A Hard Job to Quit: Camaraderie, Crabbing, and Change on the Chesapeake Bay

by Jessica Taylor and Patrick Daglaris

A. J. needed somebody to go crabbing with him. And I had heard that A. J. was an ornery fellow to work for, but I needed a job. I ain't never been crab potting except by myself in a skiff. Never done it in my life, and if he cusses me I'm quitting. But I need a job. Yeah, [I thought], "I'll go with him."

So I went down on the first day, and it was blowing a gale, and A. J. had had the flu. And he said, "Well, I guess we won't go today; it's too rough." I said, "Look. I ain't never done this in my life, and it's just as good a day for you to fire me as any; let's go." He said, "That's what I like to hear, boy! That's a man who wants to go to work. Let's go." And we went out there and we had the greatest time.

And I never worked for a man that gave me a hundred dollar tip in one week. That was in 1981, so a hundred dollars was a lot of money for a tip for one week. And he told me that I worked really hard that week and he wanted me to have it. He was a tough guy that nobody ever give him nothing, but he appreciated other people.[1]

Davey Callis earned his paycheck from A. J. Hurst, one of Eastern Virginia's patriarchs of crabbing. Over his seventy-year career, A. J. worked his way through enormous environmental and economic changes along Mathews County's hundreds of miles of marshy, winding shores on the Middle Peninsula—the piece of land between the York and Rappahannock Rivers. Like other watermen in an occupation traditionally dominated by men, he lived the ambitions of his father and friends, fishing from his own small boat. But while Virginia's commercial fisheries remain important to the state's economy, periods of decline in catches from diseased or overharvested stocks and the pull of good jobs elsewhere have, over the course of A. J.'s lifetime, discouraged other would-be career watermen and waterwomen. In the 1940s, A. J. and the young and old men beside him brought ashore the Chesapeake blue crab for widening markets. Like other watermen and women on tugboats or in the military, when fishing proved untenable in the decades after World War II, A. J. shifted between his workboat and larger vessels and longer voyages farther from home. In the 1950s, he began a lucrative stint on enormous, cutting-edge vessels that brought schools of oily, bony menhaden—fish typically processed for fertilizer, animal feed, and dietary supplements. A. J. discovered that to work the water from his home, he would have to leave for a while first to support his family. But when the crabbing got good again after a decade away, in the 1960s he returned to the waters of Mathews County to mentor young people like Davey.

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[1] David Callis, interview by Jessica Taylor, July 16, 2014, transcript and recording, Tidewater Main Street Project, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida Digital Collections. http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00032087/00001.

Fishing follows shifting and changeable channels and seasons. Work, home, and the relationships between fishermen are defined by intimacy with the tidal rivers and open waters of the Chesapeake, and watermen and women hold fast to those relationships even as it seemed the bay's environs push them away. Watchful for rises and falls in harvests, however, watermen and women along the entire stretch of the Chesapeake Bay pull in a fraction of the seafood they did a century ago, and regulators in each state scramble to reverse or mediate the decline.[2] Once the predominant occupation in the county and a major economic driver for the region, fishing is now part of Mathews County's smallest industry.[3]

Historians, folklorists, and writers have followed watermen onto workboats for more than a half-century, documenting knowledge of the bay's environment and seafood species. They also document the heartbreaks common to watermen's communities in each state surrounding the Chesapeake: the effects of increased corporatization, international seafood competition, sea level rise, and migration on fishing practices and small coastal towns.[4] By the end of many published academic studies, the death of a way of life feels imminent, a southern tragedy at the intersection of environmental and cultural decline that watermen (and coal miners, and small farmers) carry with them. What is it like to know that you're among the last of your kind? What do you worry about, for a world without you in it?

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[2] Victor S. Kennedy, *Shifting Baselines in the Chesapeake Bay: an Environmental History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), ix.

[3] Mathews County Board of Supervisors, "Mathews County Comprehensive Plan 2030: Preserving and Sustaining the Pearl of the Chesapeake" (Mathews County, 2018), 2, 32.

