



The Forgotten River

Oysters brought life to the banks of the Maurice. Then they took it away.

By Hoag Levins

STANDING IN THE WIND-WHIPPED desolation at East Point on the Delaware Bay about 25 miles southwest of Atlantic City, it's not hard to imagine how it was, nearly four centuries ago, when the Europeans first broke the horizon. The *Prince Maurice* was bound out from the Netherlands, one of the fleet of Dutch Indiamen then fanning out across the trade winds in search of new continents to claim. By contemporary standards, the ship was an awkward, boxy affair; the rigging so primitive and thickly laid aloft, all three masts were completely hidden behind tent-like tangles of meshed hemp.

Historians have reconstructed these ships in minute detail and record that "with their great spreads of sail, elaborate figureheads, painted stern carving, and flags and pennants streaming from their masts," they "made a brave and glorious sight."

But it is unlikely that this particular ship looked so grand when it was first sighted from East Point. The Dutch windjammer, named for the Prince of Orange, had been savaged by a late winter storm off Hatteras. When the skies cleared, the ship hopelessly was lost and its bilges were sloshing with water seeping in through hull cracks.

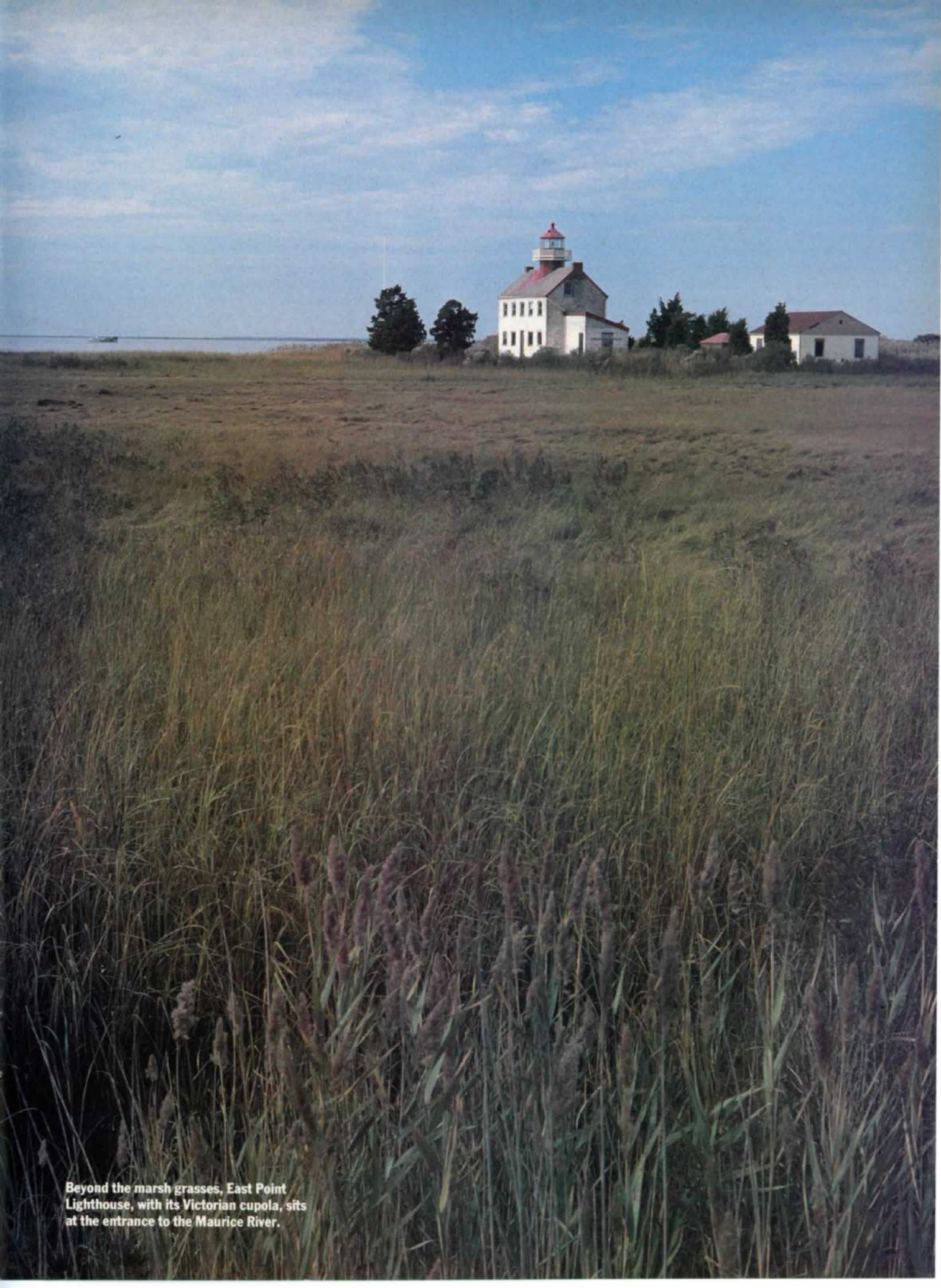
Hung crazy with torn canvas and dangling sections of splintered spar, the *Prince Maurice* was searching desperately for a safe haven along the uncharted coasts of what would later be called New Jersey. Rounding the horn of Cape May and struggling 17 miles north across a broad bay, the ship entered the mouth of an unnamed river where marshlands quickly gave way to thick forests.

The bay was a brackish mix of salt water brought in on the tide from the Atlantic, and fresh water that spilled down the 390-mile Delaware River system and its hundreds of tributaries. It was a turbid broth teeming with bass and herring and seasonally invaded by armies of shad and sturgeon that came from halfway around the world to breed in the unspoiled waters. Below the surface, huge beds of oysters bred in almost unimaginable abundance, covering the bottom of the bay and crowding so close to shore that the banks turned pearly gray at low tide.

