



The Sunday Capital

By Paul W. Gillespie
— The Capital

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‘The glory days are in the history books’

Magothy-based Hilda M. Willing among last skipjacks working the bay



Photos by Pamela Wood — The Capital; Top photo courtesy Maryland Historical Trust

ABOVE: As the sun peeks over the horizon of the Chesapeake Bay, crew member Kelly Sullivan sends a dredge sailing over the side of the *Hilda M. Willing*. Working skipjacks are a rare sight in the Chesapeake Bay, and the *Hilda M. Willing* is the last one on the Western Shore. **TOP:** A 1983 photo from the Maryland Historical Trust shows the skipjack *Hilda M. Willing* under sail.

By PAMELA WOOD
Staff Writer

MORE ON THIS STORY

- A look at the bay's dwindling skipjack fleet. **Pages A10-11**
- See a photo slideshow at HometownAnnapolis.com.

At 5:30 a.m., the parking lot of Deep Creek Restaurant & Marina in Arnold is nearly empty.

The sky is pitch black. The waters of the creek are calm. The winter chill has left the air thin and cold and coated the docks with a layer of ice.

Capt. Barry Sweitzer uses a flashlight to navigate to his workboat, the *Hilda M. Willing*.

He climbs aboard the boat, one of the last of its kind in Maryland: a 106-year-old white oak skipjack.

When the *Hilda M. Willing* was launched from the town of Oriole on the rural Eastern Shore in 1905, several hundred — maybe even a

thousand — skipjacks sailed the bay, hauling dredges bulging with oysters.

But the skipjack's story reads like many in the Chesapeake Bay.

Overharvesting. Disease. Regulation. Conflict. Money.

Now the *Hilda M. Willing* is just one of a handful of skipjacks — the last fishing fleet in America that works under sail — that regularly dredge for oysters, and the last on the

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Capt. Barry Sweitzer followed in the footsteps of his father, who captained the *Hilda M. Willing* for more than five decades. “It’s something I loved as a kid,” Sweitzer said. “It’s kind of a labor of love. You can’t do it to make a buck.”

County home sales continue to rebound

\$5.6 million home highlights February’s 20-percent jump

By ALLISON BOURG
Staff Writer

A six-bedroom Wardour colonial that fetched \$5.6 million last month is the third most expensive residential property sold in county history, real estate agents said last week.

The broker who sold the 7,600-square-foot Annapolis home said it’s a sign the real estate market — particularly for high-end homes — is rebounding after a tough couple of years.

County home sales rose 20 percent in February over the same month a year ago, according to statistics released last week by Metropolitan Regional Information Systems.

“The numbers in our office have doubled,” said George Turner, an associate broker with Coldwell Banker in Annapolis. “Since

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Both sides vow to renew gay marriage fight

By LIAM FARRELL
and THERESA WINSLOW
Staff Writers

The longer the debate about same-sex marriage went on in the House of Delegates on Friday, the worse Scott Bowling felt.

A gay Annapolitan who has run for City Council, Bowling had been optimistic about witnessing history by going to the State House and watching the chamber head for a final vote on the bill.

“I never got the sinking feeling until I sat in the gallery,” he said. “The pit in my stomach just got deeper and deeper.”

In the end, for Bowling and other gay marriage advocates, the foreboding turned out to be foreshadowing. Faced with an uncertain vote count and growing desires to spend

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WEATHER

57 | **35**
HIGH | LOW

MOSTLY SUNNY:
Tomorrow, too. **C2**

Did you turn your clock ahead?

Daylight-saving time began this morning, meaning all clocks were set ahead one hour. And on this occasion of springing forward, fire officials remind you to change the batteries in smoke and fire alarms throughout the house — and test the units to make sure they work.



deal OF THE DAY!
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HILDA

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Western Shore of the Chesapeake. Sweitzer, a second-generation skipjack captain, knows the end is near for the iconic skipjacks. He predicts that in five years, none will be left oystering. They'll all be in museums or used for tourism.

