

hand-powered. But in 1917 a Mr. Georgeson, still a keen oysterman, constructed tables at which two men could work, one from either end. The centre board of the table is a series of removable slats and the men work up the table removing a section as they go. The larger oysters are placed in boxes beside them and the discards dumped down a chute below the centre board.

Even now the job is no easy one. It is hard on the hands and done at high speed in order to clear the table for the next haul. But in the old days a more uncomfortable job than this, done while kneeling on the deck of a bucking ship, would be hard to imagine. Nowadays, too, strong rubber finger-stalls are worn for extra protection.

Each heaped box contains half a sack of oysters, and in this way the crew keep check on their haul after the boxes have been spilled out near the starboard rail. An oyster of less than $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches diameter must be thrown back into the sea. It takes these youngsters approximately seven years to attain full regulation girth.

Our dragging on the blind chance of striking the real bed is not too successful, so we move in closer to Stewart Island, where the oysters are more plentiful, but too small. About midday the skipper decides that we'd better turn for home.

The trip home is rougher, if anything, than the outward journey, especially as we near the harbour. The other boats have had enough, too, and are coming in from the West Bed, the Saddle, the Ruapuke Island bed, and the bed to the east.

On our boat the skipper, too long at the game to let the disappointments of the weather worry him, is blithely opening oysters by the dozen for home consumption while the deck tilts at alarming angles, throwing us from one side of the ship to the other. He might as well be working at the kitchen table for all the ship's antics worry him.

The steady security of the harbour and even land as uninviting as Bluff Hill on a wet and bleak day look like heaven to the sea-sick sightseers. We head for the oyster wharf to put our unsatisfactory haul ashore. Here beds have been constructed under the wharf floor which are

covered by the sea except at low tide. Each boat has a separate section of these artificial beds where the shell-fish are kept alive and fresh in sacks until transported north.

The shallower the water the better the oyster. At Ruapuke dredging is done in about 10 fathoms, and the oysters are bigger and of finer quality. There is some difference of opinion about the possibility of the famous Bluff oyster beds being worked out. As long as there is a limit to the size of the oysters taken and an Inspector on hand to prevent "chicken-stealing," the danger is not great, the old hands say. The present practice is to work a bed out and then leave it for several years to give the smaller oysters a chance to mature. There is no restriction on where you dredge. You usually do a little prospecting before the season (14th February to 30th September) starts, but if you strike a good bed the other boats of the fleet will soon be working in the vicinity. As soon as one bed ceases to be a paying proposition you move on to another.

A hundred bags, each holding sixty to seventy dozen, is considered a splendid day's haul. Sixty bags a day is a good average. The crew of five get elevenpence a bag each from the merchants who own, fuel, and outfit the ships. The skipper and engineer get an extra bonus of about $1\frac{1}{2}$ d. a bag.

Oysters straight from the sea and opened on board are a trifle salty because of the sea-water still in the shell. But it's good to be able to eat them *ad lib.* You appreciate then the amount of work that goes into dragging them out of Foveaux Strait in all but the dirtiest of weather. You realize, too, that the Strait has well deserved its title of one of the nastiest stretches of water in the world. But it takes more than the hazards of the sea to keep the oyster from the table. It's a hard, dangerous, and disappointing game that gives the savour to oyster-soup, the centre to oyster patties, or the succulence to oysters on shell. It also provides those handy little cans that give the extra touch of home to a patriotic parcel. But that's another story.