Those early-spring shores not far from the current site of the East Point Lighthouse were littered with dug-out canoes, racks for drying oyster meat and fence-like enclosures of saplings in which members of the Clan of the Wild Turkey grew corn in neat rows.

One Dutch pilot of the era, recording his first impression of these same shore people, wrote, "When some of them first saw our ship approaching they did not know what to

Hoag Levins is a Jersey-based journalist and author.



Beyond the marsh grasses, East Point Lighthouse, with its Victorian cupola, sits at the entrance to the Maurice River.

think, but stood in deep and solemn amazement, wondering whether it was a spook or apparition or whether it came from heaven or hell. They supposed some onboard to be rather devils than human beings."

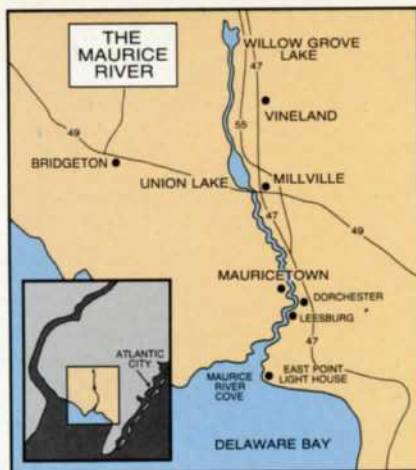
Indians would remember these same events as encounters with great canoes carrying tribes of bearded warriors who wore magic robes of iron and killed at a distance with sticks that spoke fire.

The *Prince Maurice*, listing heavily and unable to tack upstream any farther, ran aground on a mud flat and began to sink. More than a hundred crewmen, soldiers and passengers floundered through the marsh ooze, dragging what weapons and salvage they could.

Indians closed in. They would have been clad in apron-like wraps of beaver pelt, their faces and bodies streaked with colored clays and berry juice. When they burst out of the high grass, they carried flint-tipped lances and knobbed clubs.

Accounts indicate that one group of Indians aided the Europeans while another group later attacked and burned the stranded ship. Fire spread rapidly across the pitch-packed planking. Flames burst from portals and twirled skyward along webs of tarred hemp. Eventually, in a final spasm of sizzling water and flung mud, the *Prince Maurice* rolled sideways, a charred and gutted carcass.

The wreck of the ship, which remained visible for more than a century, stood near the mouth of the first major river inside the Delaware Bay and became a landmark for the ever-



increasing numbers of European pilots navigating the area. On their charts, the name of the partially sunken hulk became the name of the waterway: the Maurice River.

WITH A MOUTH commanding the Delaware Bay and a body plunged 50 miles deep into forest lands bounding with game, the river valley was quickly inundated and developed by arriving Europeans. Reaching its peak in the 1880s, the towns that sprang up along the Maurice declined rapidly after the turn of this century. By 1940, many once-thriving river communities had already disappeared. And by the 1980s, the Maurice had largely become Southern New Jersey's forgotten river.

Unlike its two auspiciously positioned sisters to the east—the Great Egg Harbor and Mullica rivers—the Mau-

rice does not intersect the metropolitan corridor linking Philadelphia to the Shore points.

Although little-known and rarely visited by the outside world, the Maurice watershed just 25 miles west of Atlantic City is a place as rich in history as it is in untrammelled landscapes. And this scenery is made all the more interesting by the fact that the Maurice has two starkly different personalities. Gushing from spring-fed lakes south of Glassboro and Malaga, the upper Maurice cuts a serpentine course through vast stands of pine, red maple and cedar. The atmosphere along this 30 miles is that of a forest wilderness. Even where the stream slices through the cities of Vineland and Millville, it maintains a parkland identity.

South of Millville, it becomes a broad working river winding toward the bay through wooded flatlands and salt marshes.

The lower Maurice is a tidal river that runs brackish with salt far inland. Boat owners 10 miles or more upstream have serious problems with barnacles on pilings and vessel bottoms. But they can fish off those same river wharves and pull in yellow perch and bluefish. In the spring, the river is thick with stripped bass, shad and even sturgeon running in from the ocean to spawn. Net fisherman in small boats haul them in by the hundreds.

This lower section of the Maurice gave rise in the 18th and 19th centuries to one of America's most prosperous nautical communities. In that era of wooden ships and tradewind commerce, the shores were lined with bus-



The Mabel Kim was the largest oyster boat of the once-great Maurice fleet. It's been converted to a clam boat. Here it gets repairs at Dorchester Industries, the only major shipworks left on the lower river.



ting port landings, clusters of ship construction yards and other facilities dedicated to reaping, storing and shipping the Maurice's most singular harvest—the seemingly inexhaustible Delaware Bay oyster.

TODAY, BOATERS WHO enter the Maurice from the Delaware Bay encounter a peculiar sight. Through binoculars, the beaches to port appear a brilliant white, catching the afternoon sun; gleaming ribbons zigzagging away into the far marshes. Closer up, these miles of strange shores can be seen as gargantuan accumulations of shells. In some places, the shells are so deep they have come to constitute land forms, which have been eroded by the tide into sharp cliffs. Some eroded faces would be of interest to amateur archeologists. Near the top level protrudes a 1960s plastic can opener amidst the shells. Farther down is a broken shucking knife of the 1940s. Below that, part of a 1930s Coke bottle lays ex-



One of the homes of Mauricetown, a 200-year-old village of schooner captains (Top). Beds have been reduced, but there are still good oysters in Delaware Bay (Above).

posed. Beneath that, the remains of an earlier rusted pot with hand-hammered rivets are imbedded. If you dug in some places to the very bottom, you'd find flint implements of the Indian tribes that originally discovered and exploited this simple, profitable truth:

Something about an oyster likes a river mouth.

