"Patuxent Brand": The Rise and Demise of Warren Denton Seafood

By Robert J. Hurry, CMM Registrar

The oyster packing industry has a long history in the Patuxent River area, dating to the purchase by Isaac Solomon in 1865 of the island that now bears his name. Within a few years he developed a bustling packing enterprise for oysters harvested from the river and adjacent bay. As the demand for the bivalve increased, other businesses along the Patuxent River were started to process oysters. In the course of the twentieth century, at least twenty-five separate packinghouses operated on the Southern Maryland shores of the Patuxent. By the 1940s, the best-known seafood packers in Calvert County were J. C. Lore & Sons and H. M. Wooldburn & Son in Solomons, Daniel Barrett & Sons in Appeal, Sellers & Dowell on St. Leonard Creek, and Warren Denton & Co. in Broomes Island. At the beginning of this century, however, only Warren Denton remained in operation.

Warren Denton Seafood, Calvert County's last seafood packinghouse, closed its doors in 2001. For seventy-five years, the name Denton was synonymous with quality seafood. Producing the famous Patuxent Brand Oysters, three generations of the Denton family contributed to the early success of the company and provided employment to hundreds of local workers as well as a market for the catches of watermen. After the family closed the packinghouse in 1982, Norman Dorrell revived the business and continued operating under the Warren Denton Seafood name until the end of 2001.

Company records, supplemented by oral history accounts and contemporary newspaper articles, document the development and success of the seafood business while operated by the Dentons, its growth mirrored by the evolution of its packing plant that grew from just a small building to a sprawling complex. John and Warren Denton applied for their first Oyster Packers License in November 1926. Trading as Denton Brothers, they operated from a small building on Island Creek. In the spring of 1928, Ballard Rogers joined the partnership. The partners contracted in 1932 to have their own oyster house built on Broomes Island at the mouth of Island Creek at a cost of $2,541.57 in materials and labor. It was a rectangular frame building with metal gable roof, concrete foundation, and concrete floor. During its first season at the new location, the company shipped 43,256 gallons of oysters, an increase of more than 27 percent over the previous season.

The partnership suffered two setbacks in the early 1930s: failure of the only bank in Calvert County and the tidal surges associated with the devastating August 1933 hurricane that flooded the oyster house and washed out its contents. The interior of the structure had to be refinished and refurbished, but the oyster house was back in operation by mid-September. The company rebounded from these hardships. In a 1980 interview, Ballard Rogers stated: "The best years for operating a business were in the early '30s when labor was cheap, overhead was low, and there were plenty of oysters, crabs, and fish." Company records show, however, that the effects of the hurricane did have a negative impact on the company's oyster production. The company shipped 36,257 gallons of oysters during the 1933/34 season, a decrease of nearly 16 percent from the previous season.

John Denton left the partnership in 1934. Additions to the building at that time increased the workspace, and oyster sales jumped to 68,674 gallons during the 1934/35 season. Another major improvement was made to the packinghouse in 1935 with the addition of an icebox and steam-powered ice-making plant, with oyster production increasing to 92,159 gallons during the 1935/36 season and 112,409 gallons during the 1936/37 season. Oysters were packed in bulk, iced, and shipped by boat to such markets as Norfolk. In addition, the company used a refrigerated truck to ship to other markets, including Baltimore, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh. During the summer season, the business handled fish

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MUSEUM BOARD FOR 2004

At the annual dinner in early December for the members of the museum's Board of Governors, two new members were welcomed to the board: Dr. James R. Hook, formerly superintendent of the Calvert County Public Schools, and Marvin E. Oursler, builder/developer with Marwick Properties, Inc., and a resident of Lusby. They replace C. Bernard Fowler and Dawn M. Szot whose terms ended in 2003. In addition, a vacancy created by John Cook's resignation has been filled by David E. Butler, an executive with General Dynamics Advanced Information Systems of Arlington, Virginia, and a resident of Solomons. Board members who will continue in 2004 are RoxAnne Riddle Cumberland, Ralph T. Eppard Jr., Richard H. Fischer Jr., John P. Ford, Marshall S. Gibson, Marianne Harms, Michael L. Hewitt, Michael S. King, Constantine J. Pappas, Kirk L. Swain, Robert L. Swann, and Edward Gregory Wells. Calvert County Commissioner Gerald "Jerry" W. Clark is an ex officio member, as well as CMM director C. Douglass Alves Jr. A third ex officio member is Rear Admiral Timothy Heely, Commander, Naval Air Warfare Center, Aircraft Division, at the Patuxent River Naval Air Station.

