2010 Bay House Tours
July 17 and August 14

On July 17 and August 14th Long Island Traditions will sponsor its annual Bay House Tour in the Town of Hempstead. Don’t miss this opportunity to visit these reminders of Long Island’s nautical past that are still used today by the area’s baymen. A passenger boat will leave from Freeport for the 1½ hour trips to the houses. Tours will depart at 12 and 2 pm on July 17th and 11:30 am and 1:30 pm on August 14th. The tour will be led by LI Traditions director Nancy Solomon. Those on board will be treated to a brief history of the bay houses, the first of which were built in the 1700s. Bay houses were traditionally used by fishermen who harvested clams, oysters, crabs and other species from local waters. The surviving houses date from the period between 1870 and 1950. Each tour will visit two bay houses including the Seaman house, which is new to the tour, and the Sheehan-Van Wicklen bay house, an old favorite. The boat will then proceed to other nearby bay houses.

For an excellent preview of the bay houses and their environs, visit the Long Island Marine Education Center, 202 Woodcleft

Profile: George Rigby – Bayman and Decoy Carver

Editor’s Note: George Rigby will be participation in the Bellport Brookhaven Historical society’s Boating with the Baymen tour on June 13th. For reservations and information call (631) 286-0888.

George Rigby was born in Bay Shore, Long Island, the descendant of several generations of baymen and duck hunters. His great grandfather and grandfather worked on the bay during the late 1800s and early 1900s in Canarsie near Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn either harvesting shellfish or hunting ducks for the commercial market. His father moved to Bay Shore and became a commercial fisher, teaching his son how to harvest clams, eels and other species. George Rigby Sr. also taught his son how to go duck hunting.

Like other baymen George learned by helping his father. He raked and tonged for clams, dug for soft shell clams, and went eel spearling. They also caught weakfish and bluefish using nets and traps.

When George was ready to graduate from high school, his father asked him what he wanted to do, he immediately said “I want to work on the bay, just like you.” His father told him he would need a boat and so George began working at the Wildfowler decoy plant in Babylon until he had enough money to buy a boat. After a year he began working on the bay, first clamming and eventually moving into eeling, catching fluke and flounder and other species. In the winter George also harvested crabs and scallops. He typically caught 4-5 bushels of clams daily, although sometimes he caught as many as 13-14 bushels in a day. George and other baymen believe that the scallops declined because of changes in the water quality of Great South Bay.

During this time there were hundreds of baymen in various communities along the South Shore, most of who were clammers. However there were several “old timers” who harvested eels
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For more information call: (516) 767-8803, fax: (516) 767-8805, write to us at:
382 Main St., Port Washington, NY 11050
E-mail: info@longislandtraditions.org
or visit us on the web at:
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Avenue (Nautical Mile) in Freeport, where a diorama by Jeff Blossom is on permanent exhibit. You can also read at your local library On The Bay written by Nancy Solomon which documents the history of the bay houses in the Town of Hempstead. Reservations are required (sorry, but this trip cannot accommodate children under the age of 10.) Tickets cost $40 per person and $75 per couple. Members of Long Island Traditions will receive a $5 discount per member. Member only reservations will be accepted from May 15-22. General tickets will be available after May 22nd. 2 tickets per order limit. For more information call Long Island Traditions at (516) 767-8803.

Classes

Over the past 10 years the Adlib Steelband Orchestra has offered classes to adults and children alike. These classes take place in Uniondale and are offered to people of all backgrounds. Classes offered are:

- Adult steelband classes are on Monday evenings 6-8pm $10 per class
- Beginners Sunday ages 8 and up 3pm $10 per class

For information about enrolling call Jean Mayers at (516) 623-4061 or (516) 672-1135.

In addition you can learn to play the traditional Indian tabla drum at the Taalim School of Music. Group and private classes are offered by Sejal Kukadia in New Hyde Park.

- Group class held Thursday at 6:30pm
- Private lessons held 7 days a week

Activists Corner

As of this writing the New York State legislature has not enacted a budget. So if you have not done so already, please write your local assemblyperson and state senator and ask them to maintain the current level of funding for the New York State Council on the Arts, which has already been reduced by 30% in the last year. Further cuts will truly devastate us and other arts organizations in the state. Please call them today!

For those members who live in the Town of Brookhaven, call or write your town councilperson and ask them to oppose or modify the proposed clam permit moratorium so that family members or current permit holders, unemployed residents, and any resident who had a clam permit from 2000-09 can continue to carry on this historic tradition. It is important to note that the ecological decline of Great South Bay is not the fault of baymen and they should be not be punished for the lack of progress in restoring the bay.
George Rigby began hunting at an early age, along with decoy carving. He remembers going at 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning with his uncle, carrying a double barrel shotgun down to the beach where houses stand today. When he was in school he would ride his bike down at 4am and would go to the Connetquot river on the east side of Roberts Creek every weekend. “We used to go down in my duck boat—and shoot broad bill in Bellport Bay and Smiths’ point.” His hunting friends included Bill Joeckel who is also a well known duck hunter and decoy carver. Another friend, bayman John Buczak once said on the radio that “whoever is shooting sure knows what they’re doing”. According to George, “a perfect day for hunting – a sunny day is no good – ducks only move in cold nasty weather. The colder the weather the better it is for ducks. Ice is good.” George also likes just being there. “It’s just fun being out there.”