"The death knell's been sounded for these boats," Sweitzer says. But for now, the *Hilda M. Willing* and her small crew have a mission. As the sky begins to lighten, they head out of the Magothy River in search of oysters.

Family tradition

"You either love it or you're crazy." That's how Sweitzer describes why he presses on in a brutally difficult industry that's dying before his eyes.

Despite the challenges, he keeps on — out of passion for the way of life, out of respect for the tradition. Sweitzer grew up in Tilghman Island, a watermen's village in Talbot County that's a few miles past St. Michaels.

His dad, Pete Sweitzer, like most Tilghman dads, worked on the water.

Capt. Pete came home from World War II and bought the *Hilda M. Willing* for \$1,600 in 1947. At the time, there were 90 skipjacks in Maryland.

Barry and his brothers and sister grew up in the watermen's way of life, with the four boys helping their father on the skipjack, a sleek, shallow-drafted, 55-foot sailboat.

"It was like our indoctrination into the seafood industry," Sweitzer says, steering the *Hilda M. Willing* out of the Magothy and around to Mountain Bar, an oyster reef near the Gibson Island causeway.

Sweitzer's dad saw the writing on the wall, though, and encouraged his children to get regular jobs, something with a pension.

Sweitzer jokes that he "halfway listened" to his father's advice. After a summer stint as an Ocean City police officer, he crossed the Bay Bridge to Anne Arundel Community College, where he majored in criminal justice and played football.

After graduation, Sweitzer took a job with the Baltimore County Police Department, where he's now a marine patrol officer.

It's a perfect fit for a waterman's kid — out on the water, but with a steady paycheck.

By 2000, Sweitzer's dad was ready to pass along the *Hilda M. Willing* to the next generation.

Sweitzer bought the skipjack — "He actually made me buy it. He said no one gave it to him." — and did a complete overhaul in 2001.

He devotes nearly all his free time to the *Hilda M. Willing*, using vacation days in the winter to go oystering twice a week.

And in the summer, he hauls the *Hilda M. Willing* out of the water and gives her a thorough maintenance regime.

He does all his own repair work, stripping all the equipment off the deck, repairing what's broken and caulking and repainting every inch. "Most people take vacations in Ocean City," he says. "My colleagues think I'm crazy."

Passion and insanity

"Obviously, he's got a passion that overlaps insanity to do that kind of work," says Sgt. Wayne Lloyd, Sweitzer's supervisor in the police department and a friend for 20 years. "A lot of people don't see the behind-the-scenes stuff in the summer months. He'll work here all day and get off work and go to the marina and strip off the paint and replace rotted wood."

Lloyd, who like Sweitzer lives in Middle River, helped Sweitzer overhaul the skipjack in 2001 and got to know Pete Sweitzer before he died in 2002.

Lloyd says it's clear the father's passion was passed to the son. "You can just tell he loves the boats and the bay," Lloyd says. While Lloyd has helped repair the skipjack, he draws the line at the brutal winter work of dredging.

"He's asked me for the past 12 years to go out," Lloyd says. "I was afraid if I helped him, I wouldn't even survive until lunchtime."

Sweitzer's winter neighbors on the Magothy River appreciate the history and significance of the *Hilda M. Willing*. He often is stopped by passersby at the marina or diners at the restaurant.

Maribeth Kalinich is one of them.

"I was having lunch one day and I saw this beautiful ship pull up," she recalls. "It's just awe-inspiring. I just walked up and said, 'Beautiful ship,' and he said,

SKIPJACKS ON THE BAY: KEY DATES IN A RICH 120-YEAR HISTORY



1891: The first true skipjack, the *Ruby G. Ford*, built in Crisfield. Previously, sloops, schooners and bugeyes were the oyster boats of choice. Hundreds of skipjacks — possibly 1,000 — are built in the next few years.

1850s-1860s: Advances in food preservation and the expansion of railroads lead to a boom in oyster packing houses.

1947: About 90 skipjacks are active in sail dredging. The Maryland harvest is about 2 million bushels.

