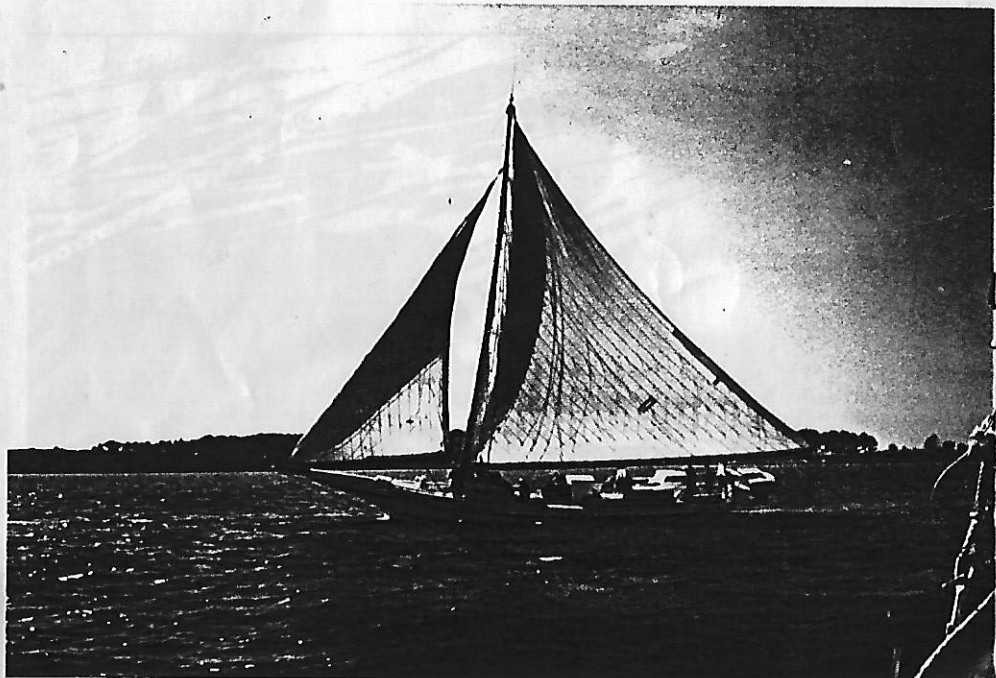
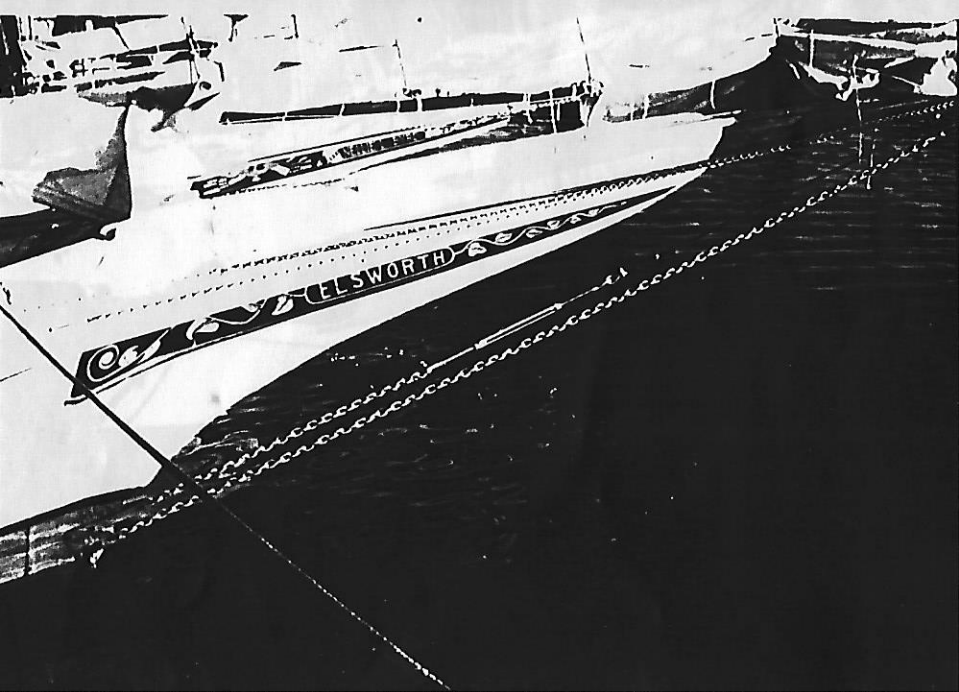


STANLEY NORMAN, CALEB W. JONES, and REBECCA  
T. RUARK at Sandy Point, MD, October 31, 1987.

