

Along the Mullica River

By GRETCHEN F. COYLE

“When our ancestors came over they were either boat builders, preachers or pirates,” says Don Leek. “Why, my grandfather, Charlie Leek, even built some rum runner boats with big liberty engines and bullet-proof glass at his boat yard in Lower Bank.”

A history so old the ships and most of the clapboard and cedar shake homes are gone. Stories abound of loyalists, rebels, pirates, and privateers; the terms seem to blend depending on the century. A sleepy brackish body of water, home to plovers, eagles, and falcons. Miles can be traversed with nary a soul in sight. Housing developments, Jet Skis whining with riders in fluorescent-colored life preservers. Salt marshes near the mouth of Great Bay, upland areas covered with miles of pitch pine. The Mullica River: a paradox if there ever was one.

The Mullica was named after the Swede explorer/settler Eric Palsson Mullica in the late 1600s; he settled at Lower Bank, though whether he lived in a shack or plantation is still up for debate. He is buried in an unmarked grave in an old Lower Bank cemetery. In 1698, Quaker Daniel Leeds made the first surveys of the area, founding Leeds Point, which overlooks Great Bay.

The Mouth Of the Mullica

Great Bay is covered with a thin sheet of morning fog, evaporating quickly as the sun rises behind us. Our 20-foot Seacraft outboard skims the surface. Small, clapboard cottages built on pilings at Oyster Creek and Motts Creek (pronounced “crick” by locals) are visible above the grasses and bayberry as we head west. Gulls cackle overhead. On this large body of water, it is strange that there is not another boat in sight.

Chestnut Neck is located near the mouth of the Mullica River. Today a large boatyard is visible, and a few homes on the north side of Nacote Creek. During the time of the Revolutionary War, the small village of Chestnut Neck was burned by British troops who attacked Gen. the Count Casimir Pulaski’s Legion.

Shipbuilding was once a big industry. Large ships sailed the Mullica; commerce was brisk. Imports were brought in from around the world on a flood tide. Exports such as timber, lime, glass, brick, iron and charcoal were loaded aboard ships.

It is easy to think about the early settlers who lived in the area. Were they dashing privateers or just plain, everyday folk trying to make the most of the moment? In 1945, Henry Carlton Beck wrote in *Jersey Genesis, The Story of the Mullica River* that as “British officers ap-

proached the sloping coast of the Jerseys, they were given to understand that Little Egg Harbor and the Mullica were contrived to conceal a ‘nest of rebel pirates.’ Natives of the little river towns, British sailors were told, knew their channels and used their ships so well that they struck and slithered to cover like snakes. Jersey daredevils did slip out of Great Bay night after night to capture larger and better armed vessels before their skippers, unfamiliar with treacherous coast and hit-and-run tactics, understood what was happening. Prize craft were captured, convoyed in, unloaded, and tied up at landings from Chest Neck to The Forks by farmer sailors who had been working up to the technique for years. On some occasions as many as thirty armed sloops lay in wait for some hapless, richly laden ship which had been signaled off shore.”

Lower Bank And Green Bank

Our boat passes under the high Parkway Bridge, and we wind our way through the salt marshes of Swan Bay, past historic Clark’s Landing, and up to the sleepy village of Lower Bank. Salt water begins to turn a bit brown; the pungent, brackish smell of the cedar water is an odor we can’t mistake. It was at Lower Bank that the Leek family built boats for generations. Today all that remain are docks in disrepair, and empty buildings. A neglected Trumphy is tied up to the Pacemaker Factory. A sign reads “Lower Bank Boat Yard.” All is silent except for the sound of our motor. This once-thriving town of shipbuilders, a general store, post office, and seven saloons is almost completely deserted.

One can almost visualize old Charlie Leek, a patch over his left eye, telling Henry Carlton Beck that the Leek family has been building boats since the mid 1700s. “With us Leeks, it’s either been ships or the Gospel. You had to take up one or the other. There was nothin’ else.” Don Leek smiles at the memory of his grandfather. “He used to build every kind of boat — race boats, pleasure craft and sailboats. He could tweak potential owners by saying that he could build the next boat faster and better.” All boats were custom built.