1960s: Chesapeake Bay oysters begin to suffer from parasites MSX and Dermo.

1962: Forty-seven skipjacks are left.

1966: State allows skipjacks to dredge with the use of push boats two days per week.

1977: Thirty skipjacks are left.

1986-1987: Maryland oyster harvest falls below 1 million bushels for the first time.

2009-2010: Seven skipjacks report oyster harvests to the state.

2010-2011: Four skipjacks report oyster harvests to the state. The oyster population is estimated to be 1 to 2 percent of historic levels.

1865: Maryland lawmakers approve dredging for oysters, but only under sail. The first year, 391 boats are licensed for sail dredging.

1869-1870: 563 vessels licensed to dredge oysters in Maryland.

1884-1885: Maryland oyster harvest peaks at 15 million bushels.

Sources: Maryland Department of Natural Resources; "Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay" by John R. Wennerston; "Chesapeake Bay Skipjacks" by Pat Vojtech; Capt. Barry Sweitzer; Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.



Photos by Pamela Wood — The Capital

The *Hilda M. Willing* happens to own Bay Dredging License No. 1 from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. The Magothy River-based *Hilda M. Willing* is one of just a few skipjacks still oystering on the Chesapeake Bay.

SKIPJACK LINGO

Oystering has its own language, especially on a skipjack. Here are some terms watermen use:

- **Push boat:** Also called a yawl boat, this is a small motorboat attached to the stern of the skipjack to propel it when not under sail.
- **Dredge:** This piece of equipment is dragged behind the skipjack, scooping up oysters.
- **Drudge:** How many watermen pronounce "dredge."
- **Lick:** One pass of the dredge along an oyster bar.
- **Cable:** Attached to dredge at one end and motorized winder on deck at other end. The cable is let out at different lengths, depending on the water depth and the features of the oyster bar.
- **Beckett:** A short rope used to regulate the length of the dredge cable.
- **Box:** Dead oyster.
- **Bushel:** Container used to measure oyster harvests.

"Thank you."

That chat led to an interview and a story in the Shore Acres community newsletter, which Kalinich edited at the time.

Kalinich says she wanted to share Sweitzer's story with her neighbors "so people could know something so special is here."

Historic landmark

Sweitzer's devotion to the *Hilda M. Willing* shows.

The skipjack is pristine, despite its age. Sweitzer keeps equipment orderly, with nothing lying about on the deck or in the cabin.

Crew members wash the dishes from lunch and dinner with water heated in a kettle on the two-burner stove in the cabin. Trash is collected and taken to shore each day — nothing is tossed overboard.

Part of it is the law-and-order nature of the cop-turned-captain, but part of it, too, are the lessons from his father.

The care and attention paid to the boat might just be what keeps her going at the advanced age of 106.

Sweitzer takes pride in doing his own maintenance and upkeep. He uses gasoline motors to power the

push boat and the winder, in part because he says they're easier to repair than diesel.

And since he does all of his own woodworking repairs, too, Sweitzer doesn't have to worry about finding — and paying — someone else to do the work for him.

The ship-shape nature of the *Hilda M. Willing* is a key reason it is listed as a National Historic Landmark by the federal government.

In the historic landmark paperwork, a historian noted: "*Hilda M. Willing* retains essentially her physical appearance as originally built. *Willing* is also one of the few early skipjacks which is in good physical condition, and represents one of the smaller and better sailing vessels of the fleet."

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push boat and the winder, in part because he says they're easier to repair than diesel.



Hoops hold the mainsail to the 60-foot-tall mast on the *Hilda M. Willing* skipjack. Capt. Barry Sweitzer rarely raises the sails anymore. "Sail dredging's pretty obsolete," he said.

sunrise, and Sweitzer follows the law religiously. A cop certainly can't get caught making mistakes on the water.

At 6:52 a.m., Sullivan and Waggoner finally drop heavy dredges over the sides of the *Hilda M. Willing*.

The dredges have claw-like spikes at the end to scrape across the oyster bar, depositing oysters and shells into a mesh and metal bag.

