New on the job and eager to prove my worth, I offered to spend the day working on his boat. Listening was considered a critical part of my new job as an extension agent, and I thought the best place to do that was out on the water. The night before the trip, I carefully planned what I’d need to be prepared. Foul weather gear, check. Boots, check. Gloves, check. Hat, sunglasses, lunchbox, pencil and paper…check, check, check and check.

When I arrived at the dock then next morning, the scruffy captain acknowledged me with a nod, said, “You’re late” and pointed toward the boat. I had arrived at 7:02 a.m.; New Haven traffic. There would be no more conversation about that. While I awaited orders, the captain reviewed his pre-departure checklist. Be mindful of the market, the weather, wind, sea conditions, inspect the controls and lines, check for leaks, measure the fuel and oil, start up the engine, fire up the electronics, start the coffee, and wait for the crew (who were supposed to show up at 6:30 a.m.). There was no paper list. This was, as I would learn, a mental process that he went through systematically, every day since he started his business.

I was assigned the job of staying out of the way until the crew arrived and lines were tossed to the dock. Once out on the shellfish grounds, I spent the rest of the day trying to keep up with the first mate who hoisted and emptied the dredge, sorted its contents and returned it to the water with lightning speed. I enjoyed every minute of it. Watching the clams being piled up on the culling table was to me like finding a treasure.

Aside from the captain occasionally shouting to me from the wheelhouse – “Stop talking,” “Sort faster!” or, “Put that camera down!” – there was little discussion. Nonetheless, at the end of the day, I’d call the trip a success. The boat was packed past the gunwales with neatly stacked mesh bags of clams destined for the market.

I wondered what the captain thought of the day, and my presence on the boat. I just thanked him and hoped that he’d invite me back someday so we could talk about shellfishing.

A few weeks later, to my surprise the phone rang and it was Larry Williams, the captain. “You can come back if you want,” he said, and nothing more. I packed up all my gear again, and this time I was early.

Perhaps he thought of me as less of a liability and more a help this time, because on this day he offered me a cup of coffee and slowly began to open up about the world of shellfishing. This was not anything I was going to learn in a classroom.

“One of the things I learned from early on was to be disciplined. In order for me to stay focused and be in the moment I had to get good rest and get up at 4:30 in the morning to begin the routine. It was a life choice, every morning, no matter what, year round for decades.” Williams said.

I would learn that from a young age, Williams was destined to work on the water. He told me of countless hours he spent exploring on the beach where he grew up in Milford. There, he enjoyed capturing and identifying what he called “creatures of the benthos” (an opportunity he wouldn't afford me on the clam boat because I was supposed to be working).

Williams fished and later farmed the waters in adjacent towns. As a young man, he worked as a deckhand, and later a captain for some of the state’s largest seafood companies. In the eighties he started his own business, the Jessie D. shellfish company. While he spent time as a seed oysterman (these are individuals who harvest

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small oyster seed and sell it to private cultivators who grow the seed on their shellfish leases in Long Island Sound), most of his recent years have been spent on a clam boat.

“The Half Shell was built in 1980 by myself and Don Whittle,” says Williams. “She was built and launched at Dock Road in Milford Harbor. Being 40 feet with a 15-foot beam, the Half Shell was a slow but steady boat that provided an enormous opportunity to learn and develop hydraulic clam dredging.” She was a gift, he adds, and only with the passage of time did he fully appreciate her value.

Another of his boats, the Sara B., was named after his daughter, who is also named after one of Andrew Radel’s oyster boats. Sara B. was built in Maine in 1996. “My third boat, the Raging Bull, was acquired in 2006 in Portland Maine,” Williams says.

Commercial clam harvesting began in the seventies, and today is the largest segment of the state’s shellfishing industry. Williams and the other harvesters target the northern quahog, *Mercenaria mercenaria*, which is also known as the hard or round clam. Quahogs are marketed live, in shell, and by size with the smallest (a.k.a. littlenecks) being the most valuable in the market. Larger quahogs, sold as cherrystones, topnecks, and chowders are also harvested.

As opposed to their wild harvest groundfishing counterparts, clam harvesters have a defined area to which they are confined to work. The state provides shellfishermen the opportunity to lease shellfish cultivation grounds in Long Island Sound. The majority of Connecticut’s clam producers (though not all) rely on seed from Mother Nature. Populations of adult clams, of which there are males and females, will in the summertime produce both sperm and eggs that are fertilized in the water column. Clams begin their lives as free-floating and microscopic zoo- (animal) plankton. After a couple of weeks of drifting in the currents, the clams will build their shells and eventually settle to and bury in the sediment. Connecticut has had commercially successful sets of quahogs for many years and this bounty has supported the livelihoods of many in the industry.

Shellfishermen target their clams using a hydraulic clam dredge that is dragged behind or beside the boat. The dredge slides along the sediment like a sled. It has short tines or “teeth” that probe into the sea bottom while a series of water jets contained by the manifold pump streams of water into the bottom. These jets fluidize the first couple of inches of the sediment so that the clams are brought to the surface and are then caught by the tines and scooped into the basket. Occasionally, something quite odd or valuable comes up in the dredge. Williams himself has happened upon old bottles, Native American artifacts such as clay pipes and arrowheads, rusted pistols, live ammunition from WWII, animal bones, coal, marble doorknobs, wallets, toys, and the list goes on. For someone like me with a degree in marine biology, hauling the dredge was sometimes like finding a gold mine. Although the dredge was designed for clams, sometimes the odd fish or invertebrate appeared in the pile.
My favorite was the rat-tailed sea cucumber, an animal that I had never encountered when out digging for clams recreationally.

Once the clams were separated, the live animals were returned to the sea and the inorganic treasures were stashed away in the boat, the clams needed to be graded, counted, and placed in bags.

“Before commercial grading machines whatever we couldn’t sort through when the dredge came up, we’d put in baskets and sort in a lull between dredge tows,” Williams recalled. “It was tedious work.”

When he made the transition from being a subcontractor to running his own operation, he got his first mechanical clam grading machine. “At first, the machine was a nemesis of mine. It was the antithesis of instincts in terms of production. I looked at it as a choke point because it set the pace for harvesting. It changed the set flow of the operation. It also restricted the deck space. It necessitated another man to load the hopper and increased overhead costs.” But eventually, once the machine became part of the captain’s daily routine the grading machine was perhaps, like me, not seen as a liability.

Over the years, on the trips back to Milford Harbor, Williams told me countless stories of the old shellfishermen that worked the sea before him. He told me of their trials and tribulations, their risks they took and their successes. He attributes his early success to them. It was also his “faith in the lean years” and his willingness to adapt that got him through. Besides being a clam grower, he has also been a seed oyster harvester, a lobsterman, and today, aside from managing his clam operation, he designs dredges, grading machines and other equipment for shellfishing.

Unlike the old Cuban fisherman in Hemingway’s novel, Williams has been fortunate in his career making a living from the sea, as a shellfisherman. He’s made an honest living working in an often harsh environment. The legacy of this Old Man and the Sea will be the knowledge that he passed on to others, and the modesty with which he did it. He’s not that old, but he is destined to be one of the legends.