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Exit the Bayman

By TOM CLAVIN

EARLY last Monday morning, Dan King got into his car with his wife, Marsha, and his mother-in-law, Sarah Wethy, and drove out of East Hampton, the town that had been home to him and his ancestors since the late 1600's. The Kings were bound for North Carolina. Their house in Springs had been rented out, and their remaining belongings were traveling with them. For Mr. King, 55, one of the last full-time baymen in East Hampton, there could be no looking back.

"It's tough to leave here," he said. "But we don't feel like we have a choice."

Mrs. King, also 55, said moving away was not a sudden decision. A King on her mother's side, she is also a true-blue Bonacker, with local ancestry dating back centuries. She had to give up her job as secretary at the Old Whalers Church in Sag Harbor and, like her husband, say goodbye to many friends and relatives.

Mr. King had grown up on the bays and the ocean waters off Amagansett and Napeague, and in the 1970's and 80's he captained one of East Hampton's six haul-seining crews, along with Ted Lester, Francis Lester, Bill Lester, Calvin Lester and Sam Merritt. And until he stepped down at the end of 2003, after he was elected to the East Hampton Board of Trustees, he had served for 20 years as president of the East Hampton Baymen's Association.

No, as Mrs. King indicated, this was not a casual leavetaking. It was an admission that on eastern Long Island the tradition-steeped occupation of bayman -- plying the inshore waters for fish or shellfish, whatever's in season -- has virtually gone the way of the blacksmith.

"To me, Dan leaving East Hampton signifies the end of a way of life here," said Brad Loewen, the new president of the Baymen's Association.

In "Men's Lives," a 1986 book celebrating the East End baymen's way of life and chronicling the economic and regulatory forces arrayed against it, the writer Peter Matthiessen quoted Mr. King as saying: "I'd like to stay on the beach as long as I can but it's getting tougher all the time. Unless things change, I think we can count the number of years we have got on one hand."

Mr. King underestimated, but the outcome has been the same. "I can catch fish here, but the bottom line is I can't afford to live here," he said the other day, before he left. "That's it. Fifty

pounds of fluke or 100 pounds of porgies out of a pound trap just don't pay the bills, and we've felt like we're losing ground. It just gets to the point where it wears on you."

"I'm filled with regret about Dan leaving," said Mr. Matthiessen, who lives in Sagaponack. "One thing it signifies to me is that the sportsfishing lobby has finally succeeded in forcing the East Hampton baymen out of business after over 300 years of providing food for their families and the community. Danny's a great guy, and we'll miss him."

Mr. Loewen said that if working full-time as a bayman meant earning 85 percent of one's livelihood on the water, there may be no full-timers left in the town. But he said a handful of men still had enough involvement to keep the tradition alive.

"We're still here," Mr. Loewen said. "And we'll be here until the last guy dies or finds another place to go. I do believe we'll be here awhile yet."

The outlook was gloomier on Aug. 29 at a ceremony at the East Hampton Town Marine Museum in Amagansett to formally accept Mr. King's donation of the dory he had used for two decades to haul seine nets along the ocean beachfront before this method of catching fish, mostly striped bass, was outlawed by New York State.

Isabel Furlaud, co-chairwoman of the marine museum committee of the East Hampton Historical Society, began the ceremony by reading a statement. "Today we are witnessing the end of a 300-year tradition of haul-seining," she said. "This is as much a tragic passing as the end of offshore whaling, the end of the long voyages of whaling ships and the end of the fish-meal factory that employed so many of our local seamen."

There are many ways to catch fish besides haul-seining, in which fishermen driving a dory drag one end of a net out from the beach in a huge semicircle, then haul in the ends and see what emerges from the surf. But the broader implications were not lost on the 60 or so in attendance, many of them from ancient East Hampton families.

"That ceremony at the Marine Museum and to honor Dan actually seemed to most of us as a sort of funeral," said Arnold Leo, 68, longtime secretary of the Baymen's Association. "It was interesting that to begin the ceremony one of the hosts rang the ship's bell behind the museum, and it really sounded like a church bell summoning people to a funeral. We heard it as a bell tolling for a way of life."

