

Desmond Eldridge

October (1975)

The Oyster River and oyster industry about 1925 – 1935

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Brief Description: Desmond Eldredge discusses his recollections of Oyster River, starting when he was a child and through his career as an oyster farmer. He also paints a picture of what it was like to be in the oyster industry in Chatham in the first half of the 20th century. Points of interest that he discusses are early grants for oyster farming, the gear they would wear, the Alice S. Wentworth, entertaining stories from the river, and other topics.

Voice: This is October 28, 1975 and Mr. Desmond Eldredge of Chatham, who is a life time Cape Codder, is going to tell us some of his remembrances of the life at Oyster River in West Chatham. Which I think is a fascinating place and most beautiful. For anybody who hasn't browsed around Chatham very much, it's really a sight to see.

D. Eldridge: Oyster River, Joe, has been a part of my life as long as I can remember. My mother was a Gould. Her old home was on the hill overlooking the shanties, in the bend of Oyster River. My grandfather, Stephen W. Gould, was the founder of the S. W. Gould & Son Oyster Company. One thing of which I'm quite proud is I believe it to be the oldest continuous business in Chatham, in the same place, in the same family. I don't think there's another business in Chatham that goes back further than we do.

Rightly, we called it Oyster River, but rightly it's an arm of the sea, not a river. It has always been too shallow for large vessels to use. At one time, many years ago, there was a two-

masted schooner named the Sharpshooter with oysters for the Smalls. And they used to get up the river as far as the present boat yard. But, even there he'd have to anchor both bow and stern as there wasn't enough for him to swing around. But, it always has been a place that produced shellfish of various kinds.

The first record I have of the sale of oysters was opened oysters, sold locally. Oh back in early 1870s. That was the way they did it then. And I believe, according to the old records that I found, the oysters were 20 cents a pint.

Voice: That's opened?

D. Eldredge: Opened. That's 20 cents a pint. The first grants were in the southeast end in the Oyster Pond and they were given to a man named Van Heis, I think is the pronunciation. Who was related or ancestor to the Smalls, who at a later date were also in the oyster business. And that, again, was about 1870 to 1873. It was several years later before grants were laid out in the river. At one time, according to the old charts from the town office building, that we've been able to look up the grants started at the mouth of Oyster River at Stage Harbor. And the entire river was grants to the entrance to the Oyster Pond. Then in the Oyster Pond, around the shores there were grants all practically all the way around. But the center of Oyster Pond was never granted. The grants only ran so far off from the shore.

Mr. Charles Hudson was a surveyor for the town. Some years ago, many years ago when I first went to work at Oyster River with Benjamin D. Gould and Roscoe H. Gould, who had been there for years, we went down and we tried to find the original stake that the grants were started from. We know by common usage that somebody would say to someone, another man

who held a grant next to him, "Well you plant on that end of that, because the flat doesn't help me, but you can use it." So we know that the stakes that we were used were not probably not in the same place that the original ones were. And in hunting for this original stake to see what we could find out, every single time we came back to Barto's boathouse, on the west side of the road at the town landing at Barto's, and as near as we can determine if it's still in existence, the original stake is somewhere in the middle of Barto's boathouse. No one has really questioned it to go hunt it up again.

I went to work at the river in 1929, in the spring of 1929. Of course I had spent much time there before that. Like all boys, I mean there was something fascinating about the water. Whenever Dad would take me up, he went in partnership with Benjamin D. Gould, my dad and Mr. Seldridge. Whenever I could go over I used to go up there and I learned to row, sail, swim. I learned a lot of things because, well you had to. If you want to learn how to row they gave you a skiff and a pair of oars and said, "There's the river." I mean, they didn't give you a book to read or anything, they just turned you loose and let you go. And of course it was an ideal place because the way the tide ebbs and flows, if you went out on the ebb tide they knew you'd come on flood tide. Either that or you learned to row well enough to get back! And so a great many of us, I'd like to know really how many young people have really learned about the water up at Oyster River from those men who seem to have one eye out for you while they did their work on other things.

