



Ron "Poss" Hammell

by Victoria Ford

According to Ron "Poss" Hammell of Tuckerton, "You either love it or hate it, there's no in-between with clamming. And I love it." It's a hard job, he says, but it's in his blood. A long-time clammer in the wilds of Absecon and Barnegat Bays, he transitioned to aquaculture when he retired from Atlantic City Electric. He also was an avid trapper and a carver of award-winning decorative decoys.

He was introduced to Absecon Bay at eight years old, when he would go out with his father, Robert Hammell, to catch a few hundred clams with an old inner tube and peach basket. "You were lucky to get through the day without putting a hole in it," he said. Back then they would get a penny, or a penny and a half per clam. He credits his dad with setting him on the path to continue the work he and his ancestors had done. Even the nickname "Poss" was handed down two generations.

He was born at home in Absecon on Dec. 11, 1951. His dad was a lineman for Atlantic City Electric; Ron, too, earned a living with the same power company for 34 years, after serving six years in the Army Reserves. He moved to Tuckerton from Absecon with his wife Louise in 1976 to work at the West Creek plant. He clammed after work, he said. He would be on his way home wearing a wetsuit, ready to go catch 1,000 to 2,000 clams in three or four hours.

The Hammell family roots in the area predate the Revolutionary War. Ron's great-great-great grandfather John Hammell was a doctor and British sympathizer. His great-great grandfather Bill Hammell was a decoy carver, guide and oysterman. Two years ago, for Christmas, Louise surprised him with a pair of Bill Hammell's decoys, golden-eyes, that she bought from a collector in Port Republic.

An early memory is a pair of hip boots he got one Christmas, which he would wear when he and his dad would go out to check the traps – in a single day, they could catch up to 200 rats and fetch a good price for them. In high school he would trap with friends for muskrats, raccoons and possums. At one time he had as many as 150 traps out – snares, kona bear traps and box traps – which required a lot of tending and maintenance. One box trap could catch four or five muskrats.

But treading for clams was his first love.

"First time out in this bay, I started in April, and I hit a spot right off the bat," he said. He treaded there until the supply dwindled and he relocated to Goose Bar, where he became acquainted with the scratch raking method.

His preferred method had always been treading, because deeper water is cooling in the summer and the bottom is softer so there's less wear and tear on the clammer. With scratch raking, you're exposed on a sandbar, and it's hot, and the greenheads bite right through wetsuits.

"I like it about waist-deep, where you can just squat down, with a basket and

tube, and just spread your legs out and feel, and just reach down, pick up the clam and throw it in the basket.” He has worked them up his legs and dove for them while wearing weight belts. He also did some big raking, with a shinnecock rake, and a little tonging. The man who got him interested in raising clams was John Schriever, who had a hatchery at Rusty Draper’s First Bridge Marina. Dale Parsons offered him a portion of his clam lot, so he put out 30 screens and was thrilled with the results.

“Now I’m planting cultured clams, and I can’t see me out in the wilds ever again. My ‘wilds’ is me on my lot, catching the clams that I missed. That’s my wilds, that’s as far as I want to go.”

He estimates this harsh winter has cost him 500 to 1,000 clams per screen, and he has 50 screens.

His passion for decorative decoy carving was rooted in competition, which he relished. The 1980s were the heyday, he said. He was setting himself up to carve fulltime in retirement, but the market petered out.

Though once he was a duck hunter, now he enjoys watching and appreciating them more than hunting them, he said. Bald eagles, peregrine falcons and loons are common sights. He was also an occasional deer hunter. Small game he’s hunted such as squirrels, rabbits, pheasants and quail. It was customary to eat what was killed.

“I eat a lot of clams, because I like to get even with them,” he said. He loves them steamed, casino, chowdered or deviled.

Poss’s 17-year-old grandson Eric Matthew has clammed with Poss every summer since he was 10. With the money he saved, he just bought himself a truck.

Eric calls his Grandpop “the hardest working man I have ever seen,” Louise said.

“I’m not easy on him. I’m not easy to work with,” Poss admitted.

But that cross-generational bond is essential to keeping the tradition alive.

“In the early days, I would talk to the old timers,” Poss said. “They would tell me anything I wanted to know,” he said, describing them as valuable sources of information and hands-on training. They trusted him and let him learn. They spent time on their trade. They were kind enough to take him under their wing and include him in their conversations. And there were some hard lessons from the bay, he recalled. Breaking down was rough, having to row in, cold weather, and wetsuits back then weren’t great. The more you earn, the better your equipment. You get smart.

Lightning storms would come up, but you just keep low in the water. Sometimes you’d have to chase the boat.

Now that he’s older and wiser, and the technology is better, and the service is good, he’s got it made out there, he said, with heat, amenities and a small crane to hoist 100-pound baskets of clams.