Like other hunters, George also carves his own decoys. He has won over 100 ribbons for competitions from Long Island to California. His award winners include a canvas back. George explains that “I used a hatchet to carve it out with, a chisel, and a drill press to hollow it out. I painted it with gesso and combed it with a baby comb through wet paint. It was time consuming and I still have that duck, it’s one of my prized possessions.”

For working decoys “I have some that I made years ago that I still use. I use a lot of cork which I bought from a friend of mine. My good ones I make out of that. You can buy the cork which is the best to use. The wooden ones are a little tougher. The cork – I use a keel and keep the head separate. You have to rig them differently because the tide is against the wind.”

While some traditional carvers make show decoys, George prefers making working decoys used in hunting. “I kind of stick to my old ways. If you’re going to use a machine why bother? I still use a paintbrush and an oil or latex paint. Some guys use airbrushes. I used to work at Wildfowler decoys painting the birds. But I haven’t made any show decoys in a long time because the competition is crazy.” George worked at Wildfowler when he graduated from high school so he could save some money and buy a boat to work on the bay.

Like other traditional baymen and carvers George now has to work part time on land as a contractor, but he prefers to make his living off the water. He worries about the regulations and whether he will be able to continue this way of life. To help educate others George participates in Long Island Traditions arts programs in schools and area museums.

George Rigby will be featured on the Boating with the Baymen tour on June 13th. For reservations and information call the Bellport Bookhaven Historical Society at (631) 286-0888.

George Rigby by out of state boats. Area baymen to secure currently restricted fishing licenses that are At the same time George would like to see more opportunities for the decline to pollution, runoff and the closing of inlets on Fire Island. He attributes hundreds that once plied the waters during George’s youth. He attributes in Patchogue, perhaps 6 in Setauket and Stony Brook, instead of the another. Today there are about six baymen in Center Moriches, three from one end of the bay to the other by jumping from one boat to harvesting activities. He uses gil and haul seine nets to catch bait fish. Like most baymen George uses horseshoe crabs as bait, which he keeps in a pen in the bay. At the end of the season the unused crabs are returned to the bay.

Like many baymen George remembers when you could walk from one end of the bay to the other by jumping from one boat to another. Today there are about six baymen in Center Moriches, three in Patchogue, perhaps 6 in Setauket and Stony Brook, instead of the hundreds that once plied the waters during George’s youth. He attributes the decline to pollution, runoff and the closing of inlets on Fire Island. At the same time George would like to see more opportunities for area baymen to secure currently restricted fishing licenses that are held by out of state boats.

Duck Hunting and Decoy Carving

Like many baymen George’s ancestors also made a portion of their livelihood from commercial hunting and as hunting guides. His father worked at Wildfowler Decoys, based on Long Island, and was one of the first members of the Long Island Decoy Collectors Association. He is also active in the South Shore Waterfowlers Association. George’s grandfather was an active sportsmen who also worked as a hunting guide. He often took his grandson hunting, a tradition that started when George was 8 years old. His grandfather was also a duck boat builder.

George’s father was an active hunting guide, taking small groups of sportsmen for a day of hunting. These days typically began at 4:30 am and lasted until the early evening. Most of his customers were local residents. George’s father preferred hunting to clamming. Like many hunters, George’s father made his own decoys, using them every season.

and finfish. George’s father also harvested bait shrimp and killies for the bait station at Sexton Island near Captree State Park.

George has a variety of tools to work on the bay including handmade tongs, clam rakes and scallop dredges, items that were commonplace in baymen’s homes. Other baymen also built boats for themselves and other baymen. They included Sam Jorgensen in West Sayville and Ben Bishop in Patchogue. Today George has five boats including garveys and skiffs that are used for a variety of harvesting activities. He uses gil and haul seine nets to catch bait fish. Like most baymen George uses horseshoe crabs as bait, which he keeps in a pen in the bay. At the end of the season the unused crabs are returned to the bay.

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PLEASE NOTE: If you have a Long Island concert or program that focuses on some aspect of traditional culture, drop us a line and we'll put it in our “Events of Interest” column. The deadline is the 1st of June, September, December and March.

Don’t forget to visit our web site and our Facebook page for timely information.

May 16: Mitch Kahn, singer, pianist and entertainer will be celebrating great American Jewish songs from Broadway to Hollywood. Midway Jewish Center, 330 So. Oyster Bay Rd., Syosset. 7:30 pm. Tickets: $25. For info call (516) 938-8390

June 13: Boating with the Baymen. Sponsored by Bellport Brookhaven Historical Society. 12 – 3pm. For information and reservations call (631) 286-0888.

June 19: Pete Kelly Ceili Band at Irish American Arts Center. 8.30pm $15 admission. 297 Willis Avenue, Mineola. For information call (516) 746-9392 or visit www.irishamericansoc.com

June 27: LI Sierra Club invites you to a morning of Wetlands education and hiking at the Quogue Wildlife Refuge at 10:00, hike at noon. This is for all ages! Author Paul Rodriguez will discuss the Wetlands of Louisiana and Long Island. Refreshments will be served. RSVP to turton@optonline.net or call (631) 560-0055.


August 28: Scottish Games at Old Westbury Gardens 8 am - 5 pm. For information visit www.liscots.org or call (516) 731-1300 or (631) 271- 6484.