

HISTORY NATURE ARTS ISSUES

# Delmarva

SPRING 2009 ■ FREE

## Quarterly

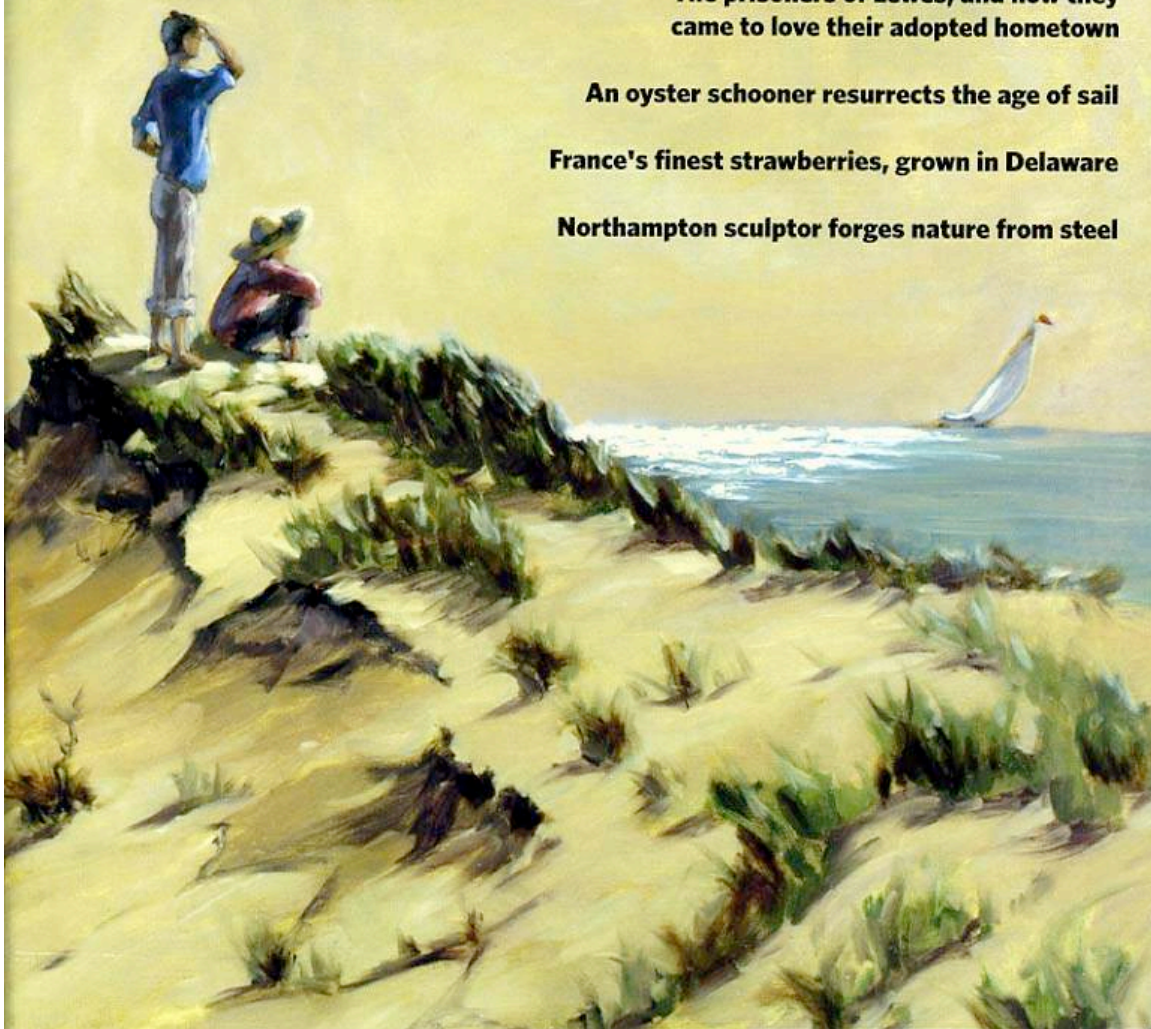
**One man, one mission, one fishing lure: the CW Crab**

