

**Adapted from: Documenting Maritime Folklife: An Introductory Guide****Fieldworker:** David Taylor**Project:** Maritime Heritage Survey**Date:** November 6, 1986**Place:** Apalachicola, Florida

Nancy Nusz and I left our rented cottage at 6:45 a.m. to meet with Apalachicola oysterman Ken Folsom and spend the day with him aboard his oyster skiff. We had breakfast at a local diner, and arrived at Ken's boat house on Water Street at about 7:45 a.m. We waited around until Ken showed up at a little before 8:00.

Ken was born in 1955 and is originally from Ft. Walton Beach, Florida. He worked in radio broadcasting for several years and decided he preferred the slower pace of fishing. He has been oystering for six years.

We boarded his boat and headed west in the bay, arriving at the intended oystering spot, called "North Spur," within about twenty minutes. Along the way we passed by a leased oyster bed marked by pilings driven into the bay floor. Ken had marked out the area he wanted to oyster in previously by putting out buoys (1 gallon-size plastic jugs). For finding a more specific location, he used "the ranges." That is, he lined up land marks, in this case a clump of trees above a small building on the shore. He records this information in a "range book"--a notebook that he keeps on board. Ken dropped anchor (an auto crank shaft) and began using his tongs to bring up oysters which he deposited on the "culling board" - a piece of plywood, with 2x4 rails, set athwartships.

Within a few minutes, another oysterman came by and dropped anchor a short distance away. Ken told us that was Cletis Anderson, the oysterman from whom he learned. After 20 minutes or so, Cletis, curious about Nancy and me, Ken speculated, came closer and introduced himself. He oystered close to us for the rest of the day and presented us with a good opportunity to speak to another oysterman, and gave us a chance to photograph activity on another boat. Cletis' boat was built by Sonny Polous.

Ken cheerfully explained his tonging activities including: developing the ability to learn what's on the bottom by listening to the sound made by the tongs, and by feeling vibrations of the tongs with hands and feet; developing balance, and using leverage to reduce effort and strain when tonging; noticing change in shell color in relationship to shell location (e.g., on edge of bar).

Ken's tongs are 12 ft. long and made by Corky Richards of Apalachicola. Cletis' are 14 footers and also made by Corky. (Cletis' tongs have 18 teeth) Ken also uses his tongs to change the position of his boat on the bed (i.e., he uses them like a pole).

Ken explained that some oystermen carry poles or a chain which they use to determine the location of oyster beds. Cletis uses a chain. Later in the day, we observed a man pass by who was using a pole in this manner while his boat was underway.



Regulations say that oysters must be at least 3 inches long. Ken has a notch in the rail of his culling board --slightly longer than 3"-- which he uses as a gauge.

Oystering by Ken and Cletis continued throughout the day. Nancy and I took photos and recorded observations. Ken and Cletis seemed happy to answer our questions. When speaking about weatherlore, Cletis said of the local winds and their correlation to fishing success:

"East is the least;
the West is the best."

Around 1:30 p.m., Nancy and I gave Ken a hand by culling the oysters which had accumulated on the culling board. Ken had culled a large batch by himself earlier. This not only helped us pass the time, but also helped us better understand how to cull, and how to recognize certain types of oysters. Local names for oysters included:

- "burr" - a cluster of oysters;
- "coon" - oyster which grows close to shore - close enough for racoons to harvest them
- "scissor" - long, narrow oyster.

Another term--"hogging"--means to harvest while standing directly on the bed rather than in a boat. "Lick" means a pass over the bed with the tongs ("my last lick was a good one").

Ken prefers to sell "select" oysters. That is, single oysters which he has separated from others, if necessary, with his culling iron, for which he receives a higher price than oysters less thoroughly culled. He takes great pride in this, and remarked on the difficulty inherent in changing this preference in order to sell larger quantities of oysters of an inferior grade.

There was much discussion during the day by Ken and Cletis about the "freedom" of oystering, and being one's own boss. Ken hurried to finish his culling in order to leave the beds by 4 p.m. We then went to the Department of Natural Resources checkpoint by the Lighthouse Restaurant (on Rt. 98). After that we went up the river to Ken's buyer's place (Seasweet Seafood on Commerce Street, run by Roger Newton, Mayor of Apalachicola). There, oysters are weighed, washed and graded as we watched. We returned to the dock at about 5:15 p.m.