

Joe Rizzo

by Joe Rizzo

Joe Rizzo, aged 61 from Mayetta, NJ, is one of the few remaining full time commercial baymen still actively harvesting shellfish and guiding for waterfowl and bay fishing. As a kid growing up in Forked River, NJ there was plenty of opportunity to get your “feet wet” fishing, hunting and clamming along the bayshore.

My dad built a small Garvey around 1970 that expanded the bay adventures, mostly around Stout’s Creek and along the Game Farm on Forked River. If the bay was calm he made the long ride to Tice’s Shoal off Island Beach to scratch rake clams.

In the early 1970s my Dad’s friend, John M. Chadwick invited me to go clamming with him off of Barnegat around Gulf Point. It was an eye opener. Everywhere you looked there were guys clamming. Treaders, bullrakers, tongers; all seemed to be putting clams in the boat. I did notice all the old guys were tongers.

We sold our clams to Chill Paul in Manahawkin, who had a little clam house in his backyard. Chill was a real go-getter. He handed me my money and said “Boy I really need’em ... going tomorrow?” I said “Yeah, I don’t drive yet, but my dad works at Conti Ford on Bay Avenue, he can drop the clams off.”

I didn’t make much at first, \$4.00 per hundred, but that was the start of my “bayman apprenticeship.” You learn pretty early on when clamming the wilds that if you can be diversified and be proficient at treading, tonging and bullraking, you can make a day’s pay whatever the conditions.

I bought my first set of clam tongs from Joe Reid, the boat builder in Waretown. The bullrakes I used were bought from Richard Cavileer in Tuckerton. In 1980 I bought a big 26 foot inboard Garvey from George “Winnie” Camburn of Waretown. The new boat enabled me to diversify into crab potting in the summer and eel pots in the fall.

In the spring of 1982 a good friend, Nelson Mills of Barnegat, passed away while fishing. Nelson had the charter boat Nighthawk out of Barnegat Light. He also was a duck guide in the winter. I bought the duck business from his wife Carol, which included his garvey, floating blind and decoys. In November of that same year, I started my career as a duck guide.

In the mid-1980s Great Bay had a good set of small clams and I moved the boat to Cape Horn Marina. While there, George Mathis Jr. gave me a lecture on the virtues, good and bad, of hard clam aquaculture. Some had really made the calculation that clamming in the wilds would die out and that aquaculture was the future of the bay.

Once again I diversified and leased some bottom, made some screens and bought some clam seed from Bayfarm in West Creek. Aquaculture, like all bay activities is time consuming and labor intensive.

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In my time I've seen a lot of changes around the Bay Shore. The bay goes in cycles; you just have to learn to adapt.