

## **LIFE ALONG THE MAURICE RIVER**

An osprey glides into a large twiggy nest atop a perch. Shorebirds cackle while small fish jump, pursued by larger predators in the food chain. Salt marshes, soon turning into more freshwater bushes and trees, wave in the Southwest breeze as we motor up the Maurice River.

If we turned off our motor and drifted with the in-coming tide only sounds of nature could be heard. No boat has passed us since we headed inland from Bivalve. Local fishing boats had headed out to the Delaware Bay early in the morning for an annual Blue Fish Tournament. Boatyards, restaurants, oyster shucking houses, and the remains of old boats give the Maurice River the look of a ghost area. Infrequent farms and a few old buildings are seen along the shoreline.

Compared to the heavily populated Atlantic Ocean coast, the Delaware Bay coast is scenic, quiet, and downright rural. No amusement parks and beach badges here – this is a place to appreciate the cultural, environmental and historic aspects of Southwest New Jersey. The twenty-mile trip up the Maurice River from the Delaware Bay to the dam at Millville is one of contemplation.

Someone once told me that there were more millionaires located in the Maurice and Cohansey River areas in the early part of the twentieth century than anywhere else. Whether this is true I have no idea; certainly it was more populated. Thriving oystering, crabbing and fisheries kept people employed up until the Great Depression.

Delaware Bay oyster schooners were developed by local oystermen, large oak sailboats usually with three sails. Hundreds of these 80 – 115' vessels, with 6' drafts and 20' plus beams, were built along the Maurice River, plied their trade, competing in the lucrative market. The oyster industry dried up in the 1930's and was completely decimated by a parasite called Msx in 1957.

Today all that remains is a few half-sunk schooners and the "A.J. Meerwald," restored at a cost of \$700,000. She is New Jersey's floating classroom where students and visitors learn about the ecology of the Delaware Bay region. Built in 1928 in Dorchester, the "A. J. Meerwald" was commissioned by the Meerwald family. The Maritime Commission in 1942 took over the schooner for World War II duty, turning her into a Coast Guard Fire Boat. After the war the boat was used for both oystering and clamming with different owners.

Today this reminder of our past is listed on the State and National Registers. In addition to sails on Delaware Bay, programs and field trips on ecology and local history are conducted at Bivalve and the Delaware Bay Museum at Port Norris. The "A.J. Meerwald" passes us at the mouth of the Maurice River, sails glistening in the morning sun.

In the background is the East Point Lighthouse, built in 1849, and known when it was in operation as the Maurice River Lighthouse. The Lighthouse was decommissioned in 1941, as more modern means of navigation became available. Thanks to the continual efforts of the Maurice River Historical Society (a fire destroyed much of the structure in 1971) this building has been brought back to life.

Once again, this second oldest Lighthouse in New Jersey is lit and used as a navigational aid. East Point Lighthouse is also on the State and National Historic Registers. Restoration is ongoing today on this lonely but beautiful red brick sentinel facing Delaware Bay.

In the early 1960's Fred Deventer wrote *Cruising New Jersey Tidewater*. Two pages on the area include negative comments about the Maurice River:

"This is not an attractive river, and navigation from Maurice Cove is difficult under the best of daylight conditions ... In an emergency pleasure boats can put into the stream for repairs or supplies. At least

a few of the long-idle oyster boats are now seen to be dredging the bivalves during the season. At the height of the season ... 50,000 of oyster stakes ... and extremely hazardous because of the forest of pine stakes used to mark the oyster beds.”

None of the above is true today as the river enjoys clean water and beautiful scenery. Since 1993 the Maurice, along with its tributaries the Manumuskin and Menantico Rivers, have been part of the federal Wild and Scenic River Program. In 1986 the area was listed for a toxic waste entombment facility. Outcries from numerous and varied environmental, cultural and historic groups brought much attention to the area, pitting environmentalists against industry. The idea was finally defeated.

A 1992 report by the National Wild and Scenic River Study states that

“The study area functions as critical migration-related habitat for shorebirds, songbirds, waterfowl, raptors, rails and fish. The Maurice River and its tributaries drain the Southwest portion of the Pinelands National Reserve, which is also an International Biosphere Reserve Under the United Nations Man and Biosphere Program.”

A great blue heron stands in a few inches of water as our boat continues up the river. Little crabs scurry back under the muddy banks. A turtle is disrupted by our noise and wake, plopping off a log and below the surface. Phragmites and marsh grasses will give way to more freshwater and deciduous foliage.

We pass by the quiet villages of Dorchester and Leesbug. Once major shipbuilding areas, now only one facility looks used. Paint peels from old buildings where local craftsmen built large schooners and ocean-going ships. Vines cover structures and grass goes unmowed. A white steeple from the Mauricetown Church comes into view and disappears again as we wind up the river. It is just as hard to imagine these bustling ports of the past as it is to visualize an “unattractive river.”

Originating in Gloucester County, the Maurice River system flows fifty-eight miles south to Delaware Bay. The area spans five municipalities and includes a variety of scenery. As one of only two pristine streams in the Pinelands National Reserve the upper part of the Manumuskin River is home to rare and endangered flora such as sensitive joint vetch. From the Pine Barrens and Atlantic white cedar stands along the low lying parts of the Manumuskin to the freshwater Menantico River with farms, beautiful flowers is a study in contrasts.

Unfortunately we find we cannot navigate the whole area in a 30' powerboat. Next time we will fit both hiking and kayaking into our visit in order to explore the two Maurice River tributaries. Depth in both the Manumuskin and Menantico Rivers is a major problem. Our motor spits up mud; we are getting into shallow water. Not sure of local navigational knowledge and with the tide still ebbing, we go slowly, turning around when we feel we cannot go any further along each of these tributaries. No vernal ponds, old cranberry bogs or wild rice wetlands for us on this trip.

Even a bridge is too low for us to get under. Along the way birds seem to be everywhere - from kingfishers to egrets “fishing,” their heads bobbing up and down. Vegetation is lush along the river in spite of our yearlong drought. Young ospreys are visible from a nest while cautious parents fuss at us.

Many hunters used to frequent the Manumuskin and Menantico Rivers. Locals and prominent people from Philadelphia enjoyed the sport. The most famous to hunt birds in the area was Teddy Roosevelt.

Millville is the end of the line for us; a dam makes Union Lake inaccessible. However, we tie up along a bulkhead adjacent to a little park and walk around town. Lumbermen, farmers and glassmakers first settled in along the Maurice and Union Mill Pond as early as the late 1700's. Dr. T.C. Wheaton became one of the finest glassmakers of all times, taking over an eight-pot furnace from his early partners in 1888. Millville was incorporated as a city in 1866. By 1900 glass blowers could earn an astonishing amount of \$8.00 per day.

Today Millville is a town in flux as some restoration has been made to the downtown area; yet other storefronts remain shut. Wheaton Glass is the town's largest employer while Wheaton Village draws people of all ages. On the trip back down the river we do not pass another boat. Farms line both sides of the river at times.

"I have an empty slip, but I have not had a transient in three years," a Port Norris marina owner informs us when we request overnight dockage. A local fisherman expresses incredulity that someone would or could actually navigate the area. "Most folk just head out to Delaware Bay to fish. No one ever goes all the way up to Millville."

It is obvious we have been somewhat off the beaten track. From salt marshes and an oystering maritime history to fresh water with threatened and endangered plants, venturing into the beauty of the Wild and Scenic Maurice River is a study of history and environment in a sparsely populated area.