

THE GIG EASY

Phenomenon still stirs excitement on Eastern Shore

By DAN MURTAUGH
Staff Reporter

POINT CLEAR — It's after midnight here, and darkness conceals the hushed activity taking place up and down the waterfront of Mobile Bay.

Lured by an almost mythical bounty, members of a small but dedicated group of outdoorsmen traverse the 25 miles of Eastern Shore coastline from Mullet Point to Daphne, hunting for the bay's most elusive marvel: a jubilee.

They don't know if they'll find it, but they know what awaits them if they do: Dozens of flounder. Buckets full of crab and shrimp. A catch that will feed their family for days, and a story that might last them a lifetime.

Jubilees have been occurring here for more than a century, but in recent years developments in science and technology have changed the way people understand and even hunt for the natural phenomenon.

Gone are the days of jubilee bells and shouts down the beach; in are the days of cell phones and pagers.

While some people say modern comforts have diminished the flood of people to the shore, others say things have evened out just fine.

"It's a lost era, but it's still here," said David Cohen, a jubilee enthusiast. "It's a community event, it's a family event, it's a deep tradition. It's just kind of a phenomenon."

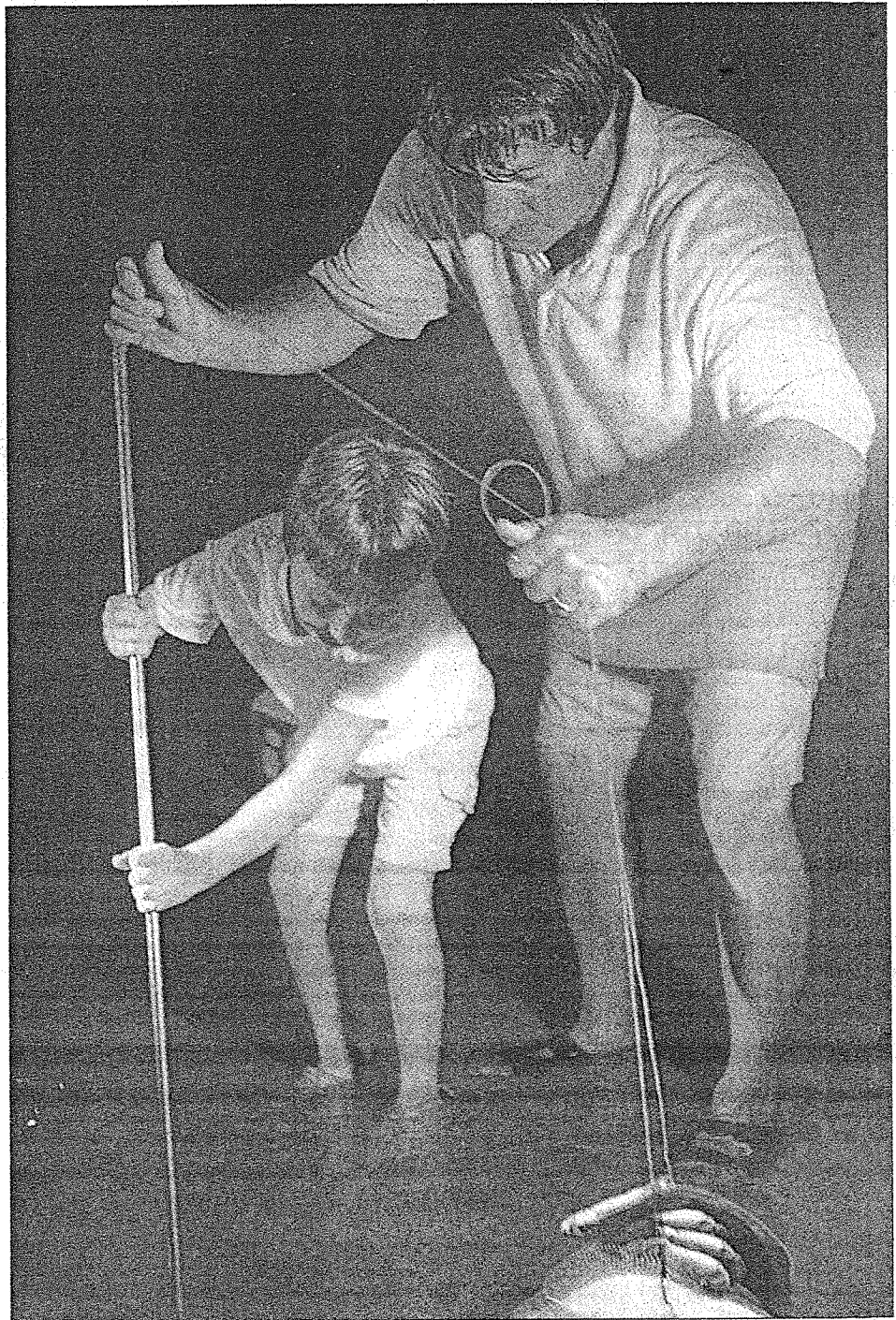
A jubilee is a rare aquatic occurrence in which bottom-dwelling sea creatures such as flounder, crabs, eels, sting-rays and shrimp swim en masse to the shore. Jubilees occur most often in the summer months, and usually in the pre-dawn hours.

