of crabmeat than hand-picking, but it pulverizes the crab in the process, leaving no trace of precious lump. Crabmeat that goes this route ends up in cans on grocery store shelves.

Crabs bound for hand-picking are refrigerated overnight, then dumped out the next morning onto the gleaming metal tables that line the Clayton picking room, which looks like it's barely changed since the day Captain Johnnie arrived in town. Here, about three dozen women (men are few and far between in this trade) sit atop tall stools pulled in tight to the thick piles of crab carcasses. Within reach of each picker is a bowl brimming with fresh meat.

Thin, lanky Nicie Jones sits among them. Every crabpicker has her own style of crabpicking, and the 70-year-old Jones is no exception. She's all angles while wielding her small knife in quick, precise flicks. Her whole body is continually moving back and forth, rocking in time with each new slice of her knife.

"I believe I was just about born in the crabhouse," Jones says later. "After Momma had me, she got back to work picking crabs. She put me in a box, then put that box underneath her table. She'd be picking her crabs, and I start crying. She pick me up, rock me. I stop crying. Then she put me back in that box and put the box underneath her table again.

"Momma's name was Fronie Jones," Nicie continues. "Momma started work in the crabhouse at 8 years old. And she was working ever since, until she pass away." Nicie, too, began working at Clayton at age 8, but she still has a ways to go to equal her late mother's believe-it-or-not record of 79 straight years of picking crabs for the company. It's stories like this that inspired the Smithsonian to celebrate the rich crabpicking traditions of the Eastern Shore during its summer Folklife Festival last year.

Some things have changed over time in the picking room, of course. Back in the 1930s and 1940s, crabhouses were one of the few places where local women could find steady work. The picking workforce back then was about half white and half black, so picking rooms were integrated islands in a segregated society.

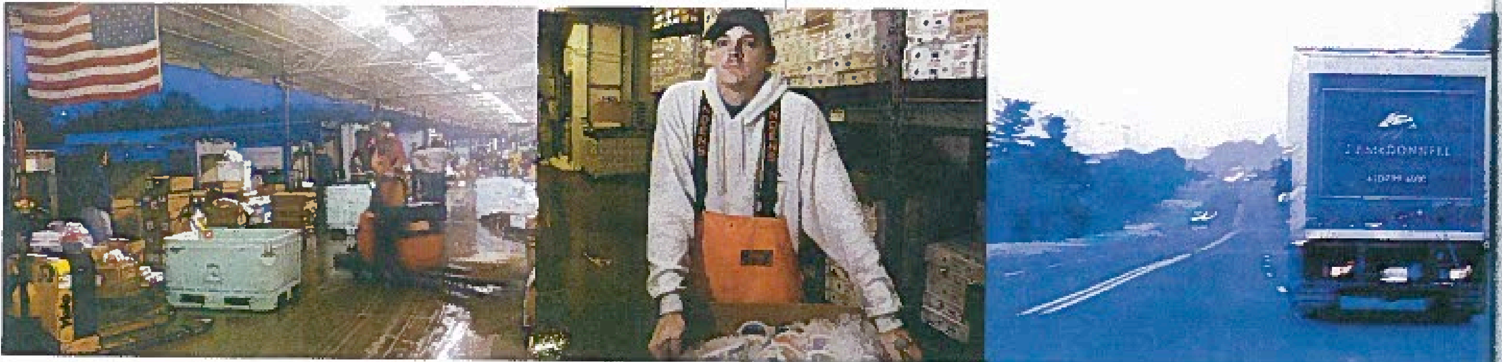
But society changed, and women won new workplace options. By the 1980s, white pickers had become few and far between. Soon, young blacks, too, were steering clear of the crabhouse. Clayton went to great lengths to find new sources of domestic labor, but eventually signed on for legal permission to bring in seasonal Mexican workers. Women like Consuelo Martinez, who has been with Clayton for six straight seasons, make up the bulk of the company's workforce today.

"That first year, in Mexico, I learn that I will go to pick blue crabs," Martinez says. "I don't even know then what is a crab. I come here, I see all these orange crabs on the table. And so I say, 'Where are the *blue* crabs? Why are there no *blue* crabs?'"

Martinez's annual Maryland adventure begins each April, with a grueling five-day trip that involves six different buses. In Cambridge, she rents space in a Clayton-owned house with co-workers. She doesn't like the smell of the crabhouse. And she hates leaving her young baby with family members for nine months at a stretch. But the money she makes at Clayton— somewhere north of $2 a pound of picked crabmeat— dwarfs anything she could dream of earning at home.

