

THE SMITH ISLAND PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKSHOP • OCTOBER 2009

FIRSTLIGHT



FIRSTLIGHT SMITH ISLAND

COVER: Waterman Jesse Kurtz resets a crab pot just emptied of crabs onboard the Young Salty, owned by Smith Island resident Brian Corbin, who is steering the boat amid a series of pots set out in the Chesapeake Bay. In season (from May through September), they will spend hours picking up full pots, emptying and then resetting them.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN SHORE

THIS PAGE: The mood of Smith Island fluctuates with the light, the winds, and the tides. A storm-tossed new day can obliterate the memory of a serene morning or the fading glow of evening past.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAT VAN HORN

DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKSHOP

BY TOM HORTON

WORKSHOP REVEALS ISLAND'S LIFE ON EDGE

An unexamined life is not worth living, the old saying goes, and one might well extend it: an unexamined place is not worth living in.

I've spent several decades examining Smith Island, whose landscapes and human culture are wonderful and rich expressions of North America's greatest estuary, the Chesapeake Bay.

The island lies nearly at the center of the 200-mile long, up to 30-mile wide Chesapeake, about halfway between Baltimore and Norfolk. Across thousands of acres in every direction from Smith the water is overwhelmingly shallow — if you fall in, to save your life, stand up! That was the advice we gave the FirstLight workshop participants.

This shallowness is more than a curiosity. It allows light to penetrate the entire water column, growing lush meadows of rooted aquatic grasses, fueling a rich production of plankton. This in turn supports a world-class population of blue crabs; also the planet's greatest trove of oysters until pollution, overfishing and disease decimated them during the last several decades. The seagrass meadows are also nursery and happy hunting ground for striped bass, speckled trout, and many other species of finfish.

During four centuries it has been the main occupation of Smith Islanders to harvest this seafood bounty. Even today they are tied to the seasonal comings and goings of nature, to wind and temperature, tide and storm, in a way that is increasingly rare in today's world.

Think about it. How often does the direction and strength of the wind determine where you go in the morning to make your living, or dictate whether you go at all?

Even a place insulated from the

mainland by miles of water, where the speech still harks back to England of the 17th century, does inevitably change.

Population of the island's three villages, probably never more than a thousand souls, has fallen now to around 200 as young people and even some successful watermen seek the relative security (think health

insurance) of mainland jobs.

And the landscape of Smith, always low lying and marshy, is increasingly threatened by a rising sea level that at current rates of increase will likely inundate the place in another generation or two.

Indeed, during the workshops we got a nor'easter, whose winds, blowing from offshore, pushed extra tide into the Chesapeake. For a day or more, there was virtually no land

anywhere in the three island towns that was not covered by water. That's going to be the norm not many decades from now, given the acceleration in sea level rise worldwide (land around the Chesapeake is also sinking, compounding the problem).

Because I wrote a book on Smith Island and lived there for three years with my family, outsiders imagine I

know about all there is to know of such a tiny place. In fact, I'm keenly aware how many layers remain to be peeled back, how it would take several lifetimes even to discover every nook and cranny in the thousands of acres of marshes around Smith, let alone the complexities of human culture there.

The workshop participants' projects, 2-3 minute slide-sound shows on various islanders, were as revealing to me as to any newcomer.

Steve and Adam Schwartzberg's piece about Hoss Parks warmed my heart. Hoss was the longtime friend and housemate of Reuben Becker, an incredibly talented painter who lived on Smith from the 1970's until his death a few years ago. Hoss, a part-time waterman and Island native, had always been in the background, tending loyally to Reuben through his illness.

Now he is beginning to emerge as a painter in his own right — not like his classically trained friend, Reuben, but with his own primitive style. To watch him, in the slide show, stand in Reuben's old studio overlooking the marshes and talk of his feelings was a high point of the workshop for me.

Sally Tyler's three minutes of fame was another glad surprise. She hadn't figured much in my book, but Angel Abbud-Madrid's slide show made me wish she had. She spoke simply and movingly about women's work in a place with few options, tending to the little sewage treatment plant, mowing the church cemetery.