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Frequently asked questions about jubilees, and a chart showing what happens during a jubilee.

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SARA HOLCOMBE/Special to the Register

Pat Reichley, right, teaches his son, Charles, how to gig a flounder during a jubilee in Point Clear in the pre-dawn hours of Aug. 3. Taking part in jubilees has been a family tradition for generations along the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay.

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JUBILEE: A MOBILE BAY PHENOMENON



SARA HOLCOMBE/Special to the Register

Flounder and eel carpet the floor of Mobile Bay during a pre-dawn jubilee in Point Clear on Aug. 3. Low oxygen levels in the water drive the sea life toward shore, making easy pickings for jubilee hunters.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT JUBILEES

"When do they happen?"

Jubilee season is traditionally from June to September, peaking in August. Jubilees have been observed during other months as well. They usually occur in the pre-dawn hours.

"Do they only happen on the Eastern Shore?"

No. Jubilees have been reported on Fort Morgan and the western shore of Mobile Bay, as well as in places such as Grand Isle, La., or the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. But nowhere in the world do they happen as frequently and regularly as on the Eastern Shore.

"Why do they occur?"

A variety of factors conspire to create large pockets of deoxygenated water on the bottom of the bay. When the wind blows water from the surface of the bay away from the shore, this deoxygenated water takes its place and forces fish to the shore.

"What animals are found in a jubilee?"

The most common are flounder, crabs, shrimp, eels and stingrays, but other fish, such as catfish and sheepshead, also can be found.

"How do I catch them?"

Adults need a saltwater fishing license, according to state officials. After that, you need a flashlight or gas-powered light to see; a long, sharpened pole, or gig, to spear flounder; a net to pick up shrimp and crabs, and buckets and cooler to store the catch.

"What if I don't own a gig?"

Daphne Police Chief David Carpenter said he has seen people use screwdrivers and pocketknives to spear flounder. There are even tales of one former Mobile resident who taped a kitchen knife to a mop handle and used it as a gig.

"Why do they call it a jubilee?"

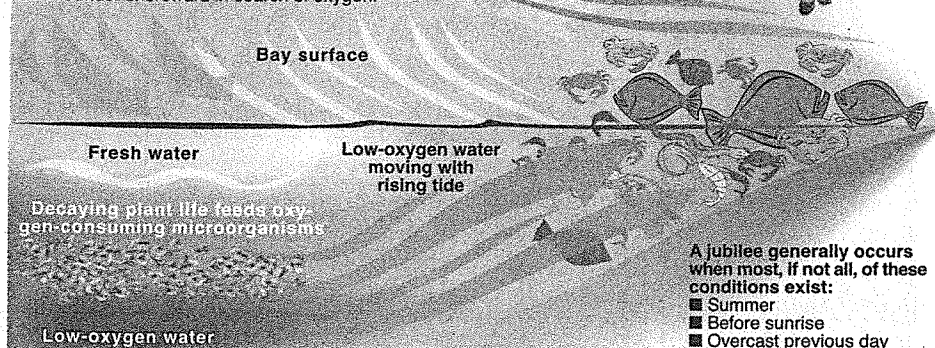
Jubilees in general terms are defined as seasons of celebration. The term comes from the Bible, which says jubilees are a once-every-50-years occurrence in which debts were canceled and slaves were emancipated.

"What do I do with 100 flounder?"

Most people put the fish on ice, take a nap, then go about cleaning all their catch at once, putting the filets in plastic bags and tossing them in a freezer so they last the rest of summer.

Jubilees leave sea life breathless

Jubilees occur when certain conditions cause pockets of low-oxygen water to balloon at the bottom of Mobile Bay. Oxygen-rich fresh water then blankets and stagnates the bay water. Westward breezes cause an upper-level current, pushing oxygen-rich fresh water away from the shoreline, into the bay, while the stagnant, low-oxygen water moves to the shore with the rising tide. This forces bottom-dwellers such as crabs and flounder shoreward in search of oxygen.



A jubilee generally occurs when most, if not all, of these conditions exist:

- Summer
- Before sunrise
- Overcast previous day
- Wind from the east
- Calm bay surface
- Rising tide