



An Electronic-Journal published for the AAPA

H A R A L D

By Bill Warner

FOR THE PAST COUPLE OF WEEKS I've been a mussel man. You don't need Olympic biceps to harvest mussels, just marathon endurance. We start at 6 am and work 12-16 hour days – seven days a week. It's dirty, dangerous, tedious, tiresome... and I enjoy it (most of the time).

Harvesting mussels is easy to understand, but difficult to visualize. The mollusks seed themselves, which is apparent at low tide when glistening blue shells crust everything. In the past, fishermen tied weighted lengths of rope from a buoyed line; then, after a couple of years, they'd haul up the ropes, and scrape off the mussels. The merchantable shells were culled; the rest was tossed back. Today, it's more mechanized and less wasteful.

The outfit I'm working for has designed new sorting and restocking equipment, with the hope of increasing this year's yield from 400 tons to 2000! Essentially it's a four-step procedure: two on water, two on land. First, we haul up straps of palm-wide netting and scrape the young mussels into cargo bags. (The bags could hold a freezer, with room

to spare.) The shells are about an inch long and clustered in fist-size knots often as long as your forearm. Then they're taken back to land, separated, and flushed into a gauze-like stocking that would dwarf catwalk legs: it's 1000 meters long. Finally we set the stocking back into the fjord. Eighteen months later they're harvested.

Namsdal Fjord is reputed to be Norway's (perhaps the world's) best mussel water. The extreme tide circulates the freshwater-saltwater cocktail constantly, at the right temperatures. The fjord is about half way up the coast. It's not the pin-up of fjord country, not postcard material with vertiginous cliffs dropping into water the color of turquoise, full of mineral motes reflecting clear light... and tourists awing from cruise ships. It's more remote, unsettled. The nearest town, Namsos, is about 40 miles away. But its scenic beauty is authentic. Old fishermen's huts brood over the water and lonely boats dwindle to specks against the snow-touched peaks. Here and there an abandoned farmhouse snaps its fingers at gravity and a patch of bright

meadow shines among the dark forests and pale rocks. It seems incredible that people had ever settled in this place. Even more incredible, they're still here.

I'm home for a week, then I head back... to the camper-trailer. It's parked at the end of the fjord – the only flat land around – and a ten-minute drive along a sinuous, gravel road to the dock. It's a cute little box and rather comfortable (for a doll). I shared it with another worker, a 'kidult' (a 30-year old student). He didn't wash a single dish for two weeks, demanded weekends off, whined constantly, and used hand lotion! And he didn't last: he quit.

"I knew from his first day," said Harald, shaking his head, "He's an office worker." Harald was our boss, a bear of a man, a true Viking who resembled his namesake cartoon character both in character and appearance. White hair frothing like an angry sea, several days of gray stubble, a few missing teeth... He looks like a Nordic Zorba: think Anthony Quinn playing Leif Eriksson. His leathered face is ageless, with wrinkles of worry that have always been there – the universal face of old farmers and fishermen with large families. (Harald has six children; one of them is handicapped and still living at home.) Mercurial eyes, pale blue, mournful one minute radiant the next, flashing joy or rage; expressive eyes that tell you he's always thinking about something. I asked him the last day of work how old he

was. He said he didn't know: "I'm too old to remember." Then he confessed. I was shocked: he's three years my senior, 60.

I've never met a fellow with larger paws; palms so calloused I doubt he can close a hand. I always wear fishermen gauntlets, and even then slivers of crushed shells occasionally pierce the thick rubber. Don't ask me how. You feel that distinctive razor-like cut, tug off the gauntlet with your teeth and see a pearly blue shard sticking out of your hand. (The best way to extract it is with your teeth.) And yet I've seen Harald rake mussels off rope with his bare hands. Even now I wince at the thought.

And he always has a rolled cigarette between his lips. But he rarely inhales. It just hangs there and smolders, barely. Like all smokers here, he rarely handles a cigarette. Once in the mouth it stays there. Occasionally a wisp of smoke curls in his face and his expression contorts to an African mask. When the butt burns down to the size of a pencil eraser he flicks it off his lip. A few minutes later he rolls another. He takes a long luxurious drag, picks a strand of tobacco from his mouth, examines it, and settles back to work. Smoking seems the one dependable pleasure of his predictably hard life.