In 1929, and after that, all the work was handwork, no mechanical devices. There was one boat with a buck engine in it, a one cylinder gasoline engine that we could use for towing scows. But aside from that they were all poled and hand tonged and hand raked. There was a

mechanical device in there, I remember it before I went to work there. I think it was about 1923 or 4, and it was an apple grater that they had tried to convert to cull quahogs. And it took up an awful lot of room in the shanty, and they had to have a gasoline engine to run it. After getting it set up and working the way they thought it would work it's best, it took two men to operate the thing, they found out that three men culling from a bench could beat it. So that didn't last very long. It was pulled out and went off again from then up until, oh I guess the late '30s. Yeah around the late '30s, I guess. There were no mechanical devices used. The next step in mechanicalizing the place was when we put out board motors on the scows and then it had to be Arthur Gould or myself or somebody like that to run them because the old-timers even with the board motor on running would stand with an oar in their hand. They never trusted that machine. They probably never would.

When I went to work there, the clothes I think perhaps might be interesting to some. There may be a few suits of them around now. But I doubt it. We wore what they called oilskins. Pants and jacket, --- with a hat. And it was a medium weight cloth that had been painted, not impregnated through but painted with a kind of oil to make them waterproof. It was really quite an outfit, and in the summer time if you stood with your hands to your sides for a little while they stuck there so it took them half the day to get them apart. In the wintertime, you had to hold them up alongside the stove to warm them to bend them enough to get into them. A remark made by one old-timer was, "The damn things cracked so it was wet two days before it rained." They did keep the wind off anyways. The rubber boots gear is nothing like they have today. They were all unlined and the best way to keep your feet warm in the winter ---- in the oyster business we were backwards to everything else, we started in October and ended in April.

And the best way to try and keep your feet warm, which you didn't exactly, but it helped, was line your boots with newspapers. So we'd line the boots with newspapers and put our feet and wear those one day and at night we'd take them out and dry the boots out and put in another part of newspapers. I don't know really how many people read the newspapers for news, but they all got it to keep their boots warm anyways. So that was one way. And as far as hands went, it was woolen mittens. Nova Scotia mittens, they were called. And I know people used to get quite a shock when they'd see us take a nice dry pair of mittens, put them on and go out, and reach overboard and soak both hands in the water. Because there is absolutely no warmth to them until they swelled up. To wear a pair of dry Nova Scotia mittens, you might as well be barehanded. So you would just dip your hands if it was ice water or whatever it was, as soon as they swelled up your body heat did the rest. That's all the heat there was in them, but for years we used those. Until they came out with the rubberized gloves and things like that.

For years the shellfish were brought – Chatham, to go backwards to go forwards, Chatham has never been able to produce enough oysters to maintain a business, keep a business going. The oysters were brought from various places. The record shows that they bought from Wellfleet, they bought some in Wareham. But the majority of them came from Long Island Sound, down around Greenport and New Haven, Bridgeport, and Dartmouth, in that country. In those years, they came up on sailing vessels. Two masted schooners. I guess one of the first men to transport oysters to Chatham was the much written about, and deservedly so, Capt. Zeb Tilton. The first schooner he had, was a small little craft, the John B. Norris. I don't know how many years she came here, but I did shovel oysters off the John B. Norris. But his next schooner was the Alice S. Wentworth. And he came for years with her, bringing oysters. I shoveled many

an oyster off of her and when I was about 14 or 15 years old, I made the trip from Chatham to Greenport, Long Island and back on the schooner with Capt. Zeb. And that was really quite a trip. Zeb knew those waters like the back of his hand. He explained everything to me on the way down and I was supposed to explain the same thing to him on the way back, but I guess if he had been a schoolteacher then I would've gotten an F for that, because I just wasn't able to keep up with the man with his experience. Another vessel, it was very familiar here was the Sharpshooter. Her captain was Warren Critchlow. Unfortunately, on the way back from Chatham to Long Island for more oysters, she was rammed and sunk by a collier in the Sound. One of our Chatham residents, Wesley Small, was aboard at the time. There were three of them aboard and they were picked off by the crew of the collier, but the Sharpshooter was a total loss. She was never able to come back.