Over time, A. J. watched the marks watermen left on the local landscape fade—the nets, docks, workboats, and mastery of them—and witnessed his social networks narrow. In contemporary interviews we helped collect through the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida, A. J. reflects on his values in light of what the "young boys" will struggle to find today: independence, mentorship, and camaraderie in the setting of a bountiful bay. Friends and younger watermen like Davey also reflected on A. J., a man who taught them how to make an independent living alongside other fishermen. In A. J.'s life, they see his adaptation, and his insistence on connection to other men in the business, as an alternative to decay and disconnection from a past full of good stories. He demonstrates that watermen can transition between independent and corporate work to maintain ties to home that made work meaningful in the first place.

Early life on the water

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[4] Earl Swift, *Chesapeake Requiem: A Year with the Watermen of Vanishing Tangier Island* (New York: Harpers Collins Publishers, 2018). John Frye, *The Men All Singing: the Story of Menhaden Fishing* (Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Company, 1978). William Warner, *Beautiful Swimmers: Watermen, Crabs, and the Chesapeake Bay* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977). Martha McCartney, *Mathews County, Virginia: Lost Landscapes, Untold Stories* (Mathews County, VA: Mathews County Historical Society, 2015). Michael Paolisso, "Blue Crabs and Controversy on the Chesapeake Bay: A Cultural Model for Understanding Watermen's Reasoning about Blue Crab Management," *Human Organization* 61, no. 3 (2002).

Arthur "A. J." Hurst left the house on early mornings at the age of eleven to support his family. He never enjoyed school, preferring fishing or driving his goat and cart down the road over sitting in a classroom. Born in 1935 in New Point, Mathews County, he lived in a rented house with no running water. His father fished on other men's boats alongside thousands of other Mathews County men who passed one another on shipping, fishing, and merchant vessels between the Chesapeake's dozens of bustling ports. He recounted working for other watermen early on as a child, but identified finding real success in working for himself, a tip that a fellow fisherman shared with him early on.

> **Jessica Taylor:** How's it different working for yourself?
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> **A. J. Hurst:** Well, I could do better working for myself. I could do better. I made more money. It's all or nothing for yourself. The way I look at it—and I had a fellow tell me one time . . . he said, "But try and look for something yourself, 'cause as long as you work for somebody else, you ain't gonna have nothing."[5]

Crab pots are a reminder that watermen's hard-won independence was built on the knowledge shared between men in the other workboats. Wire cages, strung in a line under the surface of the water, draw blue crabs in with bait and trap them with other unlucky seafood. (A. J. enjoyed catching and eating a good puffer fish for dinner.) Invented by a Chesapeake Bay waterman in the 1930s, the pots are responsible for the majority of crabs watermen pull to the surface and into wooden bushel baskets.[6] While A. J. preferred working for himself, he acknowledged the multitude of people who enabled him to do so. Between working odd jobs, learning to make pots, and tying up at other people's docks at the end of the day, he prized the camaraderie between himself and other watermen cultivated through the shared but isolated, communal but independent, work. In interviews, he talked excitedly or burst into tears over memories of working on boats with friends, singing together over the CB radio, and relying on others if his workboat's engine broke down.

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[5] Arthur "A. J." and Thelma Hurst, interview by Jessica Taylor, July 13, 2014, transcript and recording, Tidewater Main Street Project, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida Digital Collections. http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00032082/00001.

[6] Peter J. Eldridge, V. G. Burrell, and George Steele, "Development of a Self-Culling Blue Crab Pot," *Marine Fisheries Review* (December 1979), 21.

A. J.'s origin story provided a tangible model of success for younger watermen on his stretch of the bay. Roscoe Rowe remembered, "He pulled for it. He told me that his uncle gave him ten old, rusty crab pots. And that's how he started. At one time he had over three hundred in the water and three hundred in the yard. . . . He caught a lot of crabs, too. I think we caught as high as forty barrels at one time."[7] A helping hand from a member of an earlier generation, the slow accumulation of means, and knowledge of how to make, use, and care for the traps produced a visible sign of success displayed in a pile on the lawn.

