The Patuxent River Folklife and Oral History Project has completed its first year. As planned, this was a year of research. The project’s team of scholars and field researchers documented work on the river and life in the region, creating an archive of materials for use by the museum. The field research was supported by a generous grant from the Special Programs Office of the National Endowment for the Humanities and will be put to work in the museum’s exhibits and educational programs during the coming months and years. It has already provided a foundation for a new interpretive slide-tape program in the museum’s “Watermen’s Room,” feature stories in this periodical and several informal community talks.

The project’s archive includes about 5,000 color slides, another 5,000 black and white photographic negatives, approximately one hundred hours of tape recorded interviews, and about six hundred pages of written notes. Although this formidable collection may be perceived as “data,” I cannot help thinking of it as an enormous album with the pictures and voices of all of the friends I have made during the last year. These people have taught me about their lives and shared their knowledge of life on the river, but they have also shown me so much generosity and hospitality that they have all become friends. I have learned many things about the Patuxent, but I have also come to care deeply for the people of this region.

When I tell people some of the things I have learned, I find I often begin telling stories about my field experiences. Like the stories I have been told, my narratives include “facts,” but facts elaborated by detail, feelings, and insights. Some may view oral history as a process of winnowing facts from elaborations, but I do not. If we are interested in learning about history by listening to people, it is impossible to say which is more important: a fact, or the aura which surrounds it in the telling.

The following sketches have special meaning for me. The first is drawn from the recollections of three members of a black community near Solomons. Our research was designed in part to support the creation of interpretive exhibits in the J. C. Lore Oyster House, which the museum plans to open to the public within a year. Like many of their neighbors in Dowell, George and Bertha Curtis, Joe Hutchins and John Ellen worked at the Lore house. As we got acquainted, I learned about their work in the oyster shucking house, but also about the richness and variety of their lives. The second story is that of Mrs. Odie (Dixie) Buck of Broome’s Island. Variety has been one of the hallmarks of her life too, and it helps undercut the all-male stereotype of working on the water. The third story speaks of the close union of art and life in the region. In one sense, Bill Trossbach’s 46’ dead-rise workboat is a utilitarian object, built to work. But no one could watch it take shape, and hear the community’s comments of praise as it neared completion, without also seeing the boat as a work of art.

George and Bertha Curtis, Joe Hutchins and John Ellen

George and Bertha Curtis, both of whom are in their eighties, live in the small community of Dowell, on Back Creek.

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near Solomons. After a two-hour interview with the Curtises, it was apparent we had only scratched the surface of what they could tell us about patching together a series of jobs, many of which related to the water, to make do. Both Mr. Curtis' father and grandfather were employed at the M.M. Davis Shipyard in Solomons, where George started working as a boy. While his father caulked boats, young George helped his grandfather bake and sell pies at the shipyard lunch room. He recalls selling over 100 pies every day to shipyard workers, charging 25 cents for each pie. When he grew older, he sailed on the Catherine, a Davis-yard-built bugeye, when she was used to freight wood to Baltimore. In the twenties, he worked at the tomato canning factory on Back Creek, unloading, steaming, and packing tomatoes in the summer months. He also worked at one of the fish canning factories at Drum Point, cutting herring and removing the roe. He earned fifteen cents for each bucket of roe; the work was such that he couldn't fill more than one bucket a day. For several years, during the months of May and June, Curtis joined other young men from Dowell and Lusby on oyster dredging crews in New Jersey.

Like many of their neighbors, both of the Curtises worked at the local oyster shucking houses—the J.C. Lore and Woodburn companies in Solomons, and Wilson Dowell's shucking house on St. John's Creek. Mrs. Curtis combined working as a domestic with shucking oysters part-time. She remembered that around Thanksgiving and Christmas, when the shucking houses were busiest and operating round the clock, she had little time for anything but work. "I was young and we enjoyed gettin' up in the mornin' at 4 o'clock, fix breakfast, and get out there and be down there (to the oyster shucking house) by daylight . . . Well, you was young and you didn't mind doin' it, no."

