

Twiford, Horace: A 12 Gauge and a Mullet Net ^[1]

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Horace Twiford: A 12 Gauge and a Mullet Net

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 7/9/2000. Copyrighted.
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I visited with Horace Twiford at Sailors' Snug Harbor, a retirement center for merchant seamen in Sea Level, not far from the Outer Banks. Twiford grew up on Roanoke Island in the 1920s. Like many a coastal lad, he eventually went to sea. He worked mainly on freighters and tankers for 28 years. When he finally came home, he worked crab pots on Pamlico Sound for an additional 12 years.

Twiford has led a sailor's life. His stories seem to come from every port on Earth - and an awful lot seem to take place in taverns, jails and brothels. Wayward souls that we are, we did more than our share of laughing that day I visited him. But Twiford also told another sort of tale only a sailor can tell - bone-chilling stories of life in South Africa before the end of apartheid, his encounters with the Untouchables of India, tragedies from the American war in Vietnam.

We often think of the Outer Banks as a backwater, particularly in generations past. One of the funny paradoxes of coastal life is that this is partly true. The way people talk, the fishing and boatbuilding traditions, and a deep intimacy with the sea do reflect a unique maritime heritage born out of seclusion and self-reliance.

Yet as Twiford's life reminds us, maritime trade and fishing have always tied North Carolina's coastal people closely to tidewater communities and exotic ports around the world. In many ways, the Outer Banks were historically more cosmopolitan than communities like Raleigh or Charlotte.



Horace Twiford. Photo by Chris Seward, 2000. To request permission to publish or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

I was born on Roanoke Island, a place called Mother's Vineyard, May 30, 1923. My mother was Calsie Payne from Stumpy Point, and my father was known by everyone as Belove Twiford. His official name was Avery Benjamin Lovey Twiford. He [was] born there on the beach at Kitty Hawk. My grandmother was going to visit a neighbor. She was walking down the beach and she had him all by herself. She took him in her arms and took him back to the house. She put the baby on. They [Twiford's grandparents] were both Outer Bankers. They were born and raised there and so were their parents. In the 1800s sometime, when the Currituck Sound became freshwater and ducks started coming in there, well, the Twifords. When I was growing up, every kid aspired to have a 12-gauge shotgun, a mullet net and a pair of hip boots. Mullet fishing was one of the things we really loved. A group of men get together, with a little white lightning and whatnot, and sit around. The kids could hang around the fish house too. If you got out of line, they'd just run you down and give you a Dutchman's rub and, in the summertime, maybe throw you off the dock! If you did that to a kid today, you'd have a suit on your hands. As a kid, you don't particularly notice anything is different. When you get older and think about it, well, you can see that perhaps it was a little different growing up around the Outer Banks. Everybody knew everybody. You could go into anybody's house. If you did anything out of line, well, you could figure that your parents were going to hear about it. You didn't get locked up for every little thing you did. Now, everything a kid does, they want to handcuff him, take him off to jail and everything else.

In June of 1941 I picked up my gear and figured it was time to leave home and I just left. I was 18 years old and the war was getting ready to go. The first job I got was on a Virginia pilot boat. I was walking the streets of Norfolk and I met some sailor. I thought it was the best damn job! You only had to work 12 hours a day, rowing a boat! Well, you had to work around the deck too, but, hell, nothing compared to what you had been doing, just working around Manteo. At that time, Virginia had yawlboats - that was a 16-foot boat with two 13 ASCIICHAR_e3-foot oars, a man in the bow, man in the stern - to board ships. The crews were made up almost entirely from down the banks here. In fact, all up and down. Later that year, I went to Baltimore to ship out. At that time, they had stopped all ships going down the coast because the Germans were sinking so many, and there were no ships. And I got rolled, got beat up, so I didn't have any money. So I didn't go home for years. I didn't have a permanent address until I was 37. I sailed through World War II without getting a scratch. I was in convoys where they sunk ships, but hell, I never even heard it or saw it, just heard about it later, they said.

Everybody's life is different. If I had never left Dare County, maybe I would have been like anybody else. I might have been in jail, or I might have just quit drinking and got religion and been like everybody else. I would have to have done one of those things.

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