for a half-hour lunch break at 11, the men will continue the same tiring tasks they are about to begin until 2 P.M.

As the winch-powered dredge brings its five-bushel loads of shells to the gunwales, three men strain to flip the catch onto the deck. Then, on their knees, they sift through the shells, broken bottles, starfish, crabs, butterfish and oysters until they have picked out all the marketable oysters. A mound of them piles up near the bow and bushels of waste are shoveled over the side. By now, the winch has brought the dredge to the side of the boat again. This process will be repeated several hundred times today. According to Bud Coursey, the Sockwell is working a "square bed" and earns between $35 and $50 per day.

Tomorrow, while the Sockwell chugs back for another day on the oyster beds, a dozen or so black men and women will begin the arduous task of shucking today's harvest. Standing for hours on end at their damp and dreary stations, they will break off the "bills" —or thin outer edges—of the shells, insert their shucking knives, sever the powerful adductor muscles and open the oysters. It is a monotonous job, but no machine can do it.

Under strict health regulations, the white meat will then be washed with fresh water, sealed in 6- to 20-gallon cans, and packed in ice. At week's end they will be shipped to Midwestern wholesalers and supermarket chains. Only 10 to 15 percent of Bivalve's total production is in the "bag trade," oysters shipped while still in the shell.

Shucking houses this season are paying $5 to $6 per bushel. The meat yield per bushel is up this year to about 7½ pints per bushel compared with only 5½ pints per bushel in recent years. It costs shucking through about 30 bushel bags of Long Island oysters a week, according to a man there who should know. He said that "years ago" they got oysters from Bivalve, "but since they had that trouble down there that killed all their oysters, we haven't gotten any." At Snockey's, oysters on the half shell are priced from $1.30 to $1.75 for six.

Kelly's on Ludlow St. (formerly of Mole St.) uses about 25 bushels in the shell, and another 18 bushels of shucked oysters every week. Oysters on the half-shell cost from $1.45 to $2.25 for six at Kelly's.

At Old Original Bookbinder's, 125 Walnut St., a half-dozen oysters range in price from $2 to $3, according to size. Manager Jack Bronstein said they use 100 bushels of oysters in the shell every week.

Oysters have been big business in Bivalve since the turn of the century. In the early 1900s, the "bag trade" flourished. Whole oysters in burlap sacks were shipped by rail as far west as the Mississippi. As duced in the Delaware Bay planting grounds. State-regulated seed beds in the Mullica River provide oysters which are planted in the Great Bay, north of Brigantine.

But while the oystermen were making money in the better years, they were not following good conservation practices. By the 1940s the New Jersey seed beds were severely depleted because of poor management and the changing hydrography. New communities were springing up all over New Jersey and the need for fresh water was great. Rivers were diverted to form reservoirs and the loss of fresh water resulted in increased salinity in the seed beds where "spats"—young oysters—were taken. Greater salinity brought new predators to battle the oysters for survival.

The most dangerous predators introduced were largely "drills," small snails that attach themselves to oysters' hard outer shells. Drills do just what their name implies. They actually bore through the shell and secrete a juice that dissolves the oyster meat. When the oyster dies and falls open, mud crabs and small fish move in to feast on the remains.

The increased salinity also brought competitors, most of which fit into the category of "fouling," a marine term implying something comparable to a garden overgrown with weeds. Sponges and organisms known as hydroids invaded the oysters' traditional spawning grounds to compete for space and food.

By the mid 1950s the situation had worsened to the point where as many as two-thirds of the seed oysters planted in the Delaware Bay