A cable connects each dredge to a motorized winder in the middle of the deck. Depending on the depth of the water and the nature of the oyster bar — whether the oysters are tightly packed or loosely scattered — the cable is let out between 15 feet and 40 feet.

Small sections of rope called "becketts" are tied onto the cable on the winder to regulate the length. The becketts are used because they're strong enough to hold the cable, but if the dredge gets caught — say, on a large rock — the rope will break so the whole boat doesn't get dangerously hung up.

After a few minutes of dragging the dredges on the oyster bar,

Sweitzer revs down the push boat motor and revs up the winder. Sullivan and Waggoner each press a lever to engage the winder.

The dredges come up to the edge of the deck over metal roller bars, with a crashing of metal on metal, spilling oysters onto the deck.

Sullivan and Waggoner first rush to one side, each grabbing a metal ring on the dredge bag, hoisting it onto the deck, shaking out the rest of the oysters and then sending the dredge back overboard.

They rush to the other side and repeat the routine: grab, shake, toss.

Then they each kneel before their pile of oysters — Sullivan to port, Waggoner to starboard — and begin to cull, or sort, the oysters.

Legal size oysters — 3 inches or better — are tossed behind them toward the bow of the boat. Questionable oysters are pushed to the side and measured later. Dead oysters, called "boxes," and shells and rocks are swept overboard.

It's a hurried, but not frantic, pace — a routine that's been perfected with practice.

(See HILDA, Page A11)

Skipjack fleet dwindles to a handful of boats

By PAMELA WOOD
Staff Writer

A century ago, hundreds of skipjacks plied the Chesapeake Bay, sailing her waters and dragging dredges in search of oysters so lucrative they were called Chesapeake Gold.

With their distinctive shallow draft and two-sail rig, skipjacks were a unique — and iconic — workboat of the Chesapeake Bay.

Now there are believed to be six working skipjacks left in Maryland. And just four have reported catching oysters so far this season:

Hilda M. Willing.

Thomas Clyde.

Fannie L. Daugherty.

Somerset.

The skipjacks are victims as much of the changing times as the dwindling oyster populations. It just doesn't make much sense these days to sail big, wooden sailboats to catch fewer and fewer oysters.

There are perhaps a couple dozen skipjacks on the bay, though most are owned by nonprofit ventures and museums or used as pleasure boats or for charter cruising trips.

"It's been slipping every year for the last hundred at least," said Christopher White, author of "Skipjack: The Story of America's Last Sailing Oystermen." "I'm actually surprised these six men working today are still out there dredging. I would have predicted they would have not made it this long. It just goes to show you how much grit and tenacity they have to keep working."

White spent time with skipjack captains in the 1990s, working on the boats and chronicling the dying way of life for his book, which was published in 2009.

He recalls being very aware that he was documenting the end of an era while he was doing his research.

In only a few years, many expect the last few skipjacks to be retired from oystering completely.

Capt. Barry Sweitzer of the *Hilda M. Willing*, for example, has an eye toward retirement and selling his skipjack to a museum.

Capt. Lawrence Murphy of the *Thomas Clyde* is considering eventually switching to charter tours on his skipjack.

Capt. Art Daniels of the *City of Crisfield* — the last waterman to regularly use sails while dredging — turns 90 later this year.

When all the captains eventually give up oystering, it will mark the end of the last fishing fleet in America that works under sail.

Already gone are the bugeyes, schooners and sloops that preceded the skipjacks.

