

UNITED STATES

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

*****news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Flanagan - Interior 5634

For Release MAY 26, 1963

FEATURE MATERIAL

CONVERTED 1865 LUXURY SCHOONER NOW NATION'S OLDEST COMMERCIAL FISHING CRAFT

About the time the guns of the War-between-the-States stopped booming, a shipbuilder along Fish River in Alabama launched the 45-foot, two-masted luxury schooner Virginia.

Now, 98 years later, the Virginia is still braving the winds and waves of the Gulf of Mexico--not as a pleasure boat, but as the oldest known vessel in the American commercial fishing fleet. Her present owner predicts that a century hence the Virginia will still be seaworthy and active.

Attention has been focused on the Virginia as the result of a study by the Department of the Interior to determine the age of the Nation's fishing fleet. The recently released compilation merely listed the Alabama-built schooner as the most venerable.

The 98-year-old Virginia began her commercial fishing career comparatively recently--in 1946--after a five-year turn as a charter boat for sport fishermen. Her long history before that was not part of the fleet-age study.

The vessel now is based at Tampa, Fla. Her present owner is James F. Kirby, who purchased the craft in 1956. Those who have seen the boat in action in and out of Florida ports assert she is "strong as the Rock of Gibraltar." Her keel and ribs are black walnut and the planking is black cypress, two inches thick.

For nearly three-quarters of a century the Virginia traveled under sail. But 25 years ago the masts were removed and bunk facilities for 11 were taken out. A superstructure of combined pilot house and cabin was installed along with an engine.

The vessel has a gross tonnage of 14 and can carry 20,000 pounds of iced fish, although the usual cargo is about 5,000 pounds. She can stay at sea 30 days, but generally makes 20 fishing trips a year. Her occupants no longer are

people on a pleasure trip, but a crew of two to four, fishing for snapper and grouper, so popular at the dinner table.

The Virginia is known as a hand-liner because the catches are made by lines on hand-operated reels. One electric reel has been installed and the owner intends to replace the other hand-operated reels in the near future. An automatic pilot, depth recorder, and fishfinder are also part of her modern equipment.

Because the history of the Virginia was limited to cold statistical facts obtained by the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries from vessel registry maintained by the Bureau of Customs, the many adventures the schooner must have had in her 98 years of existence still remain untold. The Federal study concerned only with her fishing saga, the latest chapter of which will probably be a cruise to the Campeche, Mexico, snapper banks.

x x x

Note to Editors: Black and white photographs of the "old" and "new" Virginia are available from the Office of Information, Fish and Wildlife Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, Washington 25, D. C.