

## John Joseph Maxwell

by Victoria Ford

John Joseph Maxwell started on the water as a young boy in 1963 – and the last summer he had off was 1962. “I’m a fifth-generation bayman,” he said. “Goes back a long time; it’s in the blood.”

As he good-naturedly tells it, at age seven his family tied a rope onto him, put him on a boat, and his fate was sealed. “Man, you could get arrested for something like that now!” he said with a laugh.

“I got the bay bug really bad as a kid. I used to sit around in a box and pretend it was a boat.” He would daydream about being out on the water, duck hunting or trapping while pouring over the pages of *Field & Stream* and *Sports Afield*. Before long, by age 11, he was pulling oysters with his grandfather Curtis aboard the *A.D. 2*, a Navy Admiral’s Launch converted to a dredge boat.

“Basically, it was a lot of hard work,” he said. “We would load the shells up with these oyster forks – like a pitchfork, but with more prongs – into wheelbarrows and you’d wheel them up on the boat, and dump them on the boat, take the boat with the tide from Oyster Creek, up the river, shovel them off, and then we would catch some seed oysters and run them down into the bay to plant them. And then we would catch some oysters and go in. When I was 15, they said, ‘Let’s give the boy some help.’ Then we really started at it.”

Then, in the winter of ’76/’77, the bay froze. He went out with his dad on a sled pulled by a John Deere tractor and chopped up this ice with an ice saw. “Never been so cold in my life. It was brutal.”

Born in Atlantic City on Dec. 7, 1955, Maxwell grew up in Leeds Point and spent a lot of time on Oyster Creek – as he put it, the two worst places in the world for biting greenhead flies. “I never had a pair of shorts until I was, like, 20,” he said. “You never even went outside in the summertime, the bugs were so bad.”

Maxwell’s paternal grandfather, Curtis Maxwell, was the founder of Maxwell Shellfish. When John graduated from Rider University in 1978, there were no jobs, he explained. He worked on the relay – “that was a real education; guys were so close together, their rake handles touched.”

He took over the clam business in 1981, in his mid-20s. From ’84 to ’87, the clam business was booming, at the height of which, he opened the Maxwell Shellfish facility in Port Republic, built in 1985. For about 14 years he was in the little clam business. “I don’t think I slept through the night once while I had it,” he said. “I went all in. Had a place in North Carolina, too.”

Today John and his wife Kimberly together run the business. The couple moved to Germania in 1992. The two big company boats are named for his grandfathers, the *Captain Curtis Maxwell* and the *Captain Joseph Dayton*. (“We’re the only big boats that are consistently out, on Great Bay,” he said. “We’ve got a 42- and a 30-footer.”) Maxwell’s father Donald won the Hurley Conklin Award in 1996.



Maxwell's family tree has, on his dad Donald's side, Maxwells and Allens, and on his mom Doris's side, Daytons and Adamses. Doris's grandfather was an Adams, but her mom married a Dayton. The Daytons mostly cut cedar. Great-grandfather Bill Dayton, he and his wife were from Cape May but kept moving to all the cedar swamps. His maternal grandfather, Joseph Dayton, ran a party boat, and Curtis Maxwell built party boats.

"My parents' parents were friends. My grandmothers knew each other because they both lived in New Gretna and they were about the same age. My parents met each other when they were, like, two weeks old."

As a kid he would sew bags for the clams. Maxwell recalls coming home from school and hopping on his mini bike and heading straight down to the clam house that was about two miles away.

"I've hung around baymen all my life," he said.

He didn't start clamming, himself, until high school, when he clammed weekends with his Uncle Jack, his dad's younger brother. "We raked out of boats; the majority of harvest was done that way. Lower bays were mostly guys who waded, but up here at Great Bay it's deep, so they raked or tonged."

"Back in the old days, baymen ... did a variety of things, so they oystered, clammed, fished, ran duck parties. About when I came along, most guys clammed. The crab fishery didn't happen until sometime in the '80s

around here." But now, the traditional way of doing things and switching between fisheries is gone, and the work is more specialized, more strategically marketed. "The guys who are left (in the business) are the guys who have really adapted," he said.

In his own peer group, he said, the bay is really more of a lifestyle; they were born into it, their fathers did it. Not too many come into it cold, and those who do tend to lack an understanding of the heritage that surrounds it. "I tell all the young guys, 'If you're not failing, you're not trying.' Sometimes you really just gotta get out there and do stuff that makes sense to you but doesn't make sense to anyone else."

With the regulations today, every clam that comes through must have a documented "chain of custody," with temperatures logged at every step. Especially oysters, he said: tremendous amount of oversight and a lot of record keeping. As a result, he has had to limit his clientele in order to keep up with the paperwork.

And, to think, "I got into it because I wanted to play on a boat."

His family had about 140 acres on Turtle Creek, off the Mullica River, where as a young man he and his dad and Uncle Jack had duck hunting adventures. After he graduated from Rider, he got a black lab retriever that he remembers fondly. He also trapped those meadows for muskrat and whatnot. Since his uncle died, he and his dad have

done less duck hunting and more deer hunting in West Virginia.

Bayshore gunning was hard on the body, he recalled, but you could do well when it was cold; with no phragmites, the birds "would just tumble right into you." Now the boots are insulated, and the equipment is far superior, but "we had none of that." The standard gear was hip boots, with oilskins on top, and under layers made of wool. "You couldn't move. Itchy and cold, that's all that was."

Nowadays in the industry, every three or four years a bayman must reinvent himself, he said.

Maxwell became involved in state fisheries issues in 1992. He was co-founder and first president of the New Jersey Shellfisheries Association, which comes under the purview of the Bureau of Shellfisheries, within the state Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Fish and Wildlife. He was appointed to the Shellfisheries Council in 2001 (on which four generations of his family have served), and he served 10 years on the state Marine Fisheries Council.

Given the evidence of global warming ("I go clamming one day, and a pelican lands next to me, and I go, 'OK, something's changing here'"), he said the future of his business is most likely "more intense aquaculture." But he has no plans to retire.

"I can't stress enough: I've been very, very fortunate. It's been a really wonderful life."