

# THE BAY IS HIS OYSTER

Harvester and processor Nick Jambor never saw one until he was in his 20s, but he's since made up for it.

BY JENNIFER KARUZA

One in six oysters consumed in the United States comes from Willapa Bay in Pacific County, Washington.

In Bay Center (approximate population: 400), you will find Nick Jambor, who has been a part of the 125-year old West Coast oyster industry for 18 years. He is the owner of Ekone Oyster Co., located on the Goose Point Peninsula of Willapa Bay.

Funny thing is, Jambor, who is 43, did not even know what an oyster was until

'If I can go oystering with you, I'll go crabbing.'

Jambor wound up managing Gillies' oyster setting operation and helped him run the crew. Together they bought several pieces of tideland; and Jambor grew his farm and business on the side.

Gillies taught Jambor almost everything about growing oysters and working on the water.

Gillies had run a processing plant in the 1960s and shared his insights with Jambor. He became his sounding board, and supported Jambor from the start by having him process his oysters.

The two maintained their relationship until Gillies died about six years ago.

Still, going it on his own was a challenge for Jambor. He had borrowed \$1,000 from his parents and leased 20 acres of tidelands in 1978. It didn't come with a bed of roses.

"After two or three years of selling our oysters to other canneries, we realized we were broke and would have to do something different," he says. "So we tried packing under our own name."

In 1982, he began processing his product. He built a smokehouse out of plywood and started cooking oysters on the stove at home. He packaged the oysters in plastic baggies and presented them to Seattle-area restau-

rants.

"All of a sudden we had a little business going," he says.

With another \$7,000 borrowed from his wife's parents for a real smokehouse, he rented a small apartment that he converted into a processing plant.

"I opened oysters, washed them, packed them, smoked them, cleaned up at night," he says. "You name it. I was working also, making about \$800 a month working oysters with [Gillies]."

"We'd work half a day — we'd go harvesting, unload the boat, and that was it for the day. So I'd have four or five hours or more if I wanted. It was just what I wanted with my time. So, I just fit it in."

Ekone Oyster Co. ("Ekone" — rhymes with pony — is a Chinook word meaning "good spirit") today employs 35 full-time workers, owns three longline boats and some skiffs, and ships fresh



COURTESY NICK JAMBOR

**FRESH-CAUGHT** oysters are delivered to the waiting grasp of Raul Garcia. Nick Jambor is never far away.

he was in his 20s, which is unusual in an industry filled with third- and fourth-generation families who have been harvesting oysters since the 1800s.

"I grew up in Hawaii, on the water. I always knew I wanted to be around and work on the water and have my own business," he explains.

He tried his hand at tuna fishing and shrimping in the 1970s out of Coos Bay, Ore., but was prone to seasickness and figured there must be some other way to make a living off the sea.

"I turned to oysters, even though I didn't even know what one looked like. I was at a tide pool on the Oregon coast, and found this critter. I took it back and it was an oyster. I mean, no prior knowledge about what these things were.

"I ended up working at an oyster hatchery for about six months. An older fellow — Stan Gillies, who would become his mentor — "came along and asked me if I'd go crab fishing with him. So I said,



JENNIFER KARUZA

**OYSTERS ARE GROWN** on ropes suspended over the bottom of Willapa Bay. Deckhands aboard Ekone's boat Oyster Catcher use a small reel to bring them up.

and smoked oysters all over the country.

The company is aptly named: Good spirit flows freely at the plant. Under Jambor's direction, teamwork flourishes.

On a typical Monday morning in December, one crew is longlining oysters in the chill waters of the bay, line workers ashore are diligently shucking, and graders are conducting inspections in the processing room.

Phones are answered by anyone who can get to them.

Just outside the plant, Jambor is stapling wet-lock boxes (waxed cartons that are used to ship fresh seafood). There are a hundred things going on all at once, but everything appears to be running smoothly.

Kevin Funkhouser, 36, is the plant manager and has been with Jambor for 13 years.

"Everyone has good days and bad days, but I think for the majority of it down here, we all pretty much have a good day every day.

Even when things are hectic and we're swamped with orders, we have a good attitude.

"We all do our job, we know what we have to do. I don't stand over their shoulders and say, 'Come on, hurry up, get this done.'

"A lot of that I've learned from Nick, because he's never done that. He's never been one to yell at anybody, if you've made a mistake. He says, 'We learn by our mistakes.'"



JENNIFER KARUZA

**EKONE'S OYSTERS** are processed as soon as they are landed. José Aguellar works on the company's boats and in the plant.



