

BRAVING THE SEAS FOR SCALLOPS

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Dredging for sea scallops is one of the most demanding and dangerous kinds of fishing. Once an offshore bed is located, work continues round the clock.

ANNA FLYNN/PICTURE GROUP

By William McGowan

It was about midnight. The seas on Georges Bank, 100 miles off the New England coast, were running eight feet and building. It was hard to stand on deck let alone work on it.

We had just found a rich scallop bed, and, unwilling to give in to the gale bearing down on us, our skipper announced that we would "wait for the last gun" before heading back to Nantucket.

"Henry's taking a big

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chance out here," hissed Sam, a 21-year-old from Utah, who was making his third trip aboard the Noba-deer, ranking him with half our eight-man crew in terms of experience. "This isn't fun and games anymore," he said.

It did not help to recall Henry's tongue-in-cheek reply to a question about the seaworthiness of the lifeboat. "Lifeboat?" the skipper had growled. "That lifeboat's not worth a tinker's damn, boy. If we go down, you might as well go grab an anchor — and grease it, too!"

Behind the winch, Sam guided the starboard dredge slowly out of the water. It looked like a 10-foot-long rusted iron rake with a colos-

sal chain-mail purse attached underneath. High overhead, the dredge skittered like a kite, though it was the weight of a truck. It is difficult enough to bring the dredge aboard even in calm seas. Now, with the decks bucking, a slip-up anywhere in the operation could send the load crashing down on the skull of the deckhand who was maneuvering beneath it, waiting to make the hookup necessary for unloading the catch. Suddenly a wave knocked the deckhand on his face. Frantic, he wriggled out from under the dredge just as it smashed onto the deck. Unfazed, he leaped on it to complete the hookup. "All our mothers raised fools," Sam shouted from behind the winch.

As the dredge was emptied, a harvest of sea bottom cascaded onto the deck — huge boulders, sea creatures of every description and hundreds of scallops, some with shells the size of catchers' mitts — the skipper came out of the wheelhouse and climbed down to the deck. "O.K., you swabs, give her hell. Don't stop," he yelled, his belly a quiver. "We're catching some scallops now, boys. They're as big as pie plates. Finest kind, boys, pie plates."

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Life at sea may have changed a lot since the days of whaling on old Nantucket. Yet it is still a taut, elemental world with laws and language

of its own, a world where life is lived close to the bone and men take risks in search of daily bread. Three years ago, while living on Nantucket, I began to badger Henry Wasierski, then the skipper of the Sankaty, for a "site" on his boat. I had just got out of college. I was bored, broke and had all the basic romantic urges that a lifetime of reading sea stories and

watching Old Spice commercials provides. Beyond that, my motives for wanting to go offshore were vague but strong. Mainly, I was just crazy to go to sea and wanted to live inside a subculture few people get to know.

I finally got my first chance to go to sea for scallops in 1979. Sea-scalloping boats were looking for hands because it was November, the month

the bay-scallop season opens and many of the experienced natives on the island leave sea scalloping and move inshore to calmer waters, where they fish for bay scallops in their own small boats. Found close to shore, bay-scallop beds can be harvested with relative ease during a season that runs from November through March, in what is quite a

profitable cottage industry for Nantucketers. More highly prized than sea scallops for their small, tender meat, bay scallops can also fetch a higher price.

Sea scalloping, by contrast, is heavy industry. It takes place far offshore in specially equipped boats and calls for fishermen to work in harrowing conditions; it is considered one of the most demanding forms of commercial fishing. To be at sea in a small boat in winter is, indeed, to understand what Nantucketers mean when they speak of blue-cold winds so fierce "it takes two men to hold one man's hair down."

Sea scalloping doesn't require experience on the water as much as a strong back and an iron constitution. The work is grueling, continuing around the clock, once a scallop bed is located. The crew does duty every six hours for up to 10 days at a time, with a new avalanche of sea bottom to be sifted through every 20 minutes.

And, though the scalloping boats in New England's harbors have romantic names — Dauntless, Blue Sea, Western Ocean — conditions on them are frequently wretched. In a few years' time, after he has cut his teeth, a scalloper will usually try to get on a lobster or cod boat, where the work is easier and he doesn't have to worry about falling dredges all the time.

Those who have stayed with sea scalloping have had more problems to contend with recently than danger, as hard times have hit the New England industry. In the late 1970's, with the demand for sea scallops high, a kind of gold rush hit the northern near-shore beds and they were depleted rapidly. Sea scallops need seven years to mature, so other fishing grounds had to be found.

