

# Captain Joel Mick

By Victoria Ford

Joel Mick was born into a family of berry farmers and fishermen out in Jenkins Neck, near Chatsworth. Born in 1947, he was named after his grandfather on his dad's side; but it was his mom's dad, Capt. Les Allen, who taught him to fish, his true calling.

"I always said I had the best of both worlds, because I had the hunting in the woods and the fishing in the ocean and the bay," he said.

His great-grandfather, Israel, was an Irish immigrant; the elder Joel Mick eventually bought 500 acres of land, situated between two branches of the Wading River, with about 50 acres of blueberries on one end and 40 acres of cranberries on the other, and mostly pine woods in between. Joel's father, Francis, took over for his dad; Joel's son Keith runs it today; and Keith's 17-year-old daughter Rosie may well take it over from him one day.

"Where you couldn't get my dad or grandpop to change their ways, Keith modernized it. I still go up there every fall and help him pick the cranberries."

Joel discovered his love of the water when he was about 10 years old, at Cape Horn Marina, aboard his grandfather's fishing boat, the *Alpat* (an acronym for names of family members). He replaced his youngest uncle as mate.

"Up at the blueberry farm, as hard as you could work all day, if you could pick 100 pints of blueberries you could make \$6. You couldn't do much better than that. The first day on the *Alpat* I made \$15, they fed me corned beef sandwiches and gave me soda all day, and I got to fish. And I went home and told my pop, I said, 'Dad, I'm gonna be a fisherman. (Laughs.) You can have the farm and the flies and the 100-degree heat.' So that's where I started."

This year is Mick's 46<sup>th</sup> year running the charter boat. By the time his current fishing license expires he will be 75 years old.

Mick entered the Navy in 1965 and worked on aircraft carriers in Guantanamo Bay. When he got out, he bought his first charter boat, the *Sea Hawk*, built by Pete Cranmer, which he renamed the *Sea Mist*.

"Don't change the name of a boat!" he cautioned. "It was an old superstition, and it worked out just the way it's supposed to with me. I had nothing but trouble with it. I had to get rid of it. Got out of fishing for a while."

In 1969 he joined the Atlantic City Fire Department, where he worked for 25 years. When he came back to fishing, he got the *Paper Moon*. He continued clamming on his days off, then ran charters and did both, plus working the cranberry farm. "I was going three different ways for years," he said.

His grandfather Les Allen gave him about 30 acres of lease ground in Great Bay. "I could see the bay becoming polluted from Mystic Islands, and I could see my future was toward the fishing.

"Pop always said, 'Don't ever get rid of the clam ground as long as you're gonna be around the water.' But I sold it to Don Maxwell and his son John (of Maxwell Shellfish in Port Republic), with the right to work on it for the rest of my life as long as he owned it, but I've never been back."

He had worked on the oyster boat with Curtis and Don Maxwell and kept up the clamming until about 1980. Then he got the *Melody II*, which "really got me rolling." He ran that charter for 20-some years, rebuilt the engine three times. The day he retired from the fire department, in 1994, was the same day he donated the *Melody II* to the Seaport.

“My grandfather said, ‘You know the fishing. I taught you that. But you don’t turn down a good job with benefits and a pension. You can always come back and do this.’ So I listened to him, and that’s what I done.”

The boat he has now, the *Evelynn Ann*, named for his wife, was custom built by Jack Henriques in Bayville. “It’s been the best boat I’ve ever had under me,” he said. After 21 years she still looks like the day she came out of the showroom.

“I always said I should have named the *Evelyn Ann* the *USS Sick Pay*, because I accumulated about a year’s worth of sick time I never used, and I sold it back when I retired, so that’s what I built the boat with. And the last five years I was there, I paid into a deferred comp plan, and that’s what I bought the engine with.”

Joel inherited a lot of the business from the *Alpat* – regulars from the Philly, Trenton and local area. At the height, he would take out about 125 trips a year. “Even today, as third-generation, I still take some of the families that went with my grandfather,” he said. “That’s gratifying.”

More rewarding still is the opportunity to instill the love of fishing in a first-timer. “If you take a young boy fishing and he has a good time, you’ve created a new fisherman.”

As a youngster himself, Joel’s inspiration came from all around. He vividly recalls the day in sixth grade at the New Gretna School when he saw Capt. Freddie Kalm’s *Sapphire Lady*, a 40-foot vessel with twin engines, go by on a trailer, headed to launch. Kalm was “about the best tuna fisherman there was around,” and his dad had built the *Sapphire Lady* from scratch in their driveway. “It was beautiful. I thought that was the *Queen Mary*. I thought, ‘That’s what I want to do.’” Kalm later ran the *Kalm Waters*.

When the *Alpat* was being built, high-school-age Mick would hop off the school bus in Tuckerton to go hang out and work at the boat shop so he could watch the progress and learn everything he could. When running charters, Mick would meet the boat every day when it came in to Allen’s Dock.

“I always listened to older captains,” he said. “That was experience talking.”

Throughout his fishing career, Mick said, “I’ve reinvented myself about five times, because when one fishery closes to you, you’ve got to do something else.” He got into wreck fishing, which wasn’t as easy as it looked: “First you gotta find them, then you gotta get the boat over them, and then you gotta figure out what the fish want.” It became something of a specialty for him, such that he could fish black tog through the end of February.

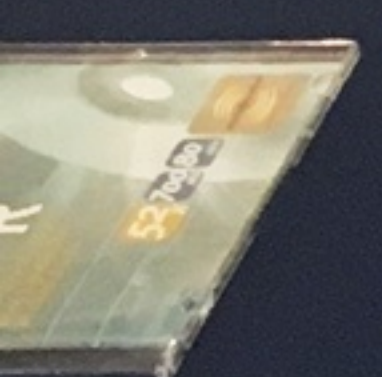
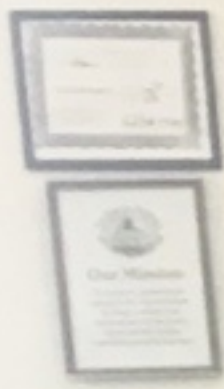
But for generations the Micks have understood adaptability is a survival skill.

The Micks are considered pioneers, Joel explained. Before the berry farming, the Mick family picked wild huckleberries all summer and did mossing, where they picked sphagnum moss out of the swamps, and baled it, and sold it to flower shops. Joel’s great-grandfather Israel worked at Martha Furnace.

When jobs were in short supply, people looked to them for employment in the fall. The Micks “created something out of the woods that nobody else could do,” he said. Without any formal education, Grandpop Joel engineered a bog system and built a road through the pines. “He was sharp.” Joel’s dad and uncles dug the bog reservoirs by hand. “To go up there and see it in the fall, it still amazes me,” what one man and his boys could build. Francis’s cousins George and Howard Mick started the canoe rental business.

“(Fishing) is all I ever wanted to do, from the time I was 10 or 11 years old. So, any time you get to do that, you never really work. I still love it today. I’m gonna go ’til I can’t go anymore, and then I might figure out a way to go some more.”





  
Capt. Joel Mick



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