

FL FINDING AID

Bobbie Harrison
01-28-02

Field Notes Only

Event: Formal Interview- not recorded

Subjects:
Harrison's Chesapeake House, St. John's Chapel,

Background:

Went to Harrison's for lunch and photos. He will be gone Valentines Day for about 6 weeks. Gets together with several community members every Mon, Wed, Fri at Timeout or in Easton.

Grandmother, Ida May (also the name of the boat one of boats). She came to Tilghman Island to teach in 1890's. Met his grandfather who was an Oysterman and net fisherman and got married. There was a conflict? one day at the church they went to, so they decided to start their own. They ordered lumber and had it brought over and built a new church. The lumber was brought by skipjacks. There was an accident? and some of it fell back into the river and all the workmen went out and gathered it up. She preached at it for 6 months until they got a preacher. It is about a mile down from Harrison's on the right.s

Children's Home Society in Easton (Orphanage where Lindsley lives?) Mrs. Harrison would bring a few of the children down to Island to live and work in the summer. Some of them stayed on to live in Tilghman.

Fishing Fair- Chesapeake Bay Fishing Fair Association. It was the biggest event- Not a tournament but a fishing contest, had a beautiful cup- Capt. Buddy has a picture of it in his office. Each year it happened at a different port city exchanging coasts. East Coast/ West Coast. "It was a festive occasion." They had dances, boat parades, largest fish of all species. It started in the late 30s, stopped during the war and started up again in 1946. It ran until 65 or 66.

Tilghman Island Days- Capt. Buddy's son, little Buddy or Bud Jr. (commissioner) handles the organizing for the festival. Capt. Buddy thinks it began in the 60s. Originally it started as a crab, clam and oyster eating festival. There were shucking contests at the Oyster Shucking House, and crab pickers. One price all you could eat. The also had men "gearing net" or tying the nets for pound fishing. More and more people started coming so they started offering Skipjack rides and then the next year, Skipjack races. Since there were more small boat oystermen than skipjack captains they started adding workboat races and then the docking contests. It was something that everyone could enjoy- even people who didn't know much about the bay. Manouvering into the pier.

Bobbie also worked with tourism. She was part of the five year strategic planning committee, serving on the Talbot County Tourism Board and the Chamber of Commerce. Most of her civic work was focused on tourism - anything having to do with the Charter business.

The schools closed down for major holidays only, not for local / Tilghman Island events (first day of hunting season, crabbing season, etc.).

FIELD NOTES:

Capt. Buddy's wife, Bobbie is one of the organizers for x-mas on Tilghman Island. She did a lot of the work for the ornaments. As did Mrs. Clifford Wilson- Donna. Bobbie is an "integral part of the business" She took over the kitchen and management of the restaurant. Originally she worked with his mom for 30 years until the Mother passed on (at 93). Alice, Capt. Buddy's mother, is the one responsible for the initial growth of the restaurant. Her cole slaw recipe and stewed tomatoes were very popular and made the restaurant what it is.

Bobbie is willing to talk to me, I should call her at 886-2407 before 2 o'clock or at the restaurant after 2. 886-2121

Pro Am tournament is the first weekend in May- Mon. 6th and Tues. 7th. Invitation for customers, outdoor writers.

Tilghman Island Days.

Young Bud is one of the original organizers. Campers use the front lawn. Also they allow the use of some of the grounds by the school. TI days brings all kinds of people here.

Bobbie Harrison

Wife of Capt. Buddy Harrison and manager of Harrison's Chesapeake House
Tilghman Island, MD

INTERVIEW NOTES: field notes only, no recording made.

Interview took place, Jan. 28 2002 at Harrison's Chesapeake House in the dining room.

FIELDWORKER- Shelly Drummond

Harrisons married in 1957 :

Bobbie Harrison married Buddy Harrison in the summer of 1957. (She and her family moved to McDaniel when she was 6 and she grew up going to school in St. Michaels.) When she was married, she worked in Easton at the Star Democrat and with a financial company. Her first son was born in 1958.

At the time, her mother-in-law, Alice Harrison had everything under control at the restaurant. They were opened seasonally, and she mainly served fishing parties. In the 50s on Tilghman Island not many people went out to dinner. When they went into town, they might go to the coffee shop in Easton, or H&G restaurant on Rt. 50. St. Michaels had a soda shop as well, but there was no restaurant as such in St. Michaels at that time. The Chesapeake House was really just for charter fishing parties.