At places where spring-fed torrents

roll into tidal salt basins, oysters find an unusual combination of circumstances that automatically provide both food and protection from their two worst enemies, crabs and drill snails, which bore holes in the shellfish and suck them out. Both crabs and drills favor pure seawater and shy away from the lower salinity levels where fresh river water and bay salt water merge. There, oysters can live and thrive.

At the same time, the river acts as a conveyor belt delivering endless supplies of organic debris on which oysters feed. Mollusks are living pumps that process several gallons of water each day, capturing edible particles and growing plump on them.

Near-perfect conditions for oysters are found in a relatively limited number of places. One of those is the Delaware Bay near the mouth of the Maurice. The river, draining 360 square miles of swamps, bogs and marsh-

land, carries, in terms of mollusk fare, a truly gourmet feast on its every ripple.

There, protected by the barrier of Cape May from direct ocean currents and positioned one-third of the way up the bay, oysters proliferated wildly, carpeting huge tracts beneath the surface. Natural oyster beds once reached far up the Maurice and provided a major industry, long before the Europeans arrived, for the Indians, who dried and traded the delicacy with neigh-

boring clans. Often, various groups of South Jersey Indians would gather along the river for Great Council meetings and oyster fests. Gigantic bonfires, visible for miles along the coast, were built at the current site of East Point Lighthouse to guide the caravans of canoes converging day and night toward the river mouth.

Throughout the region, archeologists have found "oyster rings" left behind by the Indians. These sites are about 32 feet across and shaped roughly

Going Down to Mauricetown

Perhaps the most unusual site along the lower Maurice is Mauricetown, a 200-year-old sea captains' village perched atop a bluff 11 miles upriver. Overlooking a panorama of river curves and accessible by only a few small back roads, the secluded town visually appears more like a part of New England than New Jersey. From a distance, with its white church steeple, stately trees, tiny streets, Victorian facades and lawns sloping down to weathered wharves, Mauricetown could pass for a corner of Nantucket.

"We really don't like publicity," explained one cheerful woman over her picket fence. "We like the town just as it is. We wouldn't want crowds."

Laid out as a village of cottages and mansions for mates and captains in the schooner trade, the community still consists of its original buildings. Many of them have been maintained in vintage condition by residents who are descendents of the first Comptons, Sharps and Bacons who began building the place in 1814. And, during the last decade, several homes that fell into disrepair have been purchased by young professionals who are restoring them to their 1880s grandeur.

Up until 1914, the town was a major commercial center and its population of sea captains commanded much of the schooner trade along the Eastern seaboard. Their records indicate they routinely ranged from Canada to below the Caribbean carrying such mundane loads as barrel staves and bricks as well as "Peruvian guano in sacks" and "bones and horns from Texas."



The brilliant stained-glass window in the Methodist Church commemorates 22 men lost at sea.

One of their more unusual routine cargoes was ice—"harvested" from frozen lakes in Maine, packed in holds filled with sawdust, and run before the wind down to tropical New Orleans, where ice was rare and brought a high price.

Between voyages, the seamen berthed their larger schooners in Philadelphia and "came down home" to Mauricetown. Sepia photos of the late 1800s show the town surrounded by farms and cluttered with carriages. Along the waterfront, oyster boats and barges and small schooners were lined end-to-end. There was a shipworks and a sawmill and cannery and both marine and equestrian blacksmith shops. All are gone today. The only businesses left are a few small antique shops.

But the parlors and sitting rooms and gravestones of Mauricetown still echo the lore and legend of those

windjammer days.

In the 1850s, one of the leading town fathers, Captain Alfred Sharp, built a schooner in the town's yard and named the vessel for his wife, Lydia H. Sharp. With a final embrace of his wife and infant son Coleman, Captain Sharp set out down the Maurice and across the Atlantic on a maiden voyage. He perished when the ship was lost at sea.

Coleman Sharp grew up and became a Mauricetown sea captain like his father. The younger Sharp also built a schooner and named it after his wife. On the maiden voyage, he too was lost at sea.

Another family member, Captain John Sharp, commanded the last commercial schooner that sailed from the town in 1914. He was ending both an era and a career—intending to retire when he returned. On a storm-darkened November day, he cast off, picked up a hold full of cast iron pipe in Philadelphia and set off for Havana. He was lost at sea.

In the cemetery, the Sharps and many other captains lost at sea are memorialized with markers sitting atop vacant graves. One of those stones is carved with a sentiment common to local women during Mauricetown's nautical heyday:

*"All day I hear the moaning of the sea,
All night the sobs and sighs complaining,
O sea, O sad and solemn sea,
Hast thou some secret grief like me?"*

The last surviving schooner captain was Alonzo Bacon, whose grandfather built much of the town and whose daughter, Carolyn Bacon, still lives there. In 1921, at Captain Bacon's urging, the Mauricetown Methodist Church installed a memorial stained glass window listing the names of the 22 local captains and mates who were lost at sea.

The window remains today, casting shafts of color through the 1890 church, whose front doors open toward a horizon where a gentle river disappears into an endless sea. ■

like a doughnut. At the center is a core of fire ash; 16 feet out is a thick ring made of oyster shells. The Indians sat at large oval fires, shucked and ate prodigious amounts of oysters and then heaved the empty shells over their shoulders.