Soon after, we got diesel powered, ran into diesel powered freighters that would come and go. Capt. Zeb still came for years, even after some of the diesels came. There were such boats as the Forest Burn, Jane D. They were both owned by a Capt. DeGrath. I never knew him – he was Capt. DeGrath, I was young fellow. If you were aboard he was Capt. DeGrath. The men that knew him better always called him Candy. Which I never knew why, but he was Candy DeGrath. And then there was the Marian M., Jeff Munson was her captain. They knew each other well and sometimes there would be two boats moored in the Stage Harbor at the same time, waiting down low. I guess, you know Oyster River was a busy place, about seven scows and all the oysters had to be shoveled from the back of the vessel to the scow. Either towed or polled (?), if the tide was right, up the river and planted and gotten back again. Of course the boat's skipper, he wanted to get back, each one wanted to get unloaded first, so thank goodness for

Ben Gould because he was the one that sort of did the balancing in between and kept things running smooth.

Some of the names in the oyster business, back in those days, would be like Atwood, Crowell, Smith, Gould, Buck, Cahoon, Eldridge, Kendrick, Small, Ryder. All the old Cape names were as I say, in the business and had grants there in the river. Three of them had built, all of which, I believe, have disappeared now, had underground cellars. They were boarded up and some of them I guess were cemented up. And what they would do is in the better weather, in the winter they would go out and tong and cull their oysters and barrel them and put them in in these cellars for storage to take care of all orders for when the weather was too bad to get out. Mr. Crowell, whose down by Mrs. Barto's, had a cellar. Ryder, across the river from where the shanties are now, just a little to the east, he had a cellar. And the Smalls had a cellar up in Oyster Pond. And that was the way things were done. I mean, when you took a job there, in those days, you worked six days a week, from daylight till dark. And Saturday night you got cash in your hand and nobody took nothing, it was yours. And you had it all the time.

Some of the other names that were familiar around the river were Ruben Eldredge, I guess it won't hurt anybody's feelings but he was known as Rollin' Ribbon, because of the peculiar gate he had when he walked. And it was a long time before I knew the man had any name except Rollin'. And then there was a Mr. Edrick Robbins, who had a little shanty down there at the shore. And Edrick was really quite a character. He used to like to get the young folks around and, my cousin Gunny and myself, and he would spin his yarns. If he got going a little bit too strong, and he made, and we got a question as to whether he was telling the truth or not, we were fresh kids that didn't have any respect for our elders. But if we swallowed all of his stories

started off on then we would be dumb kids that didn't know nothing. And we couldn't win for losing, no matter what happened! But still he really was a character and I'm glad I've been able to know him.

On this Mr. Ruben Eldredge there from South Chatham, he came down one day, his boat was pulled ashore at the end of Barn Hill Road, there at the river. He came down one day and painted his boat. Well, he was using copper paint, brick dust and kerosene, as we call it - everybody used in those days. And he had a gallon of white for the top side. So, he came down and he mixed up and he painted the bottom of his boat. The men went out and helped him roll her down on one side, and painted one side. And then they rolled her back up and he painted the other. Got them straightened up for him and braced up and he went and took his brush and rubbed it out a few times on a board there was there and took the same brush and dipped into the white paint, and started painting the top side. Well, she started out as sort of a reddish on the bow at one side, and faded off to a pale pink at the stern at the other. And then she went from pale pink on the stern on the other side, to pure white on the bow. And for the rest of the life of that boat, she was known as the Strawberry Roan, it was never painted on her but that was the Strawberry Roan. But that's the way they did things, I mean what the heck! You want to paint the same boat, why waste to brushes? That figured to them.

They did those things. Another character, you couldn't mention Oyster River without mentioning him. Was Capt. Stanley Gunderson. He was the lighthouse keeper at Harding's Beach Light. And when he retired he had built himself a cottage and he lived in Chatham. I probably can't pronounce it right, I don't think anybody could pronounce it exactly the way Stan did, but Stan always had to have a "bot." He just couldn't be without a "bot." And he would pick up any

