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The Life of a 19th Century Oysterman

In the 1600's the Chesapeake Bay was full of oysters that filtered the whole bay once a week, but not for long. Over the years people started hunting oysters. Soon an oyster industry moved in, changing the area. The life of an oysterman in the nineteenth century was not easy. It could even be a deadly job. There was deceit, abuse, shootings, and murder.

Some oystermen started as immigrants coming in ships to New York City; the ships were filled. Shipping agents were sent to recruit people to work for the oyster industry. For every person who signed the agreement, the agents were paid two dollars. When desperate for fortune, adventure, or the need for work, immigrants signed the agreement. The immigrants were given an employment card and also a train ticket. What they did not know was that the train ticket money and the two dollars for the agents were taken out of their wages. As the son of an immigrant, I can imagine how it feels to not know the language of a new country and not being told everything. Then comes a job offer which is exactly what most want, but they did not know what was in store for them and all the hardships ahead.

When they got to the Chesapeake Bay, they were assigned to a boat, and they had to get used to the routine. They slept on the boat with no bedding. They ate coarse food. They woke up at five o'clock in the morning and got straight to work, and when work was over they were locked below deck so as not to escape. If work was refused, they could be cruelly beaten or thrown in a deserted area with no pay. It was common for oystermen to get injuries in their daily

work that cost them a trip to the hospital. Some reasons for going to the hospital were frostbite, broken bones, and being cut and poisoned by oyster shells. This was called Oyster Hand.

There were cases of cruel abuse to oystermen for not working. On one occasion, a young twenty-year-old German immigrant was tortured and eventually murdered for asking to take a break from labor. He was seasick and suffering from exposure. The Captain cruelly abused the young immigrant day after day. In an attempt to escape, the man staggered to shore, but the captain caught up and threw him on the ground, breaking his neck and killing him. The captain and his mate decided to tell the authorities that the man jumped onto a boat and was badly injured and that he must have run to shore because that is where his body was found.

If that wasn't enough, an oyster war broke out between Virginia and Maryland oystermen. It went on and off for about seventy years. There was a boundary separating the Virginian oyster fishing grounds from Maryland's. The boundary ran through the Chesapeake Bay from the Potomac River to the Pocomoke River. Some Virginia oystermen wanted more product and entered Maryland's oyster grounds even though there was an agreement not to cross. These Virginian pirates started poaching oysters and looting the bay. The Maryland oyster men gave a fight and the Virginia pirates were met with a ring of bullets from angry oystermen. To pay back the Virginian oystermen for passing their territory they too decided to become oyster pirates and loot Virginian oystermen territory. When they crossed into Virginia a Virginian police schooner met them. The pursuit was on. The police schooner chased the oyster pirates all the way to Maryland's shore where they were met with rounds of bullets from Marylanders on shore who were ready to fight the police. The police shot back their cannon. The captain of the schooner knew he was outnumbered and retreated back to Onancock, Virginia.

A state law was passed due to the decline of oysters in 1890 and federal laws in 1906 to improve the work and control the oyster industry. The laws helped to stop abuse to oystermen and watch over the actions of the oyster industry.