Ray Huber



Ray Huber.
Photo credit: Courtesy of O.C. Parks

Ray Huber was born in 1956 in Atlantic City. He not only shares a name with both his father and grandfather, but a career as a waterman with them. His grandfather, Ray Sr., worked for 48 years on a buoy tender for the state. He started at the age of 17, working out of the state's yard on Tuckerton Creek, where the Dockside Café in now located. The state later moved their yard to the Forked River. Most of his time was spent on the buoy tender Transit 3. The crew would spend up to a week at a time on the boat, covering the entire Jersey coast.

Ray's grandfather started taking him out on trips on the Transit 3 at a fairly young age, perhaps 8 or 10 years old, something that would never be allowed today. But much of what Ray knows about being safe on the water was learned from his grandfather on those trips. In those days there were no modern electronic navigation aids. Ray doesn't even remember seeing his grandfather use a chart as he marked the Intracoastal Waterway, including all its off-channels, from Sandy Hook to Cape May. It was all in his head. The state kept a small garvey at the marina in Forked river. Ray's grandfather would take him up and down the river, teaching him how to safely handle a boat. He not only taught young ray the right way to do things, but chewed him out if he did it the wrong way. Ray Huber Sr. was well known as a waterman in his time, even being mentioned in the writings of well-known New Jersey history author John T. Cunningham in the 60s.

Ray's grandfather wasn't the only other waterman in the family. Ray Sr.'s brother operated the steamer Miss Atlantic City, and his two sons were commercial fishermen out of Atlantic City as well. Ray's maternal grandfather was a pound fisherman off Long Beach Island and also worked as a

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fishmonger (someone who peddled fish). Ray's father, Ray Huber Jr., (and 2014 Hurley Conklin Award recipient) worked as a Coast Guardsman and a commercial clammer. He started young Ray clamming at about 12 years old out of Tuckerton Creek. His dad's first boat was a cedar garvey with a car engine in it. Around 1962 his father had another cedar plank garvey built by Tuckerton builder Pete Cranmer. Ray remembers his father pointing out there was only one knot in the entire boat, the diameter of his pinky finger.

Ray now considers the amount of clams in the bay back then amazing. He and his dad could easily put 400-500 clams in the boat in an hour. Sometimes it was much more than that. He'd count a hundred boats in the bay then, where he's lucky to see a handful clamming today. The clams only brought them $18.00 a thousand back then, but that was good money for the time. Unfortunately, the money clams bring in today has not kept up with inflation, part of the reason there are so few full time clammers left. When he first started he never had to leave Tuckerton Bay. By the time he was about 18 the clamming had started to die off in that water and he was boating up to West Creek where it was better.

Ray has since clammed in the Navesink River, Barnegat Bay, Great Bay, Little Bay, Reeds Bay, Absecon Bay, Lakes Bay, the Stone Harbor area and the Wildwoods. To be successful he had to go where the clams were. He did lease bottom for a time but found the return not worth the time he put into it. Most of his clamming has been on public waters. He started out treading clams, the way his father taught him. He tried tonging and raking but never took to it. When he had trouble finding the soft bottoms that were better for treading he took up scratch raking although, like each method of clamming, it took him a few years to get good at it. He now feels there are more high tides than there once were, making both treading and scratch raking harder. He might do better tonging or using a long rake from a boat but feels he's too old to take that up now.

Like most watermen, Ray has had a few close calls while on the bay. He's been injured several time while treading, having had foot surgery three times. Conch shells are a particular hazard to treaders, with the broken shells able to slice right through the rubber or neoprene footwear normally worn. One time he got his middle finger caught in the hydraulic steering cylinder of his outboard and it was nearly severed. He wrapped it up as best he could and rushed back to the dock and to the hospital.

Another time when he was moving the boat from Tuckerton to West Creek, where the clamming was better, a plank on the bottom popped and allowed water to rush in, throwing a section of the floorboard over his head and gouging the outboard. He can only imagine the outcome if it had hit him. The garvey started to quickly take on water and he sped to the nearest shore, which was Parkertown Beach, where he ran the boat up onto the shore. Someone on the beach had viewed the incident, and drove him up to West Creek, where his father was waiting for him. Bob Suralik Sr. later shaped and fitted a new plank to replace the damaged one.

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Ray's worst memory was when he and his father were run off the water by a thunder storm. They pulled into Burton's Dock in West Creek. As they climbed up onto the porch lightning struck the piling that Ray had just tied the boat to, showering them with smoldering splinters of piling wood. A larger piece was burning on the floor of the boat and Ray rushed down to toss it out. He never remembers being more terrified and has since developed a healthy respect for lightning. He's watched outer baymen stay out during it but he always gets off the water, figuring tomorrow's another day.

Like most Baymen, Ray has left wooden boats behind. In 1986, when the old garvey could not take any more, he bought a fiberglass KenCraft, which he still uses. It is a sturdy commercial style boat with a small pilothouse to get him out of the wind and spray.

Ray doesn't see a bright future for would-be clammers. The work is as hard as ever, but for less money and no benefits. Back when bigger outboards first came out, which helped push a heavier load and allowed you to move around the bay faster, you could pay it off in as little as a few weeks. It takes far longer to pay one off now. There are less clams in the bay and the smaller number of dealers to buy them means less competition, and less money for the clammers. Even if there were more clams in the bay, it might be difficult to sell them. They are just too many other food options today and clams are not part of the everyday diet as they once were. Everything seems to work against the commercial clammer today, competition, the market, even nature. Rays have become a big problem, which are a major predator of clams. He can hardly blame younger people for not taking up clamming as an occupation. Ray has one child, a daughter. He offered to help her get into clamming but she wasn't interested. The existing clammers are all up in age and there are few to replace them.

Ray does see seed clam showing up in new areas and in larger amounts here and there. The old timers used to say you needed a good hurricane every now and then to clean things out on the bay. Perhaps Sandy did just that. Ray's not sure but it's a degree of hope. In any case, he is still out on the bay, doing the only work he knows, and loves.