Harald can't speak English, and he doesn't understand my Norwegian any better than I understand his. We're quite a team, like a crusty Down Easter and a ghetto goof who speaks only jive. Harald speaks *Tronder*, that

distinctive nasal dialect that drops the last syllable off most words – most of which I’ve never heard before. I am not a sailor; I’m a terrestrial creature not even familiar with maritime metaphors. And I am useless at any mode of transportation other than driving a car. I’m also high-strung, so unexpected use of a technical term is bound to cause panic – especially when hydraulics are bullying a crane, straining a capstan, whirling arm-crunching cogs. Our first day out, the 28-foot hulk of steel was chugging against the towline, and I was order to run forward, untie a rope, let the buoy slip past, and then “cleat it” again. I was useless. I didn’t know what he wanted me to do; and even if I did, I wasn’t familiar with the Norwegian term for “cleat.” What is a cleat anyway?

The ‘kidult’ spoke English fluently, but he was difficult to work with. Part of the problem was that he showed up three days before I did and assumed he’d show me the ropes (pun unintended), which naturally lead to his assumed position as first mate. His voice of authority increased daily. I’d be hustling to tie a knot and he’d walk over, “That’s right, make it tight. Good job.” Pretty soon I was expecting him to stand over my shoulder while I was putting on my shoes, “That’s right, lace it tight. Good job.” But he wasn’t much of a worker. He had a tendency to stand with arms akimbo, or with cell phone to ear. Who was he calling?

Harald was just the opposite. He didn’t believe in micro-management; in fact, he didn’t believe in management. He’d walk past me, handoff a grappling hook, and keep walking. “What’s he want me to do with this?” (I was talking to myself more than usual.) I learned quickly to keep my eyes on Harald’s. He’d nod toward something, like somewhere to toss the hook; then he’d nod to something else, like the capstan; then point to somewhere, like the lever for the capstan. Then I’d hop to: fling the hook, wrap the hawser around the capstan, pull the lever... and watch the line wind the wrong way.

What I lacked in skill I compensated in speed. I really tried to hustle – all of the time. And that seemed to please Harald: “Well, at least he tries.” (I suspect he talked to himself more than usual.) We communicated mostly by sign language. With the diesel chugging and the clatter of machinery on deck I could hardly hear his voice anyway. Soon I figured out the routine and tried to anticipate his next move before he’d nod or point. After a few of days Harald told the ‘kidult’ to say ashore and manage something mindless by himself. That thrilled me to no end. We were a team: Harald was skipper, I was first mate!

He’d pick me up at 6, which meant I had to get up 5:15 to chow down breakfast, pack a lunch, collect gear... ‘Kidult’ showed up at 8 and diddled around until we got back around 10. I loved shoving off early:

there's something soothing about starting a work day in silence, save the sound of a diesel. Harald would pilot the boat and roll a cigarette; I'd prepare the deck and roll my eyes: 'Where does THIS chain go?' Despite my bumbling, Harald enjoyed the break: before, he'd been doing it all by himself.

Once rigged up, we'd haul in a continuous, 500-meter seed-strap clotted with mussels. We didn't haul in the strap by hand; it was pulled aboard by two rollers. Harald fed the strap through a brush that raked off the young mussels, then sluiced them to a cargo bag chained to the stern. My task was to keep the brushed strap from mounding in another cargo bag. I hated that part of the job, because the rollers whirled right next to me. When they jammed, which happened frequently, the strap would snap taught and zip in reverse – and God help you if you're holding the strap tightly; the rollers would crush hands like egg shells. Another occupational hazard: The strap is weighed with foot-long pieces of (iron) re-bar, and occasionally they'd fling through the rollers and clank on the steel deck. I kept imagining the sound if one hit my chest, "thud", or my head "crack!" One more thing: the rollers spewed muck like a manure spreader. After four hours I looked like a mud wrestler.



After harvesting three or four bags, the laden boat chugged back to the pier. We'd tie-up, Harald climbed out and maneuvered the crane, marionette-like, while I stayed aboard and hooked up the bags. Then we headed for the shed for a cup of coffee and a sandwich.

