



Pop Cliff – The Crabs and The Seagulls

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Author's Note: This is #5 in the Growing Up With Pop Cliff Series

“Pop! Twenty-eight Dollars! Look, I got twenty-eight dollars for them!” I was breathless, I never had this much money in my life. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe somebody would pay that much for them.

I could get some more tomorrow. I could be rich!

That first summer with Pop was almost over, only a couple more weeks and it would be back-to-school time. I would be going in the Second Grade. But two weeks could still be a long time for a young boy on a summer-long adventure – his first summer staying with his grandparents.

Actually I always thought of it as staying with Pop. Bless her heart, poor Mom-mom always seemed to be in the background, except for those times when she came to the rescue of her six year-old grandson. Either as a miraculous healer for my cuts, scrapes, burns, and punctures, (thankfully no broken bones), or as my defender when I did something that Pop thought deserved a spanking.

Those were the times when men were THE authority in a household, and that’s the way Pop grew-up, but when Mom-mom took a stand, Pop knew better than to argue.

Like pizza. I don’t think Pop knew what pizza was until he moved to the Eastern Shore. I don’t think there were any pizzerias in the Virginia mountains in the late 1940’s and 50’s. Or crabs either.

He didn’t like to eat crabs – Mom-mom did — and he hated pizza with a passion. Wouldn’t even allow it in the car, said it smelled too bad.

Whenever Mom-mom wanted pizza, he would bring it home in the trunk, AND bring it in the back door to the kitchen. He didn’t want the smell in the car or the house. The kitchen was Mom-mom’s domain, so that was ok, but not in the rest of the house. Same with crabs.

Pop was doing a grade and fill job in Deal Island, (for a man named Burgess), and I had gotten bored with riding on the dozer with him. This job was mostly pushing fill dirt onto the marsh to

expand the land area, (this was either pre-EPA or what-EPA), and then grading the lot. No great forest to clear and conquer, just scrub brush and dump-truck mounds of dirt. Only a few passes of riding on that job and I was bored.

Deal Island marshes are full of little shallow waterways. Twisting and turning through the reeds and sawgrass, and usually only a few feet deep.

Almost every dirt road that ended at the marshline had a wooden dock to one of these waterways. Most times they were just a plank or two supported by poles driven into the marsh muck, just enough for a waterman or hunter to walk on to get to their boats, but sometimes they were nicer.

There was one of these nicer docks on the lot Pop was grading. It had a planked walkway that jutted out almost twenty or thirty feet to the water. It was built on driven piles and made with sturdy salt-treated cross-planks, and ended in a platform dock that was about nine or ten feet square. Perfect for crabbing.

For folks that don't know about crabbing – recreational crabbing, not commercial crabbing, (that's not fun, it's work!), it's easy, inexpensive, and fun. Almost like treasure hunting.

All you need is some cotton string, a few fishing weights, a dip-net, and a basket to put the crabs in, and the bait of course, almost always chicken necks or wings from the store. Cheapest part of the chicken.

Crabs abound in marshy waterways, crawling along the muddy bottom searching for food, and coming and going with the tides.

Apparently they love chicken. Plus, the necks and wings give them something to hold onto with their pinchers while they nibble at the rest.

To prepare the crab lines, a two or three ounce fishing weight, (or bolt, or stone, or anything else handy that will weigh the line down), is tied to one end of a piece of string, (almost always cotton string, I'm not sure why, and the line could be anywhere from four to twelve feet long, depending how high above the water you are, and how deep the water is. You want the bait to be on the bottom), and a piece of chicken is tied on just a couple inches above the weight. You do this for however many lines you think you can handle, or have room for.

Then you just tie the other end of the line to something on the dock, and toss it in the water – then wait and watch.

If you catch the tides right, (incoming tide is best), it won't be long. If your lines are the right length there will be a little slack in the water, with the bait laying near the bottom, and what you are watching for is for a line to go taut, almost like fishing. That means a crab has found your bait and is trying to take it to a safe cubby under the marshline so he can eat in peace.