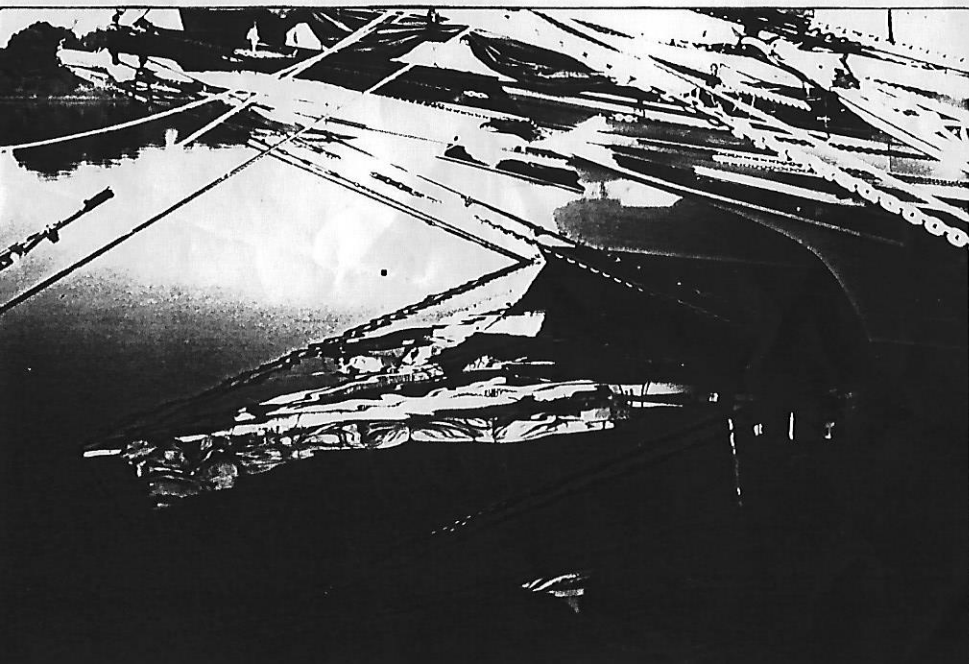
KATHRYN, from aboard MARTHA LEWIS.  
Tilghman Day, October 24, 1987.





ELSWORTH and NELLIE L. BYRD.  
Sandy Point, MD, October 31, 1987.

DEE of ST. MARY'S, MARTHA LEWIS, KATHRYN.  
Sandy Point, MD. Early morning light,  
October 31, 1987.



A DAY ON THE BAY

Dredging oysters  
In Chesapeake Bay

aboard skipjack LADY KATHIE  
of Tilghman Island, Maryland

By Charles Fewins

Photographs by the author



Splash. Wait. Watch the sky.



The crew start culling.

## A Day on the Bay

In the broad mouth of the Choptank River in this part of Chesapeake Bay, nine skipjacks are out today dredging for oysters.

LADY KATIE carries us back and forth as we make our licks over the beds. Eight others are with us ranging back and forth, in and around each other, taking a reef when the wind comes up, "shakin' it out" when the wind goes down.

"Woo!" calls Stanley, and the men push the dredge over the side. The cable slips around the roller, shimmies bottomward, and quietly scrapes up its load until Stanley hits the lever and the winder goes into gear to haul the load aboard. Again and again, "Woo!" Splash. Wait. Watch the sky. Watch the captain.

Stanley watches the other boats. Who's pulling up big loads, who little. Plan the next tack where the dredging looks best.

The winder brings it up again. Both men haul it inboard. Crash! to the deck; clatter of shells. They dump the basket, set it up back on the roller and start culling. Facing each other, they work fast, throwing the good ones - three inches or more in length - behind them in piles on the deck, pushing the remains sideways and overboard, spread-



The winder (gasoline engine-powered) hauls the dredge aboard over the roller.

Grabbing the large rings, two of the crew lift it inboard.



ing the wet pile around in front of them as they go. Sort, pick, throw; sweep the rest over the side. "Woo!", and the dredge goes in again. Sort, throw, scrape the debris to the side and over before Stanley throws the winder in gear again. Hour after hour.

Stanley's watch says eleven. It seems later to me. We'd started dredging around 8:30. We left Dogwood Harbor, Tilghman Island, before sun-up, about 6:30.

I had arrived at the dock at about 5:00, after checking Darryl's house for signs of life. No lights. He had said he'd probably go, when I talked to him the day before. His crew hadn't shown up then, so he said "probbly tomorrow."