Compromise: working on menhaden boats

As A. J. accumulated the skills and stories of a waterman, the emerging dominance of industrial-scale fishing, coupled with increased environmental pressure on Chesapeake fisheries, recharted his career. By the time A. J. was old enough to go out on his own, crab harvests were already on a steady decline that would continue throughout the 1950s.[8] As a result, some men shifted toward better-paying and more stable work at the sprawling Naval Weapons Station or Newport News Shipyard, an hour's drive away. As a young man just starting a family, A. J. made the decision to relinquish crabbing and sail with job security, benefits, and no overhead costs on a menhaden vessel.

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[7] Roscoe and Nancy Rowe, interview by Jessica Taylor, July 14, 2014, transcript and recording, Tidewater Main Street Project, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida Digital Collections. http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00032084/00001

[8] Cluney Stegg and Marguerite Whilden, "The History of the Chesapeake Bay's Blue Crab (Callinectes sapidus): Fisheries and Management, *Investigaciones Marinas Valparaiso* 25 (1997), 96.

Running a menhaden vessel was different in scale and distance from crabbing in the creeks by the house, and A. J.'s friends remember that he did not want to forsake crabs. Between the 1950s and 1990s, technological change in the menhaden industry accelerated a gradual replacement of myriad family-owned vessels into one dominated by a fleet of enormous, steel-hulled ships belonging to multinational corporations. During A. J.'s time as a young crew member under a fellow Virginian captain, men labored together, pulling full nets of menhaden into smaller boats off the side of the main ship by hand. Unlike crabbers and oystermen who own their own boats, the captain worked for a boat owner. However, white crew members could become mates and then captains by accruing years of experience. A. J. worked his way up to captain in this shifting environment.

The industry was so lucrative throughout the 1950s that one waterman described, "They would sleep on the boats just so nobody would come and take their job."[9] Today, the trends toward mechanization and consolidation, in which men like A. J. played a part, continue. Harvests hover around 200,000 metric tons, around eighty percent of which is landed by a single company.[10] Ahead of the ships, manned aircraft spotted schools of fish from the air, and vacuum hoses sucked thousands of fish onto ships equipped with refrigerators made for long voyages. Menhaden vessels can take on hundreds of thousands of fish at a time, and multiple captains in A. J.'s home county claim to have caught over a billion fish over the course of their careers.[11] It is a large, complex operation. For A. J., the time and distance away was the hardest—months aboard or in other ports along the Eastern Seaboard meant months without seeing family, friends, and his home in Mathews County.

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[9] F. Ray Rogers and Walter Rogers, interview by Susan Atkinson and Allison Mitchell, October 2, 2016, transcript and recording, Tidewater Main Street Project, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida Digital Collections. https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00032082/00001/pdf

[10] Douglas S. Vaughan and Joseph W. Smith, "Southeast Menhaden Fisheries," Our Living Oceans: Report on the Status of US Living Marine Resources, 6th edition. NOAA Tech Memo, US Department of Commerce, 2009.

[11] Helen and Charles Forrest, interview by Jessica Taylor, July 17, 2014, transcript and recording, Tidewater Main Street Project, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida Digital

The Middle Peninsula remained at the center of relationships for men like A. J. His best friend Robert Roland Hudgins, also a waterman who joined the menhaden industry with A.J., remembered the weekend his daughter was born. They were docked in Atlantic City, around three hundred miles away. A. J. promised him a ride home in his convertible before realizing he had left his keys aboard the ship, but it was no problem. "We'd cut the top out enough to get our hand down there so we could open the door and come home . . . and my daughter Nancy was born. The same weekend. That's just a coincidence. Yep. We were coming home flying, boy. I said, 'A. J.' He said, 'Don't tell me no more.'"[12]