Chris Marshall was another gem of a show produced by Jay's "amateurs", in this case, Roger Colaizzi and Pat Van Horn. Chris is a native son who left for many years, captaining big tour boats up and down the East Coast. Now he's back to the place he loves, doing largely unsung work that is as vital to holding Smith Island together as the

annual migrations of blue crabs.

He runs the "railway," the small boatyard where watermen come to haul out and be repaired when their boats pick up a stray crab pot on the propeller, and when their hulls need cleaning and repainting. Without Chris, who I suspect operates on the thinnest of profit margins, all water work would grind to a halt.

Another workshop project, by John Shore and Richard Sandor, tracked young Brian Corbin, who I remember as a little kid my son's age from when my family lived on Smith in the 1980's. Brian's all grown up now and trying his darndest to follow what increasingly seems a dying occupation, making a living from the waters of the Chesapeake. Crabs are down, pollution's bad, competition from cheap, foreign crabmeat is intense, and regulations get tighter every year. With three young children you wonder if Brian can make it; but you know he is doing what he loves to do. For me, the workshop was a chance to reacquaint myself with navigating the island's fantastic mazes of shallow, twisting waterways, since photographers want to poke into every

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nook and cranny of the landscape.

I can't recall anyone ever saying, "enough, let's go back."

Your first impression of the island might be unique, but ultimately monotonous, as there is little botanical variety in the tide marshes there, where high salinity strictly limits the number of plants that can survive. What does make it, however, thrives lustily on the nutrient-rich broth of baywater pulled back and forth by the tides throughout every square foot of Smith Island.

The marshes in turn support herons and egrets, ibis and ospreys, terns and skimmers; also thousands of brown pelicans. In the winter these give way to great flight of geese and ducks and swans that fly here all the way from the North Slope of Alaska.

Many days the marsh itself seems alive, rippling sleekly beneath the wind's force, altering its mood and texture with every shift of the breeze. Its salty sameness spreads a perfect artist's canvas beneath the sky, a playground for the light, exquisitely responsive to every shift of sun and cloud and season.

If I had to put my own theme on our workshop time on the island, it would be "living on the edge." It's well known to ecologists that life abounds along edges in nature, those overlaps of forest and field, upland and wetland, where shallows drop off to channels, the very intersections of seasons and the migrations they trigger.

The Chesapeake, with some 8,000 to 11,000 miles of tidal shoreline winding throughout its 200-mile length, is a world-class edge. Smith Island lies at the very center of it all.

And the culture that has evolved there, documented by the workshop, is a unique human expression of the Chesapeake's essential qualities.



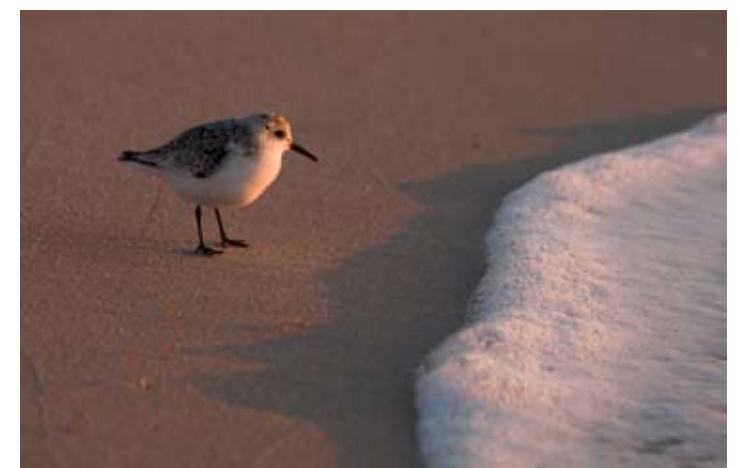
Over time winds push a lace curtain through a small slit in a window screen on one of Smith Island's old abandoned houses.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARK TERRELL



