

Opinion

Notes on the River:

Recalling Dr. Claggett and soft crabbing off Oxford shore

BY TIM JUNKIN

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We recently lost a dear friend, historian, and conservationist when Dr. Laurence Claggett passed away this month. Dr. Claggett was born in 1923 and spent much of his adult life caring for property down Baileys Neck on the Tred Avon River.

Known as "Pinney" by many, he was my late father's oldest and dearest co-conspirator. I recalled a story at Dr. Claggett's memorial service about the two of them as boys. They were about ten and had taken off their socks and shoes to wade out to a rowboat moored just off the shore. I may be hazy on the details, but I think they were planning to "borrow" the boat for a short while to go crabbing.

They had more success than anticipated. Before long, the bottom of the rowboat was overflowing with crabs, and the two barefoot 10-year-olds, neither of whom wanted to yield, were trying courageously to man their crab lines while hopping and dancing amidst a sea of angry, snapping pinchers. To hear them tell it, each claimed that the other jumped off first. I suspect that the two in combination had just sense enough to save their toes, for they did abandon ship, eventually, swam to shore, and retrieved their shoes before swimming back to the boat.

Living on the Strand in Oxford during my high school days I often would go soft-crabbing with my father on summer mornings, another delight that he and Pinney had shared together as boys, and one that was passed on to me. Calm days were best, when the surface of the water was still; "quiet as a looking glass," is how my father wanted it. To carry our bounty, we'd tie a small bushel basket inserted in an inflated inner-tube to one of our belts.

Nets in hand, we'd slowly wade across the shallows trying not to disturb the surface, the sun over our shoulders to minimize the glare. In waist-deep water, even deeper water sometimes, up to our chests, we could see the shimmering grasses on the bottom and the soft or shedding crabs half hidden in the aquamarine light. Often we'd get a dozen or more to sauté in butter for our family breakfast.

It grieves me that I am unable to share such a pleasure with my son. Recently I waded out into the water off the Strand in Oxford. Just knee deep in the river I couldn't see my feet, let alone see the mud on the bottom. Due to pollution, leading to "eutrophication" an excess of nitrogen and phosphorous in our waterways the clarity of the water has changed, diminished. And if I had been able to see through the water, the sad truth is that there are no grasses left for the peelers to hide in. Underwater grasses are the habitat for juvenile crabs, fish, and much other marine life. They pump oxygen into the water and keep it clear.

In the Miles River and Eastern Bay, for example, just over this past decade we have lost over 75 percent of our underwater grasses. The ongoing degradation of our local tributaries is uniform and ubiquitous. Many good families who for generations have fished our waters have already lost their livelihoods. If pollution trends continue and we end up with foul and dead rivers, we may lose our way of life here altogether. Unthinkable as it may be, foul rivers could cause property values to crash, people of means to leave, and bring ruin to our local economy.

We can reverse these trends by changing our ways of thinking and our habits, and in that way, each take part in restoring and protecting the vitality of these precious rivers our rivers which instill in all of us a sense of wonder.

At CREB, we urge such change, and on our Web site www.crebconservancy.org provide specific recommendations for each of us. Recently, for example, we have been conducting stewardship surveys. Upon request, our riverkeeper will walk the property of waterfront landowners and draw up specific recommendations to improve a property owner's stewardship of the land and river ways to reduce nutrient runoff and erosion, increase indigenous buffers and habitat, all the while enhancing the natural beauty of the property.

Participate in becoming a better steward. Advocate with us for stronger measures to protect our rivers. Leave behind, like Dr. Claggett, the legacy of having loved and cared for our natural heritage. Each of us one day will bid goodbye to this earth. But our rivers, fair or foul, will continue to meander through our lands and through the lives of our children. Small changes, if undertaken by all of us, can keep them fair.

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