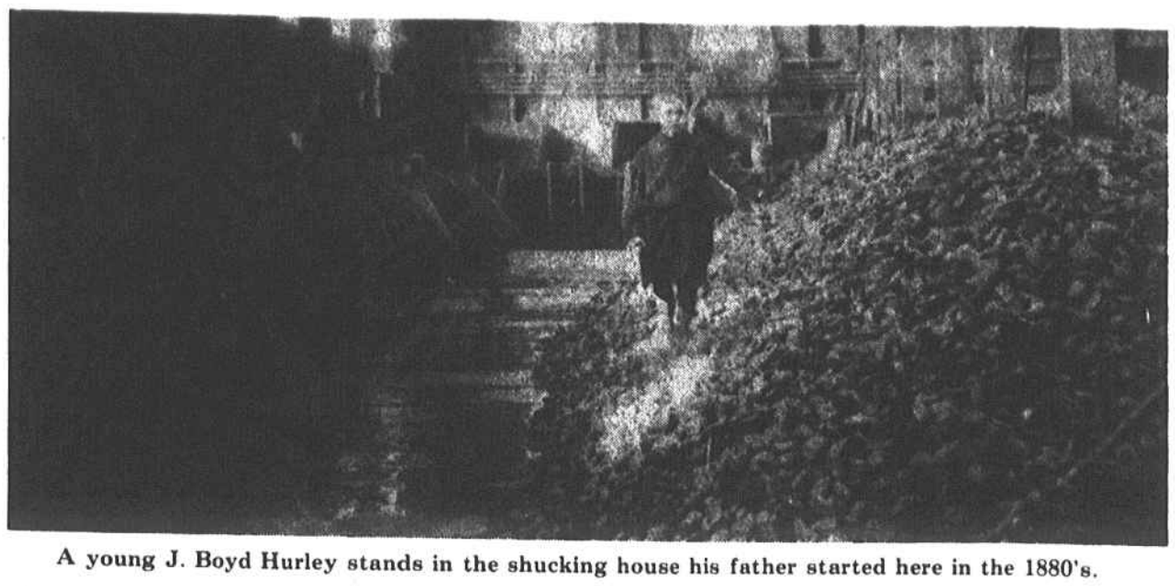
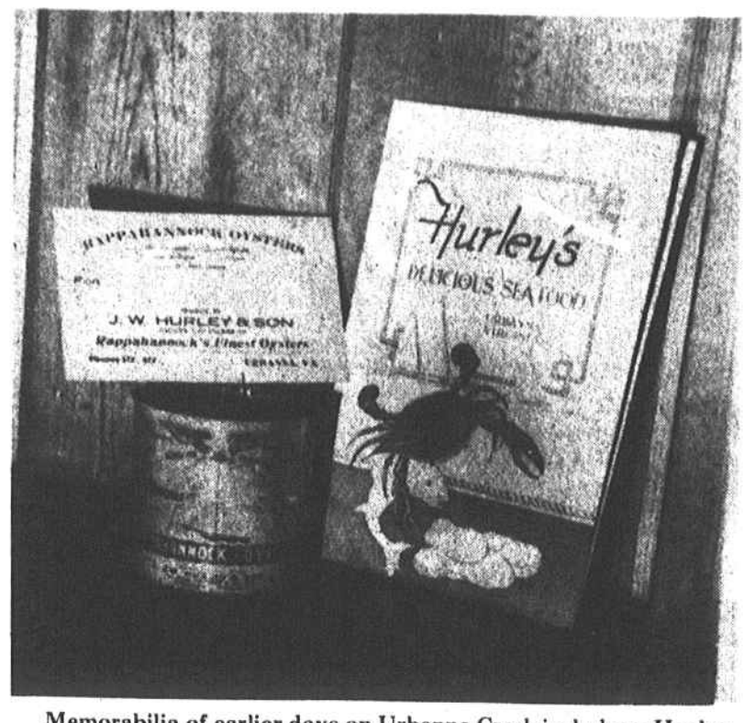


A young J. Boyd Hurley stands in the shucking house his father started here in the 1880's.



Memorabilia of earlier days on Urbanna Creek includes a Hurley oyster can, shipping label and restaurant menu.

"King of Them All!"