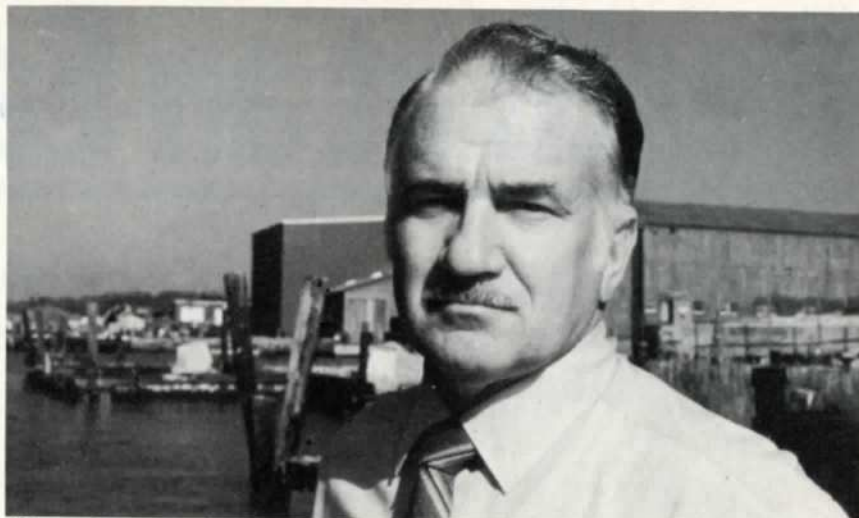
During the European colonial era, the oyster continued to shape human events along the Maurice. Beacon fires at East Point gave way to light houses. Canoes and tree-branch drying racks gave way to canvas sail and clamoring canneries. And much of the history of the towns along the lower river—Port Elizabeth, Mauricetown, Dorchester, Leesburg, Port Norris and Bivalve—can be told in terms of the lowly mollusk that sustained them.

For oysters, a gourmet delicacy that caught the fancy of America's upper crust early on, became a source of great wealth. And the Maurice River fleets became the largest producers of oysters in the world. The shores burst out with new towns, shipyards, wharves, saw mills, forges and other facilities required to support a maritime trade that dredged the bay and rushed tons of oysters to cities along the East Coast.

Although all the commercial beds along the East Coast contain the same species of oyster, there are substantial variations in size, texture and taste from area to area. This is because oysters ultimately reflect the conditions in which they mature: Long Island Sound oysters, because they are grown in cooler and more biologically fertile waters, tend to be large and meaty. Chesapeake Bay oysters come from high-salt beds close to the ocean and tend to be very piquant. The Delaware Bay oyster comes from better-sheltered and less salty beds and, according to many epicures, has the most delicate taste. But it was not only epicures that doted on them. They caught the fancy of everyone; oyster bars sprouted on almost every big city street corner. Soon the demand was insatiable.

After the Civil War, Port Norris, a town partially built on landfills of oyster shells, became the southern end of a railroad line and began shipping 90 carloads of oysters a week. This was in addition to the fleets of coastal schooners which carried tons of shellfish to Philadelphia and New York and Boston.

This was an era when leather-faced men with shoulders thick as oxbows used crude dredging tongs to load their boats so full of oysters the gunwales lapped water; when the river's every curve sprouted wharves jammed with so many masted vessels they appeared as a forest; when the streets ran thick with horses and wheelbarrows and polished black carriages and cumbersome drays piled high with barrels and



"They said oysters had died before," says Robert Morgan, of the Port Norris Oyster Co. "They always came back. But this time, they didn't. They kept dying."

cordwood; when the skyline hung gray with smoke from cookstoves, and gangs of men in baggy pants and crumpled hats posed for glass plate photos next to saw blades taller than they were.

An 1883 account indicates that the towns along the Maurice from Port

The oyster industry around the Maurice suddenly collapsed, taking the river's economy with it.

Norris north to Port Elizabeth had yards turning out oyster boats, fishing vessels, barges, coastal craft, lumber craft and ocean-going schooners, and that "new and handsome houses are being built and others projected."

Horse-drawn wagons ran in relay teams, rushing oysters to Salem and Gloucester and Camden and Philadelphia. The posh new Victorian resorts at Cape May and Atlantic City positively wallowed in Maurice oysters. There, they were nibbled daintily by crinolined, parasoled ladies or gobbled down with great draughts of beer by gentlemen in waxed moustaches. It seemed the Maurice's luck was limitless.

But luck has a way of running out. By 1900, the towns of shipwrights and sawmills were taking a nosedive as a new maritime technology was ascending—keel oak and canvas were giving way to iron plate and steam and the center of shipbuilding gravitated away from rural shipyards toward the thundering steel yards at Chester and Camden and Philadelphia.

But oysters took up much of the economic slack. The industry was bigger than ever. By the 1950s, a million bushels a year were being taken by at least 500 licensed oyster boats in the area. The trade poured money into the river towns.

But in 1957, in one of North America's great natural calamities, the oyster industry around the Maurice suddenly collapsed, taking the entire economy of the lower river with it. In September of that year, the fleet sailed out to check the beds and found nearly all the shellfish they brought up were dead.

"At first, there was disbelief," remembers Robert Morgan Sr., an oysterman since 1948, vice president of the Port Norris Oyster Company and head of the Oyster Packers and Planners Association. "At the time, most oystermen here in Port Norris were very healthy financially and the prospect of one bad year was not much of a problem. They said oysters had died before. They always came back. But this time, they didn't. They kept dying. Panic set in. Everything along the river here is pegged to oysters."

Shortly, scientists from the Rutgers University Oyster Research Laboratories at Bivalve isolated a mysterious organism found in the muscle tissue of the dead mollusks. It was a thing without a name. Lab technicians described it in their initial reports as "Multinucleated Sphere, Unknown." And the acronym "MSX" stuck.

MSX is a parasite that actually does not cause death. Instead, it causes swelling and muscular disruption that make it impossible for the oysters' life systems to function properly. Even as they lay bathed in a tide glutted with nutrients, the infected oysters die of starvation.

MSX flashed across all the beds and, between 1957 and 1960, killed 95 per-

Continued on page 110



The Ghost Forest

The deserted upper Maurice River is haunted by the spirits of giant loggers and even more giant cedars. Only paradise remains.