**The prisoners of Lewes, and how they came to love their adopted hometown**

**An oyster schooner resurrects the age of sail**

**France's finest strawberries, grown in Delaware**

**Northampton sculptor forges nature from steel**





# The Low Whistle of the Wind

How a renaissance waterman saved the Maggie S. Myers, an historic oyster schooner

By CAROL CHILD

Every star in the sky shone upon the Maggie S. Myers as she sailed across the Delaware Bay from Bowers Beach to New Jersey. She navigated up the shipping lanes, her clipper bow folding the waves over the bay like fine lace. She carried as cargo the 50-foot yellow pine pole that would become her new mast. Huge hulls of freighters and tankers of exotic registry loomed up beside her, dimly lit as by a single candle. They whispered past her in the blackness.

She reached the Jersey shoreline soon after sunup. Her captain, Frank "Thumper" Eicherly IV, guided her five-foot draft up the shallow, curving Cohansey River to Fairton and her rendezvous with the rail at Flanigan Brothers boatyard, home of second- and third-generation boat builders. That was in September 2004. Today, with one









mast and sails restored, the Maggie S. Myers is believed to be the oldest working oyster schooner under sail in the United States. The 115-year old boat has never been out of commission. Her two masts were cut down when she was motorized - probably during World War II, when the states of New Jersey and Delaware lifted power-dredging restrictions and most captains outfitted their schooners with motors and wheelhouses.

Eicherly and his wife, Jean Friend, both from Bowers Beach, have owned the Maggie S. Myers for 10 years, devotedly sinking most of her earnings into her restoration. Indeed, Eicherly works the Delaware Bay out of North Bowers nearly daily, weather and regulatory conditions permitting. His crew of up to six, sometimes all women, dredge for conchs, oysters, horseshoe crabs, and blue crabs. They catch toadfish for the Chinese market in New York City. They collect mussels. At the end of the sometimes 15-hour days, they unload their catch onto trucks waiting at the Bowers dock.

The Maggie S. Myers was built as a two-masted Delaware Bay oyster-dredge schooner by Rice Brothers in Bridgeton, N.J. and commissioned in 1893. She is 50 feet long and 18 feet wide. The 24.62-ton schooner is the 22nd boat to get a New Jersey oyster license.

When she was built, the Maggie had four berths and a wood stove for cooking. She and her crew would stay out all week, as did the other oyster schooners. Without a motor, it took too long to sail into dock every evening with the catch.

On Friday they'd sail the oysters up to Philadelphia, often piled so high the captain had to close the windows of the wheelhouse so they wouldn't spill through. The crew then hurried home for the weekend to be with their families.

The Maggie is living history, and Eicherly is enthralled by her past. He beams, almost dancing as he recalls the 16-foot oar he stumbled upon years ago. Besides her masts and sails, Maggie probably had large oars in case the wind didn't blow.

#### Five Years Without Underwear

"Maggie is thick-skinned, beefy," he says. The ship's hull is eight to 10 inches of thick wood, and on cold winter days, she cuts through the bay ice with ease.

U.S. Coast Guard records show that the Maggie was motorized sometime before 1946. The forward mast was removed to make room for a fuel tank, and the centerboard trough, running bow to stern along the bottom center of the hull, was cut and capped off to accommodate the pair of motorized winches which operate the two dredges. The centerboard runs longitudinally along the hull to help stabilize the boat and prevents it drifting with the wind. Eicherly finds that the Maggie's mast and sails help stabilize her, as her original design intended.

The Maggie S. Myers was listed on the National Historic Register in 1983 by Harry and Jeannette Killen. They bought her in 1960 from John DuBois of Mauricetown, N.J., and worked her out of Leipsic dredging crabs, oysters and clams. Killen family photos show the Maggie's crew shoveling oysters into piles that climbed halfway up the wheelhouse.

In 1946 John DuBois sold the Maggie to Seacoast Oyster Company of New Haven, Conn., and bought her back in 1950 when the company dissolved. James E. Munson, manager of Seacoast, negotiated the transactions. He kept a diary. His son, Bob Munson, of Port Norris, N.J., 13 in 1946, saw the Maggie and recalls that the mast had been stubbed already, further evidence that she was motorized prior to that year.

