

The First Crab Pots

I HAD BEEN GOING over to the Eastern Shore of Virginia in the spring to trotline for crabs the last few years. In mid-April when the first snowball bushes would bloom, a group of us from Tangier Island would leave home to work those creeks that stretched from Onancock to Cape Charles. Onancock, Pungoteague, Nandua, Craddock, Occohannock, and Hungars creeks were all good for crabbing with the trotline. One year I spent the whole season in Craddock Creek and made a barrel of money.

The night before I shoved off for another season, I was standing down at my little dock delighted to feel the change in temperature that those first few days of spring bring. I had decided not to go down to Captain Peter's store which was the hangout for the fishermen on the island. I would spend the last night at home. Anyway, the only talk down at

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the store was about the war, and no one seem to know what was really going on. The Germans and old Hitler were doing this and that, they would say. It would only depress me.

The moon was full. The rays were sparkling across the water. It was the kind of night that made your mind wonder. On the one hand, I hated to leave home, but on the other, every year offered that same excitement. I wondered how many barrels of crabs I'd catch and if this would be a better year than last. I could hardly wait until morning. By golly, it was a free life.

My thoughts were interrupted by my brother Ed who was coming down the winding dirt path toward the dock. "Are you ready to go, Elmer?" he asked. "It looks like you got your old barcat in shape for it," he said without waiting for me to answer his first question.

Ed and I oystered together during the winter months but in the spring I would crab my boat, and he would work his. My boat was a twenty-six-foot-round sterner with a single cylinder, six-horsepower Regal engine. She was a fine vessel for trotlining or scrapping for crabs.

"I've got things about ready for the morning," I said. "What about you, brother, have you got things in shape?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm ready as I'll ever be," he said. "Elmer, where did you get that spool to hold your line?"

There was a spool on the side of my boat to let the line out. It was attached to my washboard hanging out over the water. It helped to keep the line from tangling up while working.

I grinned as I told Ed I had made the spool out of a piece of pipe and the bottoms of two tomato baskets that had been

laying around the place. Ed got a kick out of that, but agreed it made a nice spool.

"How many fathoms are you going to run this year?" Ed asked.

"The same as every year two hundred fathoms with number two cotton line," I answered.

Ed stayed and talked awhile longer, but he knew we both would be leaving early in the morning and a good night's sleep was important to us both. Finally, he said good night and wished me good luck.

Ed was going to start down in Hungars Creek and I was going to Onancock where I started every year. I liked to start in Onancock Creek because there were several trap fishermen who worked out of there and during the early spring they usually were catching pinheads. I liked pinheads (small hardheads or croakers) for bait. It was a decent bait. Not the best but pinheads stayed firm longer than most other fish like spot or trout. The best bait was eel, but tripe was also good and some of the boys used calves ears. The calves ears were tough, but there certainly wasn't much there for old jimmy to eat on. We all used whatever was available at the time, and I knew I could get plenty of bait out of Onancock.

I walked home after Ed left. Ida, my wife, and I sat down and talked at the kitchen table. The Eastern Shore was close enough that I'd be home on the weekends. I stayed on my boat wherever I was crabbing. After our talk, I went upstairs and looked in on the children who were sleeping. I stood there in the dark thinking how much they had grown, when Ida cautioned me not to wake them. I would be gone when they awoke in the morning.

I awoke to the smell of fried salt fish that Ida was cooking for me. Dawn was still a couple hours away. I wanted to be one of the first crabbers there, so I could get a good spot. I ate breakfast quickly and gave Ida the little bit of money I had. I kept enough to buy bait and a few groceries. We kissed good-bye. I picked up the little basket of food she had made for me and then went down to my barcat.

The air was fresh with spring, but there was still a touch of winter in the early mornings. As I shoved off, I wondered if the fish trapper would be at his net when I arrived and if he would have any pinheads. In the early spring pinheads were often caught after a good northeaster, but there had been nothing but clear skies for the past week.

When I got to the net, my worries about bait were over. The trapper was there, and he had plenty of pinheads, but there were three other boats waiting for bait, too. They were all from Tangier and were all going to Onancock Creek. I knew there would have to be plenty of crabs to support all of us. With trotlining, unlike crab potting, the water had to be solid full of crabs to catch any amount. It was bad news to see all those boats, and I figured there would probably be some already there.