By Hoag Levins

THE ODORS ARE THOSE OF black mud and foaming, tea-colored cedar water; the sights, of tan, blue and scarlet birds darting through holly and laurel; and the sounds, those of deep forest: a lack of noise so intense that the silence itself is perceived by the ear as a sensation. Floating out of a quiet cavern formed by heavy tree boughs and tangled vine and surveying the scene near Weymouth Road

in Cumberland County—about 25 miles due west of Atlantic City—a canoer finds it hard to believe that this silent glen is part and parcel of a small but bustling city.

But such idyllic sites abound along Vineland's northwestern border—a boundary formed by the Maurice River and a thick, flanking corridor of woodlands. Rising in the churning dam runoff from Willow Grove Lake, the Maurice takes shape, winding south through 50 practically deserted miles of South Jersey, eventually emptying into the Delaware Bay.

Last month, *Atlantic City Magazine* toured the southern half of this little-known river, the section that stretches below Millville: a broad working river of oyster boats and net


fishermen; a place that once supported a thriving maritime community of schooner captains and ship builders.

But the northern half of the Maurice has a totally different personality: a wilderness course largely accessible only by canoe and hiking boot, a place tied to the memory of loggers, pioneer farmers and woodsmen.

Behind the Weymouth Road dam in this empty corner of Vineland, Willow Grove Lake, the source of the Maurice River, sits fringed in pine and clumps of cattails. It has an island at its center and a shore ringed with rustic homes and sailboat docks. Thirty miles downstream is a second dam and midpoint of the Maurice. And between these two lakes lies a section of river that is as pleasant and pristine as it is unknown to the outside world.

In the warmer months, the scene at Weymouth Road turns a bit more raucous. Local teenagers from the nearby farms and villages gather here, swinging from Tarzan ropes or heaving themselves from the road bridge into the deep pool below. Several similar bridges along the river provide the only easy access to the water, which for more than a century has furnished impromptu community swimming holes and picnic spots. On summer weekends, for instance, the small, natural sand beaches below the Garden Road and Almond Road bridges across the Maurice are teeming with families and beachballs; badminton and hibachis.

Hoag Levins is a Jersey-based journalist and author.



The northern half of
the Maurice River runs
through a wilderness
area accessible only by
canoe and hiking boot.



Union Lake was created by a dam across the Maurice at Millville that also produced this vast man-made waterfall.

The bridges also cut the river into neat segments for canoe trips. Two canoe companies—Lampe's of Vine-land and Millville Canoe of Millville—run routes every day, putting in rental craft and retrieving them at various bridges along the water. But together, the two firms put in no more than 70 canoes a day during peak periods. This makes the Maurice an unusual experience in comparison to its clogged eastern cousin, the Mullica. There, canoe companies routinely dump as many as 1,700 canoes into the system in a single day.

The Maurice—rated moderate-to-difficult because of its rapid current and wild turns that easily can swamp and sink novice canoers—is also a more rigorous canoe trip than the better-

known Mullica and its tributaries. Fallen trees present major obstacles, and "coffin cruising"—that's when two paddlers prostrate themselves in the bottom of the canoe so the craft can hurl itself beneath tree trunks with only inches to spare—is standard procedure here.

Observant canoers still can spot beaver lodges on the tributaries. In the old days, a huge beaver population built dams so large they blocked the main stream and had to be dynamited away by farmers. Muskrats, on the other hand, were equally vigorous, and destroyed the earthen dikes farmers built to extend their fields up to the water's edge. Deer are still thick, and leave their tracks in the scattered sandy outcroppings. Local woodsmen say a few ot-

ters still live along the river and appear from time-to-time — frolicking inside pools and feeding on unwary fish: The upper Maurice and its adjacent lakes are teeming with fish. Each year the state stocks the river with trout. There are also large numbers of pickerel. And in recent years, a population of striped bass has taken hold in Union Lake and upstream. This is peculiar because striped bass normally live in the ocean all year and only come into a river to spawn. Fishermen who hooked bass in the lower Maurice apparently threw some of them over the dam into Union Lake. They are trapped there, but appear to have reproduced abundantly and adjusted to year-round fresh water living.

A few years ago, a University of Pennsylvania professor made his first trip along the Maurice and was so enamored with its natural state that he now gives a two-day course each spring—his class trailing behind him in a flotilla, fretting over upcoming evening exams in tent-making.

The full 30 miles of the upper Maurice is traveled comfortably by canoe in two days, and its midpoint comes in a stretch of state-owned game lands. There are no campgrounds or access roads; no latrines or showers. You pick a good-looking piece of shore, clear away the brush and set up camp.

Every now and then along the way, civilization does intrude as a custom-built home peeks through the trees.

"This is the forgotten part of New Jersey and we like it that way. We hope it never changes," explains Dorothy

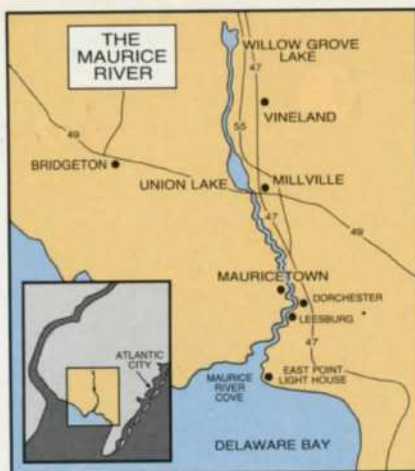


Canoers share the Maurice with muskrats, trout and pickerel.

Meyers. She and her husband, Wilfred, an executive with Prudential Insurance, purchased seven acres of woods and put up their home three years ago. Its rear window walls and angular redwood patio overlook a spectacular view of forest primeval.

A short distance upstream, hidden behind thick clusters of trees and surrounded by thickets of wild berry bushes and river grass, is the ultra-modern gray pile of corners that is the home of Tom and Kattie Riggione. Both are brokers with McClain, Heller & Reilly Realty in Vineland. They built their house five years ago on river land that was owned by Kattie's family.

