

Boll Weevils and Oysters

Remembering John Samuel Graves, Senior and Junior

by John Samuel Graves, III



You might not think that there could possibly be a connection between boll weevils and oysters but my grandfather could tell you otherwise—if he were still alive. John Samuel Graves, Sr. (1879-1963), my grandfather, was a merchant and entrepreneur in the early 1900's in Bluffton. He was affectionately called Sam Graves. Over the years he had owned and operated a cotton gin, bought and sold real estate, and did some banking. He also owned and operated a general mercantile store until a protracted and devastating boll weevil infestation in the mid 1920's left most of the farmers that relied on his store credit unable to pay their debts. Sam Graves was forced to close his store and seek other means of making a living.

Shortly after closing his store he started working for the South Carolina Board of Fisheries and became familiar with the oyster business. At some point, as the crash of 1929 began to take its toll on everyone, he had the opportunity to acquire the oyster factory at the end of Wharf Street. The original factory sat on property owned by the city of Bluffton. It was in very poor condition and needed a lot of work but had potential that my grandfather was quick to see. Originally he paid for his lease by supplying crushed oyster shell to be used on the town streets. Later, my father acquired the land on both sides of Wharf Street and built a new factory on his own land.

Families were large in those days. Sam Graves had eight children. His father had ten and his

grandfather had twelve. My grandfather's oldest son, John Samuel Graves, Jr. (1910-1964) was my father. "Junior" Graves, as he was widely known, was in school at Wofford College in Spartanburg at the time of his father's purchase of the oyster factory. However, the Great Depression and other factors forced my father to return home to run his father's newly acquired business. He left college in his third year and never completed his business degree. If it hadn't been for the boll weevil disasters, compounded by the depression, perhaps Sam and Junior Graves would never have gotten into the oyster business. So began the thirty-five year history of the Graves family owning and operating the Bluffton Seafood Co. (now called the Bluffton Oyster Co.).



"Sam" Graves with his beloved collie & cigar.

My grandfather's breakfast often included three eggs over easy, lots of bacon and multiple cups of coffee. After he retired, and even before, he loved to sit on the front porch of the Graves House on Calhoun Street in his rocking chair, his beloved collie dog beside him, reading the newspaper, smoking his cigar, and discussing everything under the sun with anyone that came

by. His grandchildren often played and skated on the porch. He once said that all he needed for church was to sit on his porch and take in the sights and sounds of nature, friends and relatives. My grandmother Graves once said that she felt next to heaven sitting on their porch.

"Papa," as we used to call my grandfather, was well liked and respected, had a great sense of humor and loved to tell jokes and humorous stories about friends and family. I can still see his smile and hear his laugh. As he got older he grew an immense head of bushy, gray hair.

In 1951 he and my Grandmother Cora Jane received a telegram notifying them of the death of their youngest son, Fred, in Korea. I still have the telegram. My grandmother collapsed and died two weeks later. Before Fred had been drafted he had been my father's most essential employee. Sam survived his wife by twelve years. Fred and both of my grandparents were buried from Bluffton's Methodist Church and are now resting in the Graves family plot in the Bluffton Cemetery.



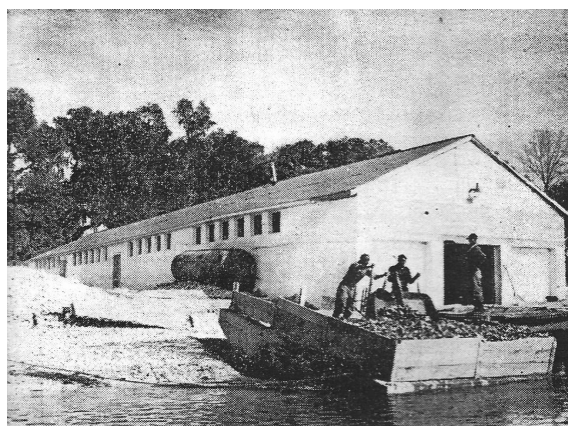
"Junior" Graves, 1942, age 32

My father was born in 1910 in Bluffton in the Graves House on Calhoun Street not long after it was built by his grandfather George Guilford, then mayor of Bluffton, in 1908. His grandmother, "Doctor" Jane Guilford, wife of George Guilford, delivered him. When "Doctor" Guilford died in 1939 my father moved into her house on the corner of Boundary and Bridge Streets. He lived the rest of his life there in the Guilford House, a house that is listed, along with the Graves House,

as a Contributing Structure in Bluffton's Historic District.