I went into Onancock on that Monday morning and let my line out. I ran down the line once with the tide to see what I'd catch, and there wasn't much. I could see the others working their lines, and they didn't appear to be catching much. I worked all day and had hardly caught any crabs.

I was pulling my line in when Homer Crockett came up to my barcat. He was in a dory boat that had lapped-over side planking like you see on a house. We used to see a lot of those boats on the Maryland side of the Potomac. "Captain Elmer, are you doing anything?" he asked.

"I'm not doing a thing, Homer," I said. "Is this your first day here?" I asked.

He told me it was and the other two boats were with him. They were Milbern Crockett and Ferman Dize. Homer told me they were going to head down to Pungoteague Creek and try there the next day. I asked if I could come along. I had planned to go there the next morning anyway. They were going to follow the creeks down the shore toward Cape Charles until they found a decent one. It was the same idea I had.

The next few weeks we worked Pungoteague, Nandua, Craddock, Occohannock and Hungars creeks with the same results as the first day. On a Friday we went into Cape Charles with not a barrel of crabs caught between us. A buy boat had bought most of our crabs earlier, but it had not amounted to much. I had enough money to buy a few groceries, a little gas, and then I was spent out. The others were almost broke after they sold their crabs. By golly, things were tight.

We moored our boats during the night in the little harbor and talked about what we should do next. I had never seen it so bad. Ferman Dize said, "Boys, we are going to starve if we stay over here this year. Why don't we go over on the western shore and try it over there? I know some creeks in Mobjack Bay that look to be good crabbing creeks to me," he said.

I had been over that way before, but not to crab. Most of my dealings with the western shore were for oysters. I figured like the others—we just as well give it a try because we didn't have anything to lose. Ferman also knew of a buy boat that came each day from Hampton to buy crabs. It meant we would have a market nearby to sell to. I wondered

what Ed was doing. Later, I learned he went over near Reedville to crab.

The next morning we headed toward Mobjack, stopping over at Tangier to tell the wives where we were going and to pick up food. I had more food than the others, but it wasn't much. None of us had taken much from home because there wasn't much there either. All of us hoped, I guess, that we would catch something so we could eat, but nobody said so.

When we arrived, we went into Davis Creek and moored our boats. It was late Sunday evening, so we waited until Monday to go to work. Food was to be a problem for several days. The little bit of money we made we saved to take home to Tangier. Several meals came from a trap fisherman, who moored his little skiff by a dock close to us. He would come in early from fishing and sell his catch. What he could not sell he would leave in the bottom of his boat. It was mostly trash fish like buck herring or bunkers. One morning I asked him for the herring and told him we were low on food. He told me to help myself. Every morning after that, I would pick up the fish and fry them up in my boat for all of us. One morning we even had to eat bunker. I tell you, that kept us from almost starving some days. Those were hard times.

After breakfast each morning we would all go to our boats and shove off in separate directions. On this one morning I went into Pepper Creek and let my line out. By midday, I'd caught a barrel of crabs. They were big rusty jimmys, and I was mighty happy. I thought I'd done all right until I took my catch out to the buy boat. The buy boat was named the *Irene Pearl*. It came from Hampton and was buying for Isaac Fass.

I took my barrel of crabs on board and got paid five dollars, which was what a barrel was bringing that day. The money looked mighty good. It always looks better when you don't have any. I stayed on the buy boat awhile watching the other crabbers bring in their catch. I noticed two boats were solid full of crabs. I wondered where those boys had been crabbing. When I saw who they were, I recognized them. They were two old-timers who piloted fish steamers up on the Delaware Bay during the summer. I'd seen them and spoken to one of them at Cape Charles a few years back.

The one that I had met I went over and spoke to. He had ten full barrels in his boat. I asked him where he was crabbing, and all he would tell me was here in Mobjack. We talked about the weather, but he wouldn't give me any information on where he had caught those crabs. I didn't blame him much.

When I got back to Davis Creek, I found I was the only one to do any good at all. The other three caught a half of a barrel apiece. Now we all had a little money, we could go our separate ways and not have to depend on each other so much.

The next morning I went back to Pepper in hopes of doing as good again, but things did not turn out that way. I hardly caught a half of a barrel. When I got out to the *Irene Pearl* to sell, those same fellows were there with ten more barrels apiece. By golly, I thought to myself they must have found a hot spot. I knew where they moored, so I decided in the morning I'd find out where they were going. I wondered where their lines were. The only things in the boats were the barrels full of crabs. It was something very strange about the whole thing. They just weren't rigged up for trotlining.