Before he decided that, as he sat in his truck, watching the eastern horizon, I watched his face. The sun came up clear and red, and its glow was on his face. He's put his boat up for sale, the NELLIE L. BYRD, yet he still hopes, like the others, that he'll still make a living. Tomorrow if not today. But the catches are smaller each year, and when they get bigger, then the prices they get a-bushel go down. And a new mast costs \$6,000 now. Darryl wants to keep on, his Uncle Stanley tells me. He loves his boat and knows every plank in her, having replaced it all from the



Stanley at the wheel, and three of the crew.



Frank, at right, also does the cooking.

waterline up. NELLIE was built in 1911, but Darryl's made her as good as new. Didn't have to buy a new mast, but needed a new bowsprit, so he made himself one with a chainsaw in two hours, he told me. The old men had stopped and watched. "What the hell you doin'?!" they said. He told me that with a pleased smile.

"They'll come back," Stanley told me, standing at the wheel. "Woo!" he shouted, and the crew tossed the dredges over the sides again.

"They come back before;" and he told me of lean years in oystering not long ago, and of a time back in the '40s. His boat's not for sale, although several others are this year, for the first time.

Heading out for the Choptank at 6:30 we had faced a faint breeze, mostly of our own making, the yawl boat behind pushing us along at a good eight knots.

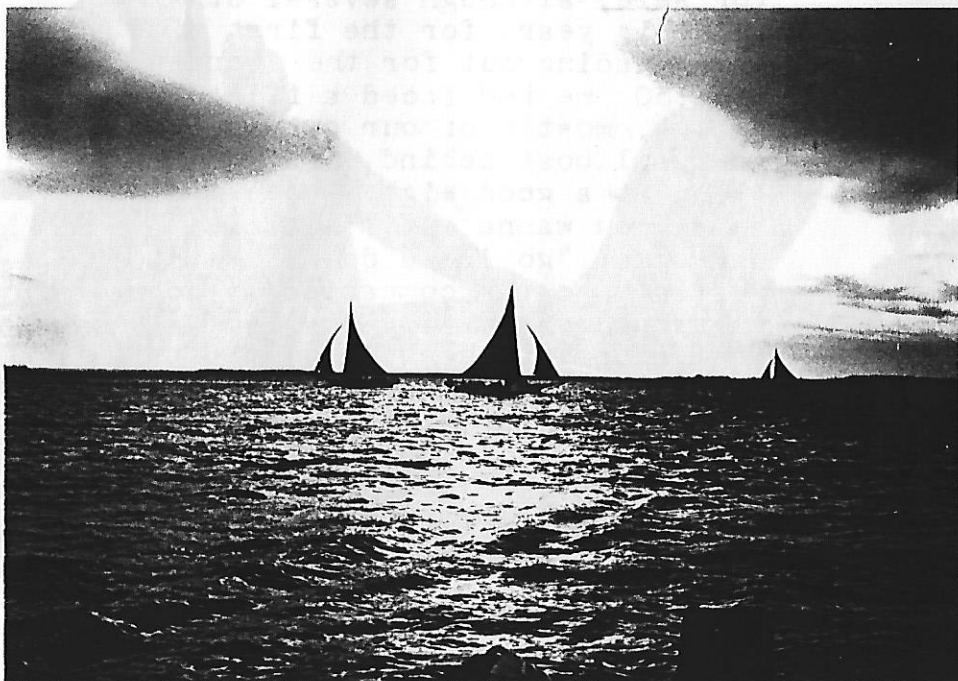
"You wanna eat?" Stanley asked me: "go 'head down," as he gestured to the companionway doors in front of him. The smell of frying bacon leaked out from the partly opened hatchcover.

Frank, one of the crew, did the cooking. I'd gone down earlier when he invited me below, soon after leaving the harbor. Coffee water was boiling, and three other



CLARENCE CROCKETT passing to port.

Such a sight they are.

