

## **Growing Up In Great River**

### **Al Skinner**

I was born at Great River, Suffolk County in 1904. I haven't seen much written about the place so I thought I would tell some happenings during my boyhood there. It was very rural then, lots of woods full of big oak trees, and some pine. There were two main roads: River Road, running north and south to the Timber Point estate of millionaire Julian Davies, and River Avenue, running east and west from the Great or Connetquot River westerly through the hamlet of Great River. There were several estates on the River Road, south of South Country Road (Montauk Highway) and I was born on one of them, the Raymond S. White place where my father was superintendent. He had a crew of 13 men to maintain the place.

People were friendly in the little community I remember, and honest. Everyone had a rowboat and they left the oars, oarlocks, crab net, butter tub for what they caught, and a bailing scoop or dish. Houses, boats, bicycles were never locked or chained. If a thunderstorm came along the first one to shore would bail out his own boat and often that of a neighbor as well.

There were a few tricks played but no vandalism. The old wooden schoolhouse closed in June and was vacant and untended until after Labor Day. It was never bothered. But we did play tricks.

When automobiles began to replace the horse and buggy very few of them were driven at night because the headlights were so poor. At the time you could tell the make of car by the sound of the motor. The wealthy had Packards, Cadillacs and Pierce Arrow cars, while the common class had Dodge, Overland and the 2-cylinder Maxwell, the I-cylinder Renault or a Ford. Many men had their arms broken while trying to crank them, which was the only way you could turn the engine to get it started.

Mr. Julien T. Davies had a grandson about my age and he often invited me to play with him. I can remember going down in the basement of their house and seeing hundreds of quart Mason jars. Each one had a canned broadhill in it for summer consumption. Mr. Davies was good to the communities and any family in need. He would furnish milk, butter, eggs and vegetables. While I was growing up I got no allowance. If I wanted a baseball glove, or anything of that nature, I had to work and earn it. So I would clean leaves out of a hedge, do a little lawn mowing, or clean out a chicken coop. Then I learned the art of catching soft shell crabs. I had use of the rowboat with two butter tubs with water in them. I would stand in the bow and pole along the Connetquot River shore. The shedder crabs would go in one tub and the soft crabs in the other.

I also had two so-called crab cars that had screen wire on the sides and bottom. I would put the shedders in those until they shed their shells. Usually the best time to go crabbing was early in the morning when the water was calm. It seemed that more crabs shed on a new moon, when the tide was low. Sometimes I would go out in the afternoon, if it wasn't windy.

The crabs had to be large to sell and I got sixty cents a dozen for them. I sold most of them to the estate owners in Great River. Mr. Davies was a good customer, so was Mrs. White of the estate where I lived. When I had enough of them I would pedal my bicycle to estates in East Islip. I guess Mrs. Cutting (the Great River estate now the Bayard Cutting Arboretum) didn't like soft shell crabs as she never bought any from me.

I got so I could tell whether a crab was hard or soft as far as I could see under water. The price went to a dollar a dozen after a few years. Oh, boy, I made money then! Some days I caught as high as seven dozen. When John Stewart opened a Fish Market in Bay Shore he sent his truck

to pick up my crabs. The first year of World War I I bought a \$100 Liberty Bond and was real proud of it.

One afternoon I went crabbing up along the Cutting property it seems I caught more there than on the W.K. Vanderbilt side of the river. There was a little brook that came out into the river from three fresh water ponds south of the Cutting place. The crabs liked that brackish water and I always had good luck there.

All at once I heard a woman's voice and when I looked up there was Mrs. Cutting. She called to me, so I poled my boat over to her. She said, "Who are you and where are you from?" I told her and she said, "Yes, I know your mother from the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Emmanuel Church." Then she said, "Well, I will give you permission to catch crabs but be sure and only take the hard shell ones. If you catch any soft shells, put them back." I said, "Yes Ma'am," and I did. Right under the back seat of my rowboat, and covered them with seaweed.

The Great River woods were full of deer, rabbit, squirrel, ruffed grouse, quail and pheasant in those days. I often saw a deer swimming from the Cutting side of the river to the Vanderbilt side. Once my brother and I overtook one. He had it by the ears and I caught on to the tail. We tried to haul it into the boat but it was too heavy. Probably a good thing because it might have hurt us by kicking, or stomped the bottom out, which we never thought of. So we turned it loose and it reached the Vanderbilt side and trotted off in the brush.

The river was loaded with crabs, eels, white perch, weakfish and blues. In the wintertime first the frost fish would come in, or as some called them, tom cods. Capt. William Smalling used to set fykes for them. They were delicious eating but a stupid fish. I used to place an eel pot close to the staving and fill the trap. After the frost fish, the smelts would come in, and these were caught in gill nets. Capt. Ed Peterson used to fish for them.