'Shed' isn't the right word. It's a monstrous pole-building that could house a destroyer, but is home to his sawmill, logging equipment, stacks of lumber, tons of rope and netting, workshop, welding gear, dismantled engines... anything that could possibly rust or drip oil. You get the picture: on your first entrance you stand in awe: "What doesn't he have?" And tucked in the corner is his cubbyhole. An insulated 10 X 10 room that serves as an office. A place to hang up your raingear, chow down, stare out the window and just think. Or just stare out the window.

When I walked in the smell kicked in a memory from twenty years ago – a cabin in the Maine woods. It was the frying pan of congealed fat leaning on the hotplate, which had probably been there for the past twenty years. The place had that heavy, unfussy stillness you get in work cubbies, a shabby chaos, with a certain air that makes you go floppy. You turn on the kettle, sit on a rickety stool, shake some instant coffee in a mug that somebody else used the day before, and then you settle down for silence. Harald rolls another cigarette and stares wistfully out the window: such a sad face longing over such a beautiful landscape. I pull out my

loaf of bread; grab one of the three knives that always remain on the table and saw off a slice, slather on some peanut butter... Harald looks at me and says with a smile: "*Barne mat*" (translation: Kid's food.)

I really like Harald. There's something about him that reminds me of Uncle Henry. Actually there's a lot about him that reminds me of Uncle Henry. And when I'm around him I find myself acting the way I did with Uncle Henry, working on his tobacco farm thirty-some years ago. Although Harald seems lugubrious at times, cold and slow moving like a glacier, his unexpected laughter explodes like a volcano. And for some inexplicable reason, he actually thinks my goofiness is funny – much like Uncle Henry did. That's actually the best part of the job, making Harald laugh. He doesn't snicker, he bellows like a giant. Once he explodes, his antics are predictable: slaps his thighs with both hands, then holds his gut with one hand, covers his mouth with the other.... I love it.

Then it's back to the pier. For the next six to eight hours we separate and re-stock the mussels. Harald toggles the levers on a derelict crane rigged to the back his logging truck. Some of the pier's boards have given way under the crane's supporting jacks, so we keep wedging new planks on top of those that have shattered. The crane hisses precariously: I swear there's a hydraulic leak. It doesn't bother me until I find myself *under* a one-ton bag of mussels. I stand on a four-foot

platform, reach up, pull a drawstring that opens a hole the size of a dinner plate, and pry out the mussels with a club. A water hose is attached to the top of the bag to help wash them out, but it mostly just washes me. I end up shoving my arm in and pulling out the clustered knots of mussels, along with muck, algae, seaweed... I feel like a veterinarian helping a beached whale with a breached birth. The clotted mess tumbles out in batches and slides down a chute to a rolling drum that shakes out the smaller mussels. But most of it spills out the other end of the drum, onto a rack. There we stand and massage the pile, by hand; the mussels falling through the grill into another cargo bag. The sound is deafening. Not so much the mussels rattling in the rotating drum; it's the truck's huffing diesel and the chugging tractor (its PTO drives the separator).

Then the crane hoists the 'separated' mussels over a bin, about ten feet high. I climb a ladder, open the drawstring and hope the mussels spill out. They rarely do. I take the club and pound the bottom – I mean pound, pound, pound... It's too complicated to explain the mechanism from there; but essentially a belt feeds the mussels into a four-inch pipe about ten-feet long. With the help of a water-slurry the mussels are packed into the cotton-gauze stocking. The stocking rolls over a pulley into another cargo bag. My task is to keep the stocking from mounding up in a pile – and keep my hands from getting

crunched in the pulley! So I stand on a box for about four hours, leaning over a railing that supports the bag – and strains my back – and pack the sausage-like stocking.

It's anywhere between 5 and 8 pm by the time we finish 6000 yards, our goal. We trudge back to the cubby for another cup of coffee. Harald rolls another cigarette; I slather another peanut butter sandwich. Then we head back to the crane, hoist the three bags unto the boat, cast off and chug out to the towlines: 'potato, potato, potato...' After 18 months the mussels will be merchantable, i.e., harvested and trucked to France.

