

Portrait of a clam digger

Story By: Sandra Phinney

Photos Sandra Phinney



Willy Dulong at work on the flats

As the Cat car ferry noses its way past the Yarmouth Lighthouse and Cape Forchu at 11:42 a.m. on a sultry August day, Willy Dulong is driving past John's Cove Fisheries. He wheels over the causeway, pumps the brakes and comes to a crawl just in time to turn left into a small ribbon of land facing the mud flats. He parks his maroon 4x4 Ranger and checks his watch. Although the tide won't reach bottom low until 1:20 p.m. today, it's pretty low right now—low enough to work.

He eases his slight 140-pound frame out of the vehicle, saunters to the rear of his truck, reaches into a bucket and stretches a yellow rubber glove over his left hand. He then grabs three buckets, a short handled hoe, and boots it to the flats.

Willy is a clam digger. Has been for several years. Started digging clams when he was shorter than a broomstick. It was a great way to pick up extra cash to attend the Yarmouth Exhibition, or to save for a new bike. He loved the peace and quiet of the shore.

When he quit school at 18, he went worming. He liked that too, but after a few years he had a chance to go lobstering. Made lots of money but he was always told what to do. That was irksome. He missed being independent and calling the shots. So after five years of lobstering, Willy dug out his clam digging license and decided to make that his profession.

It's not easy. Working in cold or foul weather is no picnic. Some days he works two tides, starting before dawn and ending at dusk. Working just one tide can last over six hours—mostly bent over—like now. He stretches forward, hooks his hoe into the mud and pulls.

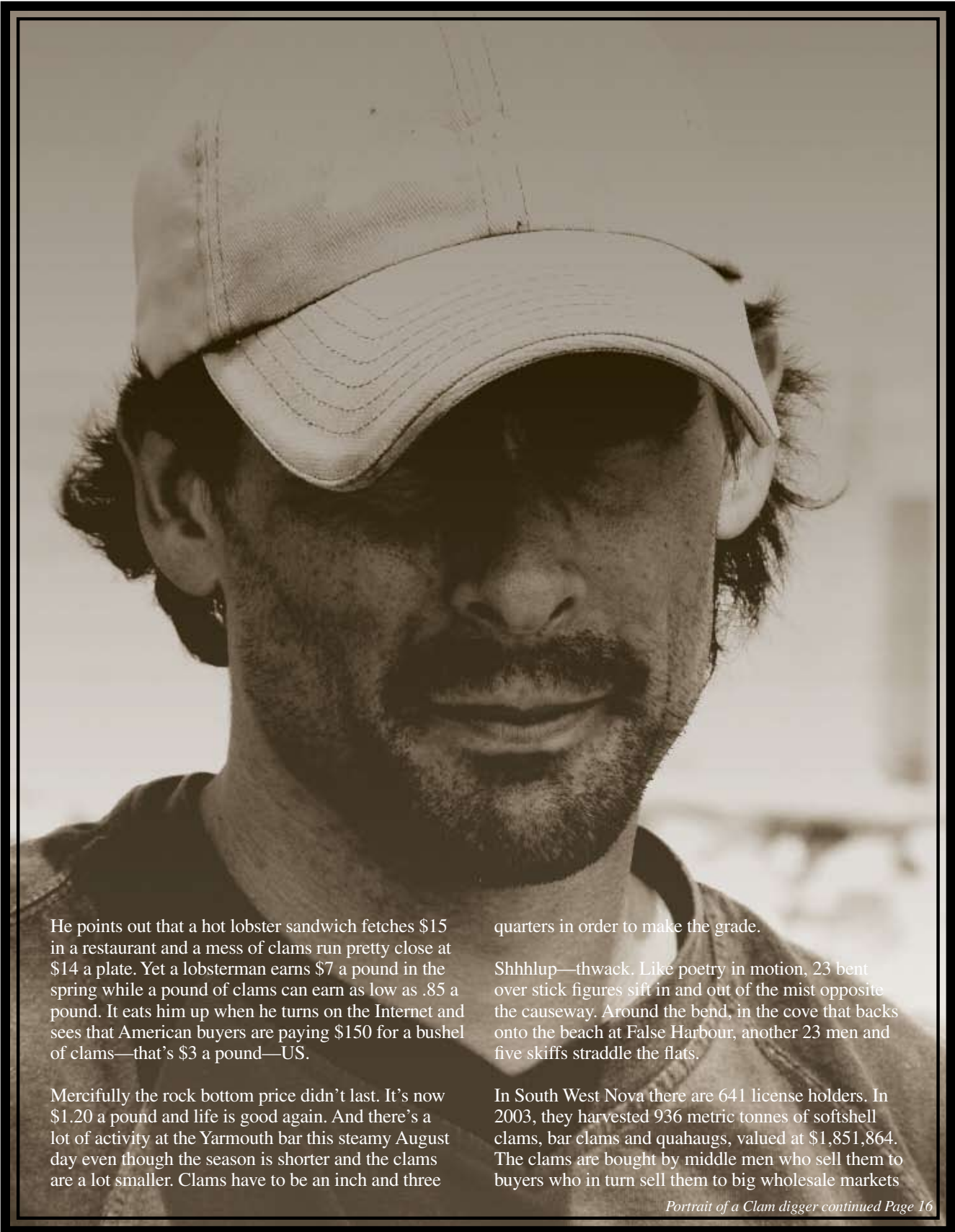
The grit of metal pierces sand and shells. Shhhllup. A slight sucking sound then—thwack. A heap of mud folds back. As Willy's left hand darts through the mound, a small stream of water pisses randomly into the air.

