Of Songs and Oysters on the Eastern Shore

by John Townley, Historical Music Interpreter
Photographs by John Townley

Except for the use of gas and electricity, the oyster plant could be straight out of the nineteenth century.

The blustery beginnings of a winter Northeaster beat on the station wagon as the group of researchers from The Mariners' Museum headed onto the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel bound for Willis Wharf to seek out and record the singing oyster shuckers of the Eastern Shore. We had heard that the work songs of the oyster houses, thought to be vanished, still survived among the employees of H. M. Terry Company, planters and packers of Sewansecott Oysters. Wec Terry's is a family business that goes back generations.

As we reached the midway point on the bridge, the fog closed in and the rain came down in sheets—and we noticed the fuel gauge read empty, which gave small assurance of our getting there at all. Suddenly a guided missile cruiser loomed out of the fog, hardly a few hundred yards away, and then was swallowed up in the storm again. I mused that we might be entering a misty time warp that would find us (if our fuel held out) in another century, another world. . . .

My storm-bred reveries turned out to be prophetic, for as we bumped down a dirt road to the waters at Willis Wharf, the scene we encountered could have been pulled from a nineteenth century etching, with the exception of an occasional automotive anachronism. The aging wooden oyster house with its odd trapezoidal swinging doors was surely nothing this century had produced. Had we stepped off a steamboat during the years of Reconstruction, the scene wouldn't have looked much different.

It was only when we got inside and met Wec Terry and the rest of the company's management that the present seemed to return: they were all Virginia Tech graduates, with pennants on the wall to prove it, and cheerfully welcomed us in from the rain and chill. The office had electric lights and a phone—but that was about as modern as things got.

Wec took us into the shucking room where about thirty shuckers, mostly in their forties or older, lined long tables with piles of oysters on them and oyster shells strewn all about. Each shucker stood on a small, slightly elevated stand in front of the table, opening the shellfish with quick, skilled slices of an oyster knife and dumping the contents into two shiny steel containers—one for regular size oysters, and one for the nice fat ones (called specials or selects, in the trade). The room was filled

with the deafening din of knives smacking about, piles of shells being dumped from or loaded into wheelbarrows, and cackling conversation.

Once a steel container gets filled, it gets taken to the next room where it is dumped into one of two rinsing vats (one for each size of oyster) where aerated water is pumped into the oysters to clean and oxygenate them before packing them into traveling containers. It's a process that has changed little over the last hundred years or so—there just isn't any better way to do this, despite the wonders of modern factory technology. Picking crabs, the other ancient Chesapeake seafood profession, is much the same. It takes human judgement and skill that a machine just can't seem to replicate. Remember, the next time you bite into a really big, juicy oyster—it's there because someone *decided* it was big and juicy enough for you to feel that way about it and guided it your way . .

But about the songs. . . Wec introduced us to foreman James H. Bunting, a shucker with more than thirty years of experience, who greeted us with a warm smile and a hearty handshake. "These are the folks who've come to hear the songs," Wec explained. James, obligingly, turned immediately to the noisy room full of busy shuckers and announced that we were here to hear the songs they sing, and that I would forthwith explain the reasons for it.

This was not an auspicious beginning. The absolute *last* thing a musical historian should do to coax what are essentially private song traditions out of people is to put them on the spot to perform. After some awkward moments, James good-naturedly began encouraging the shuckers to start up with a hymn, greeted by a mixture of sullen stares and teasing catcalls. They'd start it up, if at all, when they were good and ready. Sensing my intrusion, I retreated to the bench to join several younger vat loaders who sat highly amused by the goings-on.

James would not take "no" for an answer, and promptly launched into singing "Because He Lives." For a few perilous moments, it seemed this was going to be an embarrassing solo, but somehow the familiar melody called on its roots and a soft humming arose from here and there around the oyster house. Gradually, as the next verse began, it swelled into an audible chorus. However reluctant the choir, it was clear that somehow the song itself was not to be denied. After another verse, James stopped singing altogether, and the song carried forth with a life of its own: a low bass rumbling from one corner, a high harmony suddenly rising from the opposite corner of the room. It was filled with rough

Novella James separates the regulars from the larger specials, each to its own stainless steel container.

Foreman James H. Bunting flashes a smile as he recalls the songs of the old days.

majesty, but tenuous; not a revival meeting shout, but more like a swelling memory.