Members of the museum's Board of Governors also serve as directors of the Calvert Marine Museum Society, Inc., responsible for fundraising.

CMM REACHES OUT WITH SEAHORSES

This fall, the Exhibits Department of the museum was involved in a project of several months' duration to provide fiberglass seahorses to the county schools, a joint project with Annmarie Garden. The "Seahorses by the Bay" program is part of the county's 350th anniversary celebration and is similar to animal art programs in various cities.

CMM has been collecting live seahorses from the bay for several years, where the fluctuation in their numbers serves as a barometer of the bay's health. The Estuarine Biology Department has been propagating them as well, so museum staff members are quite familiar with these unusual creatures (see the Bugeye Times for winter 2002/2003). Although the size of seahorses in the bay ranges from a few inches to under a foot, the seahorse sculptures are nearly six feet tall, allowing for much artistic creativity on the part of students. The exhibits staff created a full-scale model that was then duplicated by a Lusby boatbuilder in fiberglass designed to withstand harsh outdoor conditions. Business and private sponsors supported the cost.

In late September the museum delivered a seahorse to each public and three private schools in the county. During the winter the students in the local schools will decorate them with imaginative designs. By March or April the sculptures will be placed in parks and other public places in the county, and by the fall of 2004 they will be auctioned off on eBay to add funds to art programs in the schools.

Unloading seahorse sculpture at Dowell Elementary School.
CMM photo by Tim Scheirer

Melvin A. Conant ~ 1924-2003

The museum has lost an early and active supporter. More information will appear in the spring issue.
WATERSIDE CONCERTS WITH EDWIN MCCAIN
A BIG HIT AT CALVERT MARINE MUSEUM

Waterside 2003 continued its momentum in November with two sold-out shows by rock performer Edwin McCain on Saturday, November 15. His popular hit, “I’ll Be,” got the biggest response from the appreciative crowd, while the song, “Could Not Ask For More,” proved to be a sentimental favorite. McCain, who entertained the crowd with his jovial wit, said the song “is a wedding favorite.”

Both shows kicked off with a performance by Will Hoge. The audience got quite a surprise when the singer turned up in CMM’s Santa suit.

Waterside 2003 is sponsored by Ralph’s Dodge-Jeep; Cumberland & Erly LLC; Solomons Landing; Coors, Coors Light, Killians; RadioShack - Charlotte Hall; Prince Frederick - Dunkirk; G&H Jewelers; Holiday Inn Select Solomons; Main Message Center; Bay Weekly; 98.3 Star FM; Mom’s In The Kitchen Catering; Southern Maryland Newspapers; DM Group; SMECO; Comcast; Center; Bay Weekly; 98.3 Star FM; Mom’s In The Kitchen Catering; G&H Jewelers, Holiday Inn Select Solomons, Main Message Center; Bay Weekly; 98.3 Star FM; Mom’s In The Kitchen Catering; Southern Maryland Newspapers; DM Group; SMECO; Comcast; and Papa John’s Pizza.

CELEBRATE MARDI GRAS WITH THE IGUANAS AND WATERSIDE!

Don’t miss the start of Waterside 2004 when The Iguanas head to the auditorium in February for two shows. The Iguanas are New Orleans based and combine Tex-Mex, Rock, R&B, and much more. Driven by twin saxophones, guitar, accordion, bass, and drums, The Iguanas’ groove will get any crowd moving and shaking. The date will be announced later.

Showtimes are 6:00 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. Tickets are $21 for members and $23 for nonmembers, on sale in February at the Museum Store and Development Office. For more information call the Development Office at 410-326-2042, exts. 16 and 17.

MEMBERS’ TRIP TO SEE THE CAPITALS A SUCCESS

Forty museum members boarded the bus for the MCI Center on Saturday, November 22, for exciting National Hockey League action. After getting off to a great start with an early goal, our members were disappointed when the home team Capitals ended up losing in overtime to the visiting Florida Panthers. Despite the loss, the members were in great spirits and enjoyed their evening in Washington.

CMM BALL RAISES $19,000!