Two of the Curtises' neighbors, Joe Hutchins and John Ellen, also described their days shucking oysters in Solomons. Mr. Hutchins recalled how the community of workers helped each other through a particularly difficult time:

"It was a rough job, but we had to make the best of it. There wasn't anything else to do, no place else to go. And it was lot of fun. Everybody lined up down the tables there and start one of those old religious songs, I remember one morning we were there and it started a 'snowin' and we didn't have no wood on our woodpile. Everything seemed like it was just about to end. And it was one old gentleman who was there, old Bud Howe, he
started up a song there at the oyster house and I never will forget it as long as I live: ‘The Lord Will Make A Way Somehow’. . .

(sings)
Oh the Lord will make a way, a way.
The Lord will make a way.
If you will only trust in him
The Lord will make a way.
If you get there before I do
And search among the sheaves,
You’ll find me there, for I am told
That’s where I long to be.

Yeah, I always will remember that. And to wind up that story, the sun came out, so bright and so beautiful. You couldn’t imagine, everything lit up so beautiful when he sung that, the clouds just rolled away. And I never will forget that song. Everybody was so depressed, you know, didn’t have a whole lot of food, some days, we didn’t have a whole lot of wood on the woodpile, but that dark cloud just rolled away, just rolled away. So I said, we used to have a lot of happy days, we had some sad days there. We just made the best of it.”

Mrs. Odie (Dixie) Buck

Dixie Buck was born at Broome’s Island and grew up surrounded by people who worked on the water. Her father, Captain George Horsmon, hauled freight to Baltimore on a schooner. Later he became a huckster, trucking fish and soft crabs from Broome’s Island to Chesapeake Beach and North Beach on the Bay. Dixie’s uncle, Bob Horsmon, was a steamboat captain on the Patuxent River. At age 19, Dixie married Odie Buck, a waterman and carpenter at Broome’s Island.

Dixie described how her life was shaped by an incident which took place when she was just two years old. As she played in her grandmother’s yard, a garter snake bit her on the leg. She was sick for 19 months and, since her mother had an infant to care for, Dixie’s father carried her around with him as he went about his business on the water.

Got in the boat with daddy . . . and that’s the reason I followed him, see. And I would lay on the stern seat of the boat and daddy would crab . . . Then he gave me my first dip net, I guess I was about five, but I started out good at seven on my own crabbin’ . . . He gave me my first boat, I was nine years old. He had it built under our apple tree. And the man came up in the mornin’ and built my boat and put it together in one day and they painted it the next day and I was all ready to go. Daddy bought me a new set of oars, and my crab net and my live box, and I was all ready. I was on my own . . . And I had a boat all my life. When I got married I still had a boat.”

As a young girl at Broome’s Island, Dixie not only soft-crabbed on her own, she also helped her father with his seafood business. She bought peelers and hard crabs from the men who set trotlines in the river, tended the soft crab floats, packed soft crabs in ice for her father’s customers, and weighed barrels of hard crabs. Industrious and enterprising, Dixie carried on a “business” of her own. Local crabbers paid her to bait their trotlines—two coils for a dollar. She also kept an eye on and pumped out workboats for watermen who lived a distance from the shore.

Dixie’s affection for the water is evident in her conversation about the past as well as in her lifestyle. Now in her 60’s, Mrs. Buck continues to soft crab, maintain her skiff and waterfront home to impeccable orderliness, and pick crab meat with astonishing speed, skill, and good cheer.