"We rode out here and I said, 'This is it,'" Tom Riggione explains. "Now I feel like I'm always on vacation. We're just minutes from downtown Vineland, but when I walk out the door it's like I'm in the Poconos. I trek through the woods. We tube down the river. I sit here on Sundays and just look out the back window. It all seems to me like it's been here for 200,000 years."



WHILE THE FORESTS along the Maurice are wild and inspiring, they are hardly so old. Even the largest trees have stood for less than a hundred years. The present growth represents

a natural state after a period of total devastation wrought by man in the 18th and 19th centuries. Back then, the upper river was reengineered with dams to function as a 30-mile long conveyor belt facilitating the complete removal of a primordial cedar forest. That original ancient woods must have resembled something like a shorter version of the surviving stands of redwood in California. But William Penn changed all that.

Three centuries ago, in the ship *Welcome*, Penn rounded the horn of Cape May, and sailed up the Delaware. He passed the mouth of a great river that had been named for the *Prince Maurice*, a Dutch ship that had sunk there earlier, and continued up to settle the town of Philadelphia.

During those first two centuries, the civilization of America was a wooden one. Its vehicles, tools, domestic implements, bridges and architecture were fashioned largely from parts of trees. In that age, wood was also the

Continued on page 82

The Castles in the Wilderness

The latest trend along the 50-mile length of the Maurice is luxury home building. During the last decade, at least six dozen \$100,000-plus custom homes have gone up quietly along the water's edge.

Tom Forrest, purchasing agent for Resorts International, is one of several Atlantic City executives who commute each day from secluded homes along the little-known Maurice. Forrest, who has been with Resorts since its 1978 opening, lives in the woods where the river broadens to become Union Lake near Millville. It's a 45-minute drive to the casino complex each morning, but he says, "I've never regretted it."

Forrest explained that the Maurice River is "peaceful and quiet. I like the solitude away from the hassle of the everyday rat race in Atlantic City. We have the river and the lake and the woods and my sons both sail. I sail. It's the best of both worlds here."

Substantial sections of the river's shores have been incorporated into



Modern wilderness retreats are beginning to spring up on the river near Vineland.

the state's Green Acres programs and will never be developed. Other enormous stretches have been held for generations by local families or corporations. DuPont, for instance, owns miles of waterfront purchased early in the century as a potential source of spring water for the firm's distant

chemical plants. The scheme never materialized and the ground remains a wilderness.

But in the available pockets of real estate along the river, sumptuous homes have been erected and more are planned. Along the upper river, one low-profile developer currently is completing a soaring stone and glass complex that features interior garden spaces traversed by marble walks—the first of four such homes he says will be a "clubby enclave" for upscale buyers.

Near Millville, dozens of homes look out on the water from the ultra-posh Woodland Shores development where some houses approach the \$500,000 range. There is also a 27-acre private sailing and tennis club offering a spectacular view of the water.

And on the lower river, a sprawling new mansion and private yacht wharf now dominate the riverfront at Mauricetown.

Al Jonus, executive vice-president of the Wheaton Industries glass conglomerate in Millville, is one of those now building a large home along the Maurice. He explained, "I think you will be seeing an increasing ripple effect from Atlantic City here along the Maurice in the coming years. It's not ocean front, that's true. But consider that an ocean front property in Stone Harbor or Avalon might be \$300,000 for a 60-by-110 lot. A piece of property here with 400 feet of water frontage might be \$50,000 to \$75,000. The difference in price is really substantial."

—H.L.

RIVER

Continued from page 59

fuel for every forge and foundry, kiln and cookhouse. It was a commodity as crucial to daily life as today's petroleum. And timber barons quickly rose

throughout the Delaware Valley, building commercial empires in the wood trade.

Soon, Southwestern New Jersey became the lumber yard of Philadelphia, and the Maurice River—a jungle-like wild place whose banks were infested

with rattlesnakes and roamed by elk—was turned into a liquid moving machine for the burgeoning logging industry.

This is how it worked: What is now Willow Grove Lake was created as a collection basin. Cedar trees of enor-

Fiddler on the Maurice

In 1881, when 24-year-old Ivan Grinevitsky leaped from behind a snow bank near the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg and heaved a bomb, he altered the history of both Russia and the Maurice River in New Jersey.

That blast tore off the legs of Czar Alexander II, ended a quarter of a century of moderate rule and began one of the world's most notorious national bloodbaths.

Government-orchestrated anti-Jewish riots ripped across such cities as Kiev, where swarms of torch-carrying horsemen marauded, burning and looting Jewish homes; littering alleyways and curbstones with bodies. At the edge of that city, Israel Hirsch Levin, a cabinetmaker who worked building wooden coaches in the new railroad yards, took his family and fled into the hills, huddled as flames and flashing gun muzzles lit the streets below.

Leading his family out of Russia, Levin became one of the first in what was soon a wave of millions of Russian Jews trekking south toward France and Germany and England. This politically problematic crush of humanity resulted in the creation of two transoceanic resettlement programs. One was devised by French Baron de Rothschild, who shipped the Russian refugees to Palestine. The other was devised by French Baron de Hirsch. He shipped them to New Jersey.

There, on the west bank of the Maurice River in 1882, the Levins and 42 other Russian families became the core of "Alliance Colony"—the first Jewish farming settlement in the United States. Half a dozen such refugee colonies eventually were set up in Cumberland, Salem, Cape May and Atlantic counties as well as in other states such as Kansas, South Dakota, Oregon and Louisiana.

Alliance Colony farmers, who first lived in tents and then a single, communal barracks before they could build individual homes, shipped vegetables and fruits to Camden and Philadelphia and, by the turn of the century, had become a prosperous community. By the 1930s, Jewish



Harry Levin is descended from the Russian-Jewish settlers who bought farms in the area in 1882. Alliance cemetery has been transformed into a museum.