Employee recalls heyday of Urbanna oyster industry

by Larry S. Chowning

Over the years, the oyster industry has played a significant role in the local economy and tongers, planters, buyers and shuckers have all contributed to the age old process.

There is, however, at least one job that's seldom considered. The early shucking houses all had a handyman, a jack-of-all-trades, who could work a dredge, build a schooner's mast, drop the roof on a three story building, or skim and package oysters.

Well . . . not many were lucky enough to have a handyman *that* talented, but J.W. Hurley & Son in Urbanna had one who could do even more. He is Ralph Woodland Rowe of Urbanna, who worked for Hurley's from 1925 until the 1940's.

Hurley & Son was a large buyer packer on the bay from the 1880's and it was later directed by his son, J. Boyd Hurley. The company bought and sold oysters and fish and ran a shucking house at the foot of Virginia Street in Urbanna.

The Hurleys were noted for their "King Of Them All — Famous Rappahannock's Oysters." Besides the oyster business, they operated a tomato factory, a general store and a restaurant. There was plenty of work for a man like Rowe.

The Rowes arrived in Urbanna on July 3, 1925, fresh from the heart of watermen country — Guinea in Gloucester County. Woodland and his family arrived in Urbanna on a vintage log canoe that belonged to his father.

Rowe went right to work for the Hurley's rebuilding a dock . . . and he remained with the firm for some 20 years.

Some of his duties during the winter were to dredge and buy oysters in the "frame built" buy boat, the Walter Boyd. On Saturday's he would also drive a load of oysters to West Point in a "snub-nose" International truck with solid tires. From there, the oysters were carried to Baltimore on a steamboat or on the train to Richmond.

Oysters were packaged in five, ten and 15 gallon containers, sealed



Woodland Rowe

and covered with ice, he said. On weekdays, the meat was hauled to Baltimore on bay steamboats that arrived in Urbanna Creek. On Saturday's, however, the steamer would go to Norfolk so the weekly pilgrimage to West Point was necessary to catch a steamer en route to Baltimore.

"Sometimes I'd be a half a day driving to and from West Point," said Rowe. "There weren't very many good roads back then."

In the summer Rowe's job would change to maintenance man. He would repair or replace shucking stalls and wheelbarrows and he was also responsible for the general maintenance of the building and boats.

Wheelbarrows were used extensively around the Hurley operation and Rowe recalled one occasion when they actually took the place of the boats.

Photos courtesy of Mrs. J. Boyd Hurley and Jonesey Payne.

It was during one of the big freezes in the early 1930's when Boyd Hurley sent a group of employees up to Turtle Point on Lagrange Creek to harvest a bed of oysters. They were planted in four to five feet of water.

The entire Rappahannock River and all the creeks and coves were frozen solid, said Rowe. "We took axes to cut through the ice" and used nippers and short handled tongs to catch the oysters."

Some stood on the ice while tonging. Others dragged a small skiff out on the ice, cut a hole big enough for it to fit, and tonged from the skiff. The oysters were loaded into wheelbarrows and pushed across the ice to a waiting truck parked on shore.

Asked if it was cold out there, Rowe laughed. "You ain't kidding, it was cold," he said.

Rowe said the metal work on the wheelbarrow was forged in the local blacksmith shop, owned by Joe Pierce. The wood work was all made at the shucking house by Rowe.

The shucking house had wooden shucking stalls for each oyster shucker. "I've made a many oyster stall," said Rowe.

One summer Rowe spent most of his time taking down the third story of the old shucking house and making it into a two story building. The remains of the shucking house are still standing at the foot of Virginia Street. The building now belongs to Southern States Cooperative.

On another occasion Rowe was instructed to replace the mast and boom on the schooner Lucy Mae, which he did with "little trouble," he said.

The Hurleys owned several vessels and one the earliest was the schooner Man-A-Way. Rowe said the Man-A-Way was lost at sea in the early 1920's when she collided with a menhaden steamer off Windmill Point. The vessel was carrying a load of canning tomatoes to Baltimore.

Later, the Hurleys had the power boat J. Boyd built and it was used to buy and haul oysters. It was later rebuilt at Price's Railway in Deltaville and renamed the Walter Boyd, he said.