Munson's diary notes that one of the changes Seacoast made was to install a coal-powered, steam-generating boiler on deck used expressly to boil starfish. They had an apparatus that looked like big mop heads, steel with cotton mesh, that snagged starfish when dragged along the bay's bottom. The starfish were boiled and tossed overboard. Today, the few starfish Eicherly and crew dredge up amid the other catch are thrown back, or dried to become tourist trinkets and Christmas ornaments.

When Harry Killen underwent open-heart surgery in 1985, he and his wife sold the Maggie to Willis Hand. They hated to see her go. Hand's son, W.C., worked her out of Port Mahon, Del. crab dredging; but with only 22 days of work a year, Maggie wasn't paying her way. The Hands owned another boat. They were watching the Maggie deteriorate.

Then one day in 1998, Eicherly heard Captain Willis Hand talking to W.C. about the Maggie. They planned to salvage the motor and beach her.

"The instant we saw her, it was love at first sight," says Jean Friend.

"She looks so cool," Eicherly observes, with childlike awe. "She's low to the water and dredges by hand. She turns on a song, like a snow goose flying around in the air." Fat Maggie, he calls her. Indeed, when she comes straight at you across the water, she looks like an overfed goose.

Hand sold the couple the Maggie for \$5,000.

They bought her to use as a pleasure boat, but their dreams soon foundered when their working boat, The Phragmites, berthed next to the Maggie at dock, was crushed by ice.

The Maggie had to go to work.

"She had holes the size of golf balls," Eicherly recalls. "Once we had thirteen pumps to keep afloat. She looked like a fireboat. It took a hundred trips to get the down payment to take her to the rail."

They commissioned Donald Flanigan of Flanigan Brothers boatyard. "One day Jean called us," says Flanigan.

**"She looks so cool," Eicherly observes, with childlike awe. "She's low to the water and dredges by hand. She turns on a song, like a snow goose flying around in the air."**



"Do what Maggie needs to make her float," she said. "Oh, boy...." I thought."

It took three months to repair her that first year, 2001. "That was the beginning of the Maggie Myers Restoration Project," Eicherly says with a half laugh. The couple's out-of-pocket expenditures went up to \$60,000 annually.

Friend said, "The Maggie's at the boatyard so much that when I go to there, the guys greet me with, 'We hear you've gone five years without underwear!'"

The Flanigans' Web site, [www.flaniganbros.com](http://www.flaniganbros.com), meticulously documents each step of Maggie's restoration, in stunning photographs and simple text, including her new bowsprit installed in the autumn of 2007.

#### **Bard, Waterman, Conservationist**

At the boatyard, when he isn't revving a chainsaw or installing stays and riggings to the mast, the slightly-built Eicherly, wearing his knit cap and looking like an early-day, bearded Pete Seeger, picks up his guitar and serenades the workers with a sea chantey. Eicherly wrote the Flanigan's Web site theme song, "The Shipwright's Lament." He and Friend are Delmarva Friends of Folk members, occasionally performing at their venues.

Thirty years ago Eicherly read Donald H. Rolfs's "Under Sail: The Dredgeboats of Delaware Bay." That book made him want to eat, sleep and feel the waterman's life. But there were earlier influences; namely, "Moby Dick" - he saw himself as a young Ishmael - "Huckleberry Finn" and "Tom Sawyer," which he read growing up on the Susquehanna River in Columbia, Pa.

"They called us river rats," he says. "I thought, 'I'm gonna build a sailboat and sail away.'"

A few years ago Eicherly made history when he introduced an innovative mesh bait bag design that uses only a quarter to an eighth of a horseshoe crab, which watermen traditionally have used for conch bait, cutting his needs by more than 75 percent. Today, watermen up and down the Atlantic coast use his bait bag. Dr. Carl N. Shuster Jr., who is recognized as the world's foremost expert on horseshoe crabs, calls Eicherly "one of the shining lights in the whole story of the Delaware Bay."