By the end of the first week I've got the routine down: toss out the grappling hook, rope the forward part of the boat to the towline, hustle aft and fit the towline to the cogged roller on the starboard side, rig up the feeding pulley at the stern, chain the first bag to the on-board crane... then sharpen the knives on a whetstone. Harald ties the end of sausage to the towline and feeds it into the water until he hears the counter "beep", then he ties it again about two feet from the first knot. If you were a fish, you'd see the sausage hanging 30 feet beneath the surface and looping back up. What I do is prepare the line for Harald: I slice away the old tie-ups and seaweed. It's not difficult, but it can be dangerous. The knives are razor sharp, the deck is slick with seaweed and scummy algae, and the boat moves constantly, albeit slowly. If the wind

picks up things get dicey. The boat bucks the towline and occasionally the line gets hooked on the railing. Then, unexpectedly, it snaps back with a 'boing!' It takes your breath away – and if you're not careful, your knife takes a finger.

When we come to a buoy I have to really hustle. As the boat creeps forward, I untie the hawser, throw it over the buoy (to let it pass) then lash it back to the railing – fast! I hate the anticipation as much as the task. The thick hawser has a life of its own, like an anaconda with an attitude. One time my knot slithered apart, so I'm a bit anxious when a buoy approaches. And there's so much tension on the towline I have to throw my weight on it, literally – actually lean over the boat to wrestle that nylon snake.

But overall, setting out the mussels is one of my favorite jobs. There's something rather romantic and heroic working under the midnight sun, though we only did it once. We're usually finished before ten – more than an hour before sunset. The sky is so light your biological clock plays tricks on you. The fjord is often asleep and the dark water, though crystal clear, looks oily, almost mirror-like. It's 200 feet deep just a quarter mile from shore. When the sun dips behind the mountains the sky comes to life. Sometimes it's the refreshing color of sherbet; other times a sleepy pale blue, like Harald's eyes. I never saw a star, not once.

I keep wondering how people live in the atmospheric landscape,

possessed of its own gigantic purpose. The long, dark winter months would drive me nuts. But the long, light summer months recharge mental batteries. Everything seems joyful, even the mercurial weather. One moment it's raining the next it's sunny. The last morning out I was bundled in a turtleneck, wool sweater, fleece, fisherman's bib-overalls, rain slicker, and those clunky rubber boots and gauntlets. Pattering rain dimpled the glassy fjord, then the wind picked up. A few minutes later the rain turned to ice. Not hail – sleet. The magical nature of this place turned surreal. A few miles away the radiant sun warmed meadows in golden light. My chattering teeth sighed, 'Why-y-y there, not here?' It was as if God heard my question. The wind stopped just as quickly and mysteriously as it started – clouds didn't scud away, they simply disappeared. As the sun danced on the water my rain slicker grew warm and comfortable, then warm and clammy, then hot and steamy. (Be careful what you pray for.) I was so busy on deck I couldn't strip down. Just as well: the temperature suddenly plummeted and it started to rain again. By the time we got back to the pier my sticky sweat and sodden clothes had chilled.

What an ending. As we tied up, two fishermen greeted us with playful insults. It's one thing getting a perfunctory nod; it's quite another to have a quiet Norwegian call out to you. I'd worked with Stig and Bjarne

last month, at a mussel-farm a couple hours north (by boat). Standing on the pier with those fellows was an unforgettable experience. I hardly understood a word they said, and yet their eyes and smiles flashed at me. I was embraced by the rubber boot brethren. Cigarettes were rolled and lit; then hung precariously on salty lips that mumbled, barked, laughed. I haven't the faintest idea what they were jabbering about, but I knew they were good stories. It ended when Stig picked up a rusty scrap of iron, weighed it in his hand while saying something – flashing a look at me – then he sailed it in the air. It hung for a moment; accenting suspense to Stig's splashing punch-line. Harald laughed so hard he had to wipe the tears from his eyes. Bjarne winked at me and asked, "Ikke sant?" (Not true?) I was clueless what it was all about, but feigned laughter anyway: "Det er sant!" (It's true!) Then Harald's bear paw clapped my shoulder, and with a sympathetic smile he said, as if to reassure me, "Nei, Bill, det er ikke sant.

Another letter from Bill Warner in Norway. My life in Kentucky is boring compared with his. This is the E-Journal of J. Hill Hamon, who lives in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky. He is a reformed letterpress printer.

KyHamon@aol.com