Another one of Rowe's assignments was to drive Harvey H. Conway around when he came to town. Conway was the patriarch of the noted family that owned the Conway fleet of sailing vessels.

Rowe remembers Captain Conway telling him this story once when he was in Urbanna buying oyster shells to sell to a lime plant!

The schooner Harvey H. Conway was moored in the Patuxent River during a blinding snow storm in the early 1930's. The skipper, Harvey H. Conway Jr., had been anchored there for several days due to the bad weather.

Harvey Jr.'s father was provoked that the vessel and its load of oysters had not been brought to Baltimore, snow storm or not. So. Harvey Sr. made the trek across the bay and found the schooner still moored.

Rowe said that the old skipper told his son that he couldn't sell a boat load of oysters sitting still and proceeded to sail the vessel to Baltimore himself.

When he arrived, several men were on the pier and one asked the skipper if he wasn't afraid of hitting a sandbar with the snow coming down so hard. Conway replied, "If you run into every sandbar on the Bay sometime or another, then you'll know where they all are!"

Rowe recalls that his days with the Hurleys were fairly pleasant.

"There was a lot of hard work, but they were good people to work for," said Rowe. "Mr. Hurley (J.W. Hurley) was one of the neatest men I've ever known. If you saw him without a white shirt and neck tie, it was some kind of hot!

"Mr. Hurley loved the days of sail," said Rowe. "I remember him saying to some oystermen that when everything was powered by sail, they'd go over to Morattico and work all day; but when the motor came along, they wouldn't go out of sight of Urbanna Creek.

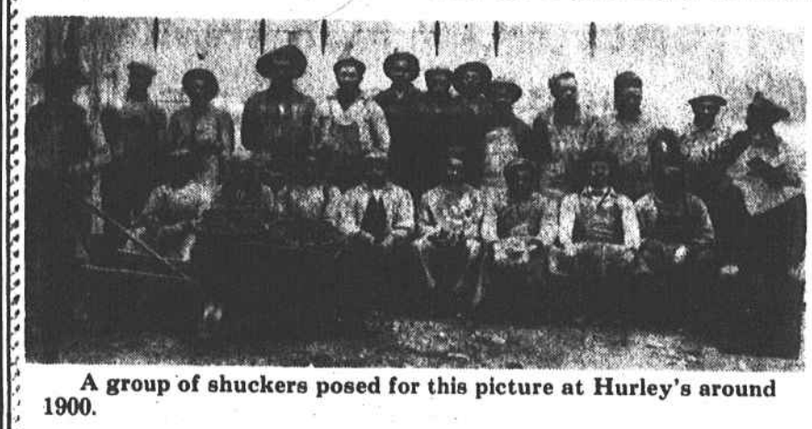
"Mr. Hurley was something. He could chew tobacco so clean you never knew it was in his mouth," said Rowe.

"Mr. Hurley and Boyd couldn't be beat in my book," said Rowe.

Boyd Hurley, J.W.'s son, kept the business open into the 1940's. He opened a restaurant near the shucking house in 1945 and was a businessman in town until his death.

Today, Urbanna pays tribute to the oyster once a year by holding the Urbanna Oyster Fstival. Thousands of people converge upon the town looking to eat those delicious Rappahannock River oysters.

The white clapboard building at the foot of Watling Street that houses Payne's Crab House today is but a reminder of the years gone by when the Rappahannock River oyster was truly the "king."