The influx of temporary workers over the last decade saved Clayton from its labor shortage woes. But in the long term, prospects for the industry's future will likely depend on how well regulators manage the crab fishery and whether nutrient pollution in Chesapeake waters can be reduced. Success on both fronts would go a long way toward reviving crab harvest numbers.

No one around here seems ready to throw in the towel quite yet.



Activity begins in the wee hours of the morning at Jessup's J.J. McDonnell Co., where employee Shaun Higgs loads packages of crabmeat on company trucks bound for restaurants, retailers and caterers in Baltimore and Washington, D.C.

"This business is what we know," says Jack Brooks. "And we think there's still a future in this business. We plan to be a part of this community for a long time to come."

So the work goes on. Picking crabs is hard and tedious, especially come late summer and into fall, when the crabbing season hits its peak and workdays get longer. By this time of year the crabs have developed tough-to-peel shells— "winter coats," the pickers call them— in anticipation of cold weather. A good day for a picker adds up to about 40 pounds of lump meat, which will then be packed into 1-pound plastic tubs emblazoned with the Epicure brand name that Captain Johnnie came up with way back in the 19th century.

THE EASTERN SHORE IS SHROUDED IN PREDAWN MIST THE MORNING I drive Route 50 across the Bay Bridge and over to Jessup. Somewhere in the darkness, a panel truck from J.M. Clayton makes the same journey, carrying a load of Epicure brand meat to the J.J. McDonnell Co. at the Maryland Seafood Market.

It's just 4:40 a.m. when I arrive, but I'm caught straight away

Devine disappears behind the counter and then re-emerges a moment later carrying an oversized cookie sheet laden with uncooked crab cakes that are, as advertised, "bigger than a baseball, smaller than a softball."

in wholesaling rush hour, lined up with half a dozen other vehicles outside the guardhouse where a genial but slow-moving security guard is jotting down license numbers and appointment details. Nine wholesalers operate out of the 112,000-square-foot facility, which was built 21 years ago to replace the old fish market in downtown Baltimore.

This morning, like most every morning, the joint is jumping. Scores of trucks line the loading docks, while others idle eagerly nearby, awaiting an open space. The air reverberates with one piercing sound after another— grinding gears, beeping reverse alerts, wheezing forklifts and rumbling cargo doors.

When J.J. McDonnell, which was founded in 1945, moved here in 1984, it operated out of two stalls with a dozen employees. Two years after that, George McManus bought the operation and set out to make it grow. Today, it's a $40 million business with 50 employees working out of five stalls.

"Being successful in this isn't just about selling," McManus says. "It's important for a wholesaler to have a good product, to take care of it the right way, to have a decent price and to get it there on time. But there are a lot of good wholesalers around. What we need to do to be successful is find any way we can to add value on top of those things."

Below, left to right: The incomparable Bill Devine of Faidley's Seafood in Lexington Market presents a tray of round beauties before they get the deep-fry treatment. The author enjoys the fruits of many labors.

From a distance, seafood wholesaling seems such a simple service— you take product in from suppliers, then ship it out to customers. But getting it done when dealing in serious volume while servicing an ever-shifting mix of 500 active accounts and abiding by safety regulations outlined in a bookshelf full of thick binders is another matter altogether. This I learned while spending a morning watching the McDonnell operation and peppering account managers Steve Vilnit and Barry Angradi with questions.

When the first McDonnell workers pull in at midnight, they find about 200 orders waiting on voicemail from restaurants, caterers and retailers. Each needs to be entered into computers, then fitted with an accurate array of packing stickers, shipping orders and internal records.

Delivery trucks start rolling in at 12:30 a.m., bringing loads not just from the Eastern Shore but from all over the country. McDonnell trades in West Coast salmon, East Coast lobster and every fishy thing in between, moving an average of 160,000 pounds of product a week.

The company has its own fleet of 15 delivery trucks, all painted a deep blue and adorned with a clever corporate logo in which a pair of hooks slice through a fish to form the initials "J.J." Ten of those vehicles follow routes oriented toward Washington and its suburbs, while the other five run into and around Baltimore. The first outbound truck is usually on the road by 4:30 a.m., with the last leaving five hours later.