Independence on the water

Leaving menhaden behind, A. J. returned to crabbing in the 1960s during a promising uptick in crab harvests but a serious reckoning with the state of the seafood industry and the bay. Together, watermen learned to adjust to regulations as legislators and scientists became increasingly concerned about overharvesting and population collapses. Nevertheless, understanding the capabilities of his boat and the vicissitudes of the Chesapeake's waves, A. J. took seriously his mentoring role as a skilled waterman and encouraged young men like Davey and Roscoe to take risks alongside him. Roscoe continued, "I remember one time, we were in Mobjack's Cross Channel and the sea came over the side of

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Collections. http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00032100/00001. Arnold Ripley, interview by Jennifer and Sandra Romero, October 3, 2016, transcript and recording, Tidewater Main Street Project, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida Digital Collections. http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00060554/00001.

[12] Robert Roland Hudgins, interview with Jessica Taylor, Jul. 14, 2014, recording and transcript, Tidewater Main Street Project, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida Digital Collections, http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00032086/00001.

the boat and fills the boat inside full of water. It went into my boots before it ran down to the bilge. And A. J. was scared." But A. J. was captain and decided to keep crabbing.

> And we crabbed that whole day and caught thirty-some barrels. I'll tell you how many crabs it was. So we ran back up the bay and then turned around and came back down with the wind on our stern again. We went and grabbed the same line we just fished. . . . We caught just as many crabs in that amount of time. They were coming up in that storm, too, I guess.[13]

It seemed to a young Roscoe that the storm itself had caused both the risks and the rewards of the day, a lesson in facing the fear endemic to the changeable Chesapeake environment. But that kind of risk and that kind of camaraderie purchased economic power. In A. J.'s view, a crabber who worked with none or only one or two crewmen retained independence, made his own hours, bought his own boats, and sold his catch to whomever he would like. In good years, on good days, he did well because he worked hard and took informed chances.

Economic pressures and regulation also reinforced the role of women, who made the watermen's work from home possible.[14] A. J.'s wife, Thelma, sat in the background during an interview, her voice barely registering on the recording. Like many women of her generation, she rarely went on a boat with A. J., but she knew and accounted for A. J.'s time crabbing. Filling out the regulatory forms, she said, "You've got to put the date, your commercial ID number, how many pots, where you set the pots, was anyone with you. You've got to put all that on that paper."[15] Some women learned the industry by keeping their father’s books, and Thelma helped make crab pots and cooked up crab dishes and lunches for later on the stove—all work done off the boat. Davey Callis recalled that Thelma also played a role in raising young watermen, calculating payroll and doling out an extra dollar or two, or five or ten, per week for him. When men like A. J. left crabbing for menhaden vessels, their months-long absences often necessitated that women handle a whole household for half a year.[16] At home, Thelma performed the invisible work of filling blanks and signing his name to legal forms.

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[13] Interview with Nancy and Roscoe Rowe.

[14] Barbara J. Garrity-Blake, *The Fish Factory: Work and Meaning for Black and White Fishermen of the American Menhaden Industry* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 84. Paulina Guerroro, The Smith Island Crab Coop: Women's Work in the Chesapeake Bay, Ph.D. diss, (Indiana University, 2019), iv.

[15] Interview with A. J. and Thelma Hurst.

When asked why there are fewer fish to catch nowadays, A. J. said he didn’t know, and that no one can actually know. “But a whole lot of times, [scientists] and all of this and all of that, but I don’t think nobody got nothing to say about that but the Lord. The Lord’s the only one that knows about all that kind of stuff. They can make any kind of rules they want.”[17] Unknowability had, after all, made watermen’s migrations away from home necessary, and left open the possibility of return. Conversations about regulation and conservation occurring across the Chesapeake sometimes felt like an affront to watermen’s respectably accumulated body of knowledge and experience. Fellow crabber Kerry Hall got heated: “You take some old waterman that’s been on the water all his life—A. J., for instance. He’s forgotten more about the crab than the people at the VMRC (Virginia Marine Resources Commission) or whatever know.”[18] Watermen beyond Mathews and across industries expressed similar frustrations, in conversations facilitated by scientists, and in lobbying efforts in Richmond and local government offices, as well as at home. Kerry and A. J. both tapped into knowledge of their localities preserved for the next generation, an intimacy that in their minds scientists cannot replicate, to explain why their work should continue unimpeded. Kerry leaned on the years of work of his elder, A. J., to reinforce his case.