## THE LINE ON LONGLINING

Oyster longlining is not unlike other longlining operations, albeit on a smaller scale. Oyster Catcher, one of Ekone's three boats, is 36 feet long by 14 feet wide. She is operated by three men. In December she was fishing William's Piece Bed, about 1 1/2 miles from the dock, in Willapa Bay, and contending with an 8- to 10-foot tide.

The oysters are grown on lines suspended on sticks over the floor of the bay. They are marked by small buoys.

While one crewman runs the boat, two stand on the stern. One of the stern men throws a gaffing hook and picks up the buoy.

He puts the line on a small reel, and within seconds it comes up with clusters of oysters attached to it. He then takes it and walks it forward.

The second stern man stands by and cuts the line of oysters into 3-foot lengths, which are easier to handle during processing. After the line is brought back, the other stern man shovels up oysters that have dropped off the line and drops them into two metal baskets, one in each stern quarter.

The operator maneuvers the boat to the next buoy. The first stern man scoops the buoy up with the hook, and the whole process begins again.

It is about six minutes from the time the hook is tossed until the loose oysters are shoveled into the baskets. In an hour and a half the Oyster Catcher has half a load of oysters.

The Oyster Catcher comes out to harvest once or twice a week in the winter and about three times a week in the summer.

— J.K.

Jambor explains his management style. "Typically, if I see there is a problem out there, I try to look at myself first," he says. "How come? What are we doing wrong here? What do we need to change? Hollering at people doesn't gain you a thing. It actually works against you as far as what people want to do for you or how they are going to perform for you."

When asked if they plan to stay with Jambor and Ekone for the long haul, two veteran employees answer with a resolute "yes." They don't have any reason to look for a new job or a new boss.

At noon, Jambor and his employees eat together at one long table upstairs. Over homemade fried chicken from the only restaurant in Bay Center, Jambor describes his thoughts on the growth of Ekone and the marketing of his product.

"So far it has been a real gradual growth, and I'm hoping to always maintain that. Our goal is to stay steady, stay ahead of the game, and to stay on our feet. It is not to grow rapidly, but to keep things rolling in the same direction.

"Going backwards or stopping doesn't seem like an option anymore, but also, going from where we are and doubling in a year, I have no desire for that."

Jambor believes that word of mouth — as well as quality — has gone a long way toward establishing the Ekone

company name. It has been a slow and steady process, he says, as the company grew, over 18 years, from two employees to 35.

When he started, he was only growing oysters. Growing the oysters led to the smokehouse, which brought opened

"I was at a tide pool on the Oregon coast, and found this critter. I took it back and it was an oyster."

—Nick Jambor

FOUNDER, EKONE OYSTER CO.

## GETTING THE PROCESS DOWN

The Ekone longline boat brings its catch ashore in buckets and offloads them into cages. Each cage holds about 12 bushels — approximately 1,000 oysters. The cages are trucked to the processing plant, where they are held at 45 degrees in coolers until they are ready for processing.

A forklift takes the oysters from the cooler to an opening table, where shuckers stand ready to open them and remove the meats. The shuckers are paid by the piece, and each opens about 3,000 oysters a day. A conveyor belt moves empty shells into a truck, which hauls them off.

The shuckers put the meats into gallon colanders, which are then rinsed and held in pure, 39-degree water, where shell particles and fine pieces of sediment fall away.

Then the oysters are hand-sorted for size and packed in various containers.

Fresh oysters are usually shipped to Oregon, California or Washington.

The process is essentially the same for smoked oysters, except that the oysters go into a canning retort when they are brought in, and are steamed before they are shucked.

The cooked oysters go into iced water to cool, then into brine buckets placed on wire racks. From there they go into the smokehouse, then are vacuum-packed and ready to be shipped out.

The brines are made from Ekone's own recipes and are used only once.

— J.K.

oysters into the building. Because the company had the oysters in the building, they started opening them on their own and learned to sell them.

Slowly Ekone started selling open oysters to other canneries. Then he began packing under his own name and selling his own opened oysters to local restaurants.

His customer list is relatively small, but the company is selling the product. Jambor continues to use brokers and distributors even as a lot of his competition has gone to direct sales. "Right or wrong," he says, it has allowed Ekone to spend its time and effort on its own pack, and to strive for consistency and reliability.