The Calvert Marine Museum Society hosted its annual ball on Saturday, October 25, to raise funds for construction of the museum’s newest exhibit, Secrets of the Mermaid’s Purse - Skates and Rays of the Mid-Atlantic. Over 150 people attended this year’s event, which raised around $19,000. The ball was held in the museum exhibition hall this year, a change from the traditional outdoor event. Guests enjoyed the beauty of the museum as it was transformed into an elegant maritime banquet arena.

Catering was provided by Mom’s In The Kitchen, and included a variety of cuisine arranged in food stations including a Mediterranean bar, carving station, antipasto bar, dessert mountain, and mashed potato bar. Guests also enjoyed a variety of fresh seafood items provided by Capt. Smith’s Seafood and beautifully displayed with a “seahorse” ice carving provided by Curator of Exhibits Jimmy Langley. Music was provided by the Kevin Brooks Project during cocktail hour, and later, the 25th Hour for dinner and dancing.

Top donors to the ball included Top Hat Party Rental; G & H Jewelers; Quality Built Homes; Chessie Lists, Inc.; W. M. Davis, Inc.; John and Marianne Harms; DM Group; and SMECO. Other sponsors included Stan and Barbara Benning; Larry and RoxAnne Cumberland; Michael and Wanda DeBord; Garner and Duff Florist; Mike Hewitt; Michael and Wanda King; Stoney’s Kingfisher’s Seafood House - Phillip and Jeannie Stone; Lewie Aldridge, Jr.; Aldridge Ford; Veda Barnes; Matt Boudreau - Nationwide Insurance; DynCorp; C.J. Pappas; Jim Perkins; Constellation Energy; Dr. and Mrs. Vivek Amin; Zelma Margelos; Dixie Miller; Margaret Phipps; Morgan Russell; and Jerry Shaw. Many other donors contributed to the ball through cash donations, auction item donations, and ball ticket sales.

Yard Sale 2004

Mark your calendars for Saturday, May 1, 2004, when your Volunteer Council will once again be holding a Yard Sale at CMM. The proceeds from the 2004 Yard Sale will go toward maritime educational programs and activities for the Patuxent Small Craft Center. At the Yard Sale two years ago we made over $2000, thanks to everyone’s support. This year we would like to make even more to contribute to these worthwhile programs.

So, when you begin your spring cleaning, please keep in mind things you might like to donate. Acceptable donations include any items in good condition with the exception of clothing, hard-bound books, and large furniture. Small furniture that is easy to lift and move is acceptable. No broken items please! If you have questions or if you need to store donated items please call 410-394-1493. Thanks in advance for your donations.

Please let your family, friends, and neighbors know about this upcoming event, and please plan to join us. See you at the museum on May 1. (Annie Michnowicz, Yard Sale Chair)

A seahorse sculpted in ice was featured at the Museum Ball on October 25. Photo by Debra Strozier
FALL 2003

Tropical Storm Isabel opened the fall season, but the museum was affected mostly by high water in the boat basin area. Other than severe water damage to several buildings at the Cove Point Light Station, there were few problems, thanks to the excellent preparations of staff and volunteers who covered exhibits and collections, tied down boats in the Small Craft Shed, moved tools to higher levels in the Patuxent Small Craft Center, covered windows in all buildings, and generally prepared for “the worst.” Fall events proceeded as planned, except for the Museum Ball that was moved from September 20 to October 25. Patuxent River Appreciation Days in October were as busy as in the past, and a concert was held on November 15. The Wm. B. Tennison completed its season in October, closing with a “Monster Mash Cruise” on the 31st. December brought a Drum Point Lighthouse open house, the annual Members’ Yule Party, and the Solomons Christmas Walk.

The Fresnel lens for the Drum Point Lighthouse, restored by Jim Dunlap (at left) of Lighthouse & Lens Restoration Corporation, was returned to its place in the cupola in September with assistance of CMM staff. CMM photo by Bob Hall

Tropical Storm Isabel returned the Drum Point Lighthouse to the water — briefly. CMM photo by Rob Hurry

PRAD 2003 began with a 5K run on Solomons Island. CMM photo by Bob Hall

CMM curator of maritime history Richard Dodds (left) accepts the gift of a telescope from Morrie Goldman. This telescope is similar to one that was used at the Cove Point Light Station for many years to report ships proceeding up the bay to Baltimore. CMM photo by Rob Hurry
WINTER 2003-2004

Winners of the toy boat judging at PRAD on October 12 were (left to right): Kyle Donaldson (first), Nick Bohaska, and Colleen and Grace McDougall (joint prize).