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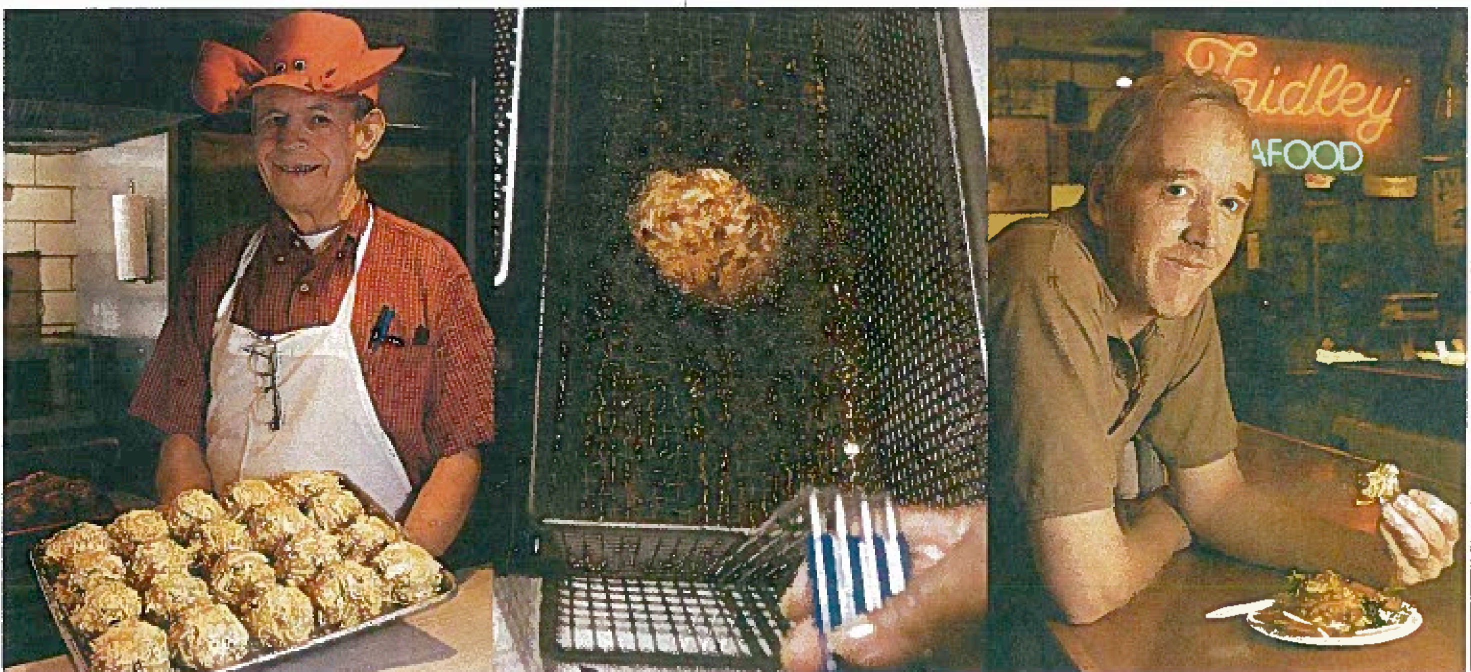

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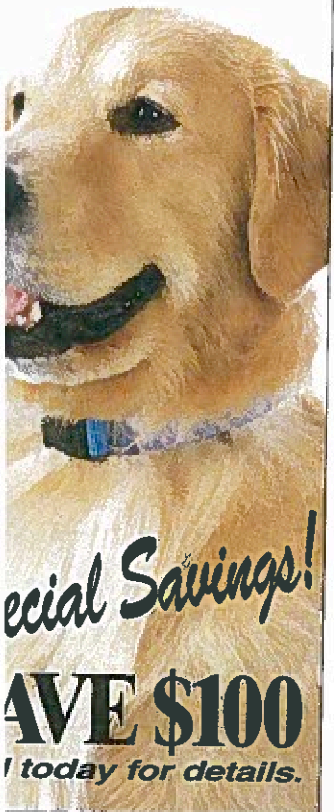

(continued from page 219)

The dock that handles these loads can be a sight to behold. Gleaming wet from melted ice and littered with stacks of empty boxes, it's a constant beehive of activity. The workers, who dodge forklifts and hurdle pallets while tackling their tasks, also manage to put on a strange sort of fashion show. A dockhand will race by in oversized orange waders. Then a freezer worker will fly by bundled in a thick parka and stocking cap. And then an office staffer will wander by in shorts and sandals.

"It's all about the temperature," Angradi says with a laugh.

He leads me on a tour through a confusing maze of coolers and freezers before we return to the dock to check on this morning's delivery from Clayton. It's being checked in by Elias "E-Z" Zavala, who chooses one box at random and slits it open to make sure the 1-pound tubs inside have been properly iced.

