

Smith Island from "Beautiful Swimmers"

William W. Warner

Smith Island's population is divided among the separate villages of Ewell, Tylerton and Rhodes Point. The population of the whole island presently does not exceed 650.

The village of Ewell, Smith Island's largest community, is divided into two roughly equal parts called "Over the Hill" and "Down the Field". It is periodically flooded by storm tides during which graves have been dislodged and coffins known to float away. But the islanders have learned to live with these floods, and some even consider the island's vulnerability an advantage of sorts. A group of older men in Filmore Brimer's general store once took great care to explain why this is so.

"We got it nice some ways," one said. "Water passes right over the island. People think we fare bad, but the island's low and it's got plenty of outlets. If it weren't for that, we'd be sunk for rain and tide!"

"Oh, my heavens, yes," a second agreed. "Now you take Crisfield. High tides and a southwest storm, the water pushes right up into town and stays there. In Hurricane Hazel it went clear up to the stoplight and they was crab floats all over Main Street. Course, it's true Hazel come over us, too, and all them coffins went adrift. You remember that, Stanley? But the people put on their boots and fetched the coffins back all right, they did. And you know the water didn't stay very long."

"That's right," the first speaker concluded. "Also you got to think we don't get squalls like they do over to the western shore. Sunnybank and places like that. Get more waterspouts there."

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Low land notwithstanding, Ewell gives the visitor a remarkably secure feeling. In spite of its name the Big Thorofare is narrow and well protected, or what cruising guides like to call a snuggery. The wind may be busy above, bending the pines and cedars, but down on the water there are only wavelets and cat's paws. Ewell's main street—it has no formal name—is similarly snug. The neatly painted houses, white clapboard with green or red shutters, retain ornamental picket fences or are sufficiently separated not to require any. In summer there is always shade. On nearly every front lawn there are fig trees and elaborate birdhouse hotels for purple martins. Out back are nicely kept shacks, also white clapboard, where the men putter with their gear, and round brick pump houses with conical slate roofs that somehow remind you of Williamsburg. For the weary sailor, Ewell is a delight.

The shady tree-lined main street of Ewell on Smith Island with its crisp white clapboard houses reflects the islanders' strong sense of the traditional American community. Cozy, simple, but well kept, the village offers refuge from the vagaries of nature.

Photo by Janet Stratton for the Smithsonian.

Tylerton offers similar pleasures, although keel boats may come to grief in getting down shallow Tyler Ditch. Quiet and isolated, Tylerton has a reputation of being very conservative. "Ewell, that's too noisy for us," Tylertonians protest. "Cars, all those lights! Might as well be city folks." Rhodes Point, the Rogues Point of yore, is the smallest of Smith Island's three towns.

Smith Island may not be to everyone's liking, but for those who want to see the water trades at their traditional best, Smith will never disappoint. Smith Island's greatest fascination lies with the memory of its older citizens, who enjoy telling how it was only

thirty years ago living without electricity and working the water mainly by sail. With the exception of Deal Island, there is no better place on the Bay to learn of forgotten craft and the skills required to take crabs and oysters under a full press of canvas. The older watermen like to talk most about the sporty little Smith Island crab skiffs—"dinkies" they were called locally—that went in flotillas to spend the week trotlining or dipping for peelers up around Bloodsworth or South Marsh. Not much more than eighteen feet in length, the dinkies had a single large sprit-sail and carried one hundred pound sandbags as movable ballast, the dexterous placement of which was essential to maintaining an upright position. "Breeze up strong and didn't we go!" says William Wilson Sneade, seventy-three, who now occupies himself making fine buster floats of cedar and spruce. "Just wicker [luff] the sail a

little, move your bags around and you made out all right. But come squalls, you could capsize easy enough! Thing to do was head for the shallers, where you could get your feet on the bottom, unstep the mast and right your boat. Then step her up, set your spreet pole and off you go again!"

"That's right," laughs Omar Evans, the proprietor of Smith Island's lone crab house. "Capsizing, it made you so mad you scooped out like half of the water and then drank the balance for cussedness."

Both men remember how bad the bugs were when they spent the week in little shanties on the uninhabited islands up north. "You walked in the high grass," Evans recalls. "And the green flies carried you off." (They still do.) Sneade's memory of trotlining techniques is especially clear. "Tide up and a smart breeze, we put out our lines," he explains. "You set them fair with the wind, hoisted a little pink of

sail, sailed downwind running the lines—you couldn't reach, that made the line too shaky for the crabs—and then you tacked back up and did it all over again. Tide down and slick pretty ca'm, we poled and dipped for peelers, standing right on the bow. Sometimes we took along a sharp-ended gunning skiff, also good for poling."

Evans is an expert on the larger boats used in crab scraping. There were the Jenkins Creek catboats, "one-sail bateaux," he calls them, and the bigger jib-headed sloops, out of which the skipjacks probably evolved, that could pull three crab scrapes in good breeze. "We built them good here," he says with pride. Both recall that it was hard work hauling in the scrapes. "No winches, like they got later," Sneade reminds you. "You slacked off on the sail a bit and just pulled in your scrapes through main strength and awkwardness."

"Couldn't do that no more," he adds. "I'm all stove in. Ailing more this year than the last ten. Age is coming to me, that's the thing."

Age is coming. To the islands as a whole, many observers believe. Whether Smith can in fact hold out is a question that is now sometimes raised. "Oh, no, the islands will never fail," an experienced picking plant owner in Crisfield recently reassured me. "Not as long as there are crabs in the Bay." He went on to explain very patiently that nobody in the Bay country caught more crabs, knew more about them, or went at it harder than the island people. "Why, they study crabs," he finished in tones of awe. "And the thing is they pass on all what they know to the young ones."

The double-ended skiff which traditionally was used in the shallow waters for dipping crabs from buster floats has now been replaced by a flat-backed boat which will accommodate an outboard motor.
Photo by Janet Stratton for the Smithsonian.

