

Captain Pete Switzer
Tilghman Island, Maryland
April 7, 1999

I met Captain Switzer at his skipjack, the Hilda Willing, at Dogwood Harbor on Tilghman Island, on Wednesday afternoon, April 7, 1999. I had been told that he might be slow to warm up to questions, but on the contrary, he began talking right away and seemed to be very interested in the project.

He has owned the Hilda Willing for 52 years, bought her when he was 22 after he got out of the Navy after World War II, a year before he married his wife. The boat was built in 1905 and named after the two year daughter of the builder. When the child died a year or two later, he sold the boat. Captain Switzer was the eleventh owner and has owned her for longer than anyone on the bay has owned a skipjack. His crew was black and most of them stayed with him for thirty years, "because they made money." Captain Switzer ascribed this to keeping the boat in top shape.

They dredged in the Choptank, between Tilghman Island and Cambridge. There were 40 oyster bars and about 45 boats from Talbot and Dorchester counties. The boats from Smith and Deal islands were not allowed to dredge in the river - they had to work the Bay. When he started in 1947, most of the skipjacks were out of Cambridge, about 10 were from Tilghman.

In the 1970's, the Hilda Willing caught her 150 bushel limit everyday and they could make \$100,000 in four months. Today, the shuckers, packers and dealers are gone. If you could catch the oysters there is no place to sell them. Years ago all women knew how to cook oysters - now women don't have time, or want to mess with them. There is no market left.

We began talking by his pick up truck, then moved to the deck of the boat and into the cabin. He explained that there were two kerosene lamps on the bulkhead in the cabin, and originally there was a wood stove - thirty-six inches high with an oven. They carried the wood for the stove in the hold in a big wooden box. There was a smaller wooden wood box near the stove. There were two thirty-gallon wooden water barrels on each side of the stern, set in wooden cradles to keep them from spilling. They were covered with canvas with a square hole in the middle. The canvas hole cover was kept down with a weight. There was a dipper so that the crew could take a drink or fill up the tea kettles. A basin was kept on a nail on the outside of the cabin near the water barrels so that the men could wash their hands and faces before eating. Often the water would freeze one inch thick over night and they would have to break the ice with a screwdriver or ice pick in the morning.

On the inside of the cabin, the cooking utensils were hung on the bulkhead - long spoons, pancake turners, forks. There were shelves

forward for knives, forks and dishes. Cupboards contained canned goods. There were lockers under the floorboards where they kept meat and other perishables because it was cool there. The starboard side of the cabin was the captain's side, where he slept and where boat tools, parts and equipment was kept in the starboard cupboard and locker. The port side of the cabin was the cook's side where the food supplies were stored. The first mate might also sleep in the aft part of the cabin. The rest of the crew slept in the forepeak.

The stove sat in the middle of the cabin with a stove pipe straight up out the top. Sometimes the fire wood would get wet and wouldn't burn hot enough. Captain Switzer remembered that the stove pipe had to be short so that it would not be hit by the boom. This meant that when he was standing at the wheel behind the cabin, he would have smoke in his face all day long. He said sometimes it got so bad he would have to move. He was "tickled to death" when "everyone got to using gas" by 1960. They didn't use coal on the boats - everyone was afraid of coal gas. When I asked about the dangers of propane, he remembered a bugeye that blew up at Deal Island. He said the crew came aboard drunk on Monday morning and someone turned on the stove without lighting it. Then someone came along and lit it and the boat exploded. He showed me where he kept the propane tanks on deck, in front of the cabin - "only fools kept them in the hold."

Dishes were washed in a big dish pan. An agate tea kettle always on top of the stove provided hot water. Dish towels and cloths were kept on the top cupboard. Every so often the cook would wash out the towels and hang them to dry over the shelves near the stove.

In the 1940's and early 1950's, they would go out on Sunday night and return on Friday at noon. This lasted until 1955 when the crews wouldn't stay out all week any more - they wanted to go home at night and watch TV.

He remembered that they ate a lot of beans, cabbage, potatoes, onions, salt pork, and codfish. Chicken was bad luck. I asked him why, but he said he didn't know. Lunch was generally something easy to cook like cabbage, potatoes and ham in a big pot, or bean soup. In the evening, they ate what ever was left over from lunch plus fried potatoes, eggs, and a can of corned beef - homemade hash. Later on, they ate canned baked beans and hot dogs. The most common was all kinds of bean soup - green lima beans, navy beans, black eye peas. One of his favorite meals was codfish cakes and fried potatoes.

For breakfast they often had scrapple and eggs. They seldom had bacon and rarely pancakes - they took too long to cook. Some of the men could eat six to eight eggs at a time. They would stack ten to twelve cardboard cartons of eggs in a locker.

Before Christmas, they only took non-perishable provisions because

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it was still warm. By the middle of December, it was cold so they could buy anything. They could keep meat on the boat for two weeks at a time because it would freeze.

John Cain crewed and cooked for Captain Switzer for thirty years. He could cook anything; roast beef, hot bread. At 2 p.m. he would bring a pan of brownies up on deck hot out of the oven which the crew loved. He made hot bread for every meal, three times a day. It was usually pan bread - no yeast - it was flat, didn't rise much. It was made in a skillet in the oven, and was eaten with molasses. It was nourishing, heavy food, nothing fancy. He also remembered beef stew. The worst meal he remembered was neck bone stew with potatoes and onions. He said the colored crew loved it and they sucked the marrow out of the bones. He remembered eating the potatoes but being put off by all the bones and no meat in the pot. Occasionally the cook would make spaghetti, but it was hard to keep ground beef on the boat. They ate a lot of potatoes - fried, boiled, easy to keep. A really good meal was roast beef and gravy, mashed potatoes, and creamed peas made with cans of peas and a can of condensed milk.

The provisions were purchased by John Cain on weekends from John Harrison's store (they called him Johnny Hot) at Tilghman Packing Company. Harrison also carried tackle, ropes, blocks, whatever the watermen needed, and he also offered credit. The captain was responsible for paying the store bill and gas bill. They divided the earnings one half for the captain and the boat, the other half for the crew.

Tilghman Packing Company also sold wood and hard coal for house stoves. Captain Switzer bought an eighth of a cord at a time for \$5.00 that would last two weeks or more. It was delivered by truck. The truck would have a frame in the back that held 1/8 of a cord of wood. The frame would be pushed off the back of the truck and the wood dumped on the dock. The crew would stack it in the hold. There was a water hose at Tilghman Packing Co. to fill the water barrels. Water was carried to the barrels in five gallon buckets. Some of the other packing houses also had hoses, and it was the cook's responsibility to fill the water barrels while the rest of the crew was unloading the oysters. The cook was also responsible for filling the gas tank and buying any food that was needed at these stops.

In 1952-53, Captain Buddy Harrison bought a truck right out of college, with the idea that transporting oysters by truck would be better than with the buyboats. They would hoist the oysters out of the boat into the truck using the halyards. Harrison was right, and this was the beginning of the end of the buyboats.

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We talked for awhile about the death of his wife and his trouble with learning to keep house and how much he misses her, about his four children and seven grandchildren. Another waterman came buy, a tonger, and stayed to chat for a few minutes. They gave each

other a hard time about the paint job on their respective boats. Captain Switzer recalled playing poker for hours on top of the engine box on days that there was no wind. He said that he learned to play in the Navy. He says he has lost the desire to dredge and is thinking about selling the boat to the grandson of one of the former owners, who lives in Chestertown. He wanted to get to work painting the deck of the boat so we brought the conversation to a close.