



EDWIN P. THOMPSON

As told to GERMAN GEORGIEFF

Edwin P. Thompson was born in 1926 in Rahway, New Jersey, and spent his earliest years in Manalapan. His father was a deep-water sailor, spending the later part of his career as an oil tanker captain for Esso. While Ed was young, his father bought property in Ocean Gate and Ed started to spend summers there. His father wanted him to follow in his footsteps as a sailor, but Ed had little desire to be away from home for such long periods. Eventually he moved to Ocean Gate and started a business called Thompson's Corner, selling bait and tackle not far from where the Pennsylvania Railroad crossed Barnegat Bay. He bought ice cream boxes to store frozen bait in from a soda fountain shop that was going out of business. His son and daughters would go crabbing, and he would keep the crabs in an eight-foot by eight-foot crab box, from which he sold them. In addition to fishing supplies and crabs, he also sold clam chowder made by his wife and daughters. His main livelihood has been his business as a carpenter, which he learned working for his grandfather as a youth, but he has always supplemented his income from the bay in one way or another.

While living in Ocean Gate, Ed decided to attempt building his own boat, despite having little experience. He rented an empty garage in Barne-

gat, and started work. One day an older gentleman stopped by and started a conversation with Ed while he was working. After a bit, the man asked if he could help out with the building of the boat, indicating that he had no desire to be paid. Ed accepted the offer. After several days of work, it was apparent that this man had obvious boat building experience. Ed expressed his appreciation but once again reminded him that he could not afford to pay him anything. The man told him not to worry about it, as he enjoyed the work. It was not until well after the boat was built that Ed found out this man was a retired fisherman and boat builder from Europe, whom his father had brought over to America, and had paid for him to help Ed with the boat. He did this even though he did not agree with the career path Ed had chosen.

Ed used the boat he built to take out fishing parties. He took parties out mostly for bluefish, but also for stripers, weakfish and porgies. He would go up to buy bushels of mossbunker for bait and chum, fresh from the bunkerworks in Belford. He had a chum grinder mounted on the boat, and would grind it while on the way out to the fishing grounds.

Eventually, Ed bought property in Waretown and built a house there, since most of what he was catching from the bay was from that area. He later became friends with Joe Reid, who was a well-known garvey builder. He would help Joe build boats from time to time, just for the experience. At one time Joe made his living primarily as a bayman. Ed once asked him why he switched from clamming to boat building. Joe replied that he saw the writing on the wall once the Oyster Creek Nuclear Generating Station was built. He felt that the station would lead to the decline of the bay shellfisheries and wanted to keep one step ahead of it, but still do something related to the bay. Ed is convinced that Joe has been proven correct. He feels that between the changes in the bay's water temperature caused by the power plant, and all the immature, free swimming clams and crabs that have been sucked into the plant's cooling intakes, the bayman's way of life has all but vanished. He has also personally observed many fish kills in the creek, due to the plant shutting down suddenly. He feels that if the plant closes, things will return to the way they once were.

For close to 20 years, Ed traveled down to Maryland to trotline crabs. Having little cash, he would tow his boat down and camp beside the road. He made arrangements with a local oyster and ice-house called Rock Hall to store his crabs in return for hard clams and eels he brought down from New Jersey. The eels lasted longer on the trotlines than other bait, but were rare in the Chesapeake. He would also purchase bushels of oysters while down there and bring them back to Jersey. Ed has run trotlines for crabs in New Jersey, but not to the extent he did in Maryland.

Ed has worked in a variety of the bay and ocean's fisheries. He has worked drifting gill nets and still maintains his gill net license. He has also tended fyke nets for winter flounder in the bay. He has speared eels though the ice. He has clammed from Ocean to Atlantic County, and he has netted grass shrimp for bait, which he still is heavily involved in to this day. He has sold shrimp to various bait shops in the area, although he has always preferred to retail his product himself, rather than deal with a middleman, since he ends up making more money that way.

Ed also did quite a bit of trapping in his time, mostly for muskrat. He trapped both fresh and salt water for them, but the salt-water muskrats tended to run bigger and sell for more. The black furred muskrats, which were rarer, also commanded a higher price. He sold the pelts to a farmer in Plainsboro, who sold them to a fur buyer in New York. Although he made less money than dealing directly with the buyer, in this case it was more convenient for him. He once made enough money in a season's trapping to pay for a trout and salmon fishing trip up north for himself, and still had half of the money left over to give his wife.

Ed has observed many changes in the area, with few for the better. There was once a time when he could leave his killie pots in the marsh cricks for a day or two and they would be left alone. Now if you leave them unattended, you are surprised to find them there when you return. The attitudes of the public toward hunting have changed also. He started to notice this back in the 1970s, especially one evening when he and some friends were raccoon hunting not far from where he lived. A state trooper stopped the group and told them the barracks had received a call from a hysterical woman who reported that the neighborhood was being invaded by "an army with guns." As the trooper found out, within their group was one teenager with a 16 gauge shotgun, brought along in case they decided to shoot the coon for its pelt, which was not always done. The trooper just shook his head in disbelief and left the group to their hunt.

Despite changing public opinions, water quality issues, and more restrictive fishing regulations, all which have discouraged Ed in recent years, he still maintains most of his licenses and still enjoys a day on the bay. His health may have slowed him down a bit, but he will continue to work the bay as long as he can.