Harvey Conkling was one of the larger boys in Great River at the time. One day Hildreth Rhodes said, "My father isn't home so come on over and let's ride his horse." Over we went and he brought out the horse. He had no saddle but Hildreth put a bridle on it and Harvey climbed up to ride it bareback. The horse had never been broken to ride and Harvey went up and down with the horse bucking. Finally he dove off between the horse's ears and it stepped on his hand. Harvey was always good at cussing and I wouldn't report what he said. However, we obeyed his orders and put the horse back in the barn.

A trick we used to play as cars became more common required a discarded, broken automobile spring. Just after dark, in front of the old schoolhouse, we would climb a maple tree and wait. When a car came either way we would wait until it was opposite us and drop the spring on the sidewalk, Clang! it would go, and we would watch the car come to a stop. Only two wheel brakes then, so it would go a block before it stopped.

We would watch the driver get out and look all under the car with a flashlight. Finding nothing he would crank it up and drive off slowly. Then we would climb down, get the piece of spring and climb back up to wait for the next car.

In the fall of the year the broadtail ducks would come in the river by the thousands, from about three o'clock on. They would stay overnight and leave next morning at daylight to go out on the bay. At dusk the sky was tilled with black ducks coming from the South Side Sportsmen's Club (now Connetquot State Park). Some would go to Timber Point, others to the Taylor estate (Heckscher State Park), and some across the Great South Bay to Hollins Island.

In a hard southwester, some of the boys would shoot a few that flew low over the treetops. Mr. Davies, being a rich man and a smart lawyer, leased the bottomland of all the waterfront owners but one, that one was Mrs. R. S. White. In that way he kept everyone from rigging out and shooting on the river. Capt. Peterson used to police it and then, when he went duck shooting, Capt. Will Rhodes and Capt. Erastus Peterson would rig him out and tend him with a small motor boat named Duckling.

Old Davies used two shotguns. He would discharge one and grab the other one. Sometimes he would get four birds that way. Capt. Will would pursue any wounded birds and pick up the dead ones.

Harvey Conkling was learning the plumbing trade and he had permission to shoot off the R. S. White estate. It wasn't much good as the place was fancy and the birds preferred the Vanderbilt side as it was all meadow bog. Once in awhile a stray bird would come to Harvey's decoys.

One Saturday morning Mr. Davies drew a good blind at the South Side Sportsmen's Club and shot his limit of 50 black ducks. He then came home and rigged out in the river and shot his limit of broadbill. He didn't know that Harry Haff, the game warden, had checked on him that morning and there he sat waiting for Mr. Davies come in. When he did, he was arrested and fined. He didn't mind the fine but he hated the disgrace of being caught.

I used to go with Harvey Conkling when he rigged out and after a few years I forged my age two years and got a license for a dollar. I was thrilled to go duck shooting, and then I got a bright idea. I got on my bike one evening and rode down to the Davies house. The butler met me at the door and knew me very well. He asked me what I wanted and I said, "I would like to speak to Mr. Davies."

When the butler came back he said, "Mr. Davies wants to know what you want?" I said, "I would like to shoot up the river where he didn't, one day a week out of sight from him, and I'm asking permission." He came back to say, "Tell him I would have nothing to do with him." I said, "Tell Mr. Davies 'thank you'," and I left.

We had a path to ride our bikes through the woods to school. Mr. Davies didn't know that Harvey had a catboat and I knew how to sail it. So three o'clock the next afternoon when school got out I headed for the river. It didn't take long to get there and I got the catboat underway. First I looked up the river and then I sailed down toward the hay. The ducks were beginning to come in so I sailed past Mr. Davies who was rigged out off of Pepperidge Hall.

I sailed by him a couple of gunshots off in the bay. turned about and sailed by him again. Then I let the sail luff and the boat flounder around. A half-hour of this. and with the birds flaring away, Ole Davies got out his white flag and waved it to the men tending him. They came to him and I heard him yell, "Who's in that sailboat?" I heard Capt. Rhodes say, "That's Skinner's kid." Davies said, "Tell him to sail somewhere else. He's ruining my duck shooting."

Capt. Will came out and told me "Mr. Davies wanted me to sail somewhere else as I was scaring the ducks away." I said, "Good, you tell him that he can stop me from anchoring but he can't stop me from sailing on the waters." There was nothing else for him to do but pick up and go home. When they did I put the sailboat away, but I returned the next afternoon and the same thing happened.