Sea scallopers must now head farther out into the ocean, expending more on food and fuel and risking the heavier seas and other hazards of the open ocean. Many boats now work Georges Bank, a fertile fishing ground east of the Massachusetts coast. It takes the average vessel one full day to reach Georges Bank, a trip Henry Wasierski refers to as "40 forevers."

Traveling such distances in small boats makes mishaps more common. Last year, a rogue hurricane with gigantic swells and winds screaming at over 100 knots caught several boats by surprise, splitting open the hull of one. The only surviving crewman spent three days in a lifeboat before being rescued.

Still, fishermen continue to challenge these hostile waters, some with arrogance, others with fatalism. "Some of these guys think they're smarter than the ocean," says Jackie Wilson, skipper of the New Bedford-based Avatar, as he waits out a "blow" in a Nantucket grog shop. "But it's only a matter of time. It's like the old saying: 'You can pay me now, or you can pay me later, but you will pay me.'"

Nantucket's fishing culture goes largely unnoticed by the casual visitor, since tourism has long taken over as the island's primary industry. There is now only one boat in the is-

land's sea-scalloping fleet — the Nobadeer. But as much as fishing has diminished as a source of livelihood, it is still Nantucket's soul, and it provides a chance for native sons, real and adopted, to carry on a tradition. Their tattoos and leather jackets may make them look more like a waterborne motorcycle gang than the heirs of God-fearing whalers, yet the sea is theirs, and "offshore therapy," as fishermen call it, is a popular way to fight island fever.

Sea scalloping on Nantucket is not really representative of the whole industry. Because Nantucketers can work lucrative land jobs associated with tourism, the economic incentives for sea scalloping are not as high as they are at New Bedford, Mass., and other coastal towns where fishermen do not have other jobs to fall back on. Turnover on Nantucket boats is higher than it is on boats coming from other sea-scalloping ports. Crews are younger and less experienced, especially during the winter months, when there may be only one or two experienced hands on board.

Last fall, I went back to sea scalloping with Henry — then skipper of the Nobadeer — once more to revel in the hard work and raw living of that peculiarly American tradition.

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Access to Nantucket's fishing community is not won easily. Considerable beer drinking is required, as well as a certain tolerance for tales of derring-do and disaster. Fishermen delight in working over a novice with woolly tales of blood and violence, but, perversely, perhaps, their bluster almost brightens the allure.

Henry Wasierski tells of a sea scalloper who was accidentally killed by a dredge and kept on ice in the hold while the crew continued to fish for a week before going home. Skipper Ed Backus, another career offshoreman, tells of a crewman who refused to work after three days at sea. Backus says he put the man in the ship's lifeboat "with one blanket and a peanut-butter sandwich." Backus gives a Captain Bligh laugh. "Two days later, he was ready to work again."

Yarns like these are not altogether farfetched. In April 1982, a captain of a Providence, R.I., sea scalloper was convicted of "cruelty to seamen" under a statute on the books since 1898. The captain had imprisoned five of his crew in the ship's hold and

dunked another overboard after threatening him with a gun, supposedly because the crew hadn't worked fast enough on trips to Georges Bank in the spring of 1981.

Beneath the *machismo* and the seafaring bravado, however, most fishermen have a clear sense of just how small they are when pitted against the great, wide sea. They wait impatiently in town for repairs to be made or for heavy weather to pass. But the start of a trip always kindles ambiguous feelings, and, as sailing time nears, omens loom large. Just before the Nobadeer sailed last fall, the boat's cook slashed his leg with a knife while attempting to shoo off a bee. After being stitched up in the hospital, the cook reported that the Nantucket police had listed the incident as "attempted suicide." He found the interpretation hilarious, but the rest of the crew was spooked. A few considered him a jinx and wanted to leave him behind, even though he had had only five stitches.

If their tall tales and shore-going antics aren't daunting enough for a would-be scalloper, their sailing ceremonies, or what passes for them, would make even the most gung-ho a bit wary.

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The Nobadeer sits on the wharf, ready to sail with a midnight tide. Her wooden hull measures 75 feet from bow to stern, with a beam 17 feet across — medium size for a sea scalloper, but the Nobadeer is known to be a good sea boat. Her floodlights shine brightly in the late-autumn gloom. The air is still; a fog beacon bleats in the distance.

At midship lie the dredges, one for the starboard side, one for port, orange with rust except where repairs have left new steel and fresh solderings. For now, the dredges look serene, but when the fishing is going full bore, the dredges will buck and sway balefully, sending dread into the heart of any hand under them.