A small barrier island south of Smith Island provides examples of what Chesapeake writer Tom Horton calls a “world-class edge” — life thriving in the “nutrient-frothing broth of baywater pulled back and forth by tides.” The remnants of feathers, eggshells, nests, bones, and guano that dot the marshes and shoreline are testament to the diversity of birds that utilize the Chesapeake Bay area: Above, a Marsh grass snags one such solitary shed feather. A sandpiper (peep), below, forages for food in the rolling tide.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELLEN JUNGCK





At the start of both workshop weeks, writer Tom Horton explained that Smith Island is undergoing a difficult transition from a seafood culture to a tourism culture, but that nature still matters. “Wind and tide determine choices of the day,” he warned.

Certainly, the two weeks provided contrasting meteorological experiences (evidenced by the group pictures), as a nor’easter moved through the Chesapeake Bay on the final days of the first workshop, turning an ideally calm “edge” into a blustery, wet one. FirstLight students saw firsthand how weather dictates life on Smith Island, how its resourceful residents adapt, and how meteorology affects the look, sound, and feel of the island.

Throughout, island residents welcomed the students into their lives and homes with warmth and openness, consistently one of the most attractive attributes of a FirstLight workshop.



ABOVE: Dwight Marshall pulls in one of his crab traps early one morning. “I’m the last of a generation, I’m afraid.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY NANETTE KARDASZESKI

LEFT: Marshall navigates one of the Smith Island waterways early one morning — a man, the water, and a job to do. “Who wants to get in a car every day and fight traffic?” he asks.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KATIE ROSEMAN

Shortly after sunrise, waterman Jesse Kurtz puts on his waterproof work coveralls as he and boat owner Brian Corbin begin another day of crabbing. Corbin, a current generation waterman, laments that he gets the same prices for his crabs, which are less abundant, as his grandfather did 30 years ago.
PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN SHORE



Waterman Jesse Kurtz works on a crab pot as the boat Young Salty leaves Smith Island at sunrise to harvest its crab pots. Kurtz' dog, who often spends the long days with Kurtz and Young Salty owner Brian Corbin, looks over a load of bait fish, known as moss bunkers. The 30-year-old Corbin says "sometimes I feel old after a day of crabbing."

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD SANDOR





ABOVE: The shallow waters surrounding Smith Island provide a fishing haven for herons, egrets, ibis, osprey, and pelicans.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAT VAN HORN

LEFT: Smith Island women bear many different responsibilities. For Louise Clayton, left, and Joan Corbin, that means picking meat from crabs in the island crab co-op from 3:30 a.m. to 10 a.m. in season, going home to do chores, eating dinner at 3:30 p.m., and then returning to the co-op until the day's catch is finished, likely about 8 p.m. As with most residents, bedtime comes soon after that.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CONNIE DINES

BELOW: Waterman Jesse Kurtz sorts crabs from a just-emptied pot, separating under-size crabs from legal-size ones in the early-morning hours.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD SANDOR



Prior to the 2009 Smith Island workshop, FirstLight's week-in-a-life format focused on a photo show wrap-up for the communities it visited.

Jay Dickman admits having a bit of trepidation when book partner Jay Kinghorn (*Perfect Digital Photography*, McGraw Hill, 2009, Second Edition) suggested FirstLight offer its first "multimedia" training, a definite new direction for the photography workshop.

"As we immersed ourselves in that process, the depth and value of the event started becoming very apparent," Dickman says.

"Adding voice to our photographer's images provided such depth to the bodies of work, allowing the personal narrative of not only the Smith Islanders, but also the sounds of the Chesapeake to become such a critical part of the presentations."

Community members gathered at the end of each week to view the participants' shows. Smith Island proved the perfect venue in which to launch this inaugural multimedia workshop.

"Look at our students' work at www.FirstLightWorkshop.com, and you'll see the proof," Dickman says.



