

# Life Lessons

A hardworking family boat, a mentor, unique catches and the beautiful waters of Great South Bay make up one man's special memories and send him on a search.

by Steven Nester

In the early 1970s my father owned *Zip*, a wooden sportfishing boat built in 1933. He kept it on the Connetquot River in the hamlet of Great River on Long Island's south shore. Five children and two adults shared the cramped space aboard this 33-footer, and, along with learning seamanship and marine repair, we grew to enjoy the simple seafood meals of the people who made their home on Great South Bay. Lying between the mainland and the strips of sand that are Fire Island and Jones Beach Island, and flowing eastward from the Nassau/Suffolk County line to Bellport Bay, this shallow body of water, only 70,000 acres in area, supports a vast ecosystem, ranging from large sea turtles to the tiniest mollusks, with plenty to eat in between.

Every Friday afternoon we would drive from New Jersey to Long Island, our Vista Cruiser station wagon (with glass panels on the roof) packed with bathing suits, towels, clean linens and a huge aluminum ice chest filled with food. We would then spend the night dockside aboard *Zip*, preparing for the weekend cruise to Sailor's Haven, a popular anchorage and marina on Fire Island.

When the sun burned low in the west and the provisions from the car were stowed below, Dick Conkling, the owner of the dock and the constable for Great South Bay, would amble down along the warped planks and join my mother and father for martinis. He was a man who



made his living on the water. Beyond sunburned, beyond weathered, his brown, creased face had seen and felt the unremitting glare of the sun, the gust of wind and the biting pinch of cold for over 60 years. Always dressed in a khaki uniform, his only concession to the blaring sun was a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses.

He always stepped aboard *Zip* bearing gifts from the sea. Whether it was fresh weakfish, flounder or quahog, Conkling's

offerings were welcomed by my parents and, slowly but surely, by me. As my appetite for this serendipitous catch grew, I found I would have to take matters into my own hands. On his way down to our boat late one afternoon, Conkling held a tool I had often seen used in the waters around us. It was a clam rake, a 15-foot aluminum pole with a T-handle on one end and a basket of thick wire on the other. As the ends of the tool bounced to Conkling's lumbering gait, I knew that Neptune's bounty and an excruciating workout would both soon be mine.

I learned the next day, when I plunged the rake into the water and lowered it to the muddy bottom of Great South Bay, that clamming is about as strenuous a workout as you can get. Two long hours of jamming, dragging and pile-driving the rake into the muck netted me half a bushel of clams.

At that time, 1973, a bushel of clams would fetch a bayman about \$18, and on a good day a clammer could bring home 10 to 12 bushels. For generations many a family has been supported this way by the shellfish industry, but I decided then and there to find another career.

Nevertheless, the sweet briny taste of the plump quahogs, steamed on the alcohol stove in *Zip*'s tiny galley and then dipped in melted butter as we sat atop the flying bridge, was enough to keep me clamming every weekend that our family made the trip to the boat. Once Conkling saw he had set a hook in me, my practi-

Tournament Ready.  
Bait not included



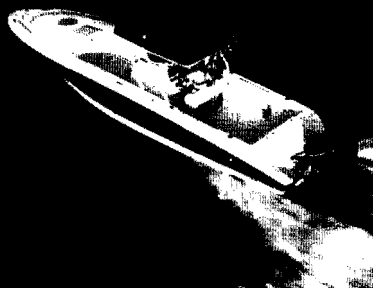
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## OVER THE TRANSOM

cal education in simple saltwater harvesting continued.

The next treat was *Anguilla rostrata*, the American eel. Born in the Sargasso Sea, eels migrate to the coast of North America, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. They spend most of their lives in tidewaters like the Comnetquot River, where Conkling kept an eel pot at the end of his dock. People who don't know better are usually repulsed by the thought of eating eel. After all, eels are slimy and live in the muck of brackish waters. But in reality eel is fatty and rich, with a soft texture that soaks up whatever it is cooked in.

In the evenings Conkling would join us for cocktails before returning to his house for supper. He knew a lot about the history of the region—his family had lived on Long Island for over 300 years. He told stories about bitter winters when people were able to drive their cars across the ice of Great South Bay to Fire Island and about various nautical exploits on and around the bay. One story I remember well was about the time his brothers-in-law had to drop anchor and row through the surf to get a part for their disabled cabin cruiser. The problem was that their anchor line was 200 feet long and the water they were in was over 300 feet deep. They returned from their errand to an empty ocean. Another favorite story was about a clammer who had worked the bay for years and had legendary hand and upper-body strength. It was said he could swing from one end of the large screened-in porch at a local sportsman's club to the other and back by gripping the exposed joists between his thumbs and index fingers.

*Zip* was a lapstrake boat built of red oak by Samuel Verity of Baldwin, Long Island. She was something of a sport-fishing legend in her time, with a 10-foot pulpit on the bow for harpooning swordfish. A flying bridge of bronze pipe and canvas rode above the deckhouse and a block and tackle stood on the starboard side of the deckhouse, which

Conkling used to sink new pilings for his dock. Pretty in her own way, *Zip* was a rugged workboat and paid her way no matter who her master was.

She also proved able to beat death on more than one occasion. Sunk in North Carolina during a hurricane in 1958, she was repaired and floated until August 1976, when Hurricane Nell roared up the Northeast coast and sank her again. After Nell churned out to sea, Conkling tacked some neoprene over the hole in *Zip* and pumped her out. With all five kids in college or occupied with other activities, my father was finished with *Zip*, so Conkling sold her to a local man who removed the flying bridge and deckhouse, plucked off the block and tackle and sawed off several feet of freeboard. *Zip* became a clam boat, and that was the last we saw of her.

Recently I began to search for *Zip*. Did she float or did she rest forgotten in an old South Shore boatyard? I had to find out. I looked first in Great River, where we had berthed her. But there was no sign of *Zip* in any boatyard or marina on either side of Comnetquot River.

Feeling like a lapstrake guy in a fiberglass world, I made my next stops the historic village of West Sayville and the Suffolk Marine Museum. The sloop *Priscilla*, built in 1888, is one of several antique boats moored at the museum's dock. An old wooden boat was a good sign, I thought. The oyster house and Dutch Cottage on the museum's property illustrate the bygone days of a bayman's life—another good omen. I asked the museum's curator about wooden boats, boatyards, the halcyon days of Long Island and told him of my search for *Zip*. He suggested I try further out the coast toward Bellport or perhaps across the bay on Fire Island. But I had done enough searching for one weekend. I had an entire summer to search for *Zip*. ■

*Steven Nester is a freelance writer and educator who lives in Somers, Connecticut. He is still looking for Zip.*