Mr. King and other members of the Baymen's Association said the decline of a centuries-old occupation began in the mid-1980's when Gov. Mario M. Cuomo signed legislation increasing the minimum legal size for a striped bass to 24 inches, up from 16 inches. Suddenly, thousands of pounds of bass -- referred to as the "money fish" by baymen -- had to be taken out of nets and thrown back in the water. The incomes of local fishing families plummeted.

At the same time, East End waters were first visited by the brown tide, an algae bloom that decimated scallops and oysters, robbing baymen of another prime source of revenue. In 1982, 500,000 pounds of scallops worth \$1.8 million were harvested by East End baymen. Fifteen years later only 53 pounds of scallops were taken in.

In 1990, acting in response to complaints from Long Island sportfishing groups that the commercial fishermen were taking in too many bass and other fish, the state's Department of Environmental Conservation banned haul-seining altogether and limited each baymen to 100 bass annually. The dory-towing trucks that prowled 25 miles of South Fork ocean beaches disappeared, and with them went a way of life. (The only haul-seining still conducted is when the D.E.C. hires Jens Lester and a crew to catch bass as part of an ongoing survey of the fishery.) In 1985, there were anywhere from 125 to 200 baymen on the South Fork, depending on the season, but today, according to Mr. Leo, there are two dozen at most who are scratching out a living on the entire East End.

Led by Mr. King and Mr. Leo, and with a celebrity ally in Billy Joel, the Baymen's Association fought back by pressuring politicians and conducting protests. The one that garnered the most attention took place in Amagansett in July 1992 when Tony Bullock, then the town supervisor, joined 20 Baymen's Association members and supporters and Mr. Joel in illegally fishing for striped bass, using Mr. King's "flag dory" and its seine.

The flag dory, the most distinctive such vessel on the beach for nearly two decades, had been built in 1974 by Mr. King, Tom Fields and Stuart and Billy Vorpahl in the parking lot of Stuart's Seafood Market in Amagansett. The dory was originally painted green; the Stars and Stripes paint job was done by Mr. King in 1976 to celebrate the nation's bicentennial.

On that July Tuesday, before 1,000 cheering onlookers at Indian Wells Beach, the dory made another statement of independence. The vessel netted more than 400 pounds of striped bass. As they walked up the beach, the flag dory's crew and supporters toting the bass were issued summonses by the D.E.C. police.

The charges were later dismissed, but the state has stood fast on striped-bass size restrictions, and the ban on haul-seining remains in effect. Gordon Colvin, the marine resources director of the D.E.C., said the restrictions on commercial fishermen have helped the bass population to rebound.

"The ban on haul-seining as well as restrictions on catching striped bass using spears, gill nets and trawls was imposed to manage commercial discard mortality," he said. "Different commercial management measures and recreational management measures were employed to control overall fishing mortality rates and rebuild stock biomass. These measures, employed cooperatively by East Coast states, have been very effective."

Mr. Matthiessen demurred. "I'm not with the state on this," he said. "The local commercial fellows have always said that the bass population comes and goes in cycles, and I believe they're right. Now, my God, you can walk on them out on the water."

Mr. King agreed. "There are more bass around now than anyone has ever seen," he said. But he can't touch them.

Yet even if the state D.E.C. were to relent (and no one, it seems, has asked it to do so), haul-seining as a practice is essentially done. By extension, so is bayman as a family-supporting occupation. Even if fishing restrictions were eased, most of the former baymen couldn't afford to resume their work. "It would be so expensive for them to gear up again," Mr. Matthiessen said. "All those old trucks are gone, and the nets and the dories. None of them have enough money to put a rig together. They have found other occupations by now, and they don't trust the state anyway."

Bill Leland, 58, now a commercial woodcutter, was a member of Mr. King's haul-seining crew. "I finally had to leave Dan's crew because I couldn't stand to keep throwing the fish back, and I had kids going to be college age in a few years," he said.

He misses his old occupation, despite its hardships. "We'd get up at 4 in the morning and go down to the beach," Mr. Leland recalled. "We'd see the sun rise, and many days we were still there when the sun set. There were days when you didn't make a penny. But you had to love what you were doing, and we did."