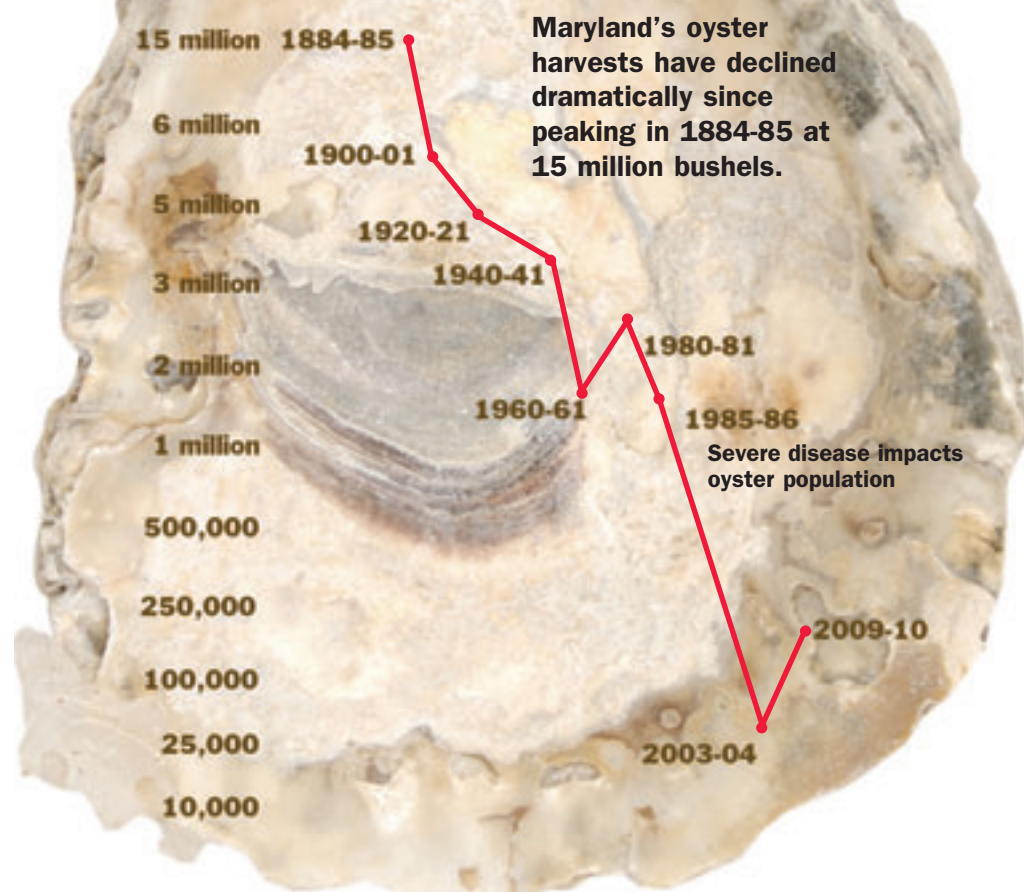
Skipjacks were developed in the late 1800s, after Maryland legalized sail dredging in 1865.

Dredging was first restricted to the deep waters of the bay's main stem. But as those beds were depleted, oystermen turned to the rivers, where they needed boats that could operate in shallower waters.

Thus, the cheaper, shallow-draft, two-sail skipjack — also called a "bateau" at the time — was born.

The first true skipjack may have been the *Ruby G. Ford*, built in 1891 in Crisfield,

When oysters were king



Source: Department of Natural Resources

wrote Pat Vojtech in her 1993 book, "Chesapeake Bay Skipjacks."

"The skipjack may not have been as big or as seaworthy as its forerunners, but when it started to be built in earnest in 1896, it had some definite advantages over the dredge boats of the time. Its flat or V-bottom hull and broad beam meant its draft was only two to four feet, so it could dredge in shallower water," Vojtech wrote.

"This was a real plus since many oyster bars in deeper waters had become depleted by the 1890s. With the introduction of the shallow-draft skipjack, oyster bars in shoal waters were now reachable with dredges."

The glory days

The fate of the skipjacks is forever tied with the fate of the Chesapeake Bay's oysters.

The skipjacks' first few years were the glory days for oysters, with the state's annual harvest topping 10 million bushels year after year.

Those harvests, however, were not sustainable. Too many oysters were being caught and the population couldn't replenish itself.

Then came a second hit to oysters: disease. While overharvesting started the slide, the parasites MSX and Dermo caused oyster populations to plummet further.

"Those parasites together are a double whammy. I don't know if the oysters can come back from that," Vojtech said in an interview.

