BAYMAN OF THE BARNEGAT

The Unforgettable Charlie Ridgeway

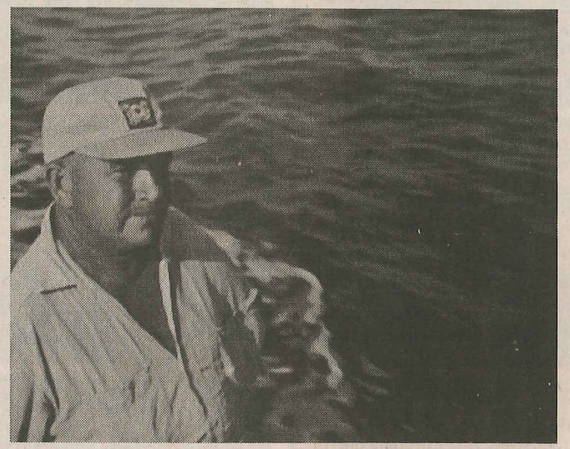
By DONALD M. LAUNER

Charlie Ridgeway was not a titan of industry, a doctor, or a lawyer — he was a bayman. Being on the water is a comfort to the soul of a man, and Charlie was at peace with himself and his environment.

Charlie's garvey was functional, to say the least. Of polished brass, chrome, or stainless steel, there was none. Galvanized fittings proclaimed it an honest work boat, an unpretentious design of the old school. It had an obstreperous, smelly monster of an automobile engine of questionable vintage, no aids to navigation except a suspect compass, no radios, an electrical system that was a nightmare. It was a "character" boat befitting its skipper. The hull, however, was built from New Jersey cedar, and tight as a drum.

"The cedar aged in my back yard 'bout 20 years before I built her," Charlie quipped.

Charlie kept his garvey in a slip at the Surf City Yacht Club, an arrangement contingent with land-sale to the club. Disabled from birth with a crippled arm and a stunted leg, he spent his life on and around the Barnegat Bay. During the summer months he chartered for crabbing parties on the bay in his garvey, and always seemed to return with a larger catch than anyone else. I think he had learned the psychology of the crab. I once asked him why he did so well.



"Crabs is just like people" he said between chews of his ever-present plug of tobacco. "If you don't give 'em what they want, they'll just go somewhere else."

Charlie always negotiated the exits and the entrances to his slip with unperturbed nonchalance. His disabilities (I don't think he would have called them that) seemed in no way to affect his seamanship and crabbing skill, and only once did he mention to me that they had been with him all his life.

I kept my boat two slips from Charlie's. There was usually minimal activity at the club during my visits, since my days off were generally during the week. I enjoyed sitting in the cockpit of Charlie's garvey and talking, or more properly, listening to Charlie talk. It was the antithesis of the technical and political conference room confrontations at the TV network where I worked in New York City, and where frequently I would sit in my chair in a control room that had never known sunlight, and hear and feel in fancy, the motion of my boat.

Charlie would tell me some stories about trips his father would make from Barnegat on the mainland, to Barnegat Light, delivering the mail by boat to the Island, long before any bridge spanned the bay.

Charlie was a large man, but his understated manner, tongue-in-cheek humor and Truman Capote voice belied his size. It was fun to hear him talk. He had a salty philosophy and folk-wisdom that was at once veracious and refreshing. I remember one day when a crabbing party came down, and before they could board Charlie's boat it began pouring rain. They decided to come back the following day. Charlie's comment was "W-e-l-l, might just as well, the crabs will be a little bit bigger tomorrow."

Any skills I have as a crabber were gleaned from Charlie. In my tackle-box is a screwdriver with a notch filed in the middle of the blade. I had watched Charlie making up crab bait and hand lines one day. His hand lines consisted of a string with a lead weight on the end. He wrapped the string over the groove in the screwdriver (about a foot above the weight) and shoved it through the fish head, withdrew the screwdriver and dropped the weight through the loop he had created on the other side of the fish head, and he was rigged. The whole operation took a couple of seconds, and Charlie could do it with his one hand. "What a great idea, Charlie," I said. "Yep," he answered, trying to conceal a smile, "that's my own invention."

One midsummer day when I was preparing to go sailing, I noticed dark clouds forming over the mainland and rumbles of distant thunder. I began putting my sail covers back on. "Aren't ya goin' out?" asked Charlie. "No, it looks like we're going to have a thunderstorm," I replied.

"Ya don't have to worry none — the tide's goin' out an' thunderstorms follow the tides out the inlets."