old boat he could, for as little as he could, or somebody had an old one they wanted to get off the property. Stan would take it and they generally ended up at Oyster River. And he was a magician, in a way. He could take things you'd think would never float and he would fix them up so they floated. I wouldn't say they were real seaworthy, but they floated anyway. And the thing about Stan was that he didn't want to spend too much, as none of them did. So in the spring of the year he would go around to the hardware stores and the different painters in town and he would pick up whatever paint that he could. It didn't matter what color or anything, discontinued colors. He'd buy it all cheap or they'd give it to him free to get it out of the place. Now at his garage, at his home there, he had a big pot. And all these paints were poured in together, and he'd stir it up. And then when it comes springtime, he had a boat ready to paint, why Stan would bail some out into a gallon can and down he would come. This was for the top side. They still had to use paint for the bottom side, brick dust and kerosene. But anyways, downward comes Stan. There would be a while there where not much work was done at Oyster River because when somebody saw Stan was painting, everybody dropped what they did and went out to see what color she was going to come out that year. You never knew when, and no one could ever duplicate him, but he added a great deal of color to Oyster River. And I know the Pauls and the Bainbridges, the Wildes – – the first sort of original summer people that came there – that was one of the first things they would look for when they got out of the car; walk out on the hill and see what color Stan's boat was that year or his boats. And he never had an engine, I don't think, bigger than a one cylinder, make and break, engine. And he was a wizard at keeping those things running. I mean how he ever did it with some of them, I don't know, and I guess nobody else does. But Stan could do it and you could hear him coming. And it never ran steady, so you knew

it was Stan. He putted around the shores after he retired and he and his boats got to be quite famous, particularly for their colors.

Those men that worked there, some of the names I have mentioned. Really had a sense of humor. Perhaps it was a different thing then we use today, perhaps it wouldn't have gone over so well on television or radio, but amongst themselves they really thought of, kept things lively. One of the things that they like to do was always tell somebody else how much more money he had then they did, I think. Everybody else was always "well off." I never really heard anybody call him a miser, or tight or anything, but they would come out with "He's darn careful of his money." And you knew then it meant that if you wanted to dicker (?) with him you'd better be on your toes. So one of the stories I remember, or I can tell about it is there were two of the old-timers sitting there on the bench we had in the shanty, by the potbellied stove. Which by the way, some fresh kid painted across the back "Liar's Bench." It stayed there, they weren't particularly pleased with it but that was the name of it, the "Liar's Bench." They sat there and one of them reached in his pocket and pulled out a watch and looked at it. I believe his remark was, "Ain't you fellows ever gonna eat, it's just about noontime?" I said, "Yeah, we'll eat pretty quick." The old fellow sitting next to him looked over, he says "If I had your money," he says, "I'd have something better than a \$1.50 watch." "What's the matter with the \$1.50 watch?" "Get yourself a good watch." Well the watch owner wasn't about to have his watch run down and he looked at him and said, "You know there is only one thing the matter with that watch." He says, "That's the telephone." "Well now, tell me how can the telephone be the matter with the watch?" "You know," he says, "ever since I got this watch and had that telephone," he says, "every single morning that phone rings." And he says, "The voice on the other end says, 'Ernest is

it time for the sun to come up?' And I tell him yes or no or whatever the case happens to be at, wait a few minutes. And then he hangs up." He says, "It's a dang gun nuisance waiting for that phone call. And several times I have missed the tide waiting for that call." So that sort of slowed him up, he had to wait and see when the sun would come up by his watch. And those stories that they spun was about everything. One fellow was complaining about his garden. He said his cucumber vines grew so fast they were dragging the skins all off the cucumbers, because they pull them along the ground. You know just ordinary things that happened to ordinary people like that.

One gentleman bought a secondhand car, He brought it down to be looked at and checked over. They always did, they had to show off a little bit. In looking the car over, why, one of them said to him, "Why that's the nice-looking car, but how did you get this dent in the fender?" "There's no dents in the fender of that car." "Come with me and look." So he ran around and saw the dent in the fender. It had been painted over, but there was a dent in the fender. So he sort of ran his hand over and said, "Oh that, that's no dent that's a birthmark. It had it when I got her." And it was never mentioned again. That solved the problem for him right there. And that was their type of humor that they went for.

Another character, perhaps not so colorful at painting his boats, though he was quite colorful, was a man named Albert Barber. He lived aboard a boat. He had a pretty good size boat for Oyster River, but he used it as a home, he lived on it. He lived on it and he had a smaller boat to go quahogging. And he had a cat, a very well cared for cat that lived aboard the boat with him. Whenever Barber came ashore to go into town to get groceries, or anything like that, you would see the cat sitting on the stern of the skiff. He'd row in and the cat would jump out and run