By the mid-1980s, the annual harvest dipped below 1 million bushels per year as the parasites ravaged the oyster population.

Last winter's harvest was 185,245 bushels, according to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

SKIPJACK SURVIVORS

Six skipjacks are believed to still harvest oysters in the Chesapeake Bay, although only four have filed monthly harvest reports with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources this season.

• *Hilda M. Willing*: Built 1905 at Oriole, owned by Barry Sweitzer since 2001. Harvested 946 bushels so far.

• *Thomas Clyde*: Built 1911 at Oriole, owned by Lawrence Murphy since 1992. Harvested 1,070 bushels so far.

• *Fannie L. Daugherty*: Built 1904 at Crisfield, by Jim Daugherty, owned by Delmas Benton since 1991. Harvested 1,562 bushels so far.

• *Somerset*: Built 1949 at Reedville, Va., by C.H. Rice, owned by Walton Benton since 1977. Harvested 1,388 bushels so far.

• *City of Crisfield*: Built 1949 at Reedville, Va., by C.H. Rice, owned by Art Daniels since 1950s. No harvest reported, but he's believed to be the only captain still dredging under sail.

• *H.M. Krentz*: Built 1955 at Harryhogan, Va., by Herman Krentz, owned by Edward Farley since 1990. No harvest reported this year.

Sources: Maryland Department of Natural Resources; "Chesapeake Bay Skipjacks" by Pat Vojtech; Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum; Capt. Barry Sweitzer; Christopher White.

State scientists study the parasites carefully and say there are signs oysters may be building some resistance. But it's a faint hope for a population that's now just 1 to 2 percent of historic levels.

Add to the disease and the small harvests the fact that the remaining skipjacks are old and expensive to maintain, and things don't look good for America's last sailing fishing fleet. A few years ago, a program was set up to repair skipjacks at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels. But the money dried up after only a few skipjacks.

Take up the cause

White, the book author, wishes someone would take up the cause of skipjacks, and perhaps start a new skipjack repair program. Funds could come from a new checkoff for donations on tax returns.

Another idea he has is to establish a marketing campaign to promote skipjack-caught oysters.

"I think that there's a great value in the skipjack fleet," White said. "It's a symbol of Maryland and yet it hasn't been capitalized on very well to the advantage of the state or to the watermen."

Come Nov. 1, White will travel from his home in New Mexico back to Maryland to crew on a skipjack on the opening day of the season. He wants to be sure next winter to sail dredge with Daniels on the *City of Crisfield*.

"One of these days, Art is going to put up his sails for the last time," White said. "And that's probably going to be the last time sails are used in harvesting seafood. ... It's hard to believe it's going to be totally gone."

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HILDA

(Continued from Page A10)

When the culling is done, each crew member reports his total to the captain: 19, 34, 60.

The number of legal oysters caught during each "lick," or pass of the dredge, indicates how well the crew is doing.

An average of 50 oysters per lick will translate to 50 bushels by day's end.

On this day, late in the season in February, Sweitzer is hoping for 40 or 50 bushels.

Skipjacks are allowed 150 bushels per day, the most allowed of any type of oystering boat.

Hauling 150 bushels in a day is rare. At the beginning of the season in November, Sweitzer was getting about 100 bushels.

That requires a larger crew — four or five helpers — which cuts into the bottom line.

As the harvest dwindles over the course of the winter, Sweitzer has to cut crew members. By the end of the season, it's just Sullivan and Waggoner, two hard-working favorites of the captain.

Sullivan, 23, is in his second year on the *Hilda M. Willing*. The more talkative of the two, he's in charge of the galley.

Waggoner, 25, is in his fifth year and runs deck operations.

Both crewmen are strapping young guys from Middle River and attended Kenwood High School a few years apart. In the summer, each has his own boat for crab potting.

Like their boss, both grew up on the water. Sullivan comes from a family of watermen and inherited this license from his grandfather. He remembers playing with GI Joes on the deck as a youngster.

Waggoner tagged along with a waterman neighbor as a kid.

