AMERICA'S LAST COMMERCIAL SAILING VESSEL: THE SKIPJACK

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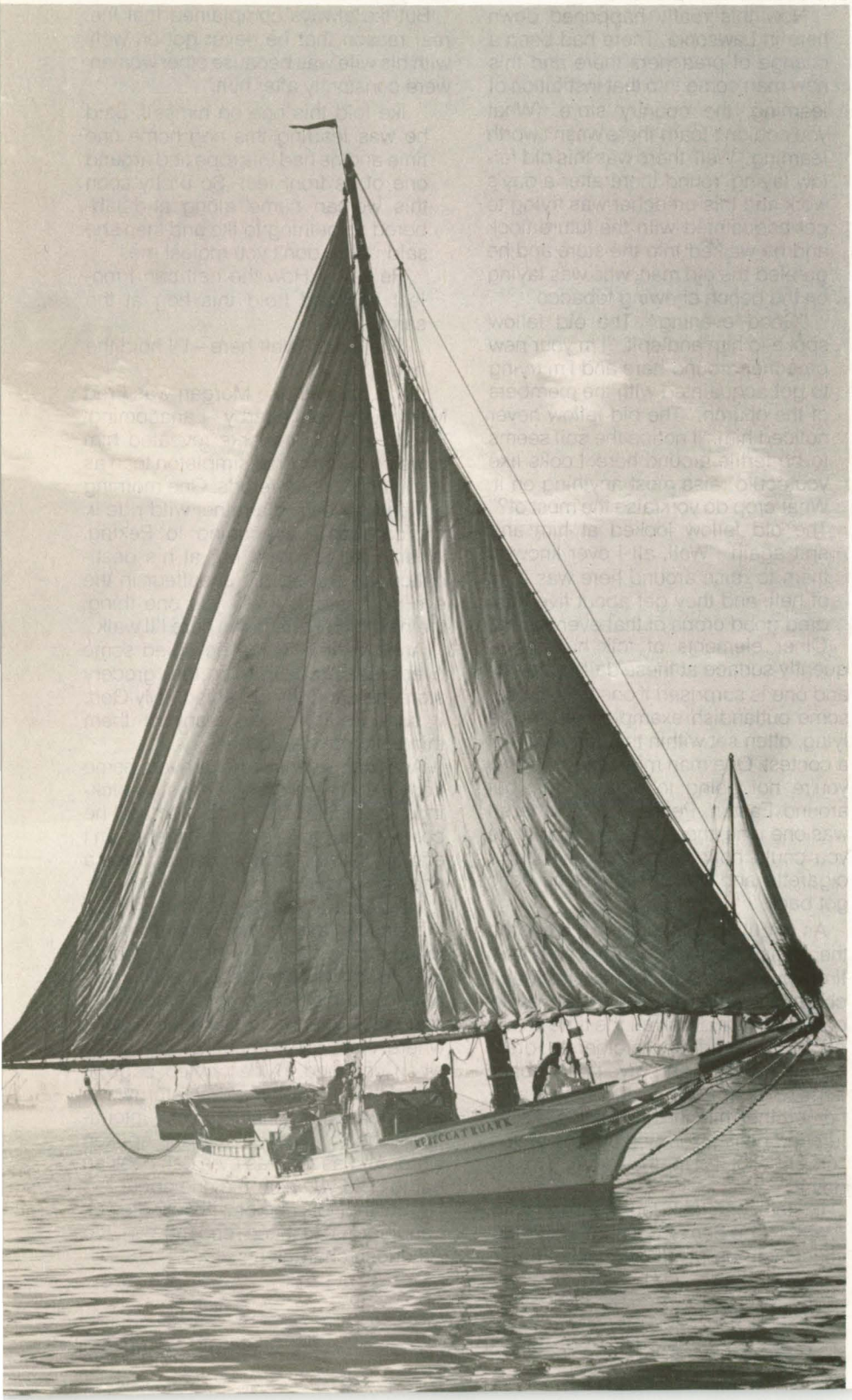

The tri-state area known as the Eastern Shore, that peninsula of Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia bounded by the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, is as unique as any section in the United States. Divided about equally between the agricultural, cattle, poultry, and seafood industries, the region is most noted for the latter. Its oysters, crabs, fish, and clams determine the careers for numerous Eastern Shoremen, as well as a way of life that has made them the independent, resourceful people they are today.

In no other place in this country can one be whisked back into the last century more easily than on Maryland's Eastern Shore, particularly in some of the small bay ports and islands. Operating there today is the last commercial sailing fleet in American waters. This is comprised of the skipjacks (or bateaux, as they are known in some sections of the Chesapeake country) employed in Maryland's oyster-dredging fishery. These colorful craft are not retained as a matter of sentiment or tourist appeal; rather, Maryland law allows oysters to be dredged *only* by sailing craft, just as was done by the forefathers of the men who sail the craft today. That law has been relaxed to some degree within recent years, however, now allowing oystermen to use power yawl boats, or push boats, to propel the skipjacks over the oyster beds two days a week.

The skipjack as a type goes back less than a hundred years. It represents a more recent design that came into existence during the latter part of the last century. The pungies, schooners, sloops, and bugeyes—other Chesapeake sailing types once prominent on the oyster grounds—have disappeared from the fleets. Once, their graceful hulls dominated the dredging craft, but being of earlier construction they wore out and were abandoned. And, as oyster catches dwindled in size, the smaller, handier skipjack became

Steamboat Virginia *at Salisbury, Maryland, about 1920, waiting to leave for Baltimore.*

more popular.

Traditions established by the larger sailing craft of the Chesapeake have been carried along by the skipjacks. Gracing the longheads of most are the delicately carved trailboards bearing, in most cases, the names of the vessels, acanthus leaves, crossed American flags, and shields cannon, and ramrods. Most of the vessels retain the deadeyes as part of their rigging, and wooden blocks, scraped masts and booms, and heavy sails are commonplace on these sailing craft in Maryland waters. And the men who sail them are descendants of generations of those who have sailed the Chesapeake.

While that phase of Eastern Shore life remains much the same as in the past, other changes have taken place to make the area less isolated and more vulnerable to progress. But these changes have been gradual in most cases.

Half a century and more ago the chief means of transportation between the Shore and the outside world were the passenger and freight-carrying steamboats. Operating out of Baltimore, these white-painted steamers threaded the principal rivers and creeks, stopping at numerous landings. Residents of the Shore looked to Baltimore for their wares and for their shopping by way of the steamboat.

Before the end of that trade in the early 1930s, ferries had opened up the Shore to motor vehicles. Hard-surfaced roads, and then bridges and tunnels followed. Through the decades, this exposure to the outside has created changes in the people, their life styles, and the countryside.

Most noticeable is the change in the countryside that has resulted mostly from the construction in 1952 of the bridge across the Chesapeake Bay between Sandy Point and Matapeake, former route of the ferries. This speeded transportation across the barrier waters and placed the Shore in closer proximity to the cities of Washington and Baltimore, and their environs. Beaches and shore properties were developed and Shore towns increased in size. Dual highways now penetrate the length and breadth of the peninsula, and motels and marinas abound.

Off those congested highways, however, and away from the towns to the more remote regions like Deal Island, Wingate, and similar waterside villages, a touch of the quaint old way of life, with colorful craft tied up at the docks, still exists. It will be there as long as the skipjacks spread their sails over the waters. When they are replaced by motor craft, then the transition to modernity will have just about been completed.