



The Consummate Clam Farmer

By Becky Schuyten, Becky's Bivalves

“Wow, this is like Easter egg hunting”. That’s what I thought the first time I dug clams. The Sells family arrived on Barron Point, Little Skookum at Totten Inlet south of Shelton, around 1915. My (first) husband John’s folks, Carl and Evelyn Sells raised and opened a few oysters back in the late 50’s and 60’s. John and I moved from Olympia to his family home in 1982. Uncle John Sells, who lived next door, was in the oyster and clamming business until he died at age 89 in 2006.

We were busy with two sons, Nick and Doug, but Uncle John helped us put in some oyster fence and told us about clamming and oystering. When the kids got older, I thought, “I can do this.” In 1992, I started digging clams and selling them locally to

Little Skookum Shellfish Growers, Taylor Shellfish, Associated Seafood and Brenner Oyster Co. John and I divorced in 1995, and in 1996 I married Gary, my present husband. I leased the beach from John, kept up the clam digging and got more serious about it. I have always liked gardening and Gary is a forester -- we both like to grow things.

My beach is very rocky, so I must rake the rocks before digging. I have a row about 2 to 4 feet wide of seed clams above and below the top fence of the oyster pen. This is my nursery. Each summer I buy 100k quarter inch screen, which is about as large as you can get, and put them in one of the rows. The row consists of bricks placed along re-bar against the oyster fence which I then fill with 2 inches of gravel that I get off the top of the beach, or have purchased. I bring the gravel down to the beach one wheel barrow at a time, and then cover it with a net. I grow the seed in the nursery for at least a year.

Every time we dig, we reseed with clams that are a year or more old, that way I have a continuous crop and don’t have to net my whole beach. I lease my oyster pens to Wallins Oyster Co. who have bought my clams for the past 8 years. They grow single oysters and we have some cultch below the pens. We ship 100 to 200 lbs. a week.

After I pay my lease, my help, my dues and license, I think I have enough to go see the chiropractor, and buy some patches for my boots. I’m glad my husband has a good paying job. When it’s rainy and cold, I dress like an astronaut to keep warm. When it is hot, I have a 5 foot piece of plastic pipe with a re-bar in one end and a golf umbrella in the other that I move as I dig. It helps block the sun and is comfortable. I just turned 60 and have a tad of arthritis so I am cutting back on my hours some. People ask me how long I plan to do this, and I tell them “as long as I can”. It is good exercise, beautiful scenery, and an extreme sense of accomplishment. When we no longer can do this, I hope my sons will take over.

I joined PCSGA in 1997. I am so grateful for their support and that of Taylor Shellfish. My company is small. I have two diggers, one Rubbermaid wagon, a couple clam forks, buckets and some great reusable nylon string bags that nobody makes any more. I try to set a good example. I really am a great gardener and farmer.

Gary and I like to hike, fish, kayak, camp, garden, make trails and be outside. I was an art major and am trying to find some more time to do art. Right now I am making pictures using stained glass in mosaic fashion. I also run the Mason County Concert Association and the Peninsula Art Association, and love music. I love to cook healthy food. We are never sick. Life is good.

Thanks, Becky Schuyten, Becky's Bivalves