

August is nearly gone and Labor Day is fast approaching. Summertime on Ocracoke has been pleasant this year. There have been many people here and business has been good, but I have also made time for swimming, walks on the beach, clamming and a little boating. When I get away from my business I often think of my earliest summers spent on the island.

One of the fondest memories of my childhood visits to Ocracoke was “floundering.” In those days we used Coleman lanterns as we walked in the shallow Pamlico Sound after dark. We were looking for the faint outline of these flat fish as they bedded down for the night in the sandy bottom not far from the shoreline.

Initially I accompanied my father and my uncles. Eventually, as I got older, I went with my friends, Wayne, Stanley and Lewis. These adventures would last late into the night and I would come home tired and hungry but, with any luck, also with a mess of flounder for the next day’s supper.

I’m not sure why, but I had not been floundering for several years. So, at the end of July this year, when Al suggested that several of us make an evening of floundering I was eager to go. The day before Al had been out in his boat fishing. The sound was exceptionally clear this time of year and when he drifted over Howard’s Reef he was surprised to see such a large number of flounder on the bottom. It was the perfect opportunity for an evening’s outing.

No longer are Coleman lanterns the preferred equipment, however. Years ago someone discovered that an underwater light is much more effective for seeing the bottom clearly. Nowadays we take homemade contraptions that consist of PVC pipe fitted with a socket and a 12 volt light bulb on one end. (Don’t worry! It’s low voltage so we don’t electrocute ourselves.) The fancier rigs also have a peanut butter jar with screw top lid mounted on the end to protect the bulb. The jar lid or another disk at the base of the bulb prevents the light from shining back and blinding the modern-day hunter-gatherer. Wires with alligator clips on the end run back through the pipe and fasten onto a car battery that floats in a wooden box or in a large styrofoam block.

Late in the afternoon we began to gather the equipment. By seven o’clock we had nearly everything we needed except the ice and colas to mix our evening refreshments. And the batteries! It didn’t take long to disconnect and remove the battery from my pick-up truck. Into my bike basket it went and in moments I was on my way to the dock.

There were five of us—Al, Dave, Frank, Ed and I. The sun was low on the horizon as we motored out the ditch past the Coast Guard Station and turned towards the “back of the

island.”

Before long we had found an ideal spot. The water was barely two feet deep and we were somewhat protected from the wind that was blowing a bit more than we had hoped. It wasn't dark yet. In fact, the sun was a huge orange orb hovering just above the western horizon. In moments it was melting into Pamlico Sound as we set our anchor, poured our drinks and relaxed to watch the last light fade from view.

We were in no hurry. After all, this was Ocracoke and we had all night to look for flounder. It was the ideal time to visit and reminisce and tell stories.

Al remembered the night back around 1959. It was just before dark. The new road to Hatteras Inlet was barely two years old and Julius Bryant, brother to Muzel, wanted a ride “down below” (or north of the village) so he could go floundering. Al drove him to a spot near the pony pen and let him off. Julius had his lantern, his gig and a long cord to hold his catch.

It was a Saturday night so Al turned around and headed back to the school recreation hall for the weekly [square dance](#). By midnight everyone was drenched in sweat and both exhilarated and exhausted at once. As the evening's fun was coming to a close Julius walked in the door with a glum look on his face. “How'd it go, buck?” Al inquired. “Did you catch a mess of flounder?” Julius shook his head. “Not too good, bucky. I forgot to bring matches to light my lantern.”

Back then the last ferry to Hatteras Inlet was at 4:00 p.m. so the road was empty. No one came by to give poor Julius a ride. He had walked all the way back to the village empty-handed, in the dark. From then on he always remembered to carry matches when he went floundering!

Misfortune, mistakes and misadventures are what tales are made of. Al's story reminded me of a conversation I had only days earlier with a local fisherman. He had taken his wife and a friend with him out to Hog Shoal for an afternoon of clamming. In the course of their labor another boat came by with more friends, and his wife decided she wanted to take their boat for a “scud” (an Ocracoke term for a short ride) instead of clamming.

She took off with the other boat while her husband and friend continued clamming on the shoal. She was having such a good time that she went back to their dock on Silver Lake for a little refreshment. Before long she was asleep in a lawn chair and forgot all about her husband and friend! They had to hail another boat to pick them up and take them and their

clams back home. Unlike Julius they didn't have the option of walking home!

We all laughed til we almost fell out of the boat thinking of the stranded clammers.

By then the sun had dipped below the horizon and we set out to stalk our prey. The water was warm, the sea breeze soft and light. Ed and I ventured forth, he with the gig, I with the light. The sandy bottom showed signs of abandoned flounder beds—shallow holes here and there—but no flounder were to be seen. In short order the boat and our companions were nothing more than specks of light in the distance.

Tiny bait fish and shrimp swirled around our ankles at times and occasionally we spotted gar fish or other small critters. Blue crabs were ready with their sturdy claws upraised when we passed by, but they quickly scurried away. Several times we disturbed large sting rays but they, too, were as anxious to avoid a confrontation with us as we were to stay away from them.

On into the night we trudged, slowly passing our light from side to side in front of us, the better to see the bottom. Ed and I traded tasks, but we were no more successful than earlier in the evening.

It was time to turn our attentions toward the boat. Throughout the night we would occasionally call out to our friends so we wouldn't venture too far apart. Slowly, we made our way back together. Suddenly I spotted the outline of a large flounder in front of us. Ed was ready with the gig and in a flash the fish was pinned to the bottom. But it didn't flop about as I had expected. When I reached down to slide my hand under the fish I realized that we had inadvertently stumbled into a gill net! The flounder had apparently been struggling for quite a while and had almost extricated itself. When I grabbed hold of the fish it slipped free of the net. By then its fate was sealed, however. He was ours!

But a hollow victory it was. As it turned out this was the only flounder any of us caught that night, and we felt like we had stolen it from a local commercial fisherman. Al was fond of reminding us of our misadventure as we put our gear away and settled back for a few minutes to enjoy the night sky before we headed home.

The stars were strewn across the heavens like diamonds on black velvet. The big dipper and Cassiopeia, as well as several other well-known constellations, stood out with exceptional clarity. The Milky Way, that grand swath of stellar abundance which marks our own galaxy's presence, stretched across the sky in awesome beauty. If that were not enough, an errant speck of galactic debris found its way into the upper atmosphere and

streaked between the fixed stars with a short-lived but spectacular trail of light.

By now it was past midnight and we were ready to return home. As we motored down the channel we were treated to yet another of nature's blessings. The water that was churned up by the propeller and the bow of the boat cutting into the waves stirred up the microscopic phosphorescent plankton that normally rests undisturbed and dormant in the warm summer waters. We were mesmerized by the thousands of tiny neon-green sparkles that somersaulted past one another through the waves.

Back at the dock we unloaded our equipment and our one large flounder before heading home for a welcome night's rest.

Once in bed I quickly drifted off to sleep with pleasant memories of one more night of floundering and anticipation of another delicious meal of fresh Ocracoke fish.

Lest you think that all we do on the island is go to the beach and fish, be sure to visit the rest of our web site. I have been busy adding many new items in the month of August. You can go directly to "What's New" to see what has been added. And don't forget to keep us in mind when you need that special gift. We keep a large inventory year-round and we ship daily.

Until next time, all of us at Village Craftsmen send you our wishes for a terrific Fall and if we don't see you in the next few months we will be looking forward to your visit next year.

Philip