Chester River Battle Is Drama Of Oyster

By WALTER M. GIBB, Baltimore

Once in wandering through an old cemetery in southern Maryland I came upon a decayed and weather beaten headstone inscribed with the name of the deceased and below, in small letters, "Killed in the Battle of Chester River." My curiosity was immediately aroused. What and when was the Battle of Chester River, and why had it been fought? No such battle is mentioned in accounts of the Revolution, the War of 1812, or the Civil War and I could recall no chronicle detailing a struggle with Indians in that locality.

A search for the key to the inscription of death revealed not only the story of that famous battle, but the entire history of a natural resource which became the setting for one of the most gripping dramas of the sea, a drama of three centuries duration with its turning point in the Battle of Chester River, fought on the night of December 10, 1888. This natural resource for which men killed and were killed and upon which fortunes were made and squandered is the Chesapeake Bay oyster.

Men discovered that the bottom of the "Mediterranean Sea of America" was virtually encrusted with gold, and men became lawful as a result, obeying the only law of the lawless—any means to an end. Crews to work in the great oyster fleets of pungies, skipjacks, and bugeyes were shanghaied in the streets of Baltimore and elsewhere, and when their fund of physical energy had reached the limit of exhaustion they were rewarded by the jibe of a boom. Some escaped murder by dying of exposure on the wintry icy decks, and still others lived to tell their tales of slaving from sunrise to sunset under a burly mate, often a black one, who drove them at the hardest type of labor while allowing them just enough nourishment to sustain life.

The bodies of shanhaied dead were washed ashore in numbers onto the banks of the Patuxent and on Barren Island. There they were buried in crude boxes and their remains may still be found where the waters have washed away the soil. Just last year a fisherman, plying his nets in Smith's Creek, on the south side of St. Mary's River, one of the tributaries of the Potomac, hauled in the trunks of three skeletons whose necks had been chained together with an anchor chain and securely wired. The skulls had been crushed by some heavy instrument, perhaps a belaying pin. Doubtless they are the graphic portrayal of the wages customarily paid shanghaied men.

The bay oysters, however, though a natural resource which replenishes itself, as very few do, cannot last if the rate of removal exceeds that of reproduction; and this soon because the state of affairs in tidewater Maryland and Virginia. Gradually steps were taken by the legislatures of both States to stem this tide of destruction.

In 1866 a license was first required for the harvesting of oysters with tongs, scrapes, and dredges, and a police force was organized to check poaching in 1868, during which year the oyster crop garnered from Maryland waters reached 7,500,000 bushels.

It was about this time that the great fleets of dredging vessels, with sometimes as many as 200 boats to the fleet, were organized. In 1880 as many as 700 boats were engaged in taking oysters from the bottom of the Chesapeake. In 1885, the year of greatest production, 15,000,000 bushels of the world-famous bivalves were marketed. The oysters were destroyed without regard for size, and millions of bushels of those taken were seed oysters for shipment northward. And sold for seven cents a bushel! A government report of 1884 recounts the operation of 700 dredging boats manned by "5,600 daring and unscrupulous men who regard neither the laws of God nor those of men." And, we might add, men responsible for lowering the annual oyster productivity of the bay from 15,000,000 bushels in 1885 to scarcely 2,000,000 in 1929.

Continuous warfare existed between the tongers and dredgers. The tongers worked in the tributary waters, of which the Chesapeake has forty-eight, and had their homes on the banks, and constituted with their trade an important factor in the economic life of their counties. The dredgers, however. with the exception of captains and mates, came from all walks of life and numbered in their crews the worst elements of many European countries. The fued reached its climax in the oyster battles of 1888.

There were many of those oyster conflicts, the most famous of them being the Battle of Chester River, fought between the dredging fleet of 49 vessels, led by Captain Pungy Joe, and the Maryland State Police steamer Gov. R. M. McLane, commanded by the late Captain T. C. B. Howard, and the police schooner Helen Baughman, under command of Deputy Commander George. The vessels in the oyster fleet, as well as the State boats, were heavily armed. The battle raged at white heat for three hours, ending when the steamer rammed and sent to the bottom two of the maurauding pungies.

That battle ,whichmarked the turning point in the oyster industry, was but one of many fought in forbidden waters between the Maryland Oyster Navy and the dredging fleet.

