

To Charter Was His Course

Fishing and Captaining Were a Labor of Love

Lester Cowperthwaite already had the third generation of captain's blood in him when he mated his first trip to Florida at age 17.

He was born in 1896 to be a bayman, following in the wake of his father, William Henry, an early charter boat captain from the Beach Haven Yacht Club, and his grandfather Sam, a sea captain.

History will remember Lester Cowperthwaite as taking the enterprise a logical step further to become the first charter boat captain to lead excursions from Barnegat Light. The move was a matter of following the resource — his sportfishing clientele wanted to fish Barnegat Inlet, and it took only a few years for him to seek dockage closer to the fishing grounds.

As an heir to a pioneering family of the Barnegat Bay, Lester Cowperthwaite had one other birthright — his true love of the livelihood.

Seldom are people so lucky, remarked his daughter, that they are able to spend their life at a job they love. It was the bay that put the smile of contentment on her father's face and the twinkle in his blue eyes even as the sun came up to find him already an hour into gathering grass shrimp for bait.

"I think it's really neat for a man from the time he was 17 years old to do what he wanted to do all his life, to do something that wasn't work for him, that he absolutely loved," said Nancy Chatterton, reflecting on her father's life from the West Creek home where he was born.

The businessman of today could envy also the security of the schedule that this bayman had going for him. "He had a steady clientele that fished with him all the time," explained his daughter's husband, Ed. "One person would come every Tuesday; somebody else would come down another day. And if they didn't come, they paid him anyway."

As fulfilling as his vocation was, fishing for striped bass in the Barnegat Inlet was a serious business. Lester Cowperthwaite fished for stripers. Weakfish were OK, too, but anything else that hooked itself on the line was an incidental catch. His son-in-law tells it best.



Hard at work in search of stripers and weakfish. Cowperthwaite was the first to charter from Barnegat Light.

"If you asked him how many fish he caught, he'd tell you how many stripers he had.

"There was one time when I was going with my wife, I happened to be up there and they had caught a big fluke, and I mean it was a big one. I said, 'If you hold that up, I'll take your picture.' And he looked at me and said, 'I don't care to have my picture taken with a fluke.'"

Why a One-Man Boat Was Kept That Way

A man can be particular about the materials for a boat that's going to service him for a lifetime. In 1927, Cowperthwaite made sure he chose them himself, right from the source.

"I thought it was quite amazing," Ed Chatterton said. "He told me one time, he cut the trees that it was made out of." After the cedar was cut into planks at the sawmill, the boat was built in Parkertown by Adam Price and launched in Parkertown Creek. Christened the *Mary Ella* after Lester's mother, the 33-foot craft

fished out of the Beach Haven Yacht Club, where Lester's father, "Captain Henry," had been one of the first members, chartering the *Zeland* for small parties.

Cowperthwaite was an "expert" fisherman, according to his daughter. "If they were there, he caught 'em. I don't know what his secrets were, but he could catch a fish."

If Lester had had a son, he probably would have been a charter boat captain, too, but since he had a daughter, he taught her how to fish. Thinking a little more, the daughter who can also claim she can "catch 'em if they're out there" tried to describe how while acting out wrist motions from her living room chair.

"There's a feel in fishing. It's not like you put a line over and there it is. You've got to ... fish for it.

"He just had it," she settled. "It was a natural thing."

It was in 1931 that the *Mary Ella*

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dropped anchor in Barnegat Light, pre-saging the party boat center that would follow. Lester had gotten so tired of running his boat all the way up there from Beach Haven and back that he decided, "If I'm going to fish out of Barnegat Inlet, that's it," Nancy said. At the time, there was a dock and a hotel to lend accommodations. The *Mary Ella* docked at Eighth Street.

Cowperthwaite was still out fishing when he was 80. The boat rested in the Westecunk Creek until spring, pulled out only long enough to be repainted.

According to a proud tradition that some still observe, the *Mary Ella's* days ended in what outsiders might consider a surprising manner.