Bobbie Harrison began working at the Chesapeake House on the weekends, helping out with the charter parties. The charter parties were mostly men, but sometimes members of the charter parties would bring their wives and families. Some of the locals were interested in coming over to have dinner occasionally but it was awhile before they actually began serving meals to the general public.

Bobbie and her sister-in-law are responsible for some of the first advertising of the Harrison's Charter Business. They began sending out mailings to advertise charter trips, post cards, thank you notes and such. At the time she was working full time in the bank and helping out in the dining room for overnight charter parties.

Raising Children:

She used to bring the children to work with her. Sometimes she had a babysitter, but often they had to entertain themselves in the dining room and they did well that way. She never had a problem with her children as they were growing up. They are self-assured, and since they grew up in the family business they matured quicker. They learned how people live, and saw for themselves what happens when people make the choice of overindulging. They learned you can't be successful if you overindulge and it helped them know what was right and what was wrong.

The kids always had a lot of friends. There would be anywhere from five to six kids around all the time. They would play ball in the field beside the Chesapeake House. There were around 120 kids enrolled in the school at that time. It was a nice little school, the teachers were very caring, and they knew all the children and all their families. They understood any problems a kid might be having in his/her home and were very patient with them. They didn't have many problems in the school then- occasionally there was a discipline problem but it was rare.

They had paddling in the schools then. Families taught their children to respect their elders and their peers. When Bobbie grew up she knew that if she got in trouble at school, she would be in twice as much trouble at home. Bobbie was president of PTA for three years which is unusual. They had good fundraisers- they used to have fairs, bake sales, crafts and food. It helped them raise money for playground equipment and the library.

Several times the county tried to close down the school, but the community managed to keep it open. It used to be the school with the lowest maintenance costs in the County. The students and teachers always took pride in their school and that was why there was less cost keeping it up- they maintained it daily and didn't behave destructively. The low cost was one of the things that saved the school.

Her most important accomplishments are raising her family and managing the family business, a 100 year old tradition. Her sons will continue to maintain the business in much the same way. Bobbie Harrison learned a lot from her mother in law Alice. Not just about the business, she was also a true friend. All the recipes still being used at

Chesapeake House were Alice Harrison's. "She was smart and tough and she knew what she was doing."

Cooks:

They've always had black cooks who were very good cooks. They serve traditional Eastern Shore food. The cooks knew the basics and Alice Harrison taught them how to finish the dishes.

The first cook Bobbie Harrison remembers was Buster Brooks- He cooked there for 15 years plus or minus five or six. He has passed on. At the time they were open during the fishing season and they closed during the winter. Buster Brooks was a cook on one of the skipjacks in the winter. He was famous for his food. He was from Wittman. Some of his family still lives there.

The cook after that (or the next long term cook) was called Bro. Thomas. He was from Bellevue and he worked on skipjacks as well. He worked at the Chesapeake House for about 14 years. He has passed on as well.

After Bro. Thomas there was James Haskins- also known as Duck. He was from Royal Oak and he almost became famous nationally. He would come out to the dining room and introduce himself. He made sure all the baseball players and politicians knew him. They all loved him. "He was part of the uniqueness of the Eastern Shore way of life."

Other recollections about various cooks: Some of them tended to be very heavy drinkers and sometimes they would drink during work. There were times when they would have to send a cook home because he was drunk. But for the most part they could depend on them. They were wonderful chefs.

Daily work schedule in the late 50s/early 60s:

The cooks would come in at 4:30-5:00 to prepare breakfast. There was no lunch served at the restaurant and they would take a break after they finished breakfast. Then from 2:00 on they worked on dinner.

First Alice, and then later Bobbie Harrison, did most of the dessert baking- the pies and cakes. They always had another lady as well who also did desserts and other dishes.

The women would come in at 5:00 in the morning and serve breakfast. After breakfast was cleaned up, they would strip all the rooms and do laundry. Then they would set up for dinner. Dinner started at 5 o'clock and went until about 9 in the evening. They would get all the dishes washed and dried and when they had finished that they would pack lunches for the next day. The fishing parties ranged in size but they would often pack anywhere from 20-80 lunches. There were nights they didn't get home until 2 o'clock.

People who worked in the business in those days worked hard, sometimes seventeen and eighteen hour days. They were open from May to about the 1st of November. Then in the 60s they began opening in April and staying open through Thanksgiving. Eventually, sometime in the early 80s, they started staying open year round. The reason they chose to stay open year round was mainly because of the work it took to reopen in April. It was easier to keep the place open than it was to close down and reopen. Also, by that time, there was enough business to justify staying open longer. They started having a lot of hunters come to stay in the fall after the charter fishing season was over and that provided business until January.