around the shore there. Go around and come back and lay down on the seat and wait for him to come back and take her around. Well, apparently his cat met a traveling man, because his cat had three kittens. I can assure you raising kittens on a boat probably is not the easiest thing in the world to do. And the kittens were falling overboard. And mama cat is running around there screaming her head off. Well, somebody would grab a skiff and go out and fish the kitten out. He never lost them – they could swim enough, so somebody could get to them. But being a Cape Codder with Yankee ingenuity, he could figure out that that wasn't a proper way to raise his family. And what he came up with was, he took a life ring about three or four feet across, it was a big one. And he tied a line to it and tied it to the stern of the boat. 'Course the boat would swing each time with the tide, so it was always bow to the tide and the ring was off the stern. So after that it was no problem at all. You'd here is splash and look and then the kitten would crawl up the life ring and there it would sit. Sometimes there would be two sitting there and when Barber come back, he'd pick the kittens off the life ring and put them back on the boat again. He solved his problems without bothering his neighbors to rescue his kittens.

Voice: And life ring like a preserver, right?

D. Eldredge: Right, like a life preserver ring. A big round one. Put it up with a line tied to it. It was plenty big enough to float kittens and they'd sit out, and as a matter of fact they'd scamper and even fall off that sometimes, I think! That's the type of man and things that were there. They could figure out an answer to most any problem – if they really wanted to.

Some of our funny experiences were with artists. I don't know how many times Oyster River has been painted. It is a fascinating place, even despite the fact I worked there nearly 40

years. I have three paintings of the place in my own home. Ones that I particularly like that struck my fancy. Things, I don't know, something about the view there that you don't seem to be able to forget. As I said, you work six days a week, daylight till dark, and there never seemed to be much trouble when you took the job and everybody worked and got along together. I think the nearest thing I ever heard to a labor dispute was in the winter, of course the days were short and we were practically in the dark getting a scowl load of oysters in the shanty. You have to get them inside where the stove was to keep them from freezing. A suggestion was made that we get a couple of lanterns and hang them from the rafters there for things like that, and a voice from the darkness says, "Why the hell don't you put in cots and spend all night?" And lanterns were never mentioned again. If we couldn't finish it, we'd quit, that's all there was to it! That's about the way the labor problem was there. In those times.

(Muffled voices)

D. Eldredge: It was not seed it was a market sized oyster. They were about three years old and it takes three years with good growing to get a market sized oyster. To understand, Oyster River was not a farm in the sense that it raised oysters. What it did was fatten and feed them. And they were brought in the spring and planted, spread out so that they could grow. And the oysters were there, we tried to have them all planted at least by the end of April. Sometimes it would run into May, but not too often. And they were there in the summer and they would spawn once. They threw out their spawn once they were there. And then as the water got colder they would start and fatten up. And it was fattening and flavoring, is what did it. The Chatham oyster was known for being a very salty oyster. We were in the arm of the sea, they were a very salty oyster. They were particularly in favor around the New England, the Boston area. Most of

our business was in Boston. We had customers in New York and in fact at one time, just before I went to work there, again that would be about the middle '20s, I think. When the railroad was in existence and operating. There was a siding in South Chatham. They use to get an order from Chicago for a car load of oysters. And they would bring the car down and put it on the siding. And the local iceman or those who had permission to cut ice, and had it in an ice house, would go up and do what they called "ice up the car." And then everybody up the river that had grants took a hold and they packed just as fast as they could. There was a horse and wagon, there is one fellow that had a Model T Ford truck. And as fast as they would get a load, they would take them up and put them in the car and close it again. A small car was 80 barrels and a full car was 100 barrels. Just as soon as they could get that 100 barrels on there, it was sealed and the next train took it to make its connection to Chicago. That was a community effort. No one company, S.W. Gould and Sons or the Crowells, or anybody could fill an order like that at that time. So everybody took a hold and each man kept track of what he packed and he went and then they'd all get together and squared away. One man might have five barrels, a bigger group might have 10, somebody else might have 20 or 25, and that's the way they worked it to get out the car load lots. The end of that was when they had the scare of typhoid from shellfish. Nothing was ever found in Chatham, at no time were they barred from shipping oysters. The only thing was the waters were checked very carefully and we had a stencil. I wished it had been saved. It was lost in the '38 hurricane. We had a stencil with a number and Mass. permit, and we could stencil right on a barrel and we were still allowed to ship. We never were at any time stopped and there was never any contamination found, to the best of my knowledge and that. But the thing hit so hard there that they stopped ordering in car load lots. After that the business sort of tapered off,

I guess trucks and things started taking them from Long Island. It was cheaper to buy there and cheaper transportation to get them there. But that was the way they did it.