ABOVE: Crabs grab at anything and everything as Dwight Marshall quickly bundles up his daily catch after returning to the Tylerton dock.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KATIE ROSEMAN

RIGHT: As the crabbing season draws to a close, Smith Island watermen start bringing in excess crab traps and cleaning them up for off-season storage.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LARRY EHEMANN





ABOVE: Boats are a Smith Island necessity for traveling through the meandering creeks — known as “guts” — in the island’s 8,000 acres of marsh.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENDA NEARY

LEFT: A waterman’s life is a constant diet of work and repair, on and off the water.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARSHA HARRIS

BELOW: The ferry between Tylerton and Crisfield on the mainland offers both a social setting and a lifeline for Smith Island residents.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN H. OSTDICK



Pools of water are remnants of a storm system that soaks Smith Island over a several-day period. The three villages that constitute Smith Island, once home to 800, rest on tracks that so far have resisted erosion. They are home to about 200 year-round residents. Some of the houses were relocated from outlying areas to these communities before rising sea levels claimed them.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SAM BERRY





Lifetime Smith Island resident Haynie Marshall took up model shipbuilding after retiring as a waterman. "I can't lie around and do nothing," he says. Marshall makes his models from redwood, mahogany, spruce, and yellow pine, mostly gleaned from contractors. He never uses blueprints for the ships, which may reach up to two and a half feet in length — rather, he may pencil directly on the wood. Like many residents, he gets around the island on his bike.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HUMBERTO GUGLIELMINA





As crab production wanes, Smith Island residents are seeking other ways to make a living. A fledgling, seasonal tourism business has taken root. But Smith Island is also known for its cakes, which is supplying a source of growing income.

Various bakeries in Maryland have sold Smith Island Cakes in the past but Smith Island Baking Co. opened its doors in 2009, with capital from a Maryland-born former commodities trader. Local bakers produced 3,000 cakes shipped from the island in its first year of business — to all 50 states. The effort is promoting economic vitality and enabling Smith Islanders to share their unique treasure with dessert-lovers everywhere.

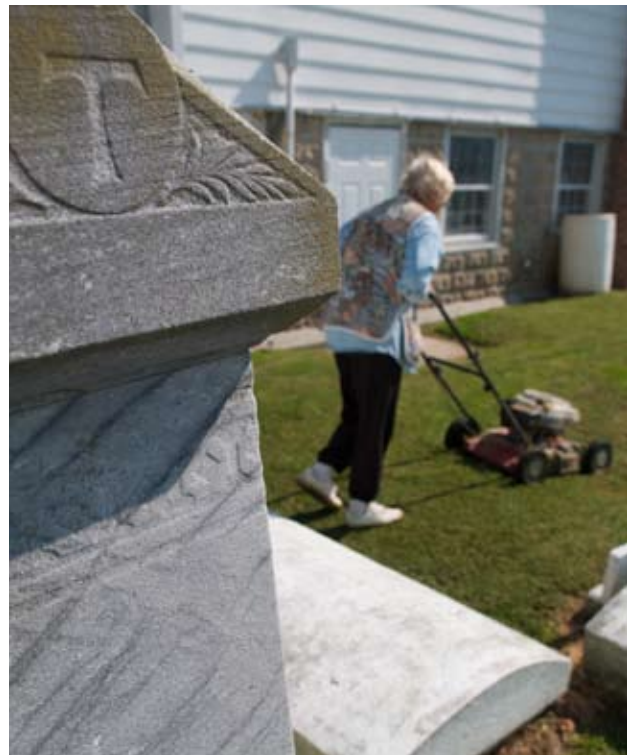
Local women have been baking Smith Island Cakes — a confection comprised of anywhere from eight to 16 thin layers of cake separated by an equal number of layers of sweet icing — for as long as anyone can remember. The cakes, which over time experienced statewide adoption, are staples at any gathering, and have attracted a far-flung customer base.

The Smith Island chocolate cake is Maryland's state dessert.