As the eldest son my father realized that he had increased responsibilities for his seven siblings. He spent much of his life trying to help and support his entire family, including his parents. His high sense of social responsibility also included his employees.

When he was only eight years old, he acquired a single shot 410 shotgun and was expected to supply game for family meals. That little gun put many a rabbit, squirrel, quail or turkey on the dinner table. My younger brother, Stephen, still has that gun.



My father built this Bluffton factory to replace the original one. Shown are barges filled with green, newly shucked, seed oyster shell, to be returned to the leased oyster beds.

After returning from college my father took early control of the oyster business and over the succeeding years added an oyster plant on Trimbleston Plantation on Sawmill Creek, one on Dafauskie Island and managed one on Jenkins Island.

Junior Graves eventually held oyster leases on thousands of acres and hundreds of miles of shoreline. The oyster beds were leased from the state and were held for life as long as they were tended, replanted and paid for each year. My father's oyster leases started some distance up May river from the Bluffton factory and then down May River taking in all surrounding estuaries, marshes and creeks; everything along Palmetto Bluff's eastern and south eastern shores, through Cauley Creek, continuing southward down Cooper River to New River, then back through Rams Horn Cut, continuing along Cooper River towards Calibogue Sound; then on around Barataria Island, the Middle Marsh area and back

up to May River, including most of both sides of May River back up to the factory.

His leases also included everything between Calibogue Sound and Bull Island, all the surrounding estuaries, Bull Creek, Savage Creek, Savage Island and Jack Crow Island (except the amount set aside for public gathering in front of Bull Island). His leases then picked up again just north of Buckingham in Mackays Creek, including all estuaries and marsh lands lying on the left side of Mackays Creek, down to Cheechessee River, then to Dilbert Creek, including all estuaries, then on around Devil's Elbow and all on the south easterly side of the Colleton River and then on to both sides of Sawmill Creek and all estuaries.

According to my younger brother, Stephen, who used to patrol the leases in a speed boat to prevent poaching, not all the leases could be inspected in one day, even two days, traveling in a high speed boat. I am indebted to him for recalling the locations of our father's oyster leases. Steve's experience of the seafood business was vast. After graduating from Bluffton High he became my father's right hand man.



My younger brother, Steve Graves, out crabbing

Junior Graves became the largest employer in Bluffton in a time when sources of income were hard to find. At his peak production he employed close to two hundred shuckers and haulers and produced as much as 24,000 gallons of hand shucked oysters in a seven month season. In off seasons he supplemented his business by harvesting and processing both shrimp and crabs.

The oyster business is much like farming. Oysters are "planted" by returning shucked "green" shell to the leased waters for young oysters to attach to. It was very important to return the shucked shell to the beds in a timely manner because attached, unopened small oysters could be saved. The beds, which can be seen at low tide, are tended by raking and spreading the oysters. The oysters are harvested by gathering them with large tongs or rakes and then brought to the oyster factory for shucking, canning and shipping to the market—usually to a middleman. The flat bottomed boat used to collect and carry the oysters is called a *batteau*.



Workers shucking oysters in Bluffton in 1962

For many years my father's workers made daily runs to Savannah to get eight, 300 pound blocks of ice to keep the fresh oysters from spoiling. Spoilage was one of the biggest problems that all oyster producers faced. Only in the early 1960's did he finally acquire his own ice maker.

The oyster business was a difficult, often dirty business, requiring long hours and incredible endurance and dedication. There were many lean years and disappointments. Over the thirty some years that my father ran the Bluffton Seafood Co. the inherent stresses, responsibilities and anxieties of the business took their toll. For many years he smoked heavily to alleviate some of that strain and the habit finally killed him. He died of cancer in 1964 at the relatively young age of 54.

My father was much loved. When he was buried from the Bluffton Methodist Church hundreds of friends and employees attended. Many had to stand in the church yard for lack of seats. During the funeral procession a line of cars stretched from the church to the Bluffton Cemetery.

More info about the Graves family is available on graveshouse.org. See the *genealogy* and the *articles* tabs. Information about the author can be seen on astarfell.com and jsgraves.musicaneo.com.