Another thing that we did there was gift packages. We would buy up all the old nail kegs we could from the lumber yards and oh they would hold about half a bushel. Nail kegs, some of them were smaller, peck and a half. And they were shipped all over everywhere. There was one restaurant owner in New York who was apparently a particular fan of the actress Fanny Brice and on her birthday, I can't remember the date, I can look it up in the old books, we shipped the package, wherever she was, it went. We shipped oysters to Eisenhower, in Paris when he was there after the war. Then at one time we shipped barreled oysters to England, to Parliament (?). We get the order and check on when Stephen was going and we'd -- and put them on. They all arrived perfectly all right! One of the stories I can tell you that I like about package things was a gentleman came to the river once and we're putting up some packages and explained to him what they were. And he left a name and address of a general in the United States Marines, in Quantico down there, Parris Island, to ship him a half bushel of oysters. So he wanted it shipped and express, prepaid, and everything. So it was done. We got a notice back from the railway express company that the General wouldn't except the oysters. We went back to the express company, explained that it was a gift, and it was all paid for. As far as we were concerned it was done. That's where it was supposed to go. We got another telegram back from the express company saying that the General would not accept gifts. Would we please tell them what to do with the oysters. My cousin, Pirate, who worked with me decided that there was only one way to settle this thing. We didn't want the oysters back, and if they couldn't do anything else there, he sent a telegram immediately saying, "If the General will not accept, gift to the enlisted men's

mess." And we never heard anything more about those oysters. I often wondered what happened to them down there. But anyway, I imagine that half a bushel of oysters went quite a long ways at Parris Island with the enlisted men's mess. Whoever got them, we never did find out!

And another problem that arose there, in Georgia, the man was from Georgia. And every year just before Thanksgiving and just before Christmas we would get an order from him, and he always ordered by number, he always wanted 150 or he wanted two hundred or something oysters. Shipped, prepaid, to arrive on a certain day. And in with his order would be a blank signed check. And in his order he would say, "When you have the charges for the oysters and the express, fill out the check to the necessary amount." Well, poor Pirate, my cousin, he was the bookkeeper. That check used to drive him right up a wall. He wrote letters and everything explaining to just send us your order please and we'll send you a bill, but we went through that year after year. We could never figure out if that fellow didn't have much money, or had so much money he didn't care. But anyway, that's one of the funny things that happened when shipping those orders.

Back years ago, in handling the oysters, 'course as I said we had to handle them in the winter, not in the summer, the oysters and everything. Anyway, there was a young fellow, a Chatham boy, come down looking for a job. And he was told there is a job available for him. Well he came to work, and he was a good worker. We were satisfied with his work. But he seemed kind of upset, how was the job going to last all winter? He wanted work for the winter. "How is the job going to last all winter?" We said, "It'll last all winter, it has." "How are you going to handle oysters and quahogs and things when it's freezing like that?" And we said, "You know,

we'll show you when we get there." "I'm mighty curious to see how you're going to keep them from freezing." It gets pretty cold around here like that.

We went on and we had a pretty good fall and in December we had a real cold snap. It was down to about 20° and the wind was blowing north and every drop of water that blew was freezing. And the phone rang and we had an order and we - little necks that we didn't have in the shanty. So we said come on we're going out and rake little necks. He was curious and we said all right, you can be curious, but just take the scow down to the end there, put about five of those watertight barrels on and a bucket, get the rakes on, and three of us will go out so we could rake quahogs. We got the bed and we anchored the scow in the little neck bed and we took the bucket and started bailing water in the barrels. And he's kind of watching, and we said you can start raking any time. But, when you pull your rake up dump them in the barrels of water. Dump your little necks in, don't dump them on the deck, dump them in the barrels of water. Well of course by the time he got the rake pulled and got some little necks in it and try to pick up the pole, the pole was all ice and it's slippery, the pole was about 24 feet long. He's trying to balance that and the deck's getting icy. And he finally got the little necks in the barrel. The rest of us were raking.

By-and-by, when one of the other fellows on the scow turned to him and says, "Pretty quiet for you, isn't it?" He says, "Thought you was wondering how we were going to rake. You was curious." The only answer we got was, "I'm all over my curiosity." He had found out how we'd handle them.

