

Lawrence Nelson  
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## AN OYSTERMAN

By Lawrence F. Evans.

Lawrence Nelson tall, tan and taciturn, stood in the door of the small weather-worn frame fish house on Bon Secour River and lazily answered questions concerning the life of an oysterman. Here, where tall oaks spread their branches protectingly over the river, the one-way sand trail ends between banks of oyster shells. Just west of here the river converges with the Bon Secour Bay and still west of this, Bon Secour Bay merges with Mobile Bay. At the merging of the waters is an island - perhaps two miles in circumference. This is known as Oyster Reef and here most of the Bon Secour Oysters are caught. In the background are enormous liveoak trees, many of which are gray with draperies of Spanish moss. These great trees and some of the houses scattered about have stood through generations of coast residents.

"Yessir," said the young oysterman, "Bon Secour oysters are the best, tastiest and fattest oysters to be found anywhere. I remember when I was just a little shaver, New York people came down here and tried to get oyster seed to take up to New England coast. Wanted good oysters there too. My dad is a Dane who came here when he was young and sorta growed up with the oyster business. He couldn't do nothing to keep strangers from taking them, if they found them - but they couldn't find them. Dad offered to guide

'em so he took 'em to the worst part of the bay. They tried it two or three days and finally gave up. Didn't git enough to fool with. But it did establish a market in New York and the market is still better than the supply most of the time."

"Nope," Lawrence continued in answer to my question. "I ain't nothing extra as a oysterman. But we oystermen make a good living most of the year. For eight months from September to April we catch oysters. There ain't no oysters during the summer cause they're jist babies. We catch red fish then. Come July and August, the best shrimp season, we turn to shrimp."

"Tell me, I said, "Do many people make their living in oysters?"

"Well I reckon they's about fifty families in this section that makes a living in oysters during the season. Guess none of 'em ever go hungry. If a fellow works he's bound to make something. Sometimes prices are bad but they're nearly always better than what a farmer gets for his work. Now, I remember one day last year when I caught four barrels and the price at that time was ten dollars a barrel. Most times they're as low as two dollars a barrel though. Still, eight dollars or forty dollars is pretty good money these days."

"Sure thing," I said. "This time or any other time. But aren't there days when you can't work?"

"Yep, quite a few. Comes the cold season when the wind blows and the fog comes in there's little use in going out. Can't see what you'e doing and besides the



water is rough. Hurricane season after Christmas is a bad time. Theys lots o'days when a fellow can't even git out. Once when I went out - I was about eighteen - a storm come up and blowed me thirty miles out in the Gulf of Mexico. Boy, I was scared! The folks thought I was a goner too. Now I've got me a real boat. Cost me twelve hundred dollars cash. Saved for it since I was a kid. Thirty-two feet, six bunks, water-tight cabin, cook shanty, nets and a Cadillac motor. She's some boat!"

"Say, just how do you go about catching the oysters anyway," I asked.

"Simple. We got oyster rakes. See these? They're fourteen feet long and the handle works like scissors. The rakes open and when you drag them to the bottom where you scrape the oysters, you just close 'em up and lift them to the barrel on the boat."

"Of course," Lawrence continued. "They's another way but we can't do that no more. Sometimes though a fisherman gits in a hurry to load a boat when the price is good. He takes a net with drags on it and rakes in a whole net load at once. Usually gits arrested. None of us who want to stay here do that any more. Can't afford to."

"Sure, its hard work lifting up rakes full of oysters with their shells on them all day. But sometimes they ain't more than three or four feet deep. I been at it since my pa made me quit school and help him when I was in the sixth grade. Been makin' my own livin' since I was thirteen years old."

"You must like it to stay at/<sup>it</sup>as long as you have," I said.

"Sure I like it. Don't know nothin' else nohow. But I like it and I ain't done so bad. Been married six years. Bought this boat for twelve hundred. Bought a new Ford last year. Built a new house last two years. Jist a bungalow but paid cash for everything. I ain't done so bad."

"Danger? Well they's some. Sometimes we're so far out we have to stay on the boat all night when the fog rolls in on us and sometimes rough weather forces us to anchor and stay below for two - three days and nights. Carry enough food along with us and if we run out jist eat fish and oysters."

"Pretty soft for you fellows though. Always catch as many as two barrels up to six and know that they are not below two dollars a barrel. Guess I'd better go to oystering," I kidded.

There was a good laugh at that. It appeared that it took he-men for the job.

"Nope. Not so soft," Lawrence answered, "We have to git up in the morning and be on the water by daylight and always git in after dark. A long day. It's hard on a feller. Makes 'em git old and rheumatic and gives 'em a cold pretty often. Not much ice in the winter but dampness here penetrates to the bone. Yep, it's pretty hard. Now me, I wish all I had to do was to run around and ask questions for the government!"

"Well, I guess I'll stop on that and let you go back to work. But I would like to see your house for I know your'e



proud of it."

"Sure am. Well, you go around the road until you come to the bend and the first house on the right is mine. But don't start no flirtation with my wife!"

I promised that there would be no flirtation. My State Director was with me anyway! Or rather I was with her.

Around the bend and on the right I found a yellow bungalow under a huge spreading oak whose limbs were protected with Spanish moss. Mrs. Nelson came to the door and invited me in. She was in a neat house dress and two attractive children, one five and one three, played on the floor. The floor was bare, the room was bare too. But the Rural Administration Electrification Association had just completed wiring the place. The house has two bed-rooms, a living-room, dining room, kitchen and bath. The furniture is very scarce. Noticing my glance Mrs. Nelson explained that they pay for things as they go. No money, no furniture is their motto. They expected to make enough this year to buy furniture. But now, fresh water had come in from the floods above and killed all the oysters. She thinks it will be a bad year. But she seems to be satisfied with her lot.

She has grown up in the community with Lawrence and they went to school together until he quit. She went ahead and finished High School in Foley, the closest town, ten miles away. She is proud of her husband, her house, her children playing quietly on the floor.

"O yes," said Mrs. Nelson. "We intend to give the

children an education. We'll send them to college if they want to go. Most of the children in this community go to school. Except the Creoles; they don't go."

I asked Mrs. Nelson if they are better off than most oysterman.

"I don't think so." She replied. "You see my husband is younger than the majority of the oystermen. We are about an average family in the business, I'd say. Lawrence works harder than most oystermen and so we have caught up with most of them in fewer years. It's hard work and dangerous, too, and I get afraid lots of times when he is off on a boat all night. But then we always rest on Saturday afternoons and Sundays. Sometimes we go to a show in Foley on Saturday night and sometimes we drive as far as Pensacola, Florida (forty-six miles). On Sundays we take the children — the boy is five and the girl is three — to the Baptist Sunday School and we are both members there. We go to church when they have preachin' once a month. I don't kick because I keep up with what is going on with a daily paper (by mail) and we'll git a radio this winter. We've never had any serious sickness yet."

Mrs. Nelson was showing signs of developing into a plump, average southern housewife. If they are examples of the oystermen families the business is not bad at all.

I thanked Mrs. Nelson and then withdrew. With plump hands, in front of healthy, shining faces, the children waved goodbye.