Photo by Janice Biennas

Canoe trips in the boat basin were offered during PRAD. CMM photo by Bob Hall

Exhibits at PRAD 2003 were popular with all ages. CMM photo by Bob Hall

During PRAD, short cruises were offered by the Lady Patty, from Tilghman Island (a ketch built in Solomons in 1935), the museum's historic Wm. B. Tennison, and the skipjack Nathan of Dorchester. Photo by Paul Berry

CMM members enjoyed the "Candy Land" theme at the Members' Yule Party on December 7. Photo by Daniel Gresham
and soft crabs, processing from 12,000 to 24,000 soft crabs a day. These were packed for shipment using seaweed collected from the shores of Broomes Island.

As the company’s business grew, the seafood processing facilities kept pace. Company records indicate that new building additions and alterations were made to the oyster house in 1936, 1938, and 1939. Photographs from about 1940 depict a large and well-maintained seafood processing plant. By that time, the original building had large shed-roofed wings on its southeast and northwest sides. The northwest wing contained cold storage rooms and the ice making plant. An oyster shucking room lit by large southeast- and northwest-facing windows occupied an addition and wing attached to the northeast end of the original building. Another large cold storage room where unprocessed oysters were stored was attached to the northeast end of the shucking room, at the water’s edge. A small shed wing on the east contained a lunch area for the workers. Lavatory facilities occupied a separate building.

During the 1940s, over 100 oyster shuckers were employed at the business in addition to packers, laborers, office personnel, and boat crews. Electric service became available in 1942, and in 1943, Charles W. Denton, Warren Denton’s son, returned from service in the U.S. Coast Guard and became a partner in the company. After World War II, the company began dealing almost exclusively in oysters and closed during the summer season. A fire at the seafood plant in January 1947 seriously damaged the structure. It destroyed the southeast wing, damaged the main structure and closed the plant for the remainder of the oyster season. The wing’s roof and exterior walls were completely rebuilt and the roof pitch was altered in the process. By 1950, the oyster house had grown into a sprawling 8,000 square feet frame and concrete block oyster processing and packing plant. During the peak season the company employed a workforce of 110, including about ninety shuckers.

To supply the oysters needed to operate a large packing facility the business dredged oysters from beds leased from the state of Maryland in the Patuxent River and its tributaries in addition to buying oysters from local watermen. The Lancaster, purchased in 1945, was used as a dredgeboat on the company’s leased oyster grounds. The Lillian T, bought in 1951, was used as a buyboat to purchase oysters from independent watermen. A second dredgeboat, Patuxent, was added in 1971. Several trucks were employed by the company to distribute its product to market.

Like other Patuxent River oyster houses, the majority of the oyster shuckers, boat crew, and laborers were African Americans from the surrounding communities. Both men and women shucked oysters and were paid on a piecework basis where skill and speed mattered. Male packers and floormen working in the oyster house, as well as those employed as boat crew or delivery truck drivers were paid a weekly wage. Shuckers were responsible for providing their own knives and aprons. During the busy Thanksgiving Day and Christmas holiday seasons, shuckers would sometimes work thirteen- to fourteen-hour days to meet the increased demand. It was not uncommon for the shuckers to sing spiritual songs that they had learned in their churches to take their minds off of their repetitive chores.

After twenty-one years with the company, Ballard Rogers retired from the seafood business in 1959, and Warren and Charles Denton continued to operate the company as partners. During the 1959/60 packing season, the company’s employees processed over 470,000 bushels of oysters and shipped 100,662 gallons. After Warren Denton’s death in 1964 a new partnership was formed among Charles Denton, his sister Fern Denton Conner, and their mother Grace Denton, but this was dissolved in 1970 when the company was incorporated.

Beginning in the early 1970s, a series of events caused the local oyster population to plummet. In 1972, rains associated with Hurricane Agnes lowered the river’s salinity, and runoff caused increased pollution and siltation. This combination devastated the Patuxent River oyster crop. As a consequence, the Dentons scaled down their efforts to restock their leased beds in the Patuxent and its tributaries. With the decline in the local oyster supply, the company was forced to rely increasingly upon imported oysters that raised production costs. Around the same time, the company experienced a labor shortage, as construction jobs and other opportunities outside the seafood industry became more common.

