

10.31.2021 FEATURED STORY

# Column: In a bayman's death is a lesson

By Steve Wick



This photograph appeared in Newsday in 1992. It shows Jens Lester of Springs removing striped bass from his haul-seine net to a holding tank, where they could be tagged by DEC agents. (Credit: Bill Davis)

On a summer day in August, a memorial was held at Green River Cemetery in Springs for a man named Dan King, who had died in North Carolina in April 2020.

Most readers of this column won't know the name. And that's fine. But in his life, in his family's history, Dan King represented something unique. And the meaning of his death begs questions we should be asking ourselves on the North Fork before the walls close in on us — as they did on him.

Dan grew up in the Springs section of East Hampton, where his family had roots going back three centuries to the first European settlers. His ancestors found eastern Long Island a fertile place, with rich soil, abundant salt creeks, bays and the ocean in which to harvest fish and shellfish.

then winched onto the shore. The Kings had done it for generations, as had members of the Lester family.

In 1992, I spent several days with Jens Lester's crew, haul-seining from the ocean beach in Amagansett as part of a state project. A photograph that ran with that Newsday story is part of this column. Look closely at it, because that world no longer exists.

At one point a man drove up the beach in a Range Rover and demanded these men stop what they were doing. He was the new East Hampton, they were the old. And powerless.

In 1990, under pressure from politically connected sportfishing groups, the state banned haul-seining, in part, they said, because they were concerned about its impact on the striped bass population. But it also came after the new money on the South Fork complained about the practice.

The larger meaning of Dan's passing — and the world lost with it — is what it portends beyond East Hampton. What does it say to us on the North Fork? Can a unique history going back generations be saved when a community undergoes wholesale change? Can what we care about, and have long tried to protect, be preserved? Or will economic forces and massive sums of money ultimately change the landscape forever?

When he finally abandoned Springs in 2004 to move to North Carolina, Dan represented a kind of canary in the coal mine. If, after 300 years of tradition, he could no longer make it work there, what was the future for anyone else trying to live a familiar life in the very place where they have always been?

The unintended consequence of huge money arriving on the South Fork was that it began the process of shutting down the very thing that made East Hampton unique, in a town where these fishing families had always lived and where they could count back 10 or more generations.

Banned from the fishing that had sustained them for so long, and faced with soaring housing costs, these families could no longer afford to live there. When Dan and his wife packed up and left, everything he represented went with him. His world was replaced by big houses, big money, private jets ever higher costs and a lifestyle and economic structure that shut out the working class that had been the bedrock of the community.

The writer Peter Matthiessen wrote about this vanishing community in "Men's Lives," a beautiful book filled with extraordinary photographs of people who were long called Bonackers.

One photograph showed Dan in his dory, on which he had painted an American flag in 1976 to celebrate the country's bicentennial. Today, that dory sits at the East Hampton Town Marine Museum — a relic of what once was.

In the book, Mr. Matthiessen quoted Dan as saying, "... the bottom line is I can't afford to live here. That's it. Fifty pounds of fluke or porgies in 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."

also took the pictures for my book. She captured these North Fork lives and the peoples hard work beautifully.

Today you can count local potato farmers on a few fingers. The potato economy had long been stacked against these few growers, yes, but soaring land and house values, along with new residents who saw something beautiful and wanted to be a part of it, changed the local economy. And this momentum has intensified in the past 18 months.

East Hampton is no longer a home to that three-century-old community. That history was erased by larger economic forces that transformed the entire South Fork into a multi-million-dollar playground. Today, there are homes on the ocean valued at more than \$20 million. What is left for anyone else when a house — and a place — commands that kind of money?

The lesson for the North Fork is that money changes everything — on the farmland and open space available for development, and certainly on the waterfront in the once vibrant fishing community of Greenport, where a rusty trawler tied up to a dock looks like a relic of a bygone age.

That new money is here. And it wants what it wants. No, it doesn't mean it is all bad. The very old Ruland farm in Mattituck will one day be a vineyard, and its Main Road farmhouse is being polished to preserve its rich past. That's respecting what was there while still adapting to the new farm economy.

Residents of Riverhead and Southold must very quickly come to some decisions, and then find ways to carry them out through the slow and tedious process of governing.

Of course, nostalgia is not a governing philosophy. But when history is lost, it doesn't come back. Some longtime fishermen on the South Fork became landscapers or "property managers" or bartenders working the summer soiree at a hedge fund manager's oceanfront estate. These old-time, working-class residents became strangers in a strange land.

What can be rescued? — what will be lost — are the biggest questions hanging over us today on our fragile North Fork, where the shoreline is also threatened by rising water levels.

This is how former East Hampton Town supervisor Larry Cantwell looks at the North Fork through the lens of his own experience.

"Dan was hurt more than just financially. He was hurt emotionally. If you broaden this out, there was the inability for the next generation of fishermen and farmers and working-class people to live here. They were eliminated by the money," he said.

"A Southold supervisor once came over here to look at a shellfishing operation we were doing. I told him, 'You are maybe 10 years away from where we are. You better get ready for what is coming. It happened here, and it will happen on the North Fork.'



people in a position to say no.

“And you need the laws in place to protect the community,” Mr. Cantwell added. “Does your zoning allow this? Change it. Someone has to speak up. Someone has to rise up and stop it. Or you will lose it.”



Steve Wick joined the Times Review Media Group staff as executive editor in 2017. He previously worked more than 35 years as a reporter and editor at Newsday, where in 1997 he won a share of the Pulitzer Prize for spot news reporting. 

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