Alliance community who still lives on the family farm. He owns 60 acres along the river.

He also has become the unofficial historian of Alliance, collecting its artifacts, documents, photographs and oral histories that are now stored in the cemetery's chapel—recently converted into a museum.

"When I was a child," he explains, "we used to go down to the river in open buckboard wagons loaded with



farmers had also become a major force in the poultry industry, pioneering the mass production techniques that made the upper Maurice famous as the "Egg Basket of the East."

But in the 1940s, the Alliance Colony was fading rapidly as its new generation abandoned agricultural life and moved into the medical, legal and business professions in Vineland, Atlantic City and Philadelphia. In August 1982, 1,700 descendants of Alliance families came from as far away as Hawaii and Florida for ceremonies marking the 100th anniversary of the settlement's founding. But only a few of its original landmarks remain.

The most visible is Alliance Cemetery, which intersects the Maurice River in a grove of solemn stone and quiet pine. Its oldest sections date to the 1880s, and the epitaphs chronicle a major epic in the history of the Jewish people. It is not unusual on warm days to find 77-year-old Harry Levin—grandson of Israel Hirsch Levin—wandering about, reading stones and scribbling notes.

Levin, an attorney who recently stepped down from the bench after 24 years as a municipal judge, is one of the few remaining survivors of the

barrels, which we filled with water and brought into the fields. In those days irrigation was done with buckets and teakettles one plant at a time. And we'd go down to a place near Eppinger Avenue where the river took a turn and the trees came down like a wall separating two areas. On one side the men went to take their baths and on the other, the women. The river was all the plumbing we had.

"And there was Alliance Beach and a hotel nearby. It was a beautiful place on the river. A little bridge went over there. We had a building for the kids to dance in and benches and tables where people played cards. There's only the beach there now. Everything else is gone."

Also nearby, overlooking the Maurice, is Echaris Israel, Southern New Jersey's oldest synagogue, built shortly after Israel Levin and the first refugees arrived.

Harry Levin leads services there when there are services. That used to be each sabbath, but now has been cut back to only the high holy days. "We couldn't get a quorum of 10 men together anymore," Levin explained. "Very few Jewish people are left here."

—H.L.

mous size—some of them 6' in diameter—were felled with hand saws and dragged to the water by horse teams.

Once the lake was filled with logs, huge wooden gates on the dam were opened—releasing a tidal wave of hundreds of thousands of tons of water and wood. This maelstrom tore through the river valley, bulldozing trees out by the roots and leaving behind a flattened trail. At the other end, another dam had been built creating what is now Union Lake. The logs caromed into the far end, their momentum dissipating, and they came to a quiet float. Lumbermen, leaping across the water, log-to-log, like flannel-shirted goats, wrestled each piece of timber toward the saw mills that lined the shore and eventually provided the lumber camp with its modern name: Millville.

Just south of Union Lake, where the Maurice abruptly changes to a deep-channelled waterway, a bustling lumber port developed: a place echoing with sea chanteys and clomp of mule hooves whacking wharf plank. Casting off at dawn, loaded schooners hauled sail and drifted south, their decks wafting the smells of morning coffee and the sap oozing from boards of cedar and pine packed solid in their holds.

In less than a century, this operation denuded the region. What had been a forboding, swamp-crossed forest of mammoth trees was changed into a sun-baked plain. The wind eventually brought grasses and seedlings of pine and oak and red maple—the beginnings of the forest that thrives today.

The only remnant of the huge cedar stands that lined the watersheds of the Pine Barrens is the odd color that stains its rivers. The Maurice's rusty hue is the result of the deep springs percolating through thick layers of living cedar roots and ancient cedar debris. Primordial cedar bogs underlay the entire water table of the region.

THE LARGE LOGGING companies all folded by the turn of the century, but several smaller mills continued operating in isolated spots into the 1940s. Today, Carl Lampe of Vineland is the last of the Maurice River loggers—heir to a tradition of three centuries. On any given day, the ruddy-faced woodsman can be found somewhere along the dirt roads that crisscross his 160 acres of heavily wooded land on the river just south of Willow Grove Lake.

Born in Germany, Lampe came to America in 1928 as a child. His family bought a small, five-acre poultry farm on the river and kept 500 chickens. In 1940, Lampe and his father built a small lumber mill with parts scavenged from



Carl Lampe, one of the last loggers along the Maurice, has been described as a cross between Paul Bunyan and Smokey the Bear.

around the area. For power, they installed a 1909 Lawson one-cylinder gasoline engine. That antique only recently gave out and now sits carefully wrapped in oil rags until replacement parts can be custom-made by a machine shop. For now, 59-year-old Lampe hitches up a tractor engine to run the mill that he operates with his son, Russell.

Carl Lampe planted 30,000 seedlings to replace the trees he cut.

During the cooler months, the Lampes cut oak and pine planks from trees they've felled themselves. In the summer, they run Lampe's Canoe Rental and thus are the only residents remaining on the upper Maurice who earn their living entirely from the river's natural resources.

"We try to be as self-sufficient as possible in the way we live," the elder Lampe explained. "We enjoy living this way. I don't like to be closed in." His home sits on the bank of the river—a ranch house with an iron stone porch. The wall studs and ceiling rafters are all oak. The walls are cedar—all fashioned from trees hewn into lumber at the Lampe Mill.

Along with lumber, the Lampes also cut and sell cordwood, a fuel that suddenly has come back into its own in this era of energy-efficient wood stoves and fireplaces.

Hardly like his slash-and-run pred-

ecessors in the Maurice timber business, Lampe has planted nearly 30,000 trees during the last two decades to replace the ones he cut. His sprawling property is striking—as a seemingly undisturbed portion of the Pinelands that runs with wildlife. Yet, the mill recently has begun cutting 6-inch lumber from stands of Loblolly pine Lampe tamped into the ground as seedlings just 12 years ago.

