



## RON BOZARTH

*As told to Lillian Hoey Gomez*

**B**orn on New Year's Day in 1940, Ron Bozarth was destined for life in the outdoors. His paternal grandfather was a woodcutter, and his maternal grandfather, Adelbert Robbins, taught him about the hunting, trapping, and bay side of making a living from the surrounding resources. The land they live on in New Gretna has been in the family since the mid-1800s.

Grandfather Robbins took Ron hunting and trapping when Ron was around 6 years old. It wasn't until he was 9 that he was taught to clam in the bay. Grandfather would get him up in the middle of the night (or so it seemed to young Ron), load everything into his 28-foot garvey (with six cylinders and no reverse), and they would slowly make their way from Allen's Dock to the clamming area in the bay. Speed was not a factor. It took them hours. By the time they got to their spot, the sun would just be coming up over the horizon. Grandfather had it timed perfectly every time.

Grandfather would clam with 18- to 20-foot tongs. It wasn't until the 1960s that he would let

Ron use a rake. You see, the tongs had wide spaces between the teeth, and that would allow the little neck clams to pass through. Chowders were the size the markets demanded, and besides, you did not want to catch all the small ones. It wouldn't leave any bigger clams for future harvesting.

Ron learned to swim very early. But when they were out in the bay clamming, Grandfather tied a rope on him and tied him to the boat. It wasn't only so he wouldn't drift away. They clammed near the fish factory when it was still a very active working bunker processing plant. There would always be an oil slick all over the bay, and sharks were always swimming around.

But Ron's father let him swim in his lagoon in Mystic Island. He had a two-tiered dock, and when you stepped down to the lower dock, you could swim from there. When the tide came in, the lower dock was always under water, and that made it

easier. It also made it easier for his Grandfather and him to unload their clams to take to market.

Before Grandfather taught him how to oyster, Ron was not allowed to go out into the bay. Grandfather had seeds on Oyster Bed Point Reef where it had a gravel bottom and ideal conditions. Ron was taught how to harvest using a rope dredge. Pulling those up by hand was very hard work. By 1953, his grandfather put power on the boats to hoist the dredges. That made life so much easier, but now they could haul in more oysters in the boats. The boats were overloaded and weighed down, but those extra hauls meant a lot to the men.

Ron and his grandfather had seed grounds in Ballenger's Creek and the Mullica River. Once the oysters were dredged up, Ron and Grandfather would go to the Mullica to cull them off. Bringing their garvey next to the bank, they could cull and grade them at the same time. They had shell piles all along the river. Without the shells for the seeds to imbed, there would be no oysters.

At the old oyster house at Amasas Landing, they

would have bath tubs full of oyster shells. They would get Benny Allen to come with his tractor to load them on the *Jesse G*, and Pratt and Howard Cramer would take them out and plant them in the bay.

Then in 1957, something happened that would change the oyster industry forever. A disease called MSX infiltrated the oysters in New Jersey. It meant the demise of the oyster industry. The men who oystered had to go on to other means of support. To Ron's grandfather it meant full-time clamming. For Ron, it was working full-time at Dupont.

In 1961, he married Margie and had two sons, Ron Jr. and Jeffrey Morgan. Every spare moment Ron had, he went clamming. It was always there for him to work when he wanted. After being in New Gretna, he and his family moved to Salem County, where both his sons graduated from Woodstown High School.

After retiring from Dupont in 1985, Ron was clamming full time. It was the best time for clamming. The bay filled up with tape mud, a suffocation mud that clams needed to penetrate to get oxygen. The clams rose closer to the surface, and clambers could rake up hundreds a day. From 1985 to '89, they were the best years and he clammed from Cape May to Tuckerton.

In 1987, Ron bought a new boat. It was a 23-foot Seahawk from Maryland. It rode better in the water with its V hull than the flat-bottomed garveys did with a heavy load. There was less clam loss from slamming down on the water.

After having a beautiful inn in Cape May, Ron and Margie bought a mid-1800s canal digger house on the C & D Canal. They restored that and lived there for a couple of years before moving back to New Gretna. Even while down there, Ron would still come up here to clam during all his time off.

Here in New Gretna, he got all his permits to build his house on his dad's property, and he has stayed put since 1990.

Back during World War II, times were tough, and his grandfather taught trapping in the traditionalists' way. Nowadays you can only use conibear traps or snare traps. He trapped muskrat, coon, and fox. Later on, he got fox hounds and named them Roxanne and Bonnie. He trained them, but now he couldn't kill the foxes anymore. He didn't have the need. But he still clammed every spare moment.

When the Decoy & Baymen's Museum was in the works, Ron was a trustee. He gave talks, and demonstrations of his clamming at the dock he used, and volunteered for all the big events. He stepped down in 2000. And he still clammed.

Last year, in 2002, Margie developed a health problem that caused Ron to stop working all the time. It was a wake-up call that told him there is more to life than working. There are his wife and Ron Jr., Jeffery, and Tracey, and wonderful grandsons Steven and Michael.

"The Lord willing and the crick don't rise," they are relocating and moving to Delaware in the fall.