

ED (SONNY) AHEARN

Since he was a very young boy, Sonny Ahearn's life revolved around the water. Born in Waretown on January 11, 1933, Sonny was mackerel fishing in the ocean at age 7 with Dick Clineman. They would jig the fish, bring them into Barnegat Light to sell and whatever was left they would sell for 25 cents apiece at Sam Gray's butcher shop.

He attended the little red schoolhouse in Waretown, where one room housed all eight grades. One teacher had three grades; one teacher had five.

By the time he was 14, Sonny was fixing up garveys by replanking them and setting them up with engines. He had started clamming by then and got very proficient. He could gather between 4,000 and 6,500 on one tide off Cedar Run, treading with a full wetsuit. He tonged a lot, also, but his preference was a scratch rake. He would sell them for 50 cents for necks, 70 for cherries and 90 cents a hundred for chowders. They didn't eat as much raw clams then so people thought they were getting more clam for their dollar. Sonny clammed most of his spare time and spent the money on school clothes. He bought his first car, a Model A Ford, for \$75. His next car was a '37 Chevy.

Sonny also mated on charter boats at the Chadwick Pound Fishery in Lavallette after graduation from high school, to get as much ex-

perience as he could for his eventual passing of his captain's license test. He worked a 56-foot dragger for fluke, sea bass and porgies. He also mated for Clineman and Stackhouse on a boat named the *Tradewinds*. At 18 years old he passed his test and became the youngest person to have a captain's license in his day. After getting that license, he started sailing charter on the *Kennebet*. He received \$50 a day for a charter party. Then within a couple of months he found another boat named the *Jet*, a 39-footer. He rigged it out and started sailing that one, too. She was a great boat in a head sea, but she rolled a lot. She was long and narrow, and not a few of his men lost their lunch on that boat. The men would fish the northeast wreck, which had her mast still sticking up, and also the southeast wreck, which still had her bow showing. Those wrecks had some fabulous fishing off them.

Sonny duck hunted some, and during his high school days he and Bill Hammerstrom would carve decoy heads from the butt lumber from the Barnegat sawmill. The owner would sell it to them for 25 cents apiece. They would get reprimanded by the teacher for carving in class.

Even though Sonny hunted ducks, his love was deer hunting. Just this past winter he got a real trophy, a six-point buck. It weighed in at 130 pounds dressed. He got an eight-pointer, too, but that only weighed in at 111 pounds.

In 1960, Sonny and his wife, Emily, daughter and two sons started selling fish from the garage of their small house on Wells Mills Road. Actually, he started the business to sell scallops. They had a couple of great years of scalloping in the bay then, so his wife sold scallops and cod in the store. Then he built some showcases and sold clams, netted fish, and every day used about 50 crab pots to stock the store. In 1971, he bought the property next door, converted it to a store everyone knows as Ahearn's Seafood Market, and kept at it for nearly 30 years.

Pea soup fog is something that strikes fear in Sonny's heart. One time he was coming in from the ridge at night, and he looked up to see a steamer 30 feet in front of him. Another time — and this was before they had radar — Don Mears and he were pulling in codfish gear when they were out past the ridge in thick fog; the wake of a steamer slapped their boat and birds flew by. Scaring him worst was the thought of getting between a tug and a tow.

Another time Sonny and his son Eddie were out with a big set of weakfish, over 200 boxes. They had finally gotten radar in by this time. When he had all the weakies in the boat and was ready to pull out at 10 o'clock at night with bad fog, he looked at his radar and immediately yelled over to Eddie to stop! A boat passed right in front of them. If it weren't for radar, they would have hit it.

In 1977, he had the *Emily A* built for him in Virginia. It was a 42-footer he rigged to net fish.

After keeping it for a long time, he sold it to Billy Leach, who then sold it to Wally Mollenkopf. He always fished with Billy but needed a bigger boat, so he had one built in Nova Scotia for himself.

Sonny's boys have done all right fishing, but right now they are in a five-year phase-out for shad and he just can't understand why. That was their biggest market for April and May — the roe. After five years are up, they can't catch any shad at all. Come May 15, weakfish are out until September, so they really miss out on a good market on them, too.

Awhile back the government asked the fishermen to cooperate with sturgeon reporting — their landings, what they got for them. Sonny kept perfect records and got thanked by their giving him a 25 percent reduction quota. The first year they let him catch 25,000 pounds. The second year they reduced it to 12,000, so it didn't make sense to even try to catch them. The third year they couldn't catch any at all. The thing is they are as plentiful as ever. It's tilefish that are overharvested.

People trying to make a living on the bay today have a tough row to hoe. Find another way to make a living — that is, unless you are going to raise your own clams or get into the transplant program.

Today, Sonny and Emily live in a lovely house overlooking the bay. His trophy deer and prize fish are mounted on his walls, and seashore trinkets and children's pictures complete their decorating style.

Even as we were speaking, their son and his friend were sewing nets for the next boat rigging. The salt air and the sea spray were calling.