Lifetime island resident Mary Ada Marshall is 62, and has been “married for 44 of them.” She believes that Smith Island Cakes — “my grandmother and great-grandma made them” — trace their roots to the English tart. Marshall makes a basic eight-layer Smith Island Cake.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATTY BODWELL





TOP: Between crossings to Tylerton, Gordon's Confectionery in Crisfield provides a great spot to catch up on what's happening on the area waterways for Tylerton ferry captain Larry Laird, right.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN H. OSTDICK

MIDDLE: Sally Tyler, who "married a Smith Islander 24 years ago," is an EMT who cares for hurt animals and cuts the lawn around the Tylerton church and graveyard.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANGEL ABBUD-MADRID

RIGHT: "Fuzznot," one of the Smith Island feline residents, takes a late afternoon sun dockside.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NANETTE KARDASZESKI



RIGHT: Hoss Parks, a part-time waterman who lived with classically trained artist Ruben Becker for 20 years before his death a few years ago, works on a frame in Becker's studio. Parks has taken up painting himself. PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM SCHWARTZBERG



RIGHT: Parks feels he is responsible for Becker's legacy, and expresses a deep commitment to his mentor's works. PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM SCHWARTZBERG



FAR RIGHT: Although Parks has had no formal training, he says he "learned a lot from watching Ruben." He paints "what I'm feeling or some of what I'm seeing." PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE SCHWARTZBERG





ABOVE: The fading light of the day illuminates the Union UME Churchyard at Tylerton. Church members and volunteers handle many of the roles formal government entities do on the mainland.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN H. OSTDICK

RIGHT: Waterman Dwight Marshall makes the "morning commute to my office," the red building to the right, which is about 50 yards from his home. He rides the bike to and from most days.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NANETTE KARDASZESKI





The water, a setting sun, and the glowing light that marries the two in the wake of a boat returning to Tylerton at the end of the day offers a glimpse of Smith Island's gentler side.
PHOTOGRAPH BY PARK TERRELL

TOP: The first-week workshop included (back row from left) Tom Horton, Jay Kinghorn, Adam Schwartzberg, Steve Schwartzberg, Dave Harp, John H. Ostdick, (front row from left) Angel Abbud-Madrid, Sam Berry, Park Terrell, Humberto Guglielmina, Nanette Kardaszkeski, Connie Dines, and (foreground) Jay Dickman. Not pictured: Katie Roseman.



BOTTOM: The second-week course included (back row from left) John Shore, Pat Van Horn, Larry Ehemann, Richard Sandor, Dave Harp, Jay Kinghorn, (front row from left) Marsha Harris, Patty Bodwell, Brenda Neary, Connie Dines, Roger Colaizzi, Ellen Jungck, and (foreground) Jay Dickman.



TEXT BY JOHN H. OSTDICK

2009 Smith Island FirstLight Workshop Faculty



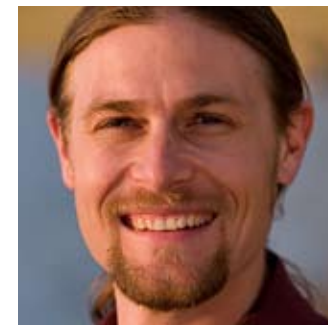
Jay Dickman - Olympus Visionary

Jay Dickman, Olympus Visionary and Lexar Elite Photographer, founded FirstLight Workshops with his wife, Becky. A Pulitzer Prize-winning Photographer and regular contributor to National Geographic, Jay's work has won numerous awards in the World Press International Competition. Jay recently co-authored Perfect Digital Photography with Jay Kinghorn, published by McGraw Hill.



Tom Horton - Author - FirstLight Instructor

Tom Horton is a native of Maryland's Eastern Shore. He covered Chesapeake Bay for the Baltimore Sun for more than 30 years, and wrote environmental stories for numerous magazines, including the New York Times, Rolling Stone, National Geographic and Audubon. He is author of eight books on the Chesapeake, including Island Out of Time, a memoir of three years he and his family lived on Smith Island. Currently he lives in Salisbury Maryland where he teaches at Salisbury University, and works on books and magazine