Bill Trossbach

The variety of work that typifies the lives of watermen includes seasonal change and the shift from oystering to crabbing, or net fishing to eeling. Some watermen even pursue agricultural work, notably in tobacco. But for a few watermen, the variety extends even further. Bill Trossbach, a waterman who lives near Drayden, in St. Mary’s County, builds boats. Several years ago he built himself a workboat and this summer, he and his sons Buddy and Jimmy, built another boat, this one for Jimmy. Construction proceeded when the men were not at work harvesting soft-shell clams in the Potomac River. Members of our project’s field research team and I made numerous visits to observe progress on the boat between June and August.

The boat took form in a barn, which incidentally, was also
built by Trossbach. Although Trossbach bought some of the lumber used in the vessel's construction, such key elements as the keel and ribs were made from trees that he located and cut himself. Like most local, traditional boat builders, Trossbach shuns plans, preferring to work by sight and by feel. The hand and eye of the maker can be felt in many aspects of a finished Chesapeake Bay workboat, notably in the shape of the stern, the rake of the stem, and the flare of the bow. It was a marvel to watch these complex forms take shape under Trossbach's hands as the summer progressed.

Naming a boat is always something of a puzzle, and as the Trossbachs' boat neared completion, the search for just the right name grew more serious. Trossbach was taken with the idea of the waterman's work as a search for "bounty," and after much discussion and study of a thesaurus, the family hit on the apt and proud name, Prospector. In early September, the workboat was launched; she made quite a spectacle as she was hauled from the barn to the launching site. A bottle of champagne was touched to the Prospector's bow as she went into the water. Within days she was rigged with hydraulic patent tongs, ready for Jimmy Trossbach to begin a season of oystering.

September 2, 1982: Bill Trossbach hauls the Prospector to her launching in Carthagena Creek, St. Mary's County.

Photograph by Paula Johnson

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all of the people who worked on the Patuxent River Project and thank them for their valuable contributions: Dr. George Carey, University of Massachusetts at Amherst (consultant and field researcher); Dr. George McDaniel, Center for Southern Folklore in Memphis, Tennessee (consultant); Dr. Kenneth Kusterer, American University, Washington, D.C. (consultant); Dr. Charles Camp, Maryland State Arts Council (consultant); Dr. Peter Bartis, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress (consultant); Peter Kurtze (folklorist and field researcher); Terry and Lyntha Eiler, Ohio University in Athens, Ohio (photographers); Carl Fleischhauer, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress (photographer); John Gibbs (photographer); Cynthia Meredith (archivist and documents researcher); Zara Johnson (local field research assistant); Dana Paulick (typist); and Joyce Brown and Sue Rees (transcribers).

I also wish to thank again the people in Southern Maryland who generously shared their personal histories and knowledge of the water business with us. Our project would not have succeeded without such gracious cooperation.

— Paula Johnson, Project Director
RECENT ACQUISITIONS

The museum has recently acquired two ship's figureheads to be added to our growing collection. The first is a gift from Mrs. Ernest Hartge, wife of the late Captain Dick Hartge of Chesapeake Twenty fame. The figurehead is a gargoyle reputed to be taken from the schooner Edna and Nellie, built in 1889 at Pocomoke City and sunk at Broome's Wharf, St. Mary's City, winter of 1936. The second is an eagle figurehead from the 1891 Solomons-built schooner, Annie C. Johnson, on loan from the Radcliff Maritime Museum.

Mrs. Robert D. Culler, wife of the late Pete Culler who authored Skiffs and Schooners, donated a nameboard from the Solomons 1888 M. M. Davis built schooner, Ada C. Shull. Although certainly not the original nameboard, this bit of memorabilia comes from a very interesting vessel. The Shull stuck on her ways during launching, usually a bad omen, but she served ably for 49 years. She oystered up until 1917 when the Shull became a part of the Island Service Company, hauling coal, cordwood and barrel gasoline to Nantucket, Massachusetts. The Shull was finally laid up on a mud bank in Nantucket Harbor in 1937, after serving as the last active coastal schooner owned at Nantucket out of a fleet that numbered several hundred vessels over the years. Charles Sayle of Nantucket has given us a remarkably complete history of this coaster.