Raucous noises issue from below deck. Since the crewmen will not touch a drop of liquor during their time offshore — it is understood that it is too dangerous out there to risk the loss of even a split second of reflex time — they have made up for it by indulging in advance. A van pulls up next to the pier. Three men pile out loudly while another staggers out of the fo'c's'le, barking hoarsely, "Get your sea bags, you're going. Get your sea bags now." The

skipper arrives with his wife and says to somebody, "Get up to that bar and get the other guys, fast."

Someone is still working on the engine. The engineer and Henry step off the boat and pull a spring out of an old Rambler parked nearby. The engineer goes below again; the engine fires up soon afterward. "That's what Yankee ingenuity is, boys," says Henry. "Only a Nantucketer can do that. I just hope that spring from Michael's car is tempered and doesn't melt halfway to hell now."

As we catch the tide and move slowly into the dark, the man is still growling: "Get your sea bags. You're going." Another moans in the sick green glow of the wheelhouse. "This is my last trip. I'm too old for this kind of living."

The accommodations aboard the Nobadeer, as on most sea scallopers, are primitive. The fo'c's'le, where the crew eats and sleeps, has all the atmosphere of a slave galley and is lighted by a bare, ever-swinging bulb. The bunks are arranged in tiers, four to a side, with about six inches clearance between the nose of one man and the bottom of the bunk above him. Rolling over is a major production. Boots, slickers, empty cigarette cartons and old melon rinds seem to litter the floor immediately.

A hand-drawn skull and crossbones with the words "Kill Scallops" written on it adorns the galley. Behind the table is the ship's library: one Playboy magazine and a well-thumbed copy of "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas." In the pilot house hangs a sign reading, "Be careful. Fingers don't grow back," with a suggestion that skeptics ask any of several fingerless fishermen who once crewed for Henry. Scribbled over the fo'c's'le hatchcover is "Arbeit Macht Frei" — German for "Work will set you free" — the inscription above the gate of Auschwitz.

The place already reeks of wet wool and sweat, and after a few days out the stench will be laced with the odor of fish mixed with the fumes of diesel fuel. There are no showers and hardly anyone uses a toothbrush or changes underwear. "What is it, hallelujah week or something?" Henry will yell, as he sprays everyone's feet with air freshener.

Eight men will share this space: the captain, first mate, engineer, cook, two winchmen and two deck-

hands. As salty and seawise as every one of them looks, only half of the crew are born watermen — natives of Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard or fishing towns on the mainland. The other four are a mixed bag of college kids and members of Nantucket's permanent population of young drifters.

The tension between those to-the-water-born and those playing the part has its lighter moments. The cook gives me a withering look one day when I challenge him about his dumping the ship's garbage over the side. When some of the crew started pitching rocks at the gulls that constantly followed the boat, I recited the lines about the albatross from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," but no one knew what I was talking about, and they kept on trying to peg a "sky rat," as fishermen call them.

Henry, who, in his 12 years of fishing, has broken in many a hand, delights in telling a story about the trip two summers ago when he took on two college kids as cooks. The hitch was that they were vegetarians bent on converting the crew. (Most scallopers eat a lot of meat. Fish is eaten less often than expected; scallops only rarely.) "These guys," Henry growls, "they brought lentils. And these little red potatoes. Looked just like meat. And that tofu stuff or whatever you call it — yuck!"



Serious business begins on the Nobadeer about 12 hours later, as we approach the scalloping grounds. Sophisticated distance and depth-measuring gear helps the skipper locate scallops on the floor of the sea, but even the most clairvoyant equipment and meticulous chart-keeping can't match the sixth sense that a skipper develops over time. Some captains trade tips on hot spots over the radio, but Henry pays no attention. "Lies, that's all they're telling," he says. "If they were catching any fish, they wouldn't be wasting time on the horn, that's for sure."

When Henry feels we are in a good spot, he or the first mate orders one of the dredges to be dropped. Depending upon the boat's distance offshore, the dredge will sink to depths ranging from roughly 150 to 300 feet. As the dredge is pulled along the ocean bottom, its cutting edge scrapes everything in its path into the bag that trails behind it. In essence, it strip

mines the ocean floor. Once a rich bed has been found, the boat will cross over it methodically, again and again, like a wheat thresher.

When the dredge is hoisted and emptied, all hands on watch cull through the mounds of stone and fish, digging out scallops. This is rough on the hands, which turn hard as boards with caluses after a few days, despite gloves. The scallops are carried in bushel baskets to the stern, where they are cut open. Their meat is packed into white linen sacks holding 40 pounds apiece, which are then put on ice in the hold; the shells and guts are returned to the sea. One opens a scallop with a series of three quick flicks of a shucking knife, a five-inch, heavy-handled instrument. During a hard watch, one can cut up to 300 scallops in an hour, work that makes the wrists swell the size of fire hoses.