Now comes the exciting part. You have to pull that crab close enough to the surface to be able to see it, (marsh water can be pretty murky), and get the dip net under it. Easy right? Nooooo, not so easy. You think those crabs are just waiting for the chance to jump into someone's steam pot?

You have to have just the right touch for pulling the line, or you'll never get any crabs.

Gently lift that line, an inch or two at a time, hand over hand, (never slide the line across your fingers, the crab will feel the vibration and drop off), slowly, carefully, peering into the depths of the water until you can see what's on your line.

Sometimes you have to pause, reassure that crab the movement it feels is just tide flow, then slowly inch him up to dipping range.

It's easier if there is more than one person, then you have a "puller" and a "dipper." Bingo! Crab in the basket.

It's a little tougher if you are by yourself. You need two hands to get that crab up, then one steady hand to hold the line still while you reach for the dipping net and get it quietly in the water, behind and below the crab. If you make a splash getting the net in the water, or if you're not behind the crab, and he sees the shadow – Zoom! He's gone! It's amazing how fast those things can swim away, leaving you holding a wet stinky piece of crab bait.

One last thing, your dipping net should have a net made from chicken wire. Just picture the waving clenched pinchers and thrashing body of a crab out of water, trying to escape. If your net is made of regular netting it is almost impossible to get that crab out of it.

He will have that netting twisted around his body like a cocoon – spindly legs, pointy shell, and massive pincher arms sticking out everywhere. Odds are very good you are going to get pinched trying to get that hard-shelled monster out of your net.

On the other hand, a chicken wire net is just dip and flop – nothing to get tangled in, and that crab is in the basket! Sure you might have to give a couple shakes or taps to make him turn loose with his pinchers, (correctly they are "pincers", but when one gets hold of you, you will understand why we call them "pinchers"), but it's a lot easier than netting.

That's recreational crabbing on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

Lunch time Pop and I drove into Deal Island proper, (meaning the docks, where there were maybe a dozen buildings, that's all Deal Island was really), to the store at the harbor. It was a waterman's store and had everything we needed for crabbing; the cotton line, fishing weights, chicken wire dipping net, bushel basket, (with a lid!), and of course chicken wings.

A couple Dr. Peppers and packs of Lance crackers, and I was ready to go crabbing while Pop worked.

When we got back, Pop went to the dozer, and I went to the dock to set up my crabbing gear. There were ten wings in the pack, so I cut ten lines. With my very own pocket knife that Pop had given me. But we only bought six fishing weights, so it was off to the car to find four more bolts, or big nuts, for the rest of the lines.

I started tying off my lines, all around the edge of the dock.

Luckily, I was catching the incoming tide, and was starting to get crabs on some of the first lines before I could even get the rest of them in the water. It didn't look like there was going to be much "waiting" this time. As a matter of fact it turned into a pretty hectic afternoon.

I was dipping crabs almost as fast as I could get to the lines.

When Pop came to check on me, and saw how many crabs I was catching, he suggested I dip the basket in the water once in a while to keep the crabs alive until we got home. You don't want to cook dead crabs, (as ironic as that sounds), something goes bad and they are not good to eat.

He tied a piece of rope to the basket handles and showed me how to put the lid on and dip the basket into a foot or two of water at the marshline. This would keep them fresh all afternoon.

It was a great afternoon. Warm weather, bright sunshine, enough wind to keep the marsh flies at bay, and I was catching crabs as fast as I could dip them. I had that bushel basket filled in only a couple hours, and was up scrounging around the lot for something to put more crabs in when Pop took a break.

We found another bushel basket, apparently discarded by a previous waterman, and headed back down to the dock. That's when Pop showed me his "Seagull trick!"

(It's really funny, and doesn't hurt the gulls – except their pride maybe)

He cut a piece of string about 30 feet long, and then pulled up one of the crab lines to cut a thumb-size piece of fatty skin from the chicken wing bait.

When those wings were first tossed in the water they were a bright chicken-yellow, but now they were the grossest slimy ghoul-gray.

He tied that piece of slimy fat to one end of his line, tied the other end to the dock, and tossed "his" bait into the water. Being just a piece of fatty skin, with no weight attached, it just floated on the surface. Which was exactly what he wanted.

