

DON MAXWELL

Don Maxwell was born on Mischief Night in 1927 in New Gretna in a little bungalow by the (traffic) light. Because his father was in the oyster and clam business, he just kind of drifted into it.

His dad put Don and his brother to work right away. He built garveys, fishing boats, took out duck parties, trapped muskrats — anything to make a living for his family, and Don learned everything about all that too. He even had a muskrat coat made for his wife, Doris, out of the muskrats he trapped. That is how he lived on the bay and around the bay.

He used to buy clams from 30-some clammers. (His clamming heritage goes back to his grandfather, Ed (Keefer) Allen, who tonged during the Civil War. His grandfather and grandmother met on Crab Island during its heyday, when all employees were locals. He used to go out on the Menhaden boats, called Pogg boats. They were great big 85-footers that went offshore. There is only one left now. It is a restaurant on Rt. 13 in Delaware.

Don's Grandfather Maxwell taught him how to net fish in the Mullica. He ran a houseboat up the river and that's what they would live on while they set up their nets. The nets had a 40-foot span across the opening and faced the oncoming tide. They would then channel the fish to the rear of the net, where it was anchored.

When the tide went back out, the fish would be trapped. Then they would haul them up by horse and buggy to the Huff Fish Company in Philadelphia.

Don's dad had the oyster house on Oyster Creek in Atlantic County, and that's where Don worked hard and learned the business.

He said you had to have a strong back and a weak mind.

He sorted and counted and bagged by hand everything the boats brought in. His hands are so big he could grab clams five in each. The bags they used were grass, and very large, and came from Charles Robinson. They were big enough to hold

400 chowders, 800 cherries and 2,000 necks. Then they had to sew them all shut, leaving ears on the end for handholds.

Over the years, the workers got softer and smaller burlap bags replaced the grass. Then the workers thought they were too heavy and they ended up with the even smaller onion bags.

One hundred to a 125 sacks were going out a day and they all were sewn shut by hand. Clams went for a penny apiece.

In 1950, on Nov. 25, Don was at his Oyster house during a severe sou'easter. The water came up through the first floor, trapping him on the second floor for the whole day. The house was rocking back and forth, boats were torn from their mooring and sank. Three people lost their lives. They finally rescued him that night but he never forgot that terrible storm.

Don's dad took him out clamming and dredging Oysters in a 36-foot Navy launch called the ADII. The boat he has now is the Captain Curtis Maxwell. It's a 42-foot diesel with a 14-foot beam. It's docked at Nacote Creek, where Maxwell Shellfish is located. After marrying Doris Dayton of Parkertown, Don eased his dad out of the business. They still call him Old Maintenance because he keeps things up so well.

Don's son, John, now works the business with him. Their workers are friends and neighbors who have grown old along with them.

For his leisure time, Don goes duck hunting. He loves it and always makes the opening day of duck season.

He recalls his mother being the fastest duck plucker he ever knew. She could do four to every one else's one.

Don and his dad had many now famous once plentiful Shourds Decoys. They would use them as they were meant to be used — throw them in the water, hunt your ducks, fish them back into your boat, throw them in the corner of the oyster house 'till next time. He never realized what they were worth or that collectors might want them.

He remembers taking duck parties out and throwing out the decoys. When he'd go back to retrieve them, he'd notice some missing. He just thought they got loose from their anchors. When he pulled them from a pile in the corner of the oyster house, he'd notice again that maybe one or two would be missing.

One by one they disappeared under long overcoats, cutaway from their anchor ties, until today he has only one left.

Today, Don and his wife Doris enjoy their beautiful home, their grown children and beautiful granddaughters.

Their collection of 60-some oyster plates adorns the walls of their dining room.