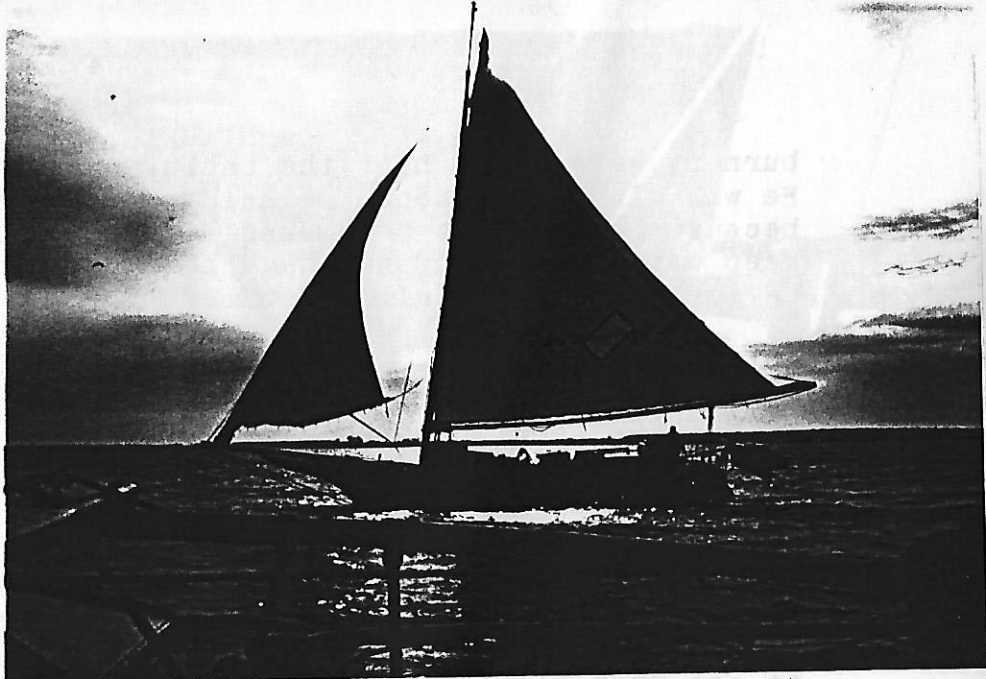


burners were on to heat the cabin. He was glad to be cook, he said, because he could go below and keep warm awhile and not have to be working on deck all the time.

Eggs and bacon, bread and coffee. It was good. By the time we ate lunch, after hours on deck, the baked beans, hot dogs, and white bread had a remarkable taste.

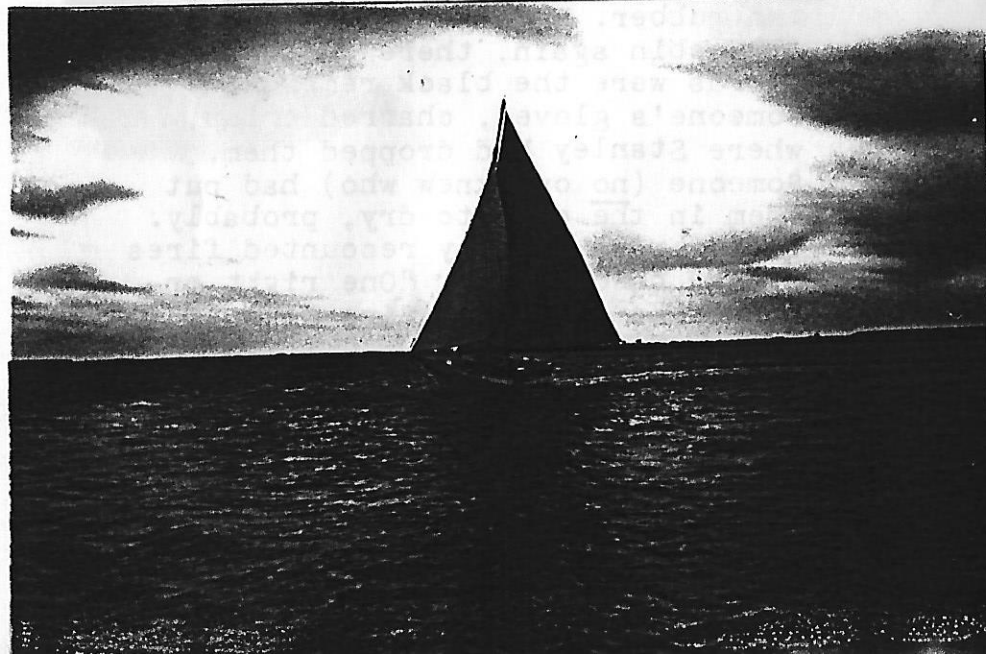
Stanley stayed on deck for the whole trip until we got back at 5:00, having gone down only once to see what all the smoke was about, coming from the oven. He reached in and pulled out something, and came back on deck with his handkerchief still over his nose and mouth, his eyes tearing freely. Frank had crawled up choking, and lay on the deck a moment to catch his breath. The smoke smelled of burning plastic and rubber. When you could see into the cabin again, there on the floorboards were the black remains of someone's gloves, charred crisp, where Stanley had dropped them. Someone (no one knew who) had put them in the oven to dry, probably. Afterwards, Stanley recounted fires aboard he'd known. "One right on here," he said, pointing down to LADY KATIE's deck. "Gasoline spill." Someone pouring from one can to another had badly misjudged, and a spark from the winder ignited it.