We tonged the oysters and did the same things. Now ice of course was a problem with us. If it was heavy enough to walk on, that was fine, then we took sleds and put barrels of water on them. We cut a hole in the ice and one man would tong the oysters into the barrels and on the sleds and we'd tow them back to the shanty. But if it was medium hard ice you couldn't walk on it. And we had nothing to break it with. That was really quite a problem. We would sometimes be able to get through by two or three men lining up, in a depth of water that you could wade. The scow would float in that. By walking in up on the edge and break it down, you could break a track through. But then of course you have to push the ice out of the way to get the scows through. And sometimes we'd use skiffs because they were narrower, but we couldn't handle too many. But that is the way it was done, they were tonged in barrels of water and brought back to the shanty, and brought in. It didn't take very long for a new man to get over his curiosity. Under those conditions.

Voice: Now you talked about tongs, Des? Were they on the ends of the poles? Or how did they –

D. Eldredge: Yes, the local blacksmith, Arthur Kendrick, he made what we called a tonged head. They were five bars of wire an inch apart, and they were about 3 feet long. With a heavier bar at the bottom and teeth that slanted in at an angle. And then those were attached to two handles that were pivoted like scissors, so that the teeth meshed. The way the tongs were made the teeth didn't hit each other, they slid in between each other. And from the side of the scow you would start and tong down tide. In other words the tide going with you. And tong down until you thought you had a tong for reasonably so. And then they were lifted and dumped on the deck and you went back and did it again. Everything that we used was made right here in Chatham. He made the rakes and he made the tongs. The rakes at Oyster River had were probably smaller

than a fisherman used because those were on beds, they were planted, and they were thick. And they were big rakes like the men used out on the natural beds. I mean you just anchored yourself, one man couldn't pull. They use to laugh at our dinky little rakes. Our rakes had about 18 teeth across the bar in the front. And the big rakes that some of those men used had as many as 26 teeth, 24 to 26 teeth, which is considerably wider. To think that they are about an inch and a half apart. Those teeth, but they were all made right here in town by the local blacksmith and the men made their own tong handles. And to see a man use a tong, it's probably really crude to some people to see it, but each and every man had his own pair of tongs, and you couldn't take the other fellows. Each and every man would plane off and sand down and scrape until he got those tongs to suit him. It was like any tool a craftsman would use. It may have been jackass work, all back muscle and everything else, but still and all to take somebody else's tongs you couldn't work with them. I don't know why, but you just couldn't. Each man took care of his own gear. And there are rakes, each man had his own rake. We didn't take the other fellows rake, unless it was an emergency because where the rake fastened onto the pole he would plane off, the head might set at, the rake might set at a different angle. It might tip under too much to suit you, or might tip back too much. Even though they look pretty primitive those men had their own ideas on how they wanted things to work. And each man took care of his own tools and kept them working that way.

The culling of the oysters, that was another place we used to have a lot of fun. Early fall and late spring we did a lot of the work outdoors on the scows. We had benches we could move right onto the scows and shovel onto the bench. Whenever we culled the oysters we tonged the oysters we culled them, for size and things like that. And then we planted them back in a bed for

shipping. Actually, from the time we bought those oysters, we handled them, we shoveled them off the deck of the vessel for once, we shoveled them off the deck of the scow for twice, we tonged them for three times, we shoveled them onto the bench for four, we planted them for five, we tonged them up again for six, and we lugged them into the shanty and put them in. We handled those seven or eight times before they finally went to market. We very seldom ever shipped right off of the rough beds. If we could help it, we would cull them back on these holding beds to do. And at one time we had some floats there that we use to put them into up off the bottom where we could get a few out quickly to do that.

We would be out there culling oysters, as I say in the early fall or late spring and there are visitors around that would come down and they'd stay there and watch us. And we used a culling iron, a piece of iron about 14 or 15 inches long. On one end was like a blade, it wasn't sharp, it was just flat. The blacksmith use to make those by taking a round piece of iron and just bang it out flat. As we pulled the oysters towards us we take the shells off and everything, we'd tap them and we had two barrels at that particular time. Our orders were for either 900 count or 700 count. You just knew, I mean after you culled a little bit, that you got used to the size, but you'd tap each one, you know. So all the tapping was to tell if there was anything in it, whether it sounded hollow or not we would eliminate those. There was always a basket there where we threw great big ones in. So, these people would be standing there and they'd watch and watch. And finally somebody who couldn't stand it any longer would say, "What do you hit each oyster for?" "Well, that's to tell if they're males or females, mating season is over and we want to separate them, they'll grow faster." And then you waited for it. And then somebody would come out with it, "Well why are some of them in the basket?" "Oh they're too old to make any

difference." And that was one of the things we'd always wait for! You knew somebody was going to ask! And you sort of took turns going around as to who was going to be the guy who kept a straight face and tell them!