Other famous encounters occurred off Swan Point, Hackett's Point, and Thomas' Point, in Eastern Bay, in the Little Choptank River, and many other places. But oyster battles belong to the past. At present an efficient fleet of the State boats consisting of the Maryland Police steamer Gov. R. M. McLane and nineteen modern power boats, known as the State Fishe[illegible]ol Fleet, or the Maryland [illegible] Navy, maintains peace and [illegible] the 2,300 square miles of bs[illegible]ers. The navy is commanded by Swepson Earle, conservation commissioner of Maryland, who is also a lieutenant commissioner in the United States Naval Reserves.

His responsibilities as commander of the State's Fishery Patrol Fleet comprise but a small portion of Commissioner Earle's duties. These consist chiefly in promoting and carrying out measures to conserve and replenish the oysterbeds in Maryland waters (the cull law, for example), and to conserve and foster the increase of crabs, fish, terrapin, and all manner of wild game within the confines of the Maryland Free State. It is largely through the efforts of the Conservation Department that Baltimore continues to be "the gastronomic center of America."

Methods of oyster conservation and protection depend directly upon the bivalve's curious manner of reproduction and growth. One female oyster may spawn as many as 60,000,000 eggs in a season, though the average is about 16,000,000. Following their discharge the eggs float around on the surface, where only one in thousands come into contact with the milt from the males, and then but very few of these fertilized eggs develop into oysters. A few hours after fertilization the embryo becomes a free-swimming larva. It then settles down upon cultch or stone and begins to build its lime crystal shell, which it does by straining the lime from barrel after barrel of water.

Oyster shells have been found to be the best cultch for Maryland, and these are not being planted in scientific manner. By July of this year 849,000 bushels of these shells had been planted. They were scattered at the rate of 500 bushels to the acre over about 4,000 of Maryland's 200,000 acres of natural oyster producing bottoms.

The Conservation Department is doing its utmost to encourage oyster farming, and there are on the record books today 9,000 acres under lease and being planted by Maryland citizens, most of whom are watermen.

Swepson Earle, in an article entitled "Maryland Is Coming Back," which appeared in the September, 1930, issue of Fishing Gazette, says:

"From a physical standpoint, the Chesapeake is still capable of producing as many oysters as it once did. The big problem, however, is to turn the tide of depletion, increase the supply, and at the same time provide a livelihood for thousands of citizens who depend upon it for their daily bread. We have a heavy catch of spat this year in many localities, and the department has placed a sufficient number of shells on the bottoms to show a marked increase in future production. By continuing the annual planting of shells we may expect this to increase."

Thus conservation and restoration have taken the place of greed and destruction.

To Improve Kent Island Narrows

The War Department Tuesday advised Representative T. Alan Goldsborough that it had alloted $11,500 for dredging Kent Island Narrows, connecting Chester river with Eastern Bay.

The project for improving the Chester river, Maryland, was authorized by Congress last summer, and provides, among other things, for a channel seven feet deep about three-fourth of a mile long through Kent Island Narrows, connecting Chester river with Eastern Bay.

Between 1873 and 1878 a total of $28,000 was appropriated for work on the project. During the fiscal year 1929 $17,000 was expended for redredging the channel to project depth.

The present channel at Kent Island bridges approaches the draw openings at an oblique angle, rendering navigation difficult, the War Department explained. "Boats frequently are thrown against the bridge piling, with resultant damage," it was explained.

"He is the recording secretary of a chess club."

But what does he do?"

"Oh, he reads the hours of the last meeting."

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$5,000	30	80.25	94.40	16.90	77.50	17.40	77.00
$5,000	40	115.15	135.45	23.05	112.40	23.75	111.70
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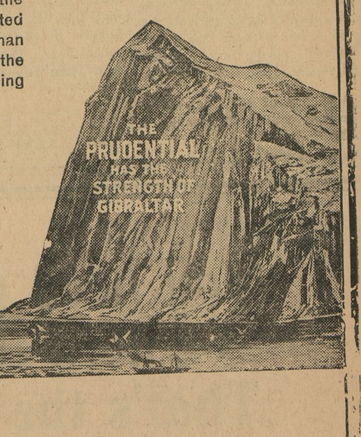

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NOTICE TO CREDITORS

Sotice is hereby given that the undersigned has obtained from the Orphans' Court for Kent County letters of Administration on the personal estate of

NATHANIEL C. SCOTTEN. JR.,

late of said county, deceased.

All persons having claims against said deceased's estate are hereby warned to exhibit the same, with the proper vouchers thereof, to the undersigned on or before the 28th day of December, 1930, otherwise they may by law be excluded from all benefit of said deceased's personal estate.

All persons indebted to this estate must settle at once.

Given under my hand this 24th day of June, 1930.

ANDREW W. WILSON,
j10-4t Administrator.

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