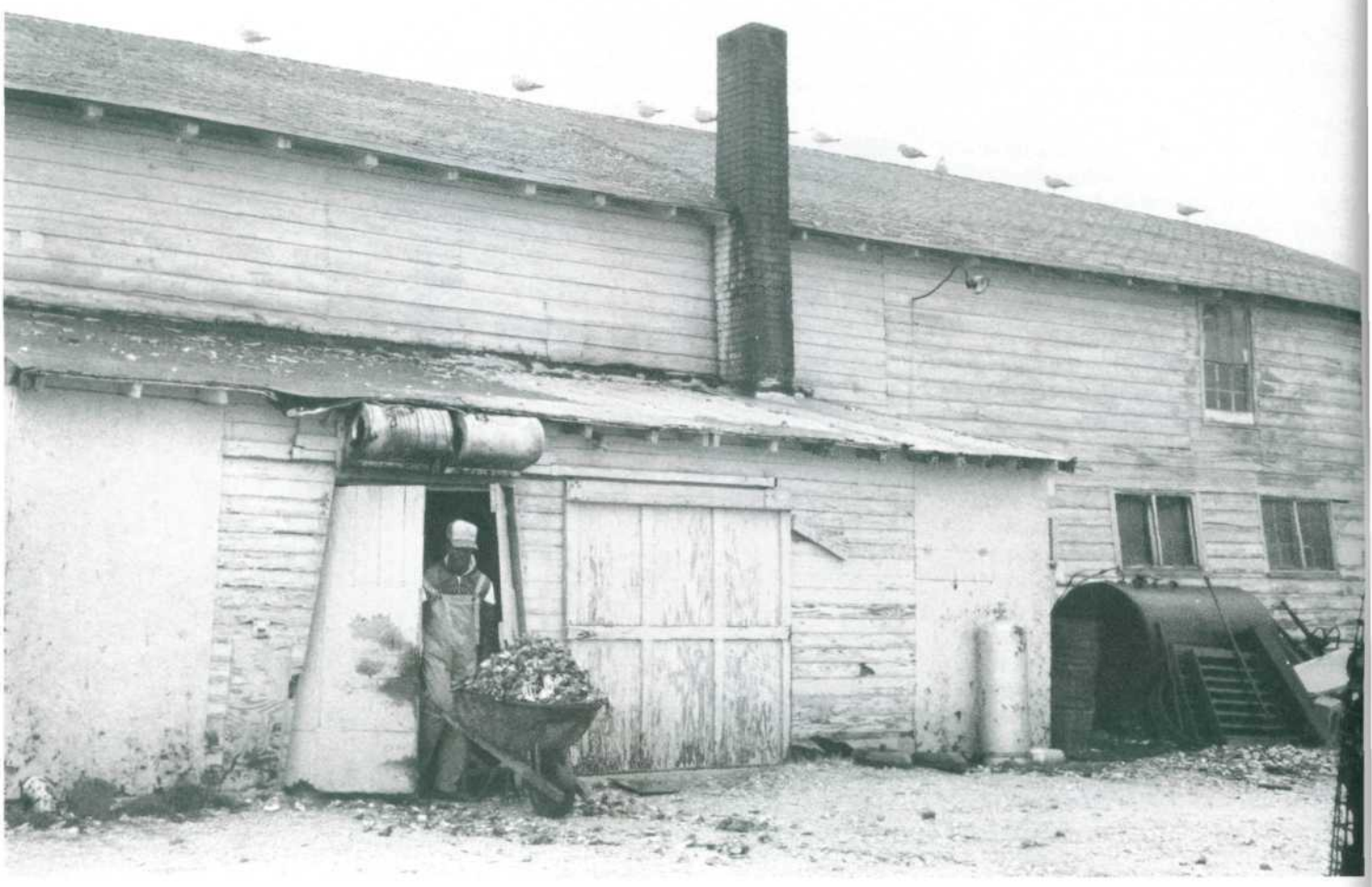
Now that the music had taken hold, I cautiously made my way across the room and asked shucker Alice Kellum if this was the kind of song they had always sung here. "No, that's a new one," she replied, not setting down her knife. "Back in my grandparents' day they sang 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' and all of the old ones, back when they didn't have nothing to do but walk to work." She allowed as how they didn't much sing the good old songs anymore, but mostly just new hymns they'd recently learned in church.

James Bunting confirmed her story. "They used to sing old hymns like 'Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross,' 'Pass Me Not O Gentle Savior,' 'I'm On The Battlefield For My Lord,' and 'There's A Fountain Filled With Blood.' But now mostly just the choir sings them in church, those ones that have been revived or renewed. They don't sing them real old timey songs like they did way back in my mother's time," he said.

Not only don't they sing the old songs much anymore, they don't sing much, period. "They used to do a lot of singin' down here years back," James explained, "but they don't do it much now. Just occasionally they'll strike up a piece." And why? James shook his head. "We're just livin' in a different age is the best way I can put it. The young generation is not like the old generation way back," he said.

It's not just the songs that are dying out, it's the whole culture. The younger generation sees better-paying jobs than shucking in their futures, particularly if they leave the area for more metropolitan climates, an exodus breaking a tradition more than a century old of staying put. Most of the shuckers come from families that have been on the Eastern Shore as long as they can recall. How far back does James go? "My folks go way back. In the beginning they came from across the sea," he said wistfully. "They were brought here way back. Most families have been here all their life, but a lot have left here because this is not the kind of work they want to do. When this generation grows old, the oyster business is going to be over with, because the young people's not takin' it up. Nobody much under thirty is shuckin' anymore," he reported.

Well, come next generation, somebody (or something) is going to be shucking because the world is not ready to give up eating oysters. But the culture that has been providing us with shellfish to the tune of the old hymns will not be among them. Next year, the shuckers will move into a brand new factory across the street, all steel and cement. The same shuckers will be hired, says Wec—in fact the Terry family has always treated their employees



Marshall Fisher trundles another load of oyster shells through the shucking plant's unique trapezoidal door.

like a family, a fine (and now too rare) antebellum tradition that survived Reconstruction. But these are the last of the family of employees. In Lively, Mexican crab pickers are being imported because there's no one left at home who'll learn the necessary skills. Likewise, on the Eastern Shore, the handwriting is on the wall and the time is not long. . . .

As we exited the strange, trapezoidal door, briefly holding it open for Marshall Fisher to roll through a wheelbarrow full of shells, we were followed by the strains of "Everlasting Love." We had witnessed a passing, and we left with a song of what remains. ■

Left: Mary Watson enjoys a chuckle as shuckers banter at their work.

Below: Mary Burton's dexterous hands perform an age-old skill—one that is rapidly vanishing on the Eastern Shore.