Soft-spoken and self-deprecating, Lampe has become something of a local legend along the upper Maurice. "He's like a cross between Paul Bunyan and Smokey the Bear," one river resident explains. On his own, Lampe acts as the river's caretaker, often patrolling it in a battered duck boat. He collects trash and carries a chainsaw for cutting away particularly large trees that have fallen across the water. It is difficult to appreciate the full measure of this last task unless you've stood up in a flat boat in fast-running water and attempted to keep your balance—at the same time you've taken hold of a roaring saw that can tear off your leg or open your chest at the slightest brush.

Lampe has little confidence in the government agencies that have actual jurisdiction along the water.

He explains, "If you have a problem on the river and you go to them, you need plans and approvals and there are funding debates and liability insurance and scheduling and it goes on and on. You can just as easily jump in a boat and take care of it yourself. It's not just me. We've had Boy Scouts and even a group of senior citizens coming in to help.

"Let the government take care of other things," Carl Lampe says. "The people will take care of *this* river." ■

PARTING THOUGHT

Continued from page 112

developed from a union of a Phoenician maiden with a Viking sailor whose ship apparently blundered into the Mediterranean while on an expedition bent on discovering Miami Beach. Their son married the daughter of an African Eskimo.

In Copenhagen I had quite a problem picking up the scent, but eventually the most amazing information of the whole strange investigation came to light. In a 1500-year-old church

cemetery I discovered some records that indicated that my ancestor, Frecklund Thor (which means freckled faced Thor) actually was a mixture of Scandinavian and a tribe that apparently had crossed from America.

"This is really quite bizarre," I said. "You mean that my very earliest ancestors were Americans? But there were only Indians in America then."

"Yes," said the wise old man in charge of the cemetery, "and we have reason to believe your principal ancestor returned about 300 B.C. with the crew of a Viking expedition that dis-

covered Somers Point. No ordinary bloke, either. His name was Chief White Water."

"Amazing," I said. "Where did he get that name?"

"Chap drank nothing but martinis."

"Good Lord, it's in the genes," I said.

It just shows what can be done if you have the time and the inclination to check out your roots. I plan to take a trip to Mesopotamia this summer where I have reason to believe there is more information. But first I have to break the news to mother about the British. ■

RIVER

Continued from page 99

cent of the area's oysters. Virtually overnight, the annual harvest that had been running at more than a million bushels dropped to less than 10,000 bushels.

The wharves along the Maurice went quiet. Some of the boats were sold off to distant fishing fleets; others were towed away to become weathered hulks haunting the surrounding creeks. Then the piers began to go, dropping off into the water, leaving only blunted stumps. The ship repair yards and warehouses laid off their employees and then boarded their windows. Canneries slowed, then stopped and auctioned off their rusting machinery. The truck routes through the area ceased to rumble and the rail lines grew weeds. Grocery stores and gas stations went vacant and then fell victim to vandals.

"Financially," explained Morgan, "It was even worse than it appeared. It's not like up in Millville when a fellow sells a million dollars worth of Fords or Chevrolets and sends 80 percent of that money back to Detroit. Here on the river, when you sold a million dollars worth of oysters, all that money stayed here. Every town along the water was tied to oyster money. And suddenly, it was gone. Catastrophic is the only word that describes it."

By 1980, a century after Port Norris rose as a boom town of oyster barons and shipping magnates, it had disintegrated. After two-and-a-half decades of trying, Rutgers' and other scientists had been unable to kill or cure the MSX blight that had destroyed the beds.

Along the shores, abandoned industrial complexes and homes had become such fire and safety hazards that whole sections of what had been a major city were torn down. Today, those empty fields are littered with cinder blocks and random timbers overgrown with the ever-creeping vines from neighboring marshes.

The nearby towns of Dorchester and Leesburg on the east bank of the



Gleaming with winterizing coats of white paint, the oyster boats await Spring.

Maurice originally were established around sprawling shipbuilding yards. Now they sit along quiet shores. A drive through either town finds an odd mix of decrepit shanties and stunning Victorian houses. Many of these striking homes—constructed by a community of ship's carpenters—are kept up by the current residents who often commute long distances in search of work. In Leesburg, rows of porches with incredibly ornate hand-wrought detail contrast with battered pickup trucks parked in the driveways.

"Ship work was all these places did in the past," explained Morgan. "Now they're bedroom communities. You have a lot of people who went to work in Millville glass plants up river and now they're unemployed from that. It's pretty depressed around here."

Dan O'Connor, a technician at the Rutgers Oyster Lab where a staff of 10 continues its quest to conquer MSX, explained. "There is no great likelihood that we will be able to do anything about it in the immediate future. It's something we have to live with and work around."

Areas that seem immune to MSX and that support new oyster beds have been found far up the bay. But the trip is a long one from the Maurice River. And the costs of operating boats have sky-

rocketed. But some oyster operations have returned. During the last year in the region that once licensed more than 500 boats, 67 are again licensed. But many of those are not working full time.

According to the Rutgers Lab, which monitors production, 200,000 to 300,000 bushels per year are being harvested from the distant beds.

Morgan points out doggedly, however, that the harvest "could go as high as 400,000 bushels."

The State Shellfish Management Office at Bivalve skeptically reports that the oyster industry's outlook "is not that great."

But Morgan insists, "I think we're about to turn the corner."

The 55-year-old riverman who is locally famed for his energy and optimism, is also vice president of the only remaining major shipyard on the lower river. Dorchester Industries, the small yard does repairs but recently began work on a new, historic venture: construction of the first new oyster boat launched on the river since 1931.

Morgan is building the new vessel for his oyster company. "I have hope," he says, waving a hand toward a river as silent as it was broad. ■

Part Two will appear in the April issue.