In 1972 and 1973, as a response to the labor shortage, the Denton Company partially automated the plant with the installation
of a conveyor system. The system delivered oysters in the shell from cold storage to the shucking tables in overhead buckets and removed the empty shells on a conveyor belt that deposited them outside the plant. This replaced the old system of employing floormen who manually moved the oysters and shells by means of wheelbarrows. During the 1972/73 season, 86,833 gallons of oysters were shipped from the plant. Another laborsaving device was introduced to the plant in 1975 with the purchase of forty-five “oyster breakers.” These electric-powered rotary machines enabled the workers to break the shell to facilitate shucking rather than opening it with just the knife blade or breaking the shell manually. The building exterior also was upgraded in 1975.

When Charles Denton died in 1976, his son Joseph succeeded him as president of the corporation. By that time, however, increasing costs and decreasing volume had resulted in a 50 percent reduction in profit over the preceding five years. Factors cited as contributing to the downturn included increased competition from Virginia packers and the closure of once productive oyster beds due to pollution. By 1977 the workforce had dropped to forty-seven workers. The company closed at the end of the 1982 season and the corporation’s assets were liquidated.

Norman Dorrell, an Eastern Shore waterman, approached the owners of the property with an offer to lease it. In 1984, he reopened the business with the intention of operating a year-round seafood packinghouse, continuing the practice of shipping oysters from outside the area to supply the packinghouse. In the summer season, the plant shucked and packed softshell clams, with picking and packing crabmeat later added to the seafood operation. The Denton family retained ownership of the building and grounds while Dorrell operated the business as Warren Denton Seafood. But finally, in the face of declining crab harvests, increasing transportation costs, and unprecedented competition from foreign seafood packers, Norman Dorrell declared bankruptcy in 2001 and Warren Denton Seafood closed its doors. Louis P. Stone, owner of the adjacent Stoney’s Seafood House restaurant, purchased the property from the Denton family in 2002. After sustaining extensive damage from Tropical Storm Isabel, Stone demolished the building in October 2003, making way for a new restaurant.

Sources: The CMM library and archives contain many primary and secondary sources for the seafood processing industry, in general, and Denton’s specifically. Included are newspaper and magazines articles, the Warren Denton Seafood and J. C. Lore & Sons business archives, oral history interviews, and various publications. Readers interested in a detailed bibliography or a longer version of this article may call the library at the museum on extension 14.
VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT—

Volunteer Members of the Solomons Island Model Boat Club Help Host Regatta

By Richard Rogers and Annie Michnowicz

On September 26 to 28, the members of CMM’s Solomons Island Model Boat Club, along with the Great Schooner Model Society, played host for the second year to the Vintage Traditional Watercraft Regatta, sponsored by the U.S. Vintage Model Yacht Group. This year’s event utilized CMM’s waterfront areas as well as the new Patuxent Small Craft Center. The boats were well displayed throughout the building.

The weekend before the regatta, Tropical Storm Isabel chose to make an appearance. Luckily there was no real damage to the boat basin, just high water, so the regatta was able to go on as planned. In fact, Mother Nature smiled on the event, and the captains had three great days — one for practice sailing and two for competition. Twenty captains sailed in the various class races, while other captains helped behind the scenes. After the skippers’ meetings each morning, led by CMM boatwright George Surgent, the races began!

Five classes of boats raced in the regatta: Vintage M’s competed in ten races; skipjacks competed in six races; and small schooners and large schooners in eight races. The schooners also had a static judging score, thanks to five volunteers who rated the models on a variety of criteria. The final class was open class, for boats that did not fit into the other classes. Basically, the captains raced against themselves, trying to maintain a consistent time around the race course for each lap they made.

When not racing, the captains, their ladies, and other museum guests were very attentive to the racing events, and the captains had opportunities to share information and ideas. Participants this year were from eight states outside of Maryland, with an award to a participant from Iowa who traveled the farthest.

This year’s event was one of great outreach for the museum, with special compliments going to the new Patuxent Small Craft Center. Skippers were able to leave their rigging intact for the whole weekend, safe and secure.

Those interested in the building and sailing of radio-controlled models will find plenty of opportunities through membership in the Solomons Island Model Boat Club. Events are listed in each quarterly calendar. (All photos by the authors)  

Models displayed in Patuxent Small Craft Center.

Skippers’ morning meeting.

Winners. Front row, Richard Rogers, Jose Medina, George Surgent, Harry Mote; back row, Alan Suydam, Ned Lakeman, Ed Cera, Herb Jones, Buck McClellan, Tom Younger

CALVERT MARINE MUSEUM

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