Among their activities, Eicherly and the Maggie have worked with the U.S. Geological Survey tagging horseshoe crabs out on the bay. USGS biostatistician Dave Smith, who headed the survey, says, "Thumper is a uniquely conservation-minded waterman. He possesses traditional eco-



Undiminished by dry land, the Maggie sits at the Flanigan Bros. Boatyard in New Jersey.

logical knowledge that stems from adapting his life to the rhythms of Delaware Bay."

Eicherly and Friend served on the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission Horseshoe Crab Advisory Panel, assisting the U.S. Geological Survey indexing of horseshoe crabs. They have taught at Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC) Green Eggs & Sand workshops. They hosted University of Delaware students on the bay for a day as part of their geography class, Environmental Videography. They've also helped members of the Sierra Club learn about horseshoe crab conservation and shore-bird preservation.

Ever the innovator, Eicherly discovered in 2008 that he could use mussels for conch bait, eliminating the need for horseshoe crabs altogether.

#### **Securing a legacy**

Friend worked on the water with Eicherly for eight years until they bought the Maggie. "It was different then. It was hard work. We fished. We had a smaller boat," she says. Now she keeps in touch by radio the same as Eicherly does out on the Bay with fellow watermen.

"The Maggie supports many mouths," says Friend. "You're only as good as your crew. When they are wet, you give them dry clothes; when they are hungry, you





**William "Thumper" Eicherly IV**, is a waterman and conservationist. He spends much of the Maggie's earnings on her restoration.

feed them; when they are thirsty, you give them something to drink." All last winter Friend, a New Hampshire native, operated a weekly soup kitchen in Bowers Beach, renting the space, buying and preparing the food herself – a kind of Mother Hubbard whose cupboards never run bare. "Anything anybody needs, they know they can turn to us," says Friend. "We've given them bed covers, food, anything."

She produced an annual Bowers horseshoe crab festival, wrote and published a monthly Bowers newsletter and much more – up until this year. Caught in the ever-tightening net of fishing regulations, the couple had to curtail their efforts. Consequently, Maggie forewent her rendezvous with the rail the fall of 2008, despite her imminent need for a new wheelhouse and centerboard.

"We must get all Maggie's restoration done in the next five years or not at all," says Eicherly, "while Donald Flanigan is still working, and while oyster schooners and watermen are still working.

"It's like putting the schooner through college," he reflects.

Their concern is for the Maggie's legacy. "We want the Maggie to be used even more to educate, especially children," says Eicherly. "We want her to become an educational living museum. We want to pass her down as a living archive in Delaware. All we need is five years."

And so, as the mornings roll in, one upon another, Friend gets up and makes the coffee for Eicherly, who sails away on the Maggie, dredging under sail when conditions allow, thereby cutting his fuel use to a third. Eicherly sews his own sails out of Gore-Tex. "It's lightweight and doesn't rot because it's resistant to UV damage," Eicherly says.

Gore-Tex is a waterproof-breathable material made from a plastic laminate that is sealed onto fabric – better than the old cotton sails that mildewed and rotted and weighed 600 to 800 pounds.

#### "How quiet..."

He tells his story of sailing home for the first time the evening of December 16, 2004 across the Delaware Bay.

It was sunset when he and the crew got to the Ship John Shoal lighthouse. They circled the lighthouse and raised the Maggie's sail. He idled the engine. Going against the tide and with a light breeze they made one and a half knots. They looked over the stern and saw little bubbles as they moved.

Then they were going three and a half knots, too fast to dredge for oysters. They had discovered an oil leak on the way over, so Eicherly turned off the engine, and again they were sailing at one and a half knots, just the right speed. He went below deck to capture the oil and put it back in the drum and save it.

From below, he recounts, "You could hear the sounds of the crew above, working. You could hear the sounds of the other fishing boats out on the water, and you could hear the chain dredging, running along the bottom, the riggings as the boat tipped and moved and the low whistle of the wind as the breeze caught the sail. Imagine if all the boats out on the Bay had sails, how different it would sound. How quiet it would be." **DQ**

*Carol Child is a freelance writer, essayist, award-winning poet, and photographer. She works from home in Smyrna, Del.*