The third day was a miserable rainy day and that is the best weather for duck shooting. When I got out of school I rushed to the river and Mr. Davies was rigged out on a point between where

Snapper Inn is now, and the TeaHouse, which is now Saxon Arms. That old sail was heavy to hoist but I did it. When I got underway Mr. Davies was having a ball but it stopped as I sailed out. The birds flared everywhere and he went to cussing. He didn't want to sit there in the rain and watch me sail around so his men picked up the decoys and they left. So did I as it was very uncomfortable out there.

That evening Mr. Davies' chauffeur, driving the four-cylinder Cadillac, came to our house. He said Mr. Davies had sent it as he wanted to talk to me. I said, "No thank you. I prefer to ride my bike." The chauffer asked why and I told him. "I know his blood pressure went to 412 this afternoon. He may cuss me out and make me walk home." So I rode my bike down River road to Timber Point.

I went in looking like a drowned muskrat and shaking like a leaf, The butler knew I was expected and escorted me right in. Mr. Davie's sat here and I said, "Hello" He said, "Skinner, sit down." And I did. "Now, he said. I have known you for many years and I have watched you grow up. Four nights ago you came here and asked if you could gun ducks up the river out of sight from me." He paused and I said "That's right."

"Well, he said, you asked for one day a week and this is what I am going to do. I am going to let you shoot up river two days a week out of sight from me. Preferably Tuesdays and Thursdays. And from now on keep that goddamned sailboat out of my sight." I thanked him and from then on we got along like peaches and cream.

#### LONG ISLAND FORUM

When Capt. William Smalling gave up commercial fishing he built a fleet of rowboats and rented them out to people who wanted to go crabbing. Crabs were every- where and I remember one year a man and his son came from Center Moriches in a horse and wagon. It was August and in the wagon they had a tent, a boat with a sprit sail, four eel pots, several barrels and two large galvanized wash tubs.

They pitched the tent, smashed up some crabs for bait and set the eel pots. Next morning they had plenty of eels for bait and they made two trot lines, putting a piece of eel every 30 feet. The trot lines were 1500 feet long. They would work a stake off shore and then run the line out with the wind, and at the end of it they would tie a window sash weight. Then they would hoist the sail and go to windward, back opposite the first stake and set another line.

Then, they continued to run both trot lines. They would come up to the first trot line, drop the sail, and the son would guide the boat while the father scapped crabs. He used chicken wire, instead of webbing, and in that way the crabs didn't get fouled. Most of the time there would be two crabs on a bait, as they were so plentiful.

I remember at the end of one day they had nine barrels of crabs. These they took to the Great River Station and shipped to Fulton Fish Market. Hard crabs weren't worth much at that time, so they probably got \$3 a barrel for them. At the end of each day they curled the trot lines in the tubs and sprinkled them with salt. In this way they preserved the bait for the following day.

In later years we held Sunday School in Emmanuel Church, instead of in the old Parrish House. After Sunday School, if it was a nice morning, we would run down to the Seaside Home Dock (later the Town Dock) to wait the arrival of Commodore Frederick G. Bourne (head or Singer Sewing Machine Co.) in one of his speedboats. He had two, one named Coot and the other Dispatch. We boys would keep the boat from bumping the dock while the captain put out the fenders. The Commodore would then step out and say, "Boys, did you go to Sunday School

today?" We would reply, yes Sir." "All right, Captain," he would say, "take them for a spin while I'm in church."

The boats of those days didn't have the power to get up and plane. They were built long and narrow so as to push easily through the water. The roar of that three cylinder, two cycle motor sounded like a string of firecrackers going off. The boats could do about 14 miles an hour but the sheer of the water on each side made you feel you were doing 50. What a thrill I got.

On murky Sundays Mr. Bourne would come in one of his automobiles. We would help the chauffeur shine up the car while Mr. Bourne was in church. We only shined up the side where he got in. The dickens with the other side. Our pay was sometimes a piece of inner tube which we would split to make a pair of strong rubber bands for sling shots. I had to keep mine out of sight from my father for he would burn everyone he saw. Many a one he destroyed on me.

Before closing I must tell you that before and after crab season I would go to the West Brook Golf Club and caddy. I received 25 cents for nine holes. It wasn't much but a quarter went a long way at the time. The fee had been 15 cents a round but later it became 25 cents the first round and 15 cents the second. It was a nine-hole course and Arthur Griffiths was the pro. He later became a local Justice of the Peace and member of the Islip Town Board.

Let me add that I loved Great River and I think all who live there now must love it today. I now live in rural Florida and I love it too. I get oysters, clams, crabs and mullet which I smoke and wash down with a beer. But I must say the place is changing. too many people ate crowding in down here.

Editors Note: Colonel' AL Skinner was the Captain of the 'Flap Bottom' in 1928

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