

BUY BOATS

Mrs. Gordon S. Pope

On June 4, 1988 Mrs. Gordon (Ruth) Pope recalled some of her experiences as the wife of a Talbot County waterman. Ruth, born in Georgetown, Delaware, a twin of Minnie (Mrs. Emory) Balderson, married Gordon Pope 1947. She was his second wife, and willingly served as an all-around crew aboard his buy boat.

"I mean I did everything," she explained. "Not just handling lines, tallying the buy, oft-times hoisting the tubs ... and they were heavy, especially after the 100th, they got even heavier! I kept the records, and," she said proudly, "the Inspectors never found anything wrong. And I prepared the food and cooked it. And while waiting for tongs or the dredge boats, I crocheted - afghans mostly -- five of them won blue ribbons at the Harrington (Del.) Fair; then I got a second place, and I then and there told Gordon I wasn't going to enter any more at that Fair, cause somebody said it wasn't right that I won a blue every year."

Gordon S. Pope, born in Oxford 1902, was in a sailing crab skiff with his father Frank before he even thought of going to school. His mother bought his first paid of long pants when he got a job as a purser on a steamboat (note: Ruth didn't recall which steamboat, nor the date). His Uncle Arch used his influence with someone in Socony Vacuum to hire Gordon on as crew aboard a freighter (see pix). His first assignment was to fill barrels with molasses. It was a dull job, Ruth remembers Gordon telling her, a real dull job watching that slow sticky stuff, he was tired, and he just fell asleep (he could always sleep anywhere, Ruth recounts). Gordon was wakened by angry shakes and loud foul language... the sticky molasses syrup was running, or oozing, everywhere on deck. After a laborious clean-up ... he didn't know whether he was hot from the work or hot from the taunts of his new companions aboard the freighter. Somehow, Gordon "fast talked" the Second Mate into letting him continue as crew. And later, Ruth added, he became on the same vessel its First Mate, continuing to make trips to the Caribbean Islands and along the Atlantic coastal ports.

In time, the enterprising young Pope became his own Master. He owned the E.C. COLLIER, GEORGE COLLIER, HONEYBEE, G L. POPE, A.G.PRICE, MARY HAYNIE. His first vessel, was a sailboat with a bug-eye rig named MARY ELIZABETH (see pictures).

When talking about his boats, Ruth remembered that Gordon said one would sail right into a bank of cat-tails if you didn't keep a firm hand on her. One time the steering gear broke, and Gordon confessed that "that boat could smell shoal water and head right for it" (Ruth quoted) ... at any rate, she added, it was a good explanation for going around during low tides particularly.

When Ruth became wife and crew in 1947, Gordon owned the buy boat, G. L. POPE. He was licensed for the Chesapeake Bay and rivers in Virginia, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. "And we sailed in all of them," Ruth recalled.

After oyster season closed in April and before the crabs were running, buy boats became freighters - lumber, stone for bulkheading, slag, dry fertilizers, and produce in season including tomatoes and watermelons (the Baltimore market had a big demand for watermelon). In the mid-1950s there was a good local market for wheat, especially on the Sassafras and Bohemia Rivers, as well as in Talbot County.

Interview Ruth Pope
6-4.88 by JFT

In the summertime, Gordon preferred to crab by himself in a small skiff; Ruth enjoyed visiting with her twin sister and family, yet managed to do a lot of canning and preserving, and the luxury of attending the fairs, especially the one at Harrington where the judges admired her excellent needlecraft.

By the end of the hot August days, she looked forward to September. "I welcomed the coming cool and cold days," she said. "Every day aboard that boat was so different. You couldn't plan ahead, like the night before. Arrangements weren't made to buy until dawn or earlier than that." Captain Pope would contact, by telephone, the oyster houses (such as J.M. Clayton of Cambridge) the quantity needed, and the market price.