The ton or more of rocks that surface when the dredge is brought up again — a "haulback" — are shoveled, kicked, thrown, pushed overboard through scupper holes in the rails. As a new pile arrives every 20 minutes, clearing the deck is a Sisyphean task. "We're going to a rock concert tonight, boys. It's the rolling stones," shouts Henry, seeing us up to our hips in boulders.

Some odd things come up from the deep. A wide-mouthed fish they call monkfish — an ancient species resembling a monster tadpole — are common, as are flounder and cod; these are usually kept and make up "shack," which the crewmen can sell on their own in port. Skatefish the size of armchairs with blank white eyes, starfish, crabs and freckled deep-sea lobsters all come up regularly. In areas where subterranean oil squirts through the sea bottom, brightly colored rocks will make their way to the deck along with the marine life. We kept a pile of them for a few days to correct a list.

The Nobadeer has also dredged up some real relics: a fossilized sea scallop that scientists at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution estimate to be 6 million to 23 million years old, evidence suggesting that Georges Bank was Georges island during the last ice age. The Nobadeer has also landed Pepsi cans from the 1950's and a few dozen scallops that had pearls inside them. Other boats have brought up depth charges, torpedoes and bombs from World War II,

lost during naval training exercises. "I recall," says K. O. Emery, a retired oceanographer from Woods Hole, "when the Navy used to run ads in the paper: 'Bring back our lost torpedoes and we'll give you \$10.'" One hand on the Nobadeer says that he remembers hauling up a life raft and a drowned man from a ship gone under.

The odors of the haul are formidable, even with all the fresh air in the world whipping by your nose. As much as the sea floor is abundant with life it is also the site of constant decomposition. A haul from an area of heavy decay can smell putrid enough to send a crewman or two to the rails, heaving, especially if heavy seas have made them a bit seasick already.

The rhythms of a watch are relentless. Six hours on, six hours off, round the clock, day after day. There's no time to waste — the longer the dredges stay out of the water, the less money is made. After a few watches, the murderous pace changes the quickest stepper into a sleepwalker.

The monotony is insufferable. Work and sleep, sleep and work, through mind-dulling rounds of bending and stooping, hookups and haulbacks. It's no wonder that old sea diaries have such huge gaps between entries. "April 3, 1842: wind, 20 knots. . . ." "June 11, 1842: wind 20 knots. Potatoes for dinner."

Sometimes the boredom leads to distraction. One night as I was coming up on deck to begin a watch, I squinted into the glare of the spotlights to see half the crew laughing like hyenas as they danced around in a circle imitating the death throes of the monkfish twitching at their feet. It was an eerie sight, a Neptune dance of the northern waters.

The work can make the nerves sing, but the stress rubs them raw, and sleep does not always relieve the strain. One hand has a recurring nightmare in which he is working furiously up on deck. In the dream he feels the end of his watch approach happily just as it's time to rouse and begin the real thing.

On a boat with such a narrow beam, it is impossible to give someone a wide berth. "You either sand off the rough edges or someone will pound them down for you," says Sam. After a time, spirits get mean and fists are often flashed. One night I saw a winchman heave a monkey wrench at his hook-up man.

"Eight guys can't agree on anything out here," says one fisherman. "Is it red? No, it's green. No, it's brown — like that."

Pecking orders take shape fast. Egos eat egos, in both subtle and obvious forms of intimidation. Generally, crewmen bait each other for sport, but sometimes the edge gets nasty. Three days into the trip, Henry and the first mate were at odds, presumably because the first mate continually bagged more scallops on his watch than Henry did on his. Things grew bitter. The crew, which had taken a dislike to the man, began tormenting the first mate, too. "I tried dropping the dredge on him," says one seaman casually, "but it didn't work."

For a while, the engineer thought the skipper was trying to kill him, convinced he had been chosen as a blood sacrifice. "Watch him, just watch him. Every few days, he'll try to kill someone with that dredge," he whispered. "It's almost like he has to. You better watch out or he'll try to kill you, too."

It's not all paranoia, of course. The punishing toil brings an intense feeling of clarity and a sense of release. Fiery dawns stretch into sapphire skies. Continents of scudding clouds form maps of imaginary kingdoms. It's hard not to think that you're going to live forever when your lungs are full of free sea air and your muscles swell under salt-taut skin.