After Nancy's father died in September 1978, the family kept the boat for about two years, but it was "too much boat for us," she said, and was becoming an expense to maintain in its old age with the

marine railway in West Creek gone.

"It was a problem getting it overhauled," explained her husband. "They used to have railways they pulled them out on, but the railways are about gone. I think there's one in Forked River and one in Cape May. And nobody wanted to lift it, like they do with a sling, because it was so old they were afraid something would happen to it."

Ed continued, "We'd seen old boats of that vintage that had belonged to people and they were sunk in the creeks. We didn't want to see that happen to that boat because it meant a lot to him, that boat. And I'd never sell it to somebody else, because it was a one-man boat."

He went on, "So I said to his nephew — and he knew what I was talking about — 'What do you do with an old boat when you're done with it, because I don't want to see it sunk in some creek somewhere.'

"He said, 'We'll cut it up.' "

The proposal couldn't have come from a more justified source: Lester's nephew Allen Tonnesen, whom he "thought the

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world of," and who had "kept that boat running as long as my dad needed it," Nancy noted.

"There's the^s wheel right there," Ed pointed, to answer the question of whether they had held onto part of the *Mary Ella*. The brass is lacquered but the handles were kept their worn and weathered gray, the way Lester wanted them. They had been first gripped by his father before the *Zeland* artifact was handed down.

Oystering and Gunning Take Over Where Fishing Finally Leaves Off

In winter, the fishing continued, but the location, the boat and the catch changed. A few of the physician clients who fished with Cowperthwaite followed the urge for many years when they went south in the winter. They fished Florida's St. Lucie River for snook from Lester's small skiff there. He held the record snook for years.

What his heritage hadn't provided him, young Lester had learned from Captain Tom Jones, who took him on as mate to Florida fresh out of Tuckerton High School.

Miami at the time had one hotel and one dock. Lester was later heard to lament that the town, like what was to become future dockage at Barnegat Light,

could have been bought for a song, but who would have known?

When many years past a teenager, Cowperthwaite figured out why Jones had made him log the barometer reading and the wind direction every morning — "He did that for me."

"He could tell the weather better than any weatherman," Nancy said of her father. "He knew exactly what it was going to do, when it was going to blow." And he knew when a fellow would be wasting his time going out after fish.

Chartering wasn't the only business Lester kept busy with, and the *Mary Ella* wasn't his only boat. Steve "Sparky" Dickerson captained his 30-foot garvey, the *Nancy T*, and Lester and his father also hosted gunning parties from two houseboats off Dinner Point. Guests slept on one and ate on the other.

From a packing house on the Westcunk Creek, Lester and William Henry shipped oysters to the cities. The *Henry Clay* was a formidable dredging boat that culled oysters and clams from the bay in those days when dredging was allowed. The Cowperthwaites had their own oyster beds, which they had planted from "seed" oysters.

"I remember him telling me they'd borrow money from the bank and go out and plant the seeds for the oysters and then when it came time they would harvest

them and pay off the loan," said Ed.

Lester's house in Barnegat Light, where he and his wife, Gladys, lived from March until returning to West Creek by Thanksgiving, was obtained by barter. It was traded for the family's old house at 221 Engleside Avenue in Beach Haven. His mother and father had built it when they got married, back when there was no causeway and the only way to get to the Island was by boat on a day when waters hopefully weren't rough. His mother, a West Creek girl, "didn't like it over there in the winter."

Photographs of Cowperthwaite leaning back on deck, with a trademark bottle of Coca-Cola at hand and a fishing pole in the other, could be an advertisement for the good life, and a picturesque one for Coke. Here one sees a man happy with his world.

"He didn't talk a lot, but when he did, it was very meaningful," said his daughter. Even when fishing, said her husband, "he'd let you go and once in awhile, he'd walk by and say, 'Keep the tip of your rod down,' and that's all he'd say."

Also describing her father as a religious, "God-fearing man," Nancy remembers his observation of his life after the last few years he fished. "He said, 'I've seen the best of it. It's over. I've lived the time,'" she said. "He was thankful for that."