About 12:20 Stanley says to me



CALEB with a single reef, starboard tack.

ELSWORTH was at her prettiest...

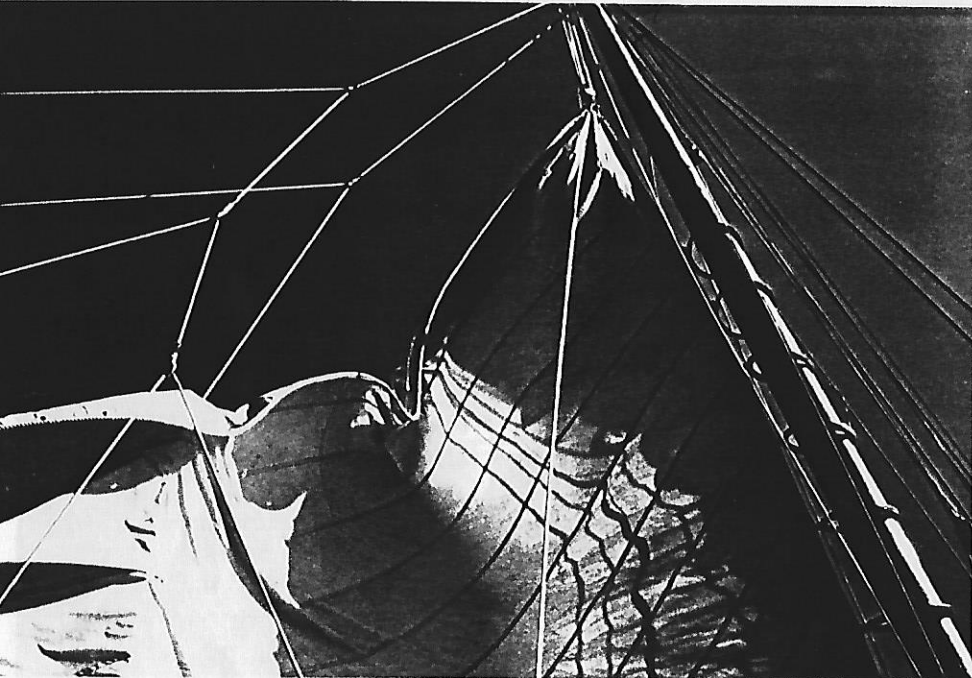


"They usually want to stop about now, to eat. If they can take it and wait, I can!" And it goes on for awhile longer. CALEB W. JONES and CLARENCE CROCKETT, of Deal Island, and ELSWORTH, from Tilghman, are near us for most of the day.

Such a sight they are. There's a good breeze now. Sails billowing out, they move by us slowly, the drag of the dredges putting them in slow motion. When the dredges are on deck, and the wind's up a bit, the boats lift and heel and a few begin to nearly scud along on their flat shallow bottoms. A beautiful big dance it is, weaving among each other, staged between the shores of the wide river mouth.

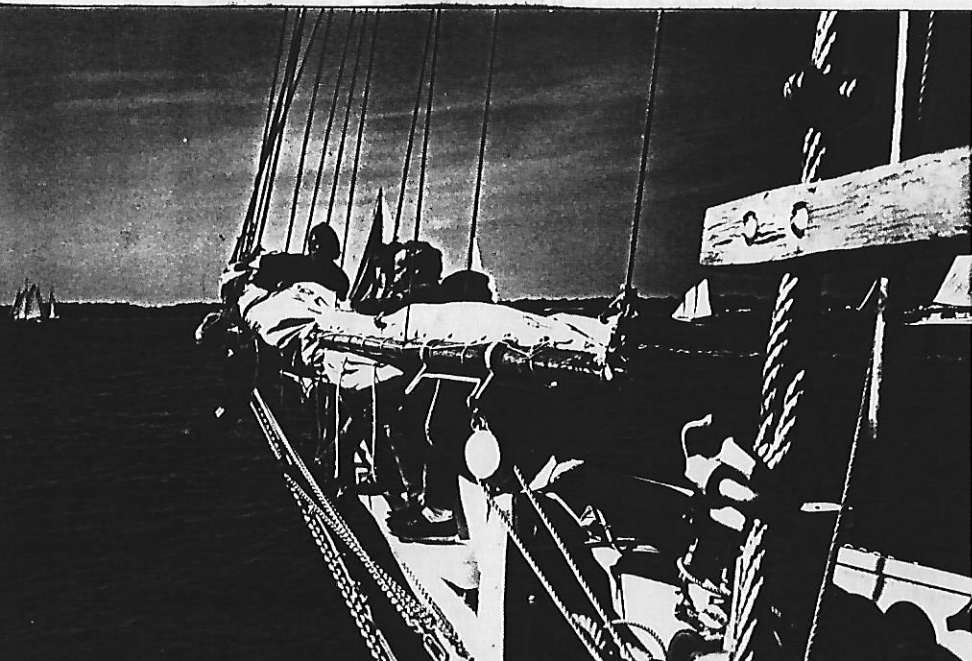
I watched CALEB on a starboard tack, coming about, her jib's reefpoints standing out like frenzied corkscrews on both sides of the wildly shaking sail until calming down into a new heel on the port tack. We were in the middle of the eight boats around us, putting some to windward, backlit by the hazy sun, and some to leeward of us, in direct light for the camera.