Willy owns his own boat, a 14 footer that he uses when he clams in the Chebogue River or Little River Harbour. The clamming grounds open here the first of April and close the end of December. The flats are like molasses, but he's used to it. Says the trick is to keep your weight forward. Otherwise you get sucked in. But watch out for the gulls. "They have pretty good eyeballs. They can see for miles." Willy finds it comical when others hoot, holler and chase the gulls. He covers a full bucket with a shirt or a hunk of rockweed.

Shhhllup—thwack. Willy waves a tanned arm and brushes away a fly from the stubble on his chin. This past April, the season opened up at .85 cents a pound. That was worrisome. Clam diggers gathered from various regions and staged a protest in front of the DFO buildings in Yarmouth.

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He points out that a hot lobster sandwich fetches \$15 in a restaurant and a mess of clams run pretty close at \$14 a plate. Yet a lobsterman earns \$7 a pound in the spring while a pound of clams can earn as low as .85 a pound. It eats him up when he turns on the Internet and sees that American buyers are paying \$150 for a bushel of clams—that's \$3 a pound—US.

Mercifully the rock bottom price didn't last. It's now \$1.20 a pound and life is good again. And there's a lot of activity at the Yarmouth bar this steamy August day even though the season is shorter and the clams are a lot smaller. Clams have to be an inch and three

quarters in order to make the grade.

Shhhllup—thwack. Like poetry in motion, 23 bent over stick figures sift in and out of the mist opposite the causeway. Around the bend, in the cove that backs onto the beach at False Harbour, another 23 men and five skiffs straddle the flats.

In South West Nova there are 641 license holders. In 2003, they harvested 936 metric tonnes of softshell clams, bar clams and quahaugs, valued at \$1,851,864. The clams are bought by middle men who sell them to buyers who in turn sell them to big wholesale markets

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like the Fulton Fish Market in Boston. Over 90 percent of the clams are exported to New England.

Shhhhlup—thwack. Willy scoops another handful of clams, leans to the left and automatically drops them into a bucket as his gaze fixes on the next spot to strike. His hoe is made out of a pitch fork. The prongs are filed down and the sawed off 10-inch handle was replaced at a 45 degree angle. It cost \$80 to have it custom-made, but it's worth it.

On an average day, Willy digs 120 pounds of clams. A real good day can wriggle up to 170 pounds. He's one of the best clamdiggers in the region but he wouldn't say that himself. Others do. They respect him. Yesterday, however, was a bum day. "It was pathetic. Hotter than hot. Sixty-five pounds. Left at 11 a.m. and got back around 5 p.m." He was not amused.

Shhhhlup—thwack. Willy spent some time in foster care when he was little. Doesn't talk about it much but he's making sure of certain things—like spending extra time with his wife and two children. They camp a lot. And both kids played soccer three times a week, all summer. He only missed one session.

The soft-spoken clamdigger puts three more clams in the bucket, picks it up and moves ahead to claim another ten feet.

Shhhhlup—thwack. Willy's thoughts leap forward and he smiles. He's taking tomorrow off and going to Upper Clements Park with his family. "I do what I want when I want. That's 100 percent reason why I clam. Means everything to me. I don't have to answer to anybody. That in itself is worth its weight in gold."

His smile turns into a blazing grin.

Shhhhlup—thwack.



Local Clam diggers in the distance at Yarmouth Harbour
Photo Neil MacKenzie



Willy Dulong continues his work


Photo Sandra Phinney

Local Clam diggers in Yarmouth Harbour

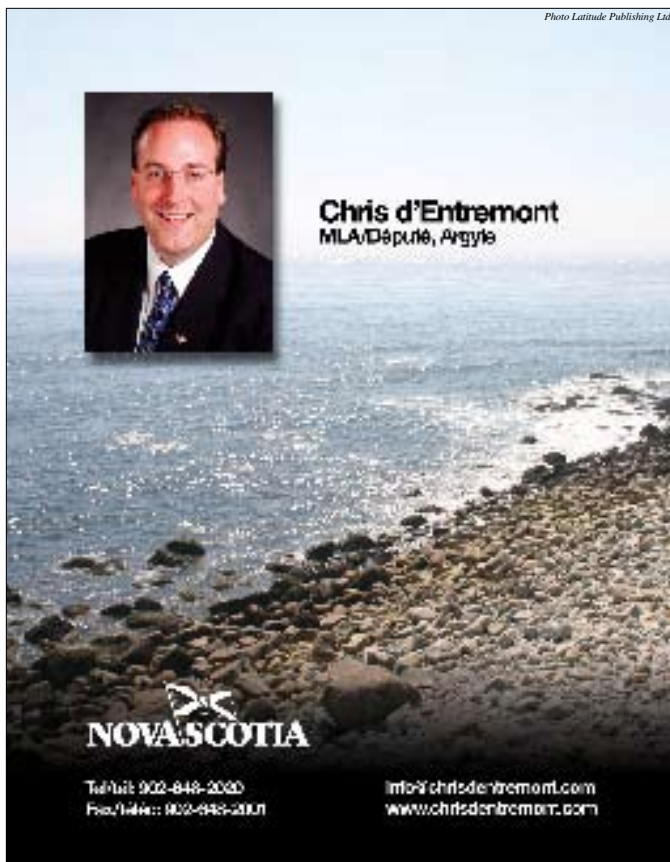
Photo Neil MacKenzie



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