But as much as the sea gives a sense of harmony, it can also be profoundly unsettling. Even with conditions so cramped, one can feel frightfully alone. The ocean is emptiness magnified: water and sky, sky and wind. Sometimes we spot the lights of other boats twinkling on the dark horizon, lights about as reachable as stars.

If there are seas running, there is fear. Heavy seas tend to swallow men who fall overboard. "You just don't fall overboard," instructs one of the crew. "Even if you do fetch up, we'd probably never find you." Fishermen tend to buy boots two sizes too big so they can kick them off if they have to. Even if a man can swim — and many fishermen can't — heavy clothes, foul-weather gear and boots impair buoyancy, and icy waters induce shock quickly. "In 50-degree water you have a 50-50 chance of living 50 minutes," says a Coast Guard officer. While shark sightings are rare, no one

doubts that there's a Jaws swimming close by.

The ship often lurches with such finality that it feels as if we're falling off the edge of the world. During a blow, huge ramparts of water smash against our hull, shooting shivers into timbers and firing terror into everyone below. Some nights, storms rattle with such fury it sounds as if we are being shelled. The crewmen use their life jackets as pillows, just in case. The dredges pound and the engine churns constantly.

In some ways, it's hard to know what makes men come back to this kind of punishment. "It keeps me from making a fool out of myself in the bars," says one. "I'm just out here for the joy ride really," says another. A third says he does it "to get the alcohol out of my system and to work my body into maximum exhaustion." But, he concedes, there's more, too. "There's an edge you get out here that you don't get on land," he says. "Out here everything's real. Out here's the main vein. You work with peak efficiency. There's no nonsense. You can get right again."

Even in flush times, it is hard for a man to get rich on a sea scalloper. Fees are paid in "shares" based on a percentage of the total catch. The catch is sold, and then expenses for fuel and grub are taken out, along with the boat owner's 40 percent, 10 percent of which, as well as a full share, go to the captain. The rest goes to the crew in half and full shares. A good trip used to net a boat like the Nobadeer up to \$1,000 a hand. "Brokers," trips where shares amount to practically nothing, have been common recently. The price for sea scallops now stands at \$4.50 a pound, up 90 cents from last year, but still not enough to guarantee a good trip. Scallops are "shy" throughout the industry. New Bedford is the center of the business, with some 60 boats working. According to James Costakes, general manager of the New Bedford Seafood Producers Association, this year's catch through September — \$33 million — is \$8 million under last year's at the same time.



The end of our trip comes quietly on the eighth day. The port dredge was damaged by a rock on the sea bottom, and it was not fishing up to par. Our pumps were failing, making us list badly starboard. Another storm was fast approaching. In general,

everybody's staying power was fading. The crew was ready to head in, weigh up and split the booty, paltry though it be. As we steamed by the Great Round Shoal buoy, a point marking three more hours to port, Henry called his wife on the radio to tell her he was coming home.

The trip was a financial disaster. After expenses for food and fuel and the shares owed to the owner and the captain, each crewman who made a full share received \$450. Since Henry has a steadfast rule that a new man receives only half a share until he knows the operation inside and out, three of us made \$225 for nearly 10 full days at sea.

"Next time, I'll get full share," Sam said. "I can run that winch better than any right now, hang the weather, anyway. I'll show Henry I'm worth two men. No way he'll get by giving me half share next time." Another is more philosophical. "As long as I don't have to hang all over the boat and borrow money to stay drunk in the bars for two days, I'll be O.K."

After being cooped up on a 75-foot scow for more than a week, shoregoing brings tremendous release. "They know what they want, and they go right after it," says one waitress in a local fisherman's haunt. "They want women and drink, and they have a look on their faces that says they want it now."

In a few hours they are deep in a spree, a spree well earned. Their weathered faces are reddened; their manners are blunt. After looking at the raw edge of things, it seems a bit hard for them to take polite society seriously. The affairs of landmen seem fatuous by comparison, and sterile, too. The scallopers stagger around the bar, wobbly on sea legs, still expecting the pitch and roll of the sea.

His third trip behind him, Sam sits at the bar. He's happy to be back, a bit peeved with his share, but happy nonetheless. "Waited for the last gun, did you now, boy?" an old salt next to him asks. "Why not?" Sam shoots back, basking in the glory.

"You know, this is a great life," he says. "It's not much of a living, but it's a great life. There's nothing like a sea job. I'd go nuts if I had to deal with people on land all the time and couldn't get offshore. What's a little trouble, anyway? Lets you know you're alive. Be in town all the time? Take the guff of rich folks? No thanks." ■