I resisted the impulse to laugh; after all, I had taken meteorology in college. I finished replacing my sail covers, then sat down in the cockpit to have lunch. I watched as the storm developed over the mainland, came closer, then moved across the bay toward Barnegat Inlet and passed out into the ocean, along with the outgoing tide.

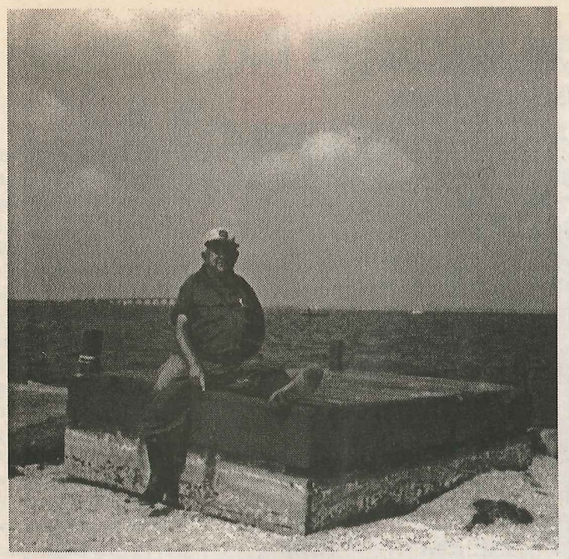
It had to be coincidence, didn't it? And then I started thinking: Was it possible that the warm water from the bay, moving out into the ocean, created the necessary up and down drafts to steer the thunderstorm in that direction? I still don't know, but no longer thought of laughing when Charlie would impart his knowledge from a lifetime on the bay.

The winter of 1975-76 I spent in Innsbruck, Austria, covering the Winter Olympics for ABC-TV, and I sent Charlie some postcards of the Alpine scenes. In the spring, when our boats were back in the water, Charlie hobbled down the dock to my slip.

"I kept them postcards on my bedroom mirror," he said, "Ya know, I been to Philly a couple times."

In August of 1976, a hurricane formed in the Caribbean and began moving north, but its projected course posed no threat to the New Jersey coast. Early the morning of August 9, Charlie got a crabbing party, a father and his two sons. He headed for his favorite crabbing area near Gunning River. Shortly after they left, the weather bureau issued a severe hurricane alert for the Jersey Shore, and the governor declared a mandatory evacuation for Long Beach Island and other coastal communities. The hurricane had changed direction and was heading right for us.

As I was preparing my boat with extra lines



and scope, a station wagon pulled up. The wife of Charlie's crabbing party, greatly agitated, was pacing up and down the dock, looking out over the empty bay for Charlie's boat. I tried to calm her.

"If they're out with Charlie, you don't have to worry," I said, not convinced of my own words. I knew that Charlie had no radio or barometer and would be unaware of a sudden change in the weather forecast. As the wind was picking up, I saw a small speck in the bay. Out came the field glasses — it was Charlie's garvey heading home, shouldering away white water under his bow.

As the crabbing party was disembarking and packing their belongings into the station wagon, I asked the father how they knew to come home. He said that shortly after they had begun crabbing, Charlie looked up at the sky and said, "W-e-l-l, I think we'll be headin' back."

Mary and Charles Schmuhl of Surf City remember a day when they were sailing on the bay and fog suddenly rolled in from the ocean, creating a visibility of less than 50 feet. With their sails down, and dead in the water awaiting improving conditions, they heard an engine approaching, and Charlie's garvey emerged from the mist. With a casual nod as he passed, he again disappeared into the pea-soup fog, heading unerringly back to his slip, as if the visibility were unlimited, with some sixth sense showing him the way.

Charlie spent his life on and around Barnegat Bay, one of the last of the old-time baymen. His experiences at the New Jersey shore spanned the transition from horse-drawn carts to spaceflight, and a sparsely populated, wooded Long Beach Island, isolated by the bay, to the highway-fed resort community of today.

He's gone from us several years now, but whenever I see an old wooden garvey out on the bay, I think of Charlie.

One of Charlie's old fisherman anchors adorns some pilings along the walkway going from our home to the dock where our schooner *Delphinus* is berthed. It's a tangible reminder of an old friend. He was one of a kind.

At the Surf City Yacht Club, on a post near Charlie's old slip, is a sign:

RIDGEWAY DOCK
This dock is dedicated to the
Memory of Charlie Ridgeway - Bay Man
"A true friend of the yacht club"

Charlie would have liked that. ❖

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