Unlike in the past, there is no next generation taking over from their fathers. "Those who are left may not be any younger than me and Danny," said Mr. Loewen, 56. "There are fewer and fewer of us and we're getting older, so the prospects for the association are dimmer and dimmer. If the state won't let us keep what we catch or catch fish at all, then there might not be a local commercial fishing industry."

At the Aug. 29 ceremony at the East Hampton Town Marine Museum in Amagansett to formally accept Mr. King's donation of the flag dory, he was joined by former crewmates George Schellinger, Bill Schultz, Mr. Leland, Wayne Vorpahl, Fred Havens, Tom Buttonow and Tom Olszewski and their families, as well as other longtime members of the Baymen's Association, including 96-year-old Jarvis Wood. There was praise for Mr. King and for the hard work of the baymen families. Photographs were taken and reminiscences about Francis Lester, who had died several weeks earlier at 94, and others were exchanged.

When Mr. King was asked to give a speech, in typical direct, understated fashion he responded: "Boat's here. Take care of it. That's it."

Symbolism aside, the fishing community will miss someone who was a leader and a familiar presence who, with his wife, is moving farther away than what "far away" means to longtime East End residents.

"Yes, it's a really sad commentary on what has happened here," Mr. Leo said. "It has saddened many of us connected to the baymen's community that Dan feels, as others before him have, that you just can't make a go of it here in East Hampton anymore. And we can see that. The scallops have never really come back, clamming has been O.K. for just a few guys and the waters keep being closed because of pollution. Combine that with the bare scraps offered by state regulations, and you have severely limited opportunities for people to make a living."

He added: "But it saddens me greatly too because I consider Dan a close and dear friend."

Mr. Loewen chose to look on the brighter side for Mr. King. "You've got to give Dan credit for realizing the fishing isn't here, and he's going to find where it is," he said. "He's not giving up on being a fisherman. If it's not one place, you've got to go where it is. I respect that."

The flag dory will be on permanent display at the museum along with other relics of local history. For Mr. King, though, it is time to start over and create a new future.

"It's just time, I guess," Mrs. King said of her husband. "And he's getting another opportunity to do what he loves most. I'll enjoy that too."

The Kings spent the first two weeks of September in North Carolina, and Mr. King began to get acclimated. "I've been out shrimping so far, and looking around," he said. "It's going to take some time. You're allowed 100 pounds of stripers a day there, so that's a big difference. There are fluke, weakfish, clams and oysters. Don't know yet for sure what I'll be doing, but it seems like the opportunities are there."

He is proud of his years in the Baymen's Association, especially when the small group fought a long rear-guard action against the state while he was president. "Everything I've done I felt needed to be done," Mr. King said. "People needed to be aware of what's going on. I just have a real bitterness in my heart for what New York State did to fishermen on eastern Long Island."

Said Mr. Leo: "The Baymen's Association was always right in there supporting land and shoreline preservation, was very active environmentally and had a political presence because each bayman represented pretty large extended families who voted in local elections. We'll try to continue that. But we're up against the tide of politics, pollution and population in East Hampton."

Before leaving for good, Mr. King went clamming one last time off Napeague. It was a good day, and he filled two coolers. "I'm going to take those clams south with me," he said. "With them, I'll make some real old-fashioned Bonac chowder. Then I'll freeze it, so I'll always know it's there."

Photos: DAN KING, left, one of the last East Hampton baymen, with Tom Buttonow, a former crew member, at a reception. Mr. King donated his old flag-striped haul-seining dory, background, to a local museum. (Photo by Doug Kuntz for The New York Times)(pg. 1); Capt.

Dan King, in bow with white shirt, and his crew bringing ashore his flag dory in 1992 during a protest by the East Hampton Baymen's Association against the state's ban on haul seines to catch striped bass. Mr. King had been the association's president for 20 years until the end of 2003. (Photo by Doug Kuntz); During a better time for baymen, Captain King's crew manned a haul seine in Amagansett in 1985.; Dan King, a bayman for more than two decades, with a conch in 1986. (Photographs by Richard Weissman)(pg. 10)