Zavala then rolls the load back through a bank of vertical plastic blinds and into a cooler, where colleague Juan Alfaro makes a closer inspection, opening each box in turn and confirming that all the tubs add up to the promised 300 pounds. Then Alfaro stacks the boxes onto the proper Epicure pallet, clearing them for loading onto an outbound truck.

"The quickest turnaround from getting in here to getting out of here, that would be about two hours," Angradi says. "Now obviously, we don't sell out every day. But I'd say the very longest something like this might stick around would be a day and a half."

WHEN THE BLUE J.J. McDONNELL TRUCKS arrive at Lexington Market, the drivers pull right up onto the sidewalk off Paca Street and cart their goods into Faidley's through a side door. Here again, the first order of business is to break open a box and eyeball the fresh meat for quality.

Some days the task falls to crabcake chef Nancy Devine; on others it falls to her husband and business partner, Bill Devine. "It's not ever a problem, really," Bill says. "J.J.'s knows that if it's not the best, I'm gonna send it back. It's a waste of time to send me anything other than the best. Why do it?"

I'd called ahead to tell Bill we'd be stopping in, so he's had plenty of time to work himself up into full colorful-character mode. His tone with the media tends to the gruff and laconic end of the charming spectrum, and he likes to punctuate this performance whenever possible by jabbing at the air with an ever-present unlit cigar.

Atop Devine's head today is his favorite crabby headgear, a bright red baseball cap with two big eyeballs lurking above the bill and fabric claws dangling off either side. Devine will never forget the day he

The workers, who dodge forklifts and hurdle pallets while tackling their tasks, also manage to put on a strange sort of fashion show. A dockhand will race by in oversized orange waders. Then a freezer worker will fly by bundled in a thick parka and stocking cap. And then an office staffer will wander by in shorts and sandals.

gave one of these oddities to William Donald Schaefer, the idiosyncratic former Baltimore mayor and Maryland governor who now serves as state comptroller.

"As you may or may not know, Schaefer likes his hats," he deadpans.

Epicure isn't the only brand of crabmeat used at Faidley's, but the plastic tubs packed at J.M. Clayton have been a common sight around here for a long time. Bill guesstimates that his own experience with the brand goes back 50 years, but the link between Faidley's and Clayton could go back further, consider-

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Follow the Crab

(continued from page 249)

ing that John W. Faidley Sr. opened this seafood market in 1886. That's four years before Captain Johnnie got his crabhouse off the ground. Back then, crabmeat made its way up to Baltimore aboard steamboats.

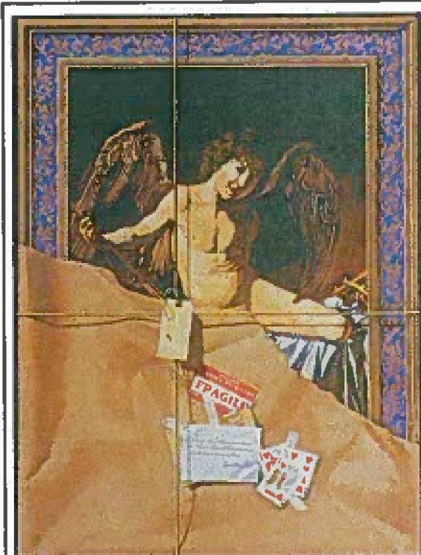
Preliminaries complete, Devine disappears behind the counter and then re-emerges a moment later carrying an oversized cookie sheet laden with uncooked crabcakes that are, as advertised, "bigger than a baseball, smaller than a softball."

"It's not ever a problem, really," Bill says. "J.J.'s knows that if it's not the best, I'm gonna send it back. It's a waste of time to send me anything other than the best. Why do it?"

Last year, Nancy created 54,450 of these crabcakes (though Bill concedes when pressed that she does employ one helper in the task). Nearly 15,000 of that total were shipped out of town— mostly around Christmas and Mother's Day. The remaining 40,000 were ordered up right here at Faidley's counter.

"One secret I'll share with you is to let 'em set overnight after they're mixed," Devine says. "Don't cook them right away; let everything seep together for a while. But you know what? The biggest secret of all is TLC— tender loving care."

With a nod of his head, Devine lifts that unlit cigar up to his lips. The gesture seems to announce that this is about all that needs to be said on the topic. After a moment's silence, he turns the tables and fires a question at me: "Hey, how 'bout a crab cake?" ☐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