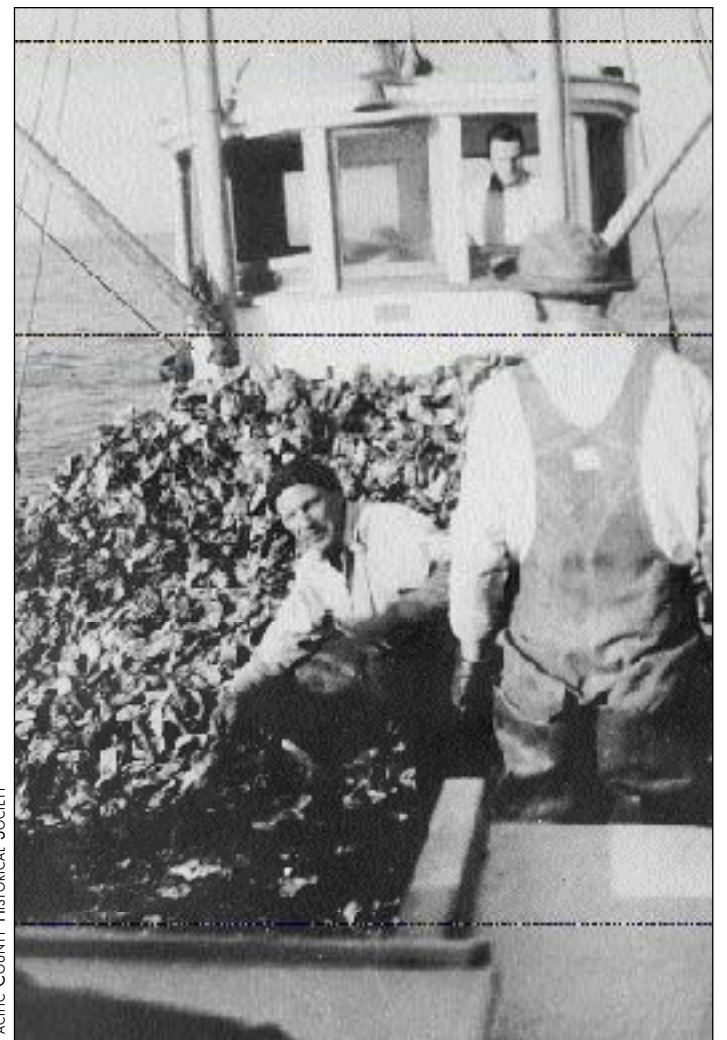
Today the oysters Jambor harvests himself are a small percentage of what he actually processes. Many come from independent growers in Willapa, Puget Sound and Grays Harbor who don't have processing plants. However, the oysters that he smokes are mostly from his longlines, and are free of sediment and sand.

Business seems to find Jambor all on its own; he spends about \$100 a year on advertising.

"I think that at certain points, the response from advertising would have been overwhelming for us," Funkhouser says. "A lot of our growth is that one of our customers will pick up more business, and that affects us."

The oyster industry seems antiquated compared with other seafood harvesting trades. "Everything here is hand done," Funkhouser explains. "Planting, harvesting, shucking, brining, smoking, grading, packing, shipping — everything.

"They might have an automatic shuck-



PACIFIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NICK JAMBOR'S MENTOR, Stan Gillies, rigged the Skanoentl for oyster dredging so long ago it's considered history.

ing machine somewhere, but for the oysters we have, it would never work. Each one is a different size and shape. As far as I can see, we're always going to have to have people to work in the oyster industry."

One of the more recent changes to affect the industry was the development of the longline method to harvest oysters in the early 1970s.

Use of fancy or expensive boats and equipment is not necessary in this business; Jambor's dredge is a converted World War II transport boat that Gillies used before him.

Jambor has paid for the business as he has gone along, which he attributes to keeping the perspective he has and the ability to stay balanced.

"Throughout the years, I have paid as I go," he says. "If it all went to heck or we had an oil spill, a 'here today, gone tomorrow' type of thing, I can lock the door and I have what I have. It really just lifts that whole burden off you."

Jambor is married and has two children in elementary school. His wife took an active roll in the business before the kids came along, and she still does graphic design for the company.

"There are still nights I'll think a lot about the business and where to go with it, but it's different. It's not that stressful. Our growth has been so gradual, so as we made mistakes and learned from them, none of them wiped us out.

"It's a slow process, but you just learn by doing. And if it works, you leave it alone."

On occasion, a phone call comes in to the company and a caller mistakenly asks for Nick Ekone.

But judging by the amount of good spirit that permeates through Jambor and flows out to his workers and plant, the presumption is not so farfetched. It's hard to separate Jambor from Ekone Oyster Co.



JENNIFER KARUZA

TABATHA WILL (left) and Linda Richardson grade Ekone oysters.