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settlers could cross with their wagons and cattle? A lone canoer glides by us, waving. “This is my morning exercise,” she relates.

Green Bank, another old village where three-masted schooners were once built and sailed the oceans, is soon visible with some beautifully restored homes lining the bluffs on the northern side. A paper plant, glass works and Aunt Hattie’s General Store are things of the past. A steamboat by the name of *Eureka*, skippered by Captain Loveland of Tuckerton, was just one of many that regularly commuted from New York to Green Bank.

We pull up to the northern embankment, tie up the boat, and walk the area. Green Bank Road leads to an old church and graveyard, the gift of large landowner Nicholas Sooy, grandson of Eric Mullica’s Dutchman friend Joos Sooy. Pioneer names such as Sooy, Leek and others are remembered here. Old farmhouses are tastefully interspersed with newer homes. In *Jersey Genesis*, Henry Carlton Beck interviews longtime resident Laura McConaghy, who remembers Green Bank as “sloping bluff banks forever green in the tangle of jasmine, honeysuckle, roses, wild grapes, holly, cedar, and laurel.”

The Mullica River-Great Bay area is part of the Jacques Cousteau National Estuarine Research Reserve. It is managed by the Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences of Rutgers University, located in the old Coast Guard station at the northern entrance of Great Bay. While the eastern end is home to aquatic vegetation, beds of eelgrass, and birds of all types (most often seen during their spring and fall migration along the eastern flyway), the upper parts of the Mullica look like a dense forest. The largest area of pitch pine in North America grows in this area of the Pine Barrens. Luckily for all of us, the New Jersey Pinelands Protection Act includes most of the area.

A Study In Contrasts

A few housing developments become visible as we approach the Sweetwater area. A Jet Skier closely passes us on a narrow bend in the river. “Civilization is upon us,” groans one of our crew members. Sweetwater Casino is probably open for lunch, but it is early, so we continue slowly along the “no wake” zone. The road from New Gretna to Batsto is visible to our right while homes of all sizes line the Mullica. Our destination is The Forks Inn, a beautifully constructed replica of an old inn. The Forks is located near The Forks where the Mullica, the Batsto River and Nescochaque Creek converge.

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This Is No Bull

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Most of my stories are true, based on facts, or could be true and a few are just plain lies. You can decide which one this is.

My friend Fred Lesser and I go way back in waterfowl gunning in Ocean County, and I recall one event which warrants recording so the younger generation of duck hunters can profit from our experiences.

Back when Ocean County was what we wish it were today, Fred and I spent too many hours chasing the ducks anywhere they chose to land. If there were some ducks any place, we would look for them.

Somehow Fred learned that a big flock of Barnegat Bay Black Ducks was using one of the freshwater ponds on the Fenninger Ranch adjacent to Barnegat Bay near Forked River. Mr. Fenninger was making an effort to raise beef cattle on a few hundred acres of land he had cleared and planted, and he'd built some ponds to provide water for his livestock.

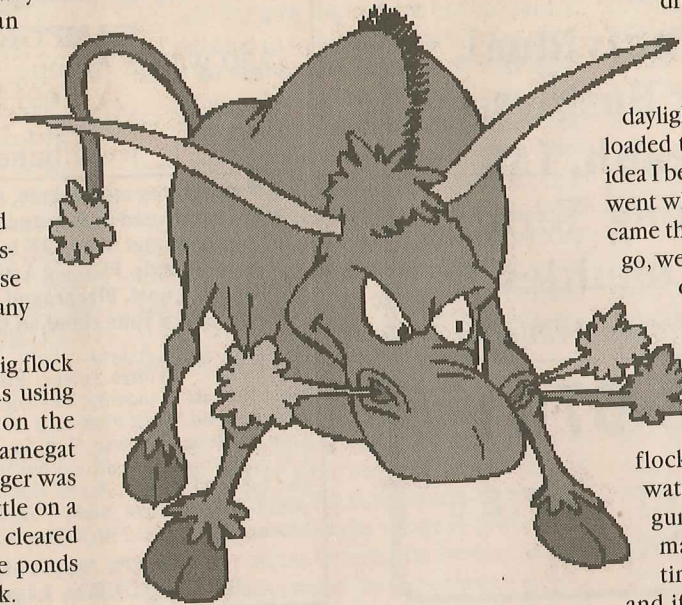
Fred surveyed the situation and decided these saltwater ducks needed to be hunted to restore the balance of nature in these freshwater ponds. He elected himself to be the one to do it and invited me to join him in this mission of mercy.

