

Just a few hours before my father's funeral in March of 2002 I received this message from Captain Rob Temple who was unable to attend: "Lawton's life spanned a period of dramatic changes not only of a global nature but also, and particularly, changes on Ocracoke.... But through it all, Lawton could always be counted on for a wink and a grin and usually an amusing story about the old days. New acquaintances (including myself back in the 70s) were not strangers to him for long."



Lawton Howard

A few days ago as I was sorting through my parents' remaining papers I came across the following story by part-time resident Warner Passanisi which illustrates Capt. Rob's observations:

Back around 1997 I decided to go clamming for my first time. I borrowed a couple of beautiful clam rakes from Philip and went with Rudy Austin to Portsmouth Island. The weather was perfect and by the end of a good few hours I had a couple of full buckets of clams. Rudy was right on time at 4 pm and we headed home. Walking back along Howard Street I detoured to return the rakes. As I put the rakes back in the shed, Lawton approached quietly. This was about the second time I had ever spoken with him.

"Hey Warner, where have you been?" he asked.

"I've been clamming for the first time, over on Portsmouth. Thanks for the use of your rakes; they were great. I came home with two full buckets," I replied, holding one of the full buckets.

Lawton asked, "Well, what are you gonna do with those clams?"

I replied, "Well, I'm gonna throw them in a big pot of boiling water, wait until they start opening, and then make some clam chowder."

"Oh, you don't wanna do that!" exclaimed Lawton.

Taken aback, I asked, "What do you mean? That's the only way to cook clams that I know of."

Lawton proceeded to explain, "Well on Ocracoke we cook them different. We shuck the clams right out of the shell and then boil the meat till it's tender. It's an old family tradition. Here, let me show you how to do it. Go and fetch that knife for me in there."

"Well, I've never heard of that," I stated, surprised. I put the bucket of clams down, and went into the shed to fetch the knife that I had to reach for carefully.

I came out of the shed and gave the knife to Lawton. He opened it up like a pro, and said, "Here, this is what you do." He reached into my bucket, pulled out a clam and put his strong knife to the minute space between the two shell halves. He said, "What you've got to do is carefully pry open the shells to get at the meat..." But he stopped in mid-sentence, as the shells were pried apart to reveal nothing inside.

"Heck, there's nothing inside here. Let's try another one," he said as he casually discarded the open halves over his shoulder and leaned down to pick another clam from the top of the bucket.

"Here you go. You've got to get the knife in carefully so you don't cut yourself. You could get a nasty infection with a clam-schuck cut he recounted.

But again, as the knife got through the opening, it revealed nothing inside.

"Well, I never...another empty clam. Let's try one more; there couldn't be three like that," he said.

So Lawton plunged his hand down into the middle of the bucket and pulled out another clam. "This time we'll be lucky."

However, I was amazed when the shells opened to reveal absolutely nothing again.

Lawton stated coldly, "Well, I don't believe it, Buck*, but you've got a bucket full o' blanks! You may as well throw the rest away," he continued.

I said dejected, "No, I'll take them back and show my wife. Thanks for your help anyway, Lawton." And I proceeded to shuffle off down the lane. Not only had I not known how to cook clams properly, but I had caught a bunch of empty shells.

About a dozen steps on, Lawton called me back.

Lawton then began to tell me a story. He said, "Don't always believe everything you see or everything you are told." He started smiling as he told me that when I had gone into the shed to fetch his knife he had scattered a small number of empty clam shells that he had just discarded onto the top of the bucket, having first closed the shells. He had then palmed the empty clam each time he had dipped into the bucket. He even managed to palm one from the top when he plunged into the middle without me spotting. We had a good laugh.

The next few times I saw Lawton he always called to me, "Hey Blank!"

*Buck is an Ocracoke form of address meaning pal or friend.