ELSWORTH was at her prettiest on one particular tack. It was like a past dream come to life, like seeing in my father's old bug-eye GYPSY on Hampton Roads again. I looked, and saw things. I forgot I had a camera.



Lowering sail on skipjack MARTHA LEWIS.  
Gene Tyler, Captain.

MARTHA LEWIS's crew furling the jib.



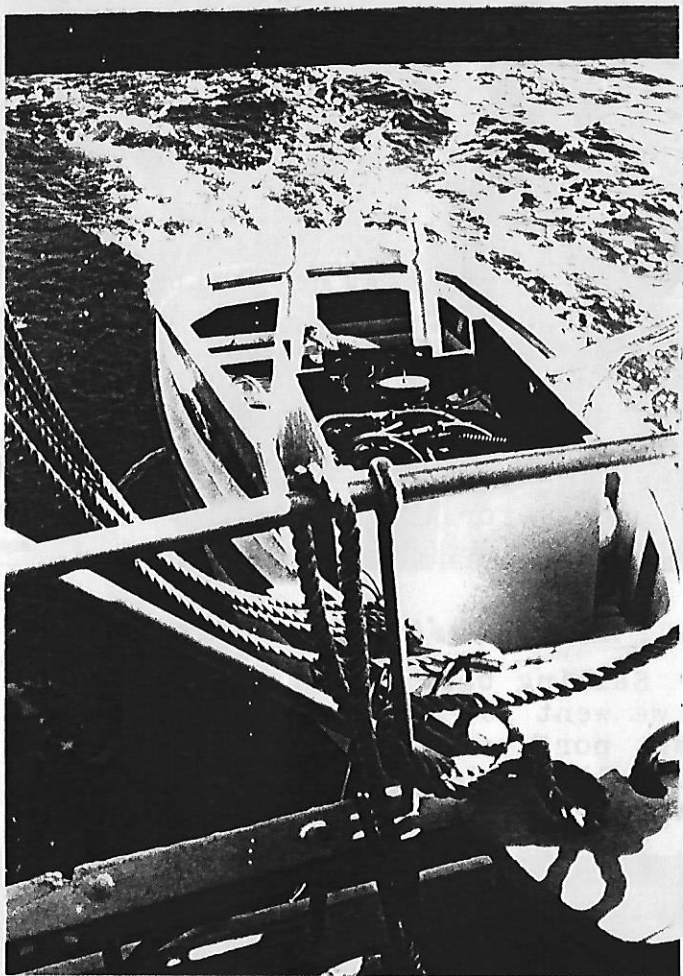
CALEE gave me a good show once just after I had decided to save my last two shots till later. She flirted with me, it seemed, after I'd promised not to do anything more to her. She lifted her skirts, all ruffly at the bottom edges from reefing, and foamed along only a few boatlengths abreast of us, her bottom nearly exposed now and then in a trough between waves. She was so pretty. By the time I changed my mind and reached for the camera it was too late. She'd left me.

Sailing back to Dogwood Harbor we went for awhile on a broad reach, port tack. The skipjacks sail well in both light and heavy airs. They're built for the Bay, not the ocean. They're oversailed for the hull size in order to keep way while dredging. There are four sets of reefpoints on main and jib to reduce sail when necessary to keep the dredges on the bottom and not skipping along, missing too many oysters.

Soon we both motored and sailed. Dredging stops at 3:00. We have to get the catch ashore two hours after finishing for the day. It's nearly a two-hour run from the Choptank to Tilghman.

Then we lowered both sails, and after furling them, motored at full speed the rest of the way.





