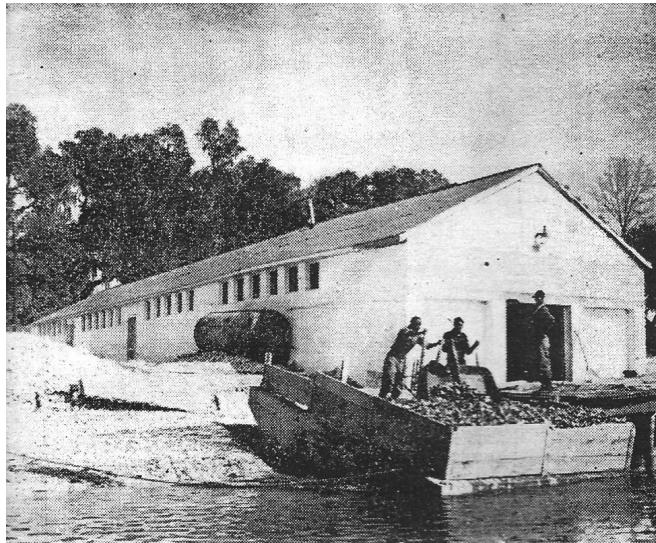


# Mud Money in the Devil's Elbow

A highly successful seafood industry has emerged from a Bluffton man's vision, industry and courage

By Andrew Peeples

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Workers at the Bluffton plant owned by J. S. Graves, Jr., load oyster shells, fresh from shucking benches, aboard a barge. The shells will be used for planting in the rivers. This modern plant, like Graves' new Trimbleston plant, has received the highest sanitary ratings of the State Board of Health.

Gold is always where you find it, but it's not always up in "them thar hills."

John Samuel Graves, Jr., of Bluffton, S.C. made his modest strike right at home in the Devil's Elbow, or, as some call it, Colleton's Neck, which is many a mile from a rise high enough to look remotely like a hill.

When young Graves came back home from college in the middle of the Depression, he didn't waste time with the W.P.A. Nor did he sit around gazing upward to purple heights that weren't there. Instead, he turned his eyes downward to the rivers and creeks in the Devil's Elbow he knew so well. There, in the mud he saw his nuggets—oysters and crabs, boatloads of them, just waiting for an enterprising young man like himself to pick them up. And today, some three decades later, the flourishing seafood business bearing his name provides a livelihood for scores of families in the Bluffton community and boosts the local economy with its largest year-round payroll.

Now, at the peak of the oyster season (March 1962), Graves' two plants located in Bluffton and nearby Trimbleston, are literally humming. The

shuckers, mostly women, are making as much as \$1.50 an hour; and compared to breaking your back over a washtub for as little as a dollar and a half a week, that's something to be humming about. Besides, where would you find better accompaniment for humming a joyous old spiritual such as "We's Headin' Fud De Promise Lan'," than the melodious cracking of succulent Bluffton oysters?

Graves' plants were not always so cheerful. Starting from scratch, he had to do the best he could with the little he had. His first buildings, constructed of wood and tin and woefully inadequate, were a far cry from his modern concrete structures of today. Cold, damp wind from the river howled through cracks in the walls. In severe weather the shucking benches were often abandoned for less miserable huddles around the pot-bellied stove in the middle of the drafty floor.



Negro Women are employed by the Graves' plants as shucking bench workers. They make up to \$1.50 an hour. The benches, floors and walls of the plants are concrete, easily cleaned after each day's operations by pressure hose.

In those early years Graves not only supervised his operations, but also acted as carpenter, plumber, electrician, and general

maintenance man for his plants. If a roof leaked, he climbed up and fixed it. If a boiler needed repairing, he rolled up his sleeves and went to work on it. He built and repaired his bateaux<sup>1</sup> and often piloted his towboats.

Tall and gaunt, his face and hands leathered by wind and sun, Graves was equal in strength and spirit to the task of achieving his goal—success in the seafood business. Fortunately, he had five younger brothers willing and able to work with him, and a father whose long experience with the S. C. State Board of Fisheries made his assistance and counsel of inestimable value.

Progress was slow, with lean years often exceeding fat years. At best, the seafood business is hazardous, depending on seasonal markets, fluctuating prices and, particularly, the weather. Long spells of rain or extreme cold can be disastrous. One time a tornadic wind snatched one of Graves' plants from its foundation and sent it flying into the channel of May River.

Despite the handicaps, risks and adversities, Graves kept pace as best he could with advanced production methods and high standards of sanitary excellence required by state and federal laws. Living frugally he poured profits back into his waterfront property and other valuable acreage. And, still young at 53, Graves is looking forward to other local investments, including cattle raising and development of some of his real estate.<sup>2</sup>

The name of Graves has been prominently identified with the Devil's Elbow ever since the beautiful barony lying between Colleton and May rivers was inherited by Lousia Carolina Colleton Graves from her father, a great great grandson of Sir John Colleton, one of the original proprietors of South Carolina, and passed on to her son, Samuel Colleton Graves.

With three fine sons of his own—John and Gerald, twins in college, and Stephen, a senior in Bluffton High School—John Samuel Graves, Jr., can have little doubt that there will always be a Graves around to seek his gold somewhere in the Devil's Elbow.

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1 Wide, flat-bottomed, wood rowboats used for hauling oysters.

2 Sadly, John Samuel Graves, Jr., died on 6-10-1964.