

For the first hundred years, Eastport was home to the working class. No better person exemplifies life in Eastport during the first hundred years than William Theodore Branzell, Eastport's bridgetender for twenty-seven years.

William was born March 9, 1860, just outside of Annapolis. He was the fifth of eight children born to George and Rachel (Margaret) Branzell. His father was a huckster, a term used then for people we call salesmen.

William's father saved enough money to purchase three lots on the bank of Back Creek, a place where his family could live and grow. George and his boys built a two-story farmhouse in 1871. Once completed, they began work on a second dwelling.

The day before William's 12th birthday his father died at the age of 51. To help his mother make ends meet, William took a job with a local oyster packing house. William loved the water and didn't want to work inside. He wanted to be a waterman, so he took any job, on any boat that would hire him. He celebrated his 13th birthday on the Chesapeake Bay. William continued to work for the next seventy-seven years.

There was not much money to be made as an oysterman apprentice, certainly not enough to preserve his father's dream. In 1874, the first lot his father purchased on Horn Point was sold for \$800 dollars. Two years later, on February 5, 1876, the remaining two lots with the family's farmhouse was sold to Wm. Feldmeyer. William's mother and two brothers moved in with his sister on Chestnut Street in Annapolis. At 16, William was on his own.

William met and married Harriet Ann Elisabeth Denver in 1882. He became a stepfather to her children. They rented a house on Fifth Street (now Second). Together, they added to the family and raised two sons, William Francis and Thomas Joseph Branzell. During the winter William tonged for oysters, during the summer he caught crab. Between seasons, he took odd jobs. His oldest son died at the age of 24 in 1907.

In his late 50s when living off the water became too hard on William, he and Harriet moved to Chester Avenue where they shared a home with their son, Thomas and his wife, Flora. For a time, William worked alongside his son as a painter, often picking up jobs at the Naval Academy.

In March of 1922, Harriet, his wife of forty years, passed away. Shortly after her death, to keep himself busy, William applied for and got the job as Eastport's bridgetender. At the age of 62, William, his pipe, and his dog moved into a small one-room house built at the end of the bridge at the base of Third Street (now Fourth). It wasn't much, but it was all he needed.

William became a stationary sailor on the banks of Spa Creek. For over a quarter of a century, he opened the bridge for passing boats with a hand-crank. The job wasn't easy, but it allowed him to live near the water he loved.

On hot summer days when the bridge swelled, and refused to open, he would call the fire department to hose it down and cool the metal. The kids of Eastport loved those

days. They danced on the bridge under the firehose waterfalls. William laughed as he directed the choreography of fun.

The first few years of his job, William opened the bridge a dozen or so times a week. As Eastport, the boat builders and Annapolis grew, the number gradually increased. In the 1930s, the city added another room to his home, giving him a separate sleeping quarter. But there was still no bathroom, only an outhouse. During the height of WWII, William opened the bridge by hand ninety times a day. He never complained or asked for a raise. He considered himself lucky to have such a great job.

When William wasn't opening the bridge, he fished from his deck. When he sat outside and smoked his pipe he'd wave to the people in passing cars. William became a community fixture, the person everyone stopped to say hello to on their way home from Annapolis.

No matter what William did, or where he walked, he always had one of his dogs by his side. William buried seven of his faithful companions on the beach beneath the bridge. Two were killed on the bridge, one was hit by a car on his daily walk to Annapolis.

His last dog was a little black and white fox terrier named Girlie. She was William's favorite. When William's eyesight and hearing began to fail, Girlie would let him know when a boat sounded its horn requesting the bridge open. Many times, cars honked and tried to trick Girlie, but she knew the difference between a car and a boat horn and never fell for one of their pranks.

When William was hit by a car while opening the bridge in 1943, Girlie stayed by his side. When people stopped by his house to see how he was doing and take Girlie for a walk, she refused to leave. He joked he had to get better quick before Girlie got too fat.

After William's accident, the city tried to hire another bridgetender, but the people of Eastport said no. William was their bridgetender, the house on the bridge was his home. So instead the city hired him an assistant, Edward Norfolk. For the next 3 1/2 years, William, Edward, and Girlie lived in the two-room house on the bridge.

When the city opened the current bridge and demolished the old one, William retired at the age of 89. He and Girlie moved in with his son on Chesapeake Ave. It was there on June 8, 1951, at the age of 91, William Theodore Branzell passed away.

For several years, after William, and then Girlie's death, in the quiet of the night, when boaters traveled up Spa Creek they often heard a dog bark as they passed the banks of Fourth Street where once stood the old bridgetender's house. They figured it was Girlie continuing her watch, waiting for William to come home.

Legend has it, if you sound your boat's horn when passing fourth street on Spa Creek, you just might hear Girlie barking to William to open their bridge.