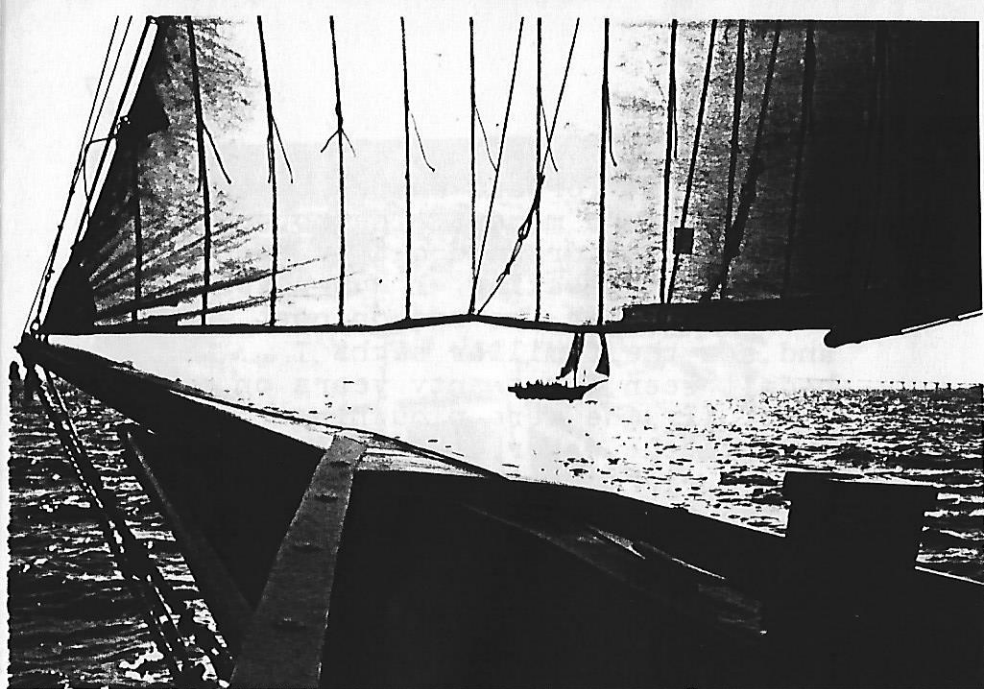
MARTHA LEWIS's yawl boat. The powerful push-boat is used for leaving the harbor and returning to harbor, and for dredging under power only on Mondays and Tuesdays, a Maryland law conservation measure.

I went forward where it was quieter for a moment. The motor sound became drowned out by the bow waves' breaking. I hung over the side, near the samson post, and saw the familiar sight I hadn't seen for twenty years on GYPSY II. We were ploughing through the water, the bow wave coming right up to the after end of the trailboard. I stayed there awhile, and almost wanted to climb down into that water.

Then into Knapp's Narrows, just above Dogwood Harbor, to deliver our catch. We had taken in about 35 bushels, Stanley estimated. 150's the limit, he says; about 110 is the most he's taken. The last few years haven't been good. "They'll come back." He repeats his earlier statement. "They always do. Mother Nature does it. We sure don't! They'll come back ... unless", he chuckles, "...unless things have gone too far!"

On the walk back to my car at Dogwood Harbor I stopped by the little store at the Exxon station near the bridge. The men congregate there every morning before going out. It opens at 5:00.

A cup of coffee - self service - was precious, after eleven hours on the open water with only two or three warm-ups below in the cabin. Standing there by the coffee machine, stirring in sugar and canned milk, I sensed the deck moving under my feet. A good feeling.



Aboard Darryl Larrimore's NELLIE E. BYRD.

Darryl, Stanley's nephew, at the wheel of NELLIE. Next to him, James O. Webster, whose grandfather had owned her when new. Bob McLaren at right.



The men were coming in again, back from the water. Some older ones on the benches were carrying on about prices and such.