(Laughter)

It got so down there that visitors used to come all the time, people used to come and say, "You fellows have really gone too far. It's getting so now that they don't believe you when you tell them the truth, you gotta tell them a story or they don't believe you." I sometimes think that was true. But those were the types of things they had.

Now, I'm going to tell you something here that unfortunately most of those men are gone, I think Arthur Gould could bear me out, but very few left that can bear me out. Living down at Oyster River was a gentleman, Benjamin F. Cahoon. More commonly known as Pat. And Pat had cats, I mean many cats. All over the place he had cats. If Pat ate, the cats ate. If things were slow for Pat, then things were slow for the cats and they had to scrounge. Come the scallop season, and the men down there opened scallops and it wasn't quite the same as it is today, they each had their little shack and opened and dumped the shells outside. And that's another story too, but anyway, the innards were there the guts as they called it, the offal, that they didn't use were there. And there were some cats that would eat it and some that wouldn't. Now, I want to get this on tape while Arthur is still there so in case anybody wants to check it. The cats that ate the offal, in about a month to a month and a half, their ears would start and dry up and curl, and fall off. As I say, not all of the cats would eat it, no matter how hungry they were. But those that did, and I have seen this many years, three or four cats in the fall of the year went around there

and had no ears. Now no one's going to believe me, they never have and they probably never will, but at least I'm glad I got it on tape because it was so and I saw it! They really would lose their ears.

Voice: I know it does make some of them lose their hair, when they start eating that stuff. And it makes them thin too.

D. Eldredge: Well these cats seem to survive it, but how come I don't know. We've been very fortunate up there that people in the town has been very good to us. Up there in the hurricane of '38, all we had left when the hurricane got through was some flat slabs of cement. That's all that we had. Well the Boy Scouts, people with time on their hands, even some of the summer visitors that lived around there, they came down and they started and they walked for hours, cruising the shores. And anything that they could find they would bring back and dump up at Oyster River. Pile up there. And the local contractors and the builders and like that, the lumber yards and all, they got things for us. So -

Voice: Go to side two of the tape please.

Notes found in the original transcription of this recording:

Oyster River

From conversations with Desmond Eldridge (1980)

- Charles Hudson began surveying Oyster River in 1929
- Everett Eldredge, cousin of Desmond, bookkeeper and oysterman
- Patriot, Sharpshooter and Alice S. Wentworth, two-masted schooners
- Gould had seven scows. Oysters shoveled from schooner to scows, from scows to beds, from beds tonged or raked back to scows, culled, shoveled back onto holding beds, tonged up as needed.
- Rakes larger and heavier than tongs. Tongs and rake fashioned by blacksmith, Arthur Kendrick, five-toothed, 24 ft handles
- Oysters kept in many cold cellars all winter
- RR car brought into West Chatham siding, "iced up" everybody packed (total 100 bbls.), Different grant holders put in a share (10 bbls.) 700 to 900 per bbl.
- In Depression, some men fixed up shanties to live in with agreement of owner.
- Hurricanes of '38 and '44 townspeople walked the shores and brought in anything helpful. Horace Reynolds pulled men off their jobs to rebuild shanties in a hurry.
- Now no business as earlier – shanties used privately or by Oceanographic Research Institute and Cultured Clam Research of Dennis (?). Business ended because of restricted shellfish regulations and poor seed in L. I. and Conn., pollution, pleasure boating churned up bottom to smother oysters, two cycle engines feed gasoline and oil back in water, dredging done without understanding of environmental effect – mostly just dumb regulations.
- Oilskins cracked in cold weather "So you'd get – two weeks before it rained."
- Joe Lincoln frequent visitor.
- Oceanographic Institute kept a scow with tent and apparatus anchored there ('30s and '40s?)