Elwood Harrison donated a pair of oyster patent tongs. This set is significant as it was built by Solomons blacksmith, Charles L. Marsh, who patented the deepwater tongs in 1887.

Finally, Marguerite McKenna donated a very rare fossil carnivore tooth found at Flag Pond. This tooth probably belongs to the extinct Miocene age dog Tomarctus.

CMM Saddened by Loss of James Buys

James Buys recent passing away was a great shock and loss to the museum. Jim was the first chairman of the CMM Board of Governors, first recipient of the 1,000-hour volunteer award and faithful supporter of CMM from its inception. Back in the late 60's and early 70's when the museum was located in a small Quonset hut-type building next to the post office, Jim volunteered at the museum every Saturday. To honor his memory, the museum, with the cooperation of the Buys' family, has established a James H. Buys Memorial Fund. Already, over $900 has been contributed. Jim will be greatly missed, but never forgotten.

SPECIAL NOTICE

Since the Wm. B. Tennison will be traveling to Chesapeake Appreciation Days, at Sandy Point and back, during the weekend of October 31, any CMS member is welcome to either ride up or back on a first come, first served basis. Weather permitting, the Tennison will leave CMM on October 28 and return October 31 around 8:00 a.m. Any CMS member wishing to ride must arrange his own transportation back or up. Call the museum to put yourself on the list.
New Educator at CMM

Liz Gilbert, who has served as the museum’s educator for the past year, has left for Western Maryland where her husband has taken a new position. We are all sorry to lose Liz and her ever-smiling face, but we wish her success in her new environment. To replace Liz, the museum has been fortunate to acquire the services of Scott Rawlins.

Scott has a master’s degree in museum education from George Washington University with special interests in biology. Scott has extensive museum experience having worked in the exhibition department of the American Museum of Natural History, as curator of exhibits at the Joseph Moore Museum, assistant curator of natural sciences at the Children’s Museum in Indianapolis, and in the education department of the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. Members will have a chance to meet Scott at the docent training sessions which start October 6. (See calendar for more details.)

SPECIAL THANKS

Mr. Richard Roming has been a ball of fire volunteering around the museum this summer. Thanks to his energy, Dick has reorganized the dark room and gotten a great backlog of photo work accomplished. Our flag pole has been completely taken down, refinished and rerigged, the tractor has been overhauled, and many of the outdoor exhibits spuced up. Dick deserves special recognition for his dedicated service to the museum.

Mr. Strickland Parker recently completed indexing a 685-page manuscript on the Patuxent River Cultural Resource Survey conducted over the past four years by Nautical Archaeological Associates and CMM. This massive, time-consuming job now makes the survey manuscript several times more useful.

CMM Receives Grants

Two important grants have recently been awarded to CMM. The first is a National Endowment for the Arts grant of $12,000. This grant is a 10-month award to complete research for and produce an exhibit on traditional wooden workboats and their builders in Southern Maryland. Staff folklorist, Paula Johnson, will coordinate this project.

A portion of the museum’s general operating funds for this fiscal year is being provided by CMM’s fourth consecutive General Operating Support Grant of $25,265 from the Institute of Museum Sciences, a federal agency that administers to the nation’s museums.

HELP WANTED

The museum is looking for a volunteer to catalog books and work in our library. A minimum of one half-day per week is necessary. An office assistant one day per week is needed to help with membership, typing, filing, and general office work.

Finally, we need a 437-page manuscript on the history of Patuxent River indexed for easy reference use. This manuscript by Donald Shomette, research associate of CMM, is the most comprehensive maritime history of the Patuxent River researched to date.

Winter Hours

Just a reminder that the museum will begin its winter hours on October 1, 1982. This means that the museum will close one-half hour earlier, 4:30 p.m. each day. During winter hours, the Drum Point Lighthouse is open only on weekends.