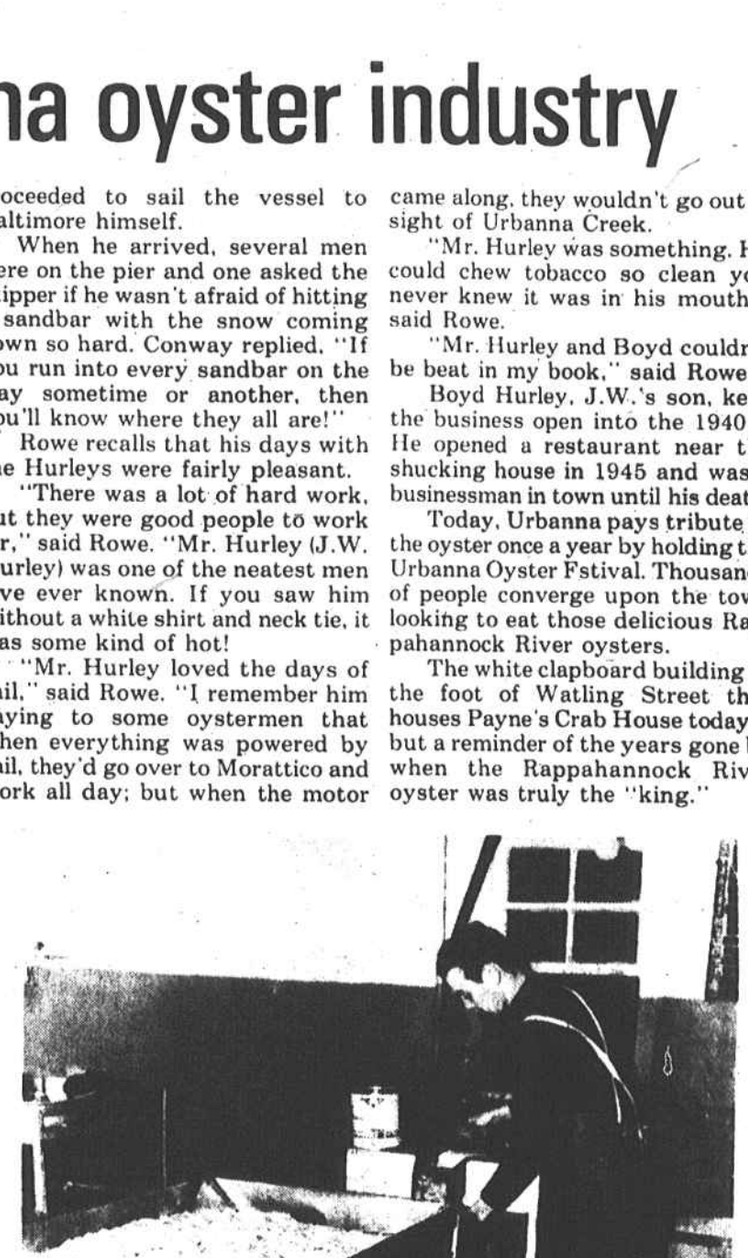
A group of shuckers posed for this picture at Hurley's around 1900.



Berkley Epps (front) and other Hurley employees haul wheelbarrows full of oysters on the Lagrange Creek ice.



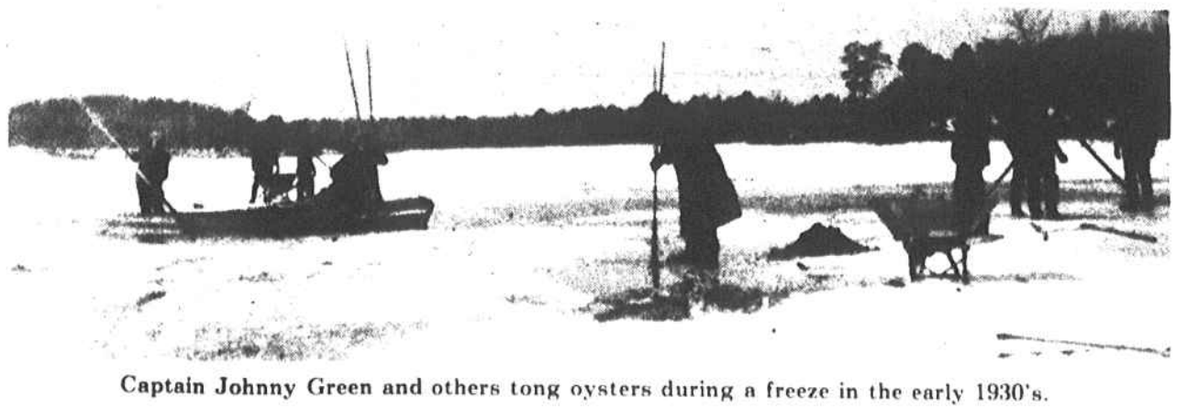
Ben Wormeley unloads oysters at Hurleys from the hold of the power boat Grace.



Shelton Lewis skims and packs oysters around 1932.



Shuckers fill the stalls at Hurley's oyster house at the foot of Virginia Street.



Captain Johnny Green and others tong oysters during a freeze in the early 1930's.