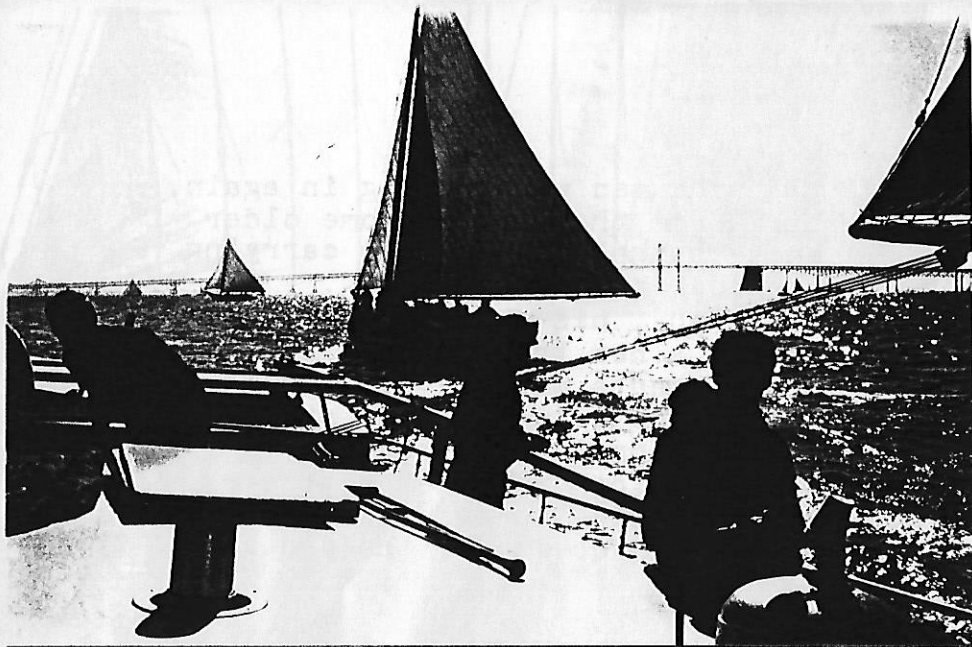
"Why, his son's got a new house, a new truck, a new boat...; his payments must be 2,000 a month, and now he cain't git no steady work! I don' know what they goin' do." The other two shake their heads slowly, in agreement to the negative, looking at the floor.

I can only hope that Stanley's prediction is right. Darryl said to me earlier in the summer, "by the time they come back - in twenty years - all the boats will be gone!" With all his usual kidding and joking, there's still a sadness, the same as I saw in him when he watched the sun come up the day before, waiting in his truck for his crew to show up.

If a few days' pay feels good enough to them, often the crew just won't appear, the day after they're paid.

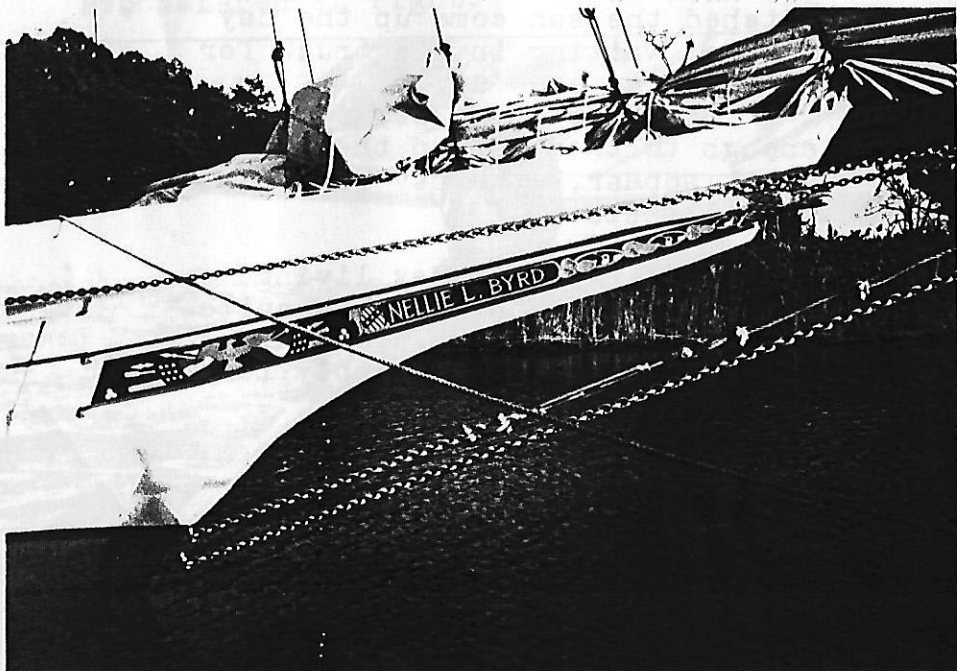
It's a day-to-day living, hoping it can continue, in spite of pollution or lack of rain.

If not today, "probbly tomorrow."



Darryl Larrimore. (crouching) steering  
 NELLIE L. BYRD, passing REBECCA T. RUARK.  
 Chesapeake Appreciation Days, October 31  
 and November 1, 1987, off Sandy Point, MD.

The BYRD's new trailboard and gilded eagle.



Stanley Larrimore, Captain,  
 at the wheel of his skipjack  
 LADY KATIE on Chesapeake Bay.