

## Tale of skipjack captain and caper still worthy of praise



By Tom Horton

This is the story of a gift of Chesapeake waters, no less important than any bounty of seafood.

It's about Art — the late Art Daniels, Jr., that is, legendary Deal Island oyster dredger, captain for more than half a century of the skipjack City of Crisfield.

It's also about the art of the oyster, which appears to be the least glamorous of Chesapeake seafood, no match for the blue crab's colors, the sportiness of striped bass or the eel's epic migration from Bay streams to Sargasso Sea.

But pursuit and capture of the humble "arster" has inspired more lore and photography, painting and passion (the "oyster wars" of the 1800s), than anything else from these waters.

No method of harvesting the Bay was more artful than the wind filling the outsize mainsail of a skipjack as the captain drove her skillfully, "licking" her twin dredges across the "rocks" (reefs) of oysters.

Among this fraternity, Art Daniels Jr., and the City of Crisfield were renowned. My late friend Tom Wisner, singer and storyteller of Bay tales, called Art one of the "elemental folk," one of the lives twined intimately with the estuary's nature.

He recalled Art showing him a fossil whalebone that came up in the City's dredges: "likely 12 million to 20 million years old," Tom ventured. Art quietly demurred — it could be no older than the time of Noah.

"Ahh, well, I dunno about that, Cap'n," Tom mumbled.

"Well that's just it, boy," Art smiled

broadly, "you don't know. But I *know*."

The two did share abiding faith, Tom in Nature, Art in the Lord, who surely governs nature. They traded stories, shared songs, Art in his fine tenor, Tom in a resonant baritone.

Perhaps it was that familiarity that led Tom to ask something of Art that would result in an act of high Chesapeake art.

In early January 1972, loaded with oysters, Tom aboard with his camera, Art had the City of Crisfield flying before a southeast breeze toward Solomons harbor on Maryland's Patuxent River. It was Jan. 6, 1972, a date of revelation, the Christian feast of Epiphany. At the wheel, Art hummed a hymn as he passed Drum Point Light.

"Y'know, Cap'n, I've heard some of these Eastern Shore captains can put a boat into dock under sail only," Tom said. Art hummed, lost in thought, hummed some more.

"Might be true," he said finally.

Only later would Tom realize what he was requesting: "[It was] like asking an 18-wheeler to come into a tight parking space at 65 mph ... throwing tons of old wooden boat and rigging against the hard concrete of Solomons wharf, with sure disaster if a single thing went wrong."

Art scanned the waves and currents, hummed another hymn. Silence. Then, to his crew: "Eddie, you go forward and take that jib off and stand by on the main halyard. Be ready to let 'er go. Elmer, you get forward with that bowline. Tom, put that camera down and hold this rope."

The Solomons dock was coming fast. The other skipjacks had all dropped sail for docking with the powered "pushboats" carried astern. They hung back. This would be something to see. A crowd formed along the catwalk of the Orca, a big barge that extended from one end of the dock.

Art held a collision course for the Orca. He would need to turn, or "come about," very sharply at the last possible moment, spinning the City of Crisfield in a great arc, dropping sails and luffing up into the wind, kissing the dock — or smashing it.

At such moments, Tom recalled, "watermen say a skipper has the whole universe in the palm of his hand." No sound



*The City of Crisfield, a skipjack once captained by the late Art Daniels, Jr., stands in a boatyard on Deal Island, MD, where Bob Fitzgerald (pictured above) is conducting restoration work. (Dave Harp)*

now but the rush of wind and water curling from the City's bow.

Art spun the wheel, and the boat's long bowsprit swept down the Orca's side so close the gawkers lined up on her fell backwards or sucked in their stomachs.

Sails down, boom drawn in, she was still whizzing past the dock. Elmer knew what to do; he hurled the dock line ashore, aiming for the man standing ready to quickly wrap it around a bollard.

And he *missed*. The rope slithered back into the water.

Art was already "striding forward from the wheel, running like an old rooster," Tom said. His whole body bent to gather the rope and whirl in one fluid motion and struck the dock man in the chest. And with a groan the City of Crisfield settled to the dock.

Art sauntered back to the stern as the crowd applauded. "How's that for docking one of 'em, Tom?"

It was a work of Art, captured vividly on *Follow on the Water*, Tom's last CD. And there's so much more.

There's *Watermen*, the hauntingly lovely 1968 film by Holly Fisher and Romas Slezas,

that follows Art and the Deal Islanders through a year of oystering, and there's *The Oystermen of the Chesapeake*, by Robert de Gast, arguably the finest photo book ever done on the Bay.

Also, at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, as part of photographer Dave Harp's *Where Land and Water Meet* retrospective photo exhibit, there's a continuously playing loop of roughly 60 photos from 1976, chronicling the last days of widespread sail dredging. And the Skipjack Heritage Museum on Deal Island will soon be opening a section featuring Art Daniels and the City of Crisfield. ■

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