I didn't mention it, but there are always Seagulls flying around the marsh looking for food too. All my antics on the dock and the smell of those chicken wings and crabs ensured a constant canopy of circling gulls hoping for a morsel. Pop was going to give them one.

Another thing about gulls is that if the morsel they find is small enough to get down their throat, they swallow it as soon as they snatch it, if not, they'll carry it away to tear apart and eat. But if it

will fit, it's down the gullet as soon as the beak closes.

Pop knew that, I didn't.

So out goes that piece of chicken fat, floating on the water. Down swoops a gull, scoops up that piece of fat and heads for open air. At least until he reached the end of that 30 feet of string.

Wham! Line goes tight, gull does an instant 180 degree turn, swapping head for butt, and up from the gut comes that piece of chicken fat. Funniest thing I ever saw.

Alright – I know it sounds cruel, but it didn't hurt the gull, most times they went back down for a second helping of that chicken fat, and it was funny as hell. But after a while the resident gulls got wise to that piece of fat and left it alone, (not before each had taken a couple stabs at it though). Pop went back to work and I went back to crabbing.

I ended up catching almost one and a half bushels of good size crabs that afternoon. A great day!

The Seagull escapade set the stage for Pop's Duck Story ...

It was on the long ride home that Pop told me his "ducks on a string" story. With the back-drop of my new "Seagull experience" that afternoon, it was a perfect set-up for a story teller like Pop.

"Ducks" he said, "are a lot like Seagulls. As they are swimming along on the water, they are constantly looking for food, floating on the water, or sitting on the bottom. You can see ducks just swimming along with their heads turning left or right, and then Wham! Their head is gone and their butts are sticking straight up in the air. That means they spotted something to eat on the bottom.

And ducks are also like gulls in that they too swallow what they find the instant it is in their mouth.

But ducks do something different. For some reason they are always pooping when they eat. You can watch a line of ducks – you've seen how ducks always swim in a straight line haven't you?"

"Yep," I said. I had seen ducks swimming in a straight line. I just never looked close enough to see if they were pooping, but I believed him.

"Anyway," he said, "you watch this line of ducks and if you look close you can see that every time they eat something, they poop something. Well, knowing all about that, I once used that "fat on a string" trick we used on the gulls today, to get seven ducks in a row lined up on one piece of string!"

Then he just stopped. Watching me to see if I would "swallow" that story.

I did. After all Pop was beyond question! My hero! And hadn't I just seen the proof that afternoon with the gulls!

I think I was probably 13 or 14 years old before I found out he was pulling my leg.

About that twenty-eight dollars...

On the ride home Pop told me we would only need a couple dozen of those crabs for Mom-mom to steam, neither one of us ate crabs, just Mom-mom. So what could we do with the rest? He said I should try to sell them to the Elk's club at the house.

The Elk's Club was a big deal. It had meeting and banquet rooms, and a downstairs bar that served all kinds of food, including full dinners. And they had a golf course! Their members had money.

Sure enough, when we got home Pop drove me over to the back door of the kitchen at the Elk's. When I knocked, a friendly looking cook came out, complete with white hat and apron, and all. Looked at me, then at Pop in the car, and asked me what he could do for me.

I told him I had a bushel of fresh big hard crabs to sell. Did he want to buy them?

We walked over to the car and Pop opened the trunk so he could see that jam-packed basket of squirming live crabs.

"How much you want?" he asked.

Uh-oh. I didn't know how much to ask for. I was thinking maybe I could get five dollars for them, but didn't know if that was too much to ask for.

He saw me hesitating and said, "How about twenty-eight dollars?"

"Ok" was all I could say.

We took the crabs to the kitchen and he went to the bar to get the money for me. The money he handed me was a twenty, a five, and three ones. Wow!

I was in a daze when I got back in the car. All I could say was:

"Pop! Twenty-eight Dollars! Look, I got twenty-eight dollars for them!"

I was breathless, I never had this much money in my life. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe somebody would pay that much for them. I could get some more tomorrow. I could be rich!

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