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RICHARD W. MATHEWS

As told to Grove Conrad

To use a phrase of this generation, “back in the day” of the last generation of baymen it seems as if it was a prerequisite for each man that worked the bay to have a substantial garden. Rich Mathews, very much today’s generation, has a garden that would delight not only those baymen of days gone by but also the “oligists” of Rutgers.

Asparagus, rhubarb, onions that behave like weeds, beans that behave like onions, heirlooms and — well it’s a sight to see, as is the cultivated bamboo that rings the property.

Richard Willard Mathews, born in 1949, lives in the house his father, Willard, left him. He is kept company by his wife of 27 years, Carol, the two retrievers — Chowderhead and Nacote Sue — and an assortment of toys for the two grandchildren and daughter Sara when they visit. His father died in 1985 and that year Rich returned from Pennsylvania and began anew on the bay as a clam farmer converted for a profuse life as bayman — taught to him by a very influential Grandfather, Herbert Mathews.

Grandpop was “THE CAPTAIN”. “He was a stern man but had charming charisma and character, especially for a young man growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. Herbert, born in the late 1870s, sailed oyster between

the Virginia coast and New York reminiscent of the story of Thomas Rose Lake and the sloop Golden Light (ref: “Golden Light” author James Kirk, 2003, Down the Shore Press). Rich spent countless days on the water with his grandfather and they sailed — sail only — a 22 foot sharpie, simply called “Sharpie”, built in 1850 then rebuilt by Herbert a hundred years later with sails of canvas stitched by Rich’s grandmother, Martha Doughty Mathews. Herbert’s main business was oysters. Those oyster trips were slightly before Rich’s time on the bay but Rich recalls clearly sailing that sharpie to and from the clam lots on Reeds Bay and off Beasley’s Point. The old man died in 1966 but not before passing a bank of knowledge to the teenage grandson.

At age 15, along with this brother, Brian, Rich built a 15-foot bateau, then a 19-foot v-bottom garvey, sold clams to Emory Wilson on Oyster Creek. Treading and raking on the wilds became almost impossible in the early 90s and Rich became what he describes as a “clam farmer” so much so he considers his boat a tractor and his clam lots fertile fields of bivalves. Like his garden, the agri-study of clams is an obsession and the science of it is still evolving. Rich evolved right along with it and if there is a hope for the next generations to being baymen, Rick represents that hope.