Dining room changes:

Originally, the regular dining room (where the bar is) seated about 60. Then they built the expansion, which seated 85-90 people. (This is the second part of what is the bar today.) Around that time, her father-in-law, Capt. Buddy's father, had wanted a porch and started building one along the side of the house. As it was finished, however, it became a dining room instead. (This is the area along side the mural.) That was about the early 70s. At that time, there was no bar at the restaurant. Office work for the charter business was done in Alice Harrison's dining room.

In 1970 or 1972, her father-in-law came home one day and said, “Well, I got a liquor license. I guess we’ll try it. I’m not hiring a bartender. You and Donna are going to tend bar.”

Bobbie Harrison didn’t really drink, maybe she’d have a vodka and soda occasionally but she didn’t know how to make drinks. So she bought some bartending guides and their liquor salesmen helped her organize the bar. He was real nice and helped her get the brands and the bar into an organized system. He is still their salesman today.

Today she manages the business, but she helps out on just about anything. She does everything from cooking, dishwashing, bookkeeping and taxes. If they are short in the kitchen, she works there. Over time, she’s learned to fill in for everybody. And she still does some of the baking at home and brings it in. She likes to do the baking at home because it’s easier.

Dinners:

In the early days, before the bar, everyone who came brought their own bottle and Chesapeake House provided set ups. In the evening they would have all the bottles and mixers on the table and the men would drink then they would take all of it off the table to serve dinner. It was always a traditional meal. They would serve tomatoes, corn on the cob, cucumbers- all the vegetables were fresh and there were usually eight or nine bowls of vegetables on the table. They served a set number of combinations. One night would be chicken and crab cakes another ham and oysters. Combinations were usually a fish and a meat. Other combinations served were crab and roast beef, ham and soft crab.

They are considering going back to the combinations. Today, people make a lot of demands on restaurants. First they want one kind of fish, or their crab cooked a certain way, then they want it another. It makes things too complicated. “Perhaps it is a good idea to go back to the past and find something that might work in the present.” Serving combinations, getting back to basics, may be good for everything- food and other things. For example, children need to know how to “make their own play”. Now all of their toys are automated and bought off a shelf. When Bobbie Harrison was growing up they could

play all day long on a haystack. “We did all kinds of things. The kids today can’t play.” That is why they are so frustrated.

St. John’s Chapel

The history of the chapel. St. John’s Chapel is a spin off of the upper church. At some point, Capt. Buddy’s grandmother and part of the congregation got mad with the upper church and decided to build their own church. Originally they called it the United Methodist Episcopal Church South. However, when they built it, the cornerstone read St. Johns. Capt. Buddy’s grandfather organized the building wood to be brought up the bay on skipjacks from N.C. or VA. It took three trips and on one trip there was an accident and the wood went into the bay. The community however, went out there on boats and saved the wood. The money for the building was raised by the community.

Capt. Buddy’s grandmother was a school teacher and she became the minister until another one was found. The Harrisons have strong family ties to the church; Capt. Buddy’s family is buried there. Eventually the congregation got smaller and they limited the service. In 1995 someone offered to buy it and that sort of started the congregation to thinking about what it wanted to do with the church. The trustees got together and decided to renovate it. Nine to eight members organized a conference, some people wanted to sell it because it was in bad repair, but it was decided to renovate it.

In the area there are several churches that have become homes, in McDaniel there is a black church from Sherwood that was moved and renovated as a home, there’s one in Fairbanks as well. There’s a flair these days to buy churches and make homes.

They decided to have a fund raiser to help pay the costs of the work. Capt. Buddy said, “Let’s have a homecoming.” So, on the 1st of December they had a big dinner at Harrison’s. They asked for donations. They added an auction, the first year Capt. Buddy did a lot of the organizing. Young Bud was the auctioneer. They raised \$11,000 that year. They took down the original roof which was made out of cedar shakes and replaced it with a tin roof. Originally the cost for painting the church was going to be \$25,000 but a painter volunteered his time to do it at cost and it totaled less than \$4,000 to have it painted.

They got all of that done and began to use the church for special occasions in exchange for a minimum donation of \$250.00. Baptisms, funerals, weddings – some people pay the minimum and some pay more. One man left the church a lot of money and they used it to pay off the loan. St. Michaels Bank loaned them money and made a donation as well. So every year, the first Sunday in December is homecoming and they have a dinner and an auction. Last year they had ornaments made for the chapel as a fund raiser. The ornaments are commemorative Christmas tree balls, hand blown, and very pretty.