We surveyed the small pond the evening before the hunt and saw about 300 ducks of all sizes and shapes feeding and drinking, and reasoned they would be there at daylight the next morning.

The cattle had eaten most of the grass

around the pond so we would need to crawl about 200 yards to get close enough to the pond for a shot.

The following morning, under cover of darkness, we began our long crawl guided



only by the quacking of the ducks. We must have looked like a couple of alligators heading for a water hole.

We crawled on our bellies, just like alligators, and when we were 100 yards from the pond the flock of ducks saw us and flew just out of gun range. Fred was mad and so was I.

That night I called Fred on the dial phone — that is all we had in those days — and said I figured I had a way to get close to those ducks. I mentioned the ducks were not afraid

of the cows that fed right next to the pond.

Fred rudely interrupted my conversation and said, "Well, we ain't no cow." I replied that we were going to be one, and I picked him up the next morning in my truck. We drove to the old butcher shop in Jackson and bought a fresh cowhide for \$20.

The following morning long before daylight, we drove to the pasture and unloaded the cowhide. Since I suggested this idea I became the head of the cow, and Fred went where he was supposed to be and became the back end. All dressed and ready to go, we looked just like one of those other cows that were now feeding next to the pond.

Slowly we inched toward the pond, stopping now and then to pretend we were eating grass. We got to within 40 yards of the flock of ducks that sat quietly on the water. I was shooting a double barrel gun and Fred was shooting his automatic shotgun, which shoots three times if the game warden is around, and if he isn't, it's been known to shoot five times.

We got in position to shoot, raised our guns, and Fred shouted "NO!" The ducks rose in a great cloud of feathers and there wasn't a single one left on the pond, not even a coot.

I looked back at Fred and said, "What in the world is wrong with you, didn't you see all those ducks?"

Fred said, "Yeah, I saw all those ducks, but here comes the bull!"

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Nearby are the old paper plant ruins at Pleasant Mills. Old Charlie Leek described the paper as "nothing extra. Old fashioned, kind of brown. But it was good enough for what it was used

for." Across small Nesco Lake sits the old Kate Aylesford Mansion. Inspection of another Methodist church and graveyard yields names of Revolutionary War survivors and their descendants. Nearby Batsto, site of the old mansion, iron works and cannon ball factory, is restored for everyone to admire. But these are trips for another day, by canoe or by car. Our boat doesn't draw much water, but the river is very shallow in spots.

A trip up the Mullica River is a study in contrasts: old, new, historical and environmental. Exploring the Great Bay-Mullica River area by boat can take a long time, as there are many creeks to investigate. Going at almost idle speed, we can back off whenever our motor hits the muddy bottom. While there has been some development, much of the area is preserved for

posterity. At turns in the river we never know whether we're going to see the Jersey Devil or a fast Donzi. Instead, we see wilderness, wildlife and beauty. One cannot help but be moved by the serenity and wonderment of the area. It is easy to see why early pioneers came to settle the area, and why generations of families have never left.