While crabbing is their true passion — they engage in friendly trash-talking all day long about who is the better crabber — they love oystering, too.

The reason for working on the



By Pamela Wood — The Capital

Crew member Kelly Sullivan culls oysters on the deck of the *Hilda M. Willing*. While skipjacks are allowed to harvest up to 150 bushels per day, on this day, the catch was just 33 bushels.

skipjack, rather than work for themselves oystering on a small boat, is simple: money.

"We do a week's pay in two days. The other days, we work on our crab pots," Waggoner says.

'Not a bonanza'

These days, the skipjacks usually only work two days per week.

They are, of course, sailboats. But since 1966, captains have been allowed to add small push boats to the stern of the skipjack.

These push boats, or yawl boats, are barely boats in the sense that most people imagine. They're basically big motors surrounded by a boat frame.

The state allows skipjack captains to operate under power of the push boats, instead of under sail, two days per week.

Sailing and dredging on a skipjack is difficult work — so difficult that it's rarely, if ever, done anymore.

Sweitzer says he'll sometimes raise the sails coming into or out of the docks. But he never dredges with the sails.

For one, it requires more crew members to man the sails as well as the dredges. And constantly tacking back and forth means the dredges aren't in the water as much.

"Sail dredging's pretty obsolete," Sweitzer says.

For some working skipjacks, the only time their sails are raised is during Labor Day weekend skipjack races at Deal Island in Somerset County. Sweitzer doesn't participate, for fear of damaging the *Hilda M. Willing* too close to the start of oystering season on Nov. 1.

Despite working only two days per week, the economics work out OK for the captain and crew of a skipjack.

On the *Hilda M. Willing*, Sweitzer keeps 50 percent of the money from the day's catch and

gives the other 50 percent to the crew to split amongst themselves.

Other captains give only one-third to the crew, and Sullivan and Waggoner appreciate Sweitzer's generosity.

Out of his 50 percent, Sweitzer pays for everything it takes to run the boat for a day: \$20 to \$30 for food (fried egg and sausage sandwiches for breakfast, hot dogs and Doritos for lunch) as well as \$130 to \$150 for 40 gallons of gas for the motors.

"The first four bushels go to fuel," he says.

By the time it all shakes out, Sweitzer says he ends up with a decent day's pay.

Sullivan and Waggoner make enough to allow them to spend the other days of the week fixing up their crab pots and preparing for the April 1 start of crabbing season.

"It's not a bonanza," Sweitzer says. "This time of year, you make a day's wage and that's it."

Retirement plans

There was a time when watermen could do very well for themselves on skipjacks. But no longer.

That's why, Sweitzer says, so few are left. By his count, just six watermen are oystering on skipjacks in the Chesapeake Bay this year. The state only has records of four watermen harvesting on skipjacks. "The glory days are in the history books," he says. "If there was glory, everybody would be doing it."

And though Sweitzer stays afloat, he's not going to captain the skipjack indefinitely.

At 49, he's the youngest of the remaining skipjack captains. Once he retires from the police force in a few years, he plans to move back to the Eastern Shore, give up oystering and work as a crabber.

He hopes to sell the *Hilda M. Willing* to the fledgling Tilghman Watermen's Museum so she can be preserved and appreciated.

"It will be very sad," Sweitzer says of eventually giving up the skipjack. "It's been part of my family, part of my life. Sixty-three years in my family."

Sweitzer won't sell the *Hilda M. Willing* to another captain who might run it into the ground or let it rot in a marsh. He'd sooner saw her up and throw the pieces in a Dumpster than do that.

For now, though, he's dedicated to oystering.

On this recent day, Sweitzer skips around to a few different spots at the mouth of the Patapsco River, giving bars such as Mountain Bar and Belvedere Shoals one last try for the season.

Back at the Deep Creek dock at the end of the day, Sullivan and Waggoner load up oysters to be sold to a seafood wholesaler from Virginia.

The tally doesn't end too well — 33 bushels instead of the 50 they had hoped for.

Sweitzer shrugs. "Tomorrow's another day."

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