"Whoever bought set the prices, not Gordon." Then, before leaving dock, the captain would contact a number of watermen (or sometimes they called him) to firm up their probable destination (oyster grounds in what river, etc.) and Pope would try to obtain a promise or obligation from each waterman to sell to him.

"But he had to know where most of them would be each day -- those that he was going to buy from," Ruth explained, "so he'd be available for their catch. Of course, you were never sure of the quantity you might be able to buy ... and the weather, well the weather could change everything ... a front might come through, or a white fog settle in. You just never knew. And that was the fun of it."

Ruth kept a daily "tabulated computed table of bushel and prices" (her words). She emphastred: the buyer and seller always dealt'. in cash, as did the commission merchant.

The oyster prices could fluctuate within hours, she noted. One day in St. Michaels the price of \$2.50 a bushel leaped to \$3.00 in the afternoon. In September, the price could start at \$1.00 per bushel and by Christmas drop to 25¢ a bushel when the market was glutted. Many times, when the boatyards were not busy or closed for a long period, those workers would go out in their own boats and oyster for extra money, and add to the quantity available on the market.

Mrs. Pope again mentioned that there was little time for boredom aboard the buy boat. "There are always things to do on a boat. Sometimes it was just Gordon and me; other times Dillard Collins"(note: affectionately known as "Dilly" in Oxford and at this writing still working for the Town at age near 80). "Dilly was crew too, and he was a good worker."

Sometimes the tongs finished soon after noontime, depending upon what oyster beds they harvested. When arrangements were made with the sailing dredge boats, Ruth knew that that day the work would be heavy and hard. She remembers hoisting 300 bushels herself...not once, either, she adds.

The sailboat dredge would approach as slowly as the wind and water allowed to the anchored buy boat; then she and Gordon would quickly tie up to the snubbing bits. The dredge crew shoveled the oysters into a bushel-sized iron tub, latched to the oyster fall which was attached to the pulley, then hoisted aboard the buy boat. Ruth kept the tally - every 5th tub was a mark or tally.

Usually there was a Natural Resources inspector aboard, Ruth explained, to check size of oysters and obtain other information - if he could. How much could a buy boat haul? "Well," said Ruth, "the A.G.PRICE could safely haul

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900 bushels, but her hull would be awfully low in the water." (The interview recalled some disastrous trips when a buy boat would be overloaded.)

"Incidentally," Ruth added, "the PRICE was used by the Navy in World War II, and in 1959 Slade Dale converted her to the COASTAL QUEEN. Today the COASTAL QUEEN is a restaurant at Myrtle Beach!" (note: this ignoble ending made this interviewer quite sad).

..see copies of letter 3/59 to Slade Dale re C.Q. and postcard dated 4-24-61, drawing by John Moll, with message from S.Dale

After Captain Pope had purchased the day's quantity he would transport it to oyster houses or commission merchants in Baltimore, Annapolis, Solomons Island, or whatever market place he had committed that day's boatload.

Each day in her record book, Ruth noted purchases from each waterman: boat number, number of oysters (bushels) bought, from what bar, and the destination. As with all freight, a bill of lading was required and completed before the buy boat could unload for land distribution to various markets.

Gordon's last boat was 14A' f' L
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See negative photostat of Bill of Sale -- to be copied. It recorded A.G.Price (228138) Delmas Price, Crisfield, seller and sole owner, \$11,318.10 sold "unto the United States of America, represented by the War Shipping Administrator, and assigns, effective as of the said time of requisition of title thereto..." signed 3 August 1944.

also see photostat of Consolidated Certificate of Enrollment and License, issued by Department of Commerce, Coasting Trade for one year issued 13 October 1943 to Delmas Price.... it shows

A.G.PRICE built 1928 Hudson, 70-Diesel 58.4 length 21.0 breadth 6.3 depth

see snapshots of MARY HAYNIE March 1960

(see photo 211- , , , X, A, 1, , -4)