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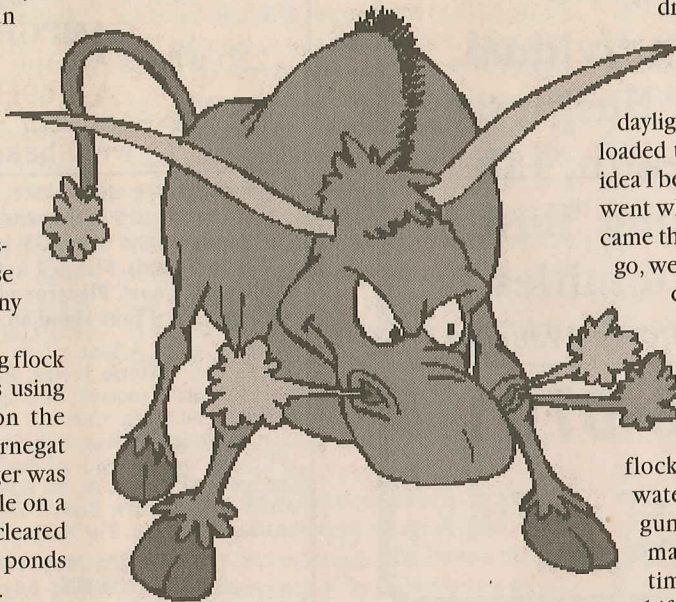
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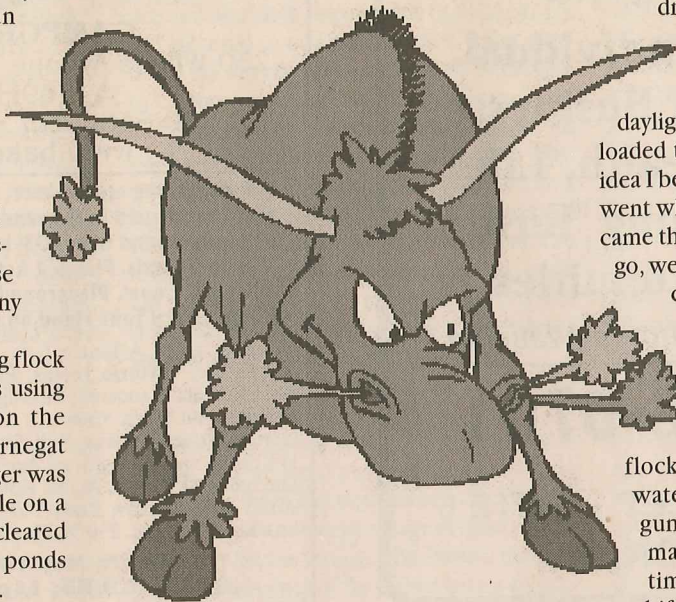
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Once a hub of activity during the Revolution, The Forks is now a village of tidy homes nestled in among tall pines and hearty cedars. It may seem amazing today that sailing ships could navigate so far up the Mullica. Sediment of mud and debris has filled the riverbed over the years. Henry Carlton Beck notes that at The Forks, "houses and barns and wharves (lined) the shore, and in the river were hundreds of ships, privateers, and their prizes."

Nearby are the old paper plant ruins at Pleasant Mills. Old Charlie Leek described the paper as "nothing extra. Old fashioned, kind of brown. But it was good enough for what it was used

for." Across small Nesco Lake sits the old Kate Aylesford Mansion. Inspection of another Methodist church and graveyard yields names of Revolutionary War survivors and their descendants. Nearby Batsto, site of the old mansion, iron works and cannon ball factory, is restored for everyone to admire. But these are trips for another day, by canoe or by car. Our boat doesn't draw much water, but the river is very shallow in spots.

A trip up the Mullica River is a study in contrasts: old, new, historical and environmental. Exploring the Great Bay-Mullica River area by boat can take a long time, as there are many creeks to investigate. Going at almost idle speed, we can back off whenever our motor hits the muddy bottom. While there has been some development, much of the area is preserved for

posterity. At turns in the river we never know whether we're going to see the Jersey Devil or a fast Donzi. Instead, we see wilderness, wildlife and beauty. One cannot help but be moved by the serenity and wonderment of the area. It is easy to see why early pioneers came to settle the area, and why generations of families have never left.

Old Charlie Leek lived all his life along the Mullica, telling Henry Carlton Beck: "There's a smell of the Mullica that ain't like any other smell on earth. Once you get the smell of the Mullica up your nose, all other smells are stinks." Beck himself agreed, writing in the preface to *Jersey Genesis*, "I may be wrong about the Mullica River. I don't think I am. To me the Mullica is the most wonderful of the unrecognized rivers of America." ■