

MAURICE "MERCÉ" INMAN RIDGWAY, JR.

Merce was born in 1941. His family was living in the tiny Pine Barrens hamlet of Bamber in western Lacey Township. Bamber in those days was isolated. It was an all day trip to Toms River to shop, over 10 miles of sugar sand roads. Merce remembers his father telling him about one trip to Barnegat and back where he got 14 flat tires.

At a young age, his family moved to Taylor Lane in Forked River. At about six years of age, his family purchased property on Route 9 in Lanoka Harbor, and they built a home.

Merce's first experience with the outside world was when he reluctantly went off to school. To his amazement the school was lighted with electric lights, not kerosene, and there were indoor toilets that flushed.

The Ridgways have the sea and the pines in their blood. Merce's ancestors are Richard and Elizabeth (Chamberlain) Ridgway. They arrived at Burlington in the ship "Jacob & Mary" of London, on Sept. 12, 1679, from Wallingford, Berkshire, England

In 1729, Timothy Ridgway, son of Richard Jr. and Mary Willitts, married Sarah Cranmer and settled in Barnegat. This is the line Merce is descended from.

His connection to the Inman line comes from his great grandmother, Mary Catherine Inman, wife of Joel Haywood Ridgway, second keeper of the Barnegat Life Saving Station, who served from 1876 to 1898. The old stock of Inmans in the area were noted as whalecatchers on L.B.I.

Lenape blood runs through both sides of Merce's family. The Dutch line is represented by his grandmother, Wilhelmina Leek.

The Ridgways over the centuries have made their living working the traditional occupations of the woods and the water.

When Merce was old enough to walk, he started working the woods with Merce, Sr. As his dad would cut a tree, he did not want Merce to be too close for a tree to fall on him, so he told Merce he could range as far as he wanted, as long as he stayed within the sound of his Dad's ax. This gave Merce an opportunity to study nature and become an expert woodsman.

His dad taught him the ways of the bay. He learned how to be a true bayman, harvesting oysters, clams, scallops, crabs and mussels.

When he was young, the oldtimers told Merce not to make a career on the water, because the bay was dying. He did not believe them! He thought there were lots of fish, clams and other things to make a living from the bay. They told him, "Believe us, this is nothing compared to the past." Since then, the bay has further declined to the point where few can scratch out a living.

In the last decade Merce became disillusioned with overdevelopment, the decline of the bay, and the lack of freedom to wander the land, and has retired to West Virginia.

Besides being a bayman, Merce has picked cranberries, blueberries and worked at a sawmill, cutting and dragging cedar from the swamps. But Merce is most famous for his musical talents, handed down from family traditions.

Merce's dad along with Bill and Walt Britton, were literally plucked out of these woods by folklorist Dorothea Dix Lawrence. They performed at the National Folk Festival in 1941 and soon they were performing live on the radio. Merce remembers listening to them play on a radio hooked up to a car battery. They knew the three as the "Pinchawkers".

In 1979, Merce and the new Pinchawkers played original songs about the bay and pines composed by Merce and his dad, as well as many old Pine Barrens tunes.

Merce was the first president of the Baymens Association for Environmental Protection. He was also a member of the

first executive board of the Commercial Fisherman's Council, and the Coalition for Survival. For many years, Merce was one of the musicians who gathered at the Albert brother's, cabin — the Old Home Place, to play on Saturday nights.

When George died and Joe could no longer handle the crowds, Merce instituted the Sounds of the Jersey Pines in the old Waretown Auction Hall, and became a founding member and first president of the Pinelands Cultural Society. Merce also served as president in the 10th year.

In 1983, Merce represented New Jersey at the Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C. The Pinchawkers played again for the New Jersey State Folk Festival in 1995, at Rutgers. He was presented an award by the executive director, Angus Kress Gillespie, for distinguished contributions to the traditional arts of New Jersey.

Merce and the Pinchawkers performed again in October for the First Annual Pine Barrens Jamboree at Wells Mill County Park in Waretown. He was presented an award by Michael Mangum on behalf of the Ocean County Board of Chosen Freeholders, to recognize his outstanding musical contributions to preserve and celebrate the traditions and culture that have deep roots in Ocean County. Merce's song, "It's a Beautiful Day on Barnegat Bay" is autobiographical. However it also could be biographical for many past Conklin winners.

It's a Beautiful Day on Barnegat Bay

*Some people think a clamdigger,
he's got it mighty fine,
riding along in his old work boat,
in the good old summer time,
it's a beautiful day on Barnegat Bay.*

*Now if you should chance to get closer,
you see that he's wrinkled and lined,
from the wind and the snow,
the cold wind that blows,
he don't seem to mind, he goes all the time,
and there's a twinkle in his eye.*

*Sometimes you might see him towing
his sneakbox on Barnegat Bay
after some Blackducks he's going,
to eat on a cold winter's day
it's a beautiful way on Barnegat Bay*

*And if you could visit his kitchen
after the day is through,
chances are he's a musician and he'd
play a tune for you,
he's sure got it fine, he does it all the time*

*Now if you should happen to see him
clamming on Barnegat Bay
give him a wave, say hello for me,
as you pass along your way,
It's a Beautiful Day on Barnegat Bay
and It's a Beautiful Way on Barnegat Bay.*