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[16] Interview with David Callis.

[17] Interview with A. J. Hurst.

[18] Kerry Hall, interview with Jessica Taylor, October 15, 2019, recording, Virginia Tech Special Collections and University Archives..

By the time we met A. J. in 2014, he had come to the understanding that the demographic and environmental shifts bar other men from the path he chose. Decades of political infighting and narrow concern for one's slice of the seafood industry—oysters, crabs, shad—tanked efforts to organize lasting local watermen's associations. Concerned that the knowledge of banned or regulated fishing methods might disappear, watermen hung nets for the dredges—used to scrape the bottom of the river for crabs—for out-of-state Chesapeake watermen not subject to Virginia bans. But A. J. observed, "The young bunch ain't learning no more. There's a very few know how to make a crab pot . . . how to mend. They don't want to learn." For A. J., scarcity and regulation threatened his ability to share knowledge about fishing with the next generation. "I even told the boys from Delaware, I said, "Y'all come here and we'll show you how to make them." They promised they was coming, but ain't never seen them."[19] He felt knowledge from men his own age was not just worth knowing, but connected watermen across distance. As it was for his father and uncle, the process of making the nets and pots together—the work—had always tied watermen of different ages and places together.

With few young people on the water, A.J. lamented the loss of irreplaceable friends who caught fish and played pranks in his stories ("I'm the only one left of them now; the rest of them is dead."). Our interviews were not just conversations but also lessons, in constructing crab pots, singing, and piloting his boat, *Miss Norma*, to the right spot to watch sunrise. He wanted somebody to know the process and the meaning and the location of the work. A. J. persisted in his attachment to the Chesapeake as it changed around him, working through "old colds" at age eighty. In the afternoons, he found the watermen who had grown old with him at the hardware store to discuss regulations and pots.

JT: How do you think Mathews will change after all the watermen are gone?

AJH: Well, I'm a put it this way: after the young boys is gone, you won't hear talk of them. It'll be gone. Mathews will be here, but, hey.

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[19] Interview with A. J. and Thelma Hurst.

A. J. noticed that the signs of active work left by past fishermen and sailors, their net stakes and lighthouses, had decayed and disappeared. The Middle Peninsula's younger watermen are reminded every day, glancing down the aisle at the grocery store and at natural vistas without workboats, that the place is aging. A. J.'s Mathews County has lost population even as Virginia's has grown.[20] Here and in other locales on the peninsula, with those gorgeous open views, residents must adapt to bedroom community status and tourism. In their interviews, people on the Middle Peninsula frequently reference "come-heres," a teasing term for new residents in use since at least the early twentieth century. "Come-heres" have begun to pull the meaning of the shoreline away from work, cruising down the rivers and creeks in kayaks and yachts that have for decades been familiar sights along the Chesapeake.

In 2016, Mathews County crabber Kevin Godsey, who was mentored by A. J. and his friends, texted one of the authors with news that A. J. had passed. Even in the best of times, A. J. would never ask a younger waterman to stay. He respected a fellow crabber's independence and had indeed exercised his own by joining menhaden crews far from Mathews. But if they chose the water business, he would advise young people to take chances to make this living work in a risky environment. Even in solitary, open waters, sailors and crabbers are never alone, as family and fellow watermen do the invisible work of signing checks, hanging nets, fixing motors, and driving friends home. They built geographically vast and creative nets, harbored at specific docks on the Chesapeake, stretched on menhaden voyages, and uniting watermen together during moments of economic distress. The accumulated knowledge they share informs the decision to keep fishing during the toughest storms, and their responses to environmental and technological change pull from the same desire to return home.

Notes

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[20] Mathews County Board of Supervisors, 19.