

Buck's Online

The Watermen: Oyster Cans

Shackelford-Schlifer, Shackelford-Thomas, and Cooks Oyster, Co. were three big names in the local Guinea seafood canning industry. All three canned oysters, clams, and fish harvested in Gloucester County by local watermen. Tommy Shackelford began Shackelford's in 1964, with Schlifer joining in business partnership in 1965. Through their business, Shackelford continued a family tradition of oyster packing. According to Shackelford, all of the oysters were initially locally sourced by Guinea watermen, who would sell where they fished. The Gloucester oysters that Shackelford-Schlifer packaged were then shipped to places like Miami, New Orleans, Boston, Baltimore, Atlanta, and Texas; Shackelford-Schlifer ensured that Guinea's name travelled far (25).

Eldridge Cook, a local entrepreneur, began Cook's Oyster, Co. in the 1940s. He had been transporting seafood locally and nationally since the age of 17; his company expanded the market, processing and shipping seafood as far as Europe and Turkey. Like Shackelford-Schlifer, Cook's processed seafood caught locally, supporting local watermen. Eldridge Cook retired his business in 2010 (26).

The cans from these companies are a rare find outside of Gloucester; a standard Shackelford-Schlifer oyster can currently is selling for \$239.00 on Etsy (27). The connection between local watermen and these companies shines a new light onto the purpose of the Guinea watermen; not only did they provide seafood for the community, but they supported and were supported in business by other local professionals to market that product. The Guinea watermen helped and continue to help support the community in a broader sense via the jobs and financial opportunities that these companies offered in Gloucester.