I cooked supper on my boat that night and was eating when Homer came by and asked if I wanted to take a look around after dinner. I said that would be fine. After I ate, we took a walk down a dirt road to a small village. We were in Mathews County. We came to the end of the road and there was a house with a man sitting on the front porch. He got up and said, "Hey, boys, come on over here. I got some strawberry shortcake you two can have."

Homer and I went over and sure enough he had some of the best strawberry shortcake I'd ever had. We sat down and filled up. When we got up to leave, he said, "Wait a minute, boys, I've got a little job, and I'd like to hire you boys to do it."

Well, he had been nice enough so we decided to see what it was he wanted. He owned a little fish house there behind his house. We went down and went inside. There were 250 fish boxes he wanted iced down. Homer and I decided to do it, and we worked late into the night to finish the job. When it came to settling up, he gave Homer fifty cents. I didn't think it was enough, and he knew by the look on my face I didn't. So he asked, "How much do you think I should pay you?"

"I think a dollar would be better," I said.

He gave me a dollar and Homer fifty cents. Times were tight, but for what we had done it was worth more than fifty cents. He came down the next day and wanted us to help him load the fish on a truck, but we didn't think it would be in our best interest. We said no.

I was up early the next morning waiting for the two old crabbers to come to their boats. I was going to find out, once and for all, where those fellows were catching ten barrels a day. It was not long before they came down and got their

boats and headed off. I could see they didn't have a trotline rig in their boats. They went out a short distance into the Mobjack and started pulling on a rope tied to an oyster stake that was marking oyster grounds. By golly, he pulled up a wire cage that was solid full of crabs.

I sat in my boat and watched them go from one stake to the next pulling in crabs. I thought to myself, boy they are doing the right thing. I didn't crab that day but went back to shore and waited for the old fellow to come to the dock. I wanted to find out how the cage was made. He came after awhile and tied to the dock. He had sold his catch and was finished for the day.

"How you doing, Captain?" I asked. "I was hoping you might tell me what you call that rig you were pulling up at those oyster stakes."

"I can do better than that. Let me show you one," he said.

It surprised me because I didn't think he would tell me anything. He showed me one and let me use one for a sample so I could make my own. It was the first crab pot I'd ever seen.

I took the pot over to my boat and put it in the cabin. I went to the store and bought a roll of wire. It cost \$3.50 for a roll. One roll back then would make thirteen pots whereas now a roll will make ten and a half. I worked by lantern the entire night in hopes of having a few made to give it a try the next day. I had six pots made by daybreak, and I was anxious to try them out. I headed on out without my breakfast and tied the six pots to some oyster stakes, and went back to shore and made up the rest of the roll.

The first day I caught a half barrel and when I got all thirteen pots made I was catching a barrel a day. Five dollars

a day, that was some kind of good money. This went on for a week or so, catching a barrel and sometimes a little over a barrel a day. My partners soon saw I was making all the money. They also went and got some wire, and I showed them how to make the pots. Well, this would have been the beginning of something great if it had not been for the other trotliners.

Soon everyone had heard of the crab pots that were catching all the crabs. Talk got around that the boys from Tangier were using them. One morning I was late going out to fish the pots, and as I made the turn from Davis Creek out into the Bay, I could see someone by the oyster stake where I had one of my pots tied. I didn't pay much attention at first until I realized what he was doing.

It was a trotliner and he was going from stake to stake cutting the lines to the pots. I knew who he was by his boat. I got good and mad at first and thought of several ways to get even, but I realized it was best to let it pass. I knew what it was to be hungry and desperate. I also knew the boys were not making any money. I went back to the dock and rigged up a long pole with a bent nail in the end. I then went out and hooked my pots. The ropes needed repair, but after I tied the cut ends together, they were ready to go again.

It was not long after this the boys and I decided to take the pots home to Tangier and see how they would do over there. We were the first to bring the crab pot to Tangier. I went home with fifty dollars in my pocket. We were all glad we had decided to try the western shore.

Shortly after this, the trotline began to fade out, and the crab pot took over on most parts of the Bay. The man who built the first pot was from the western shore of Virginia. He lived on Little River which is above Smith Point Light. He

Barcat Skipper

would go up and down the western shore and collect a fee from anyone who was using the pots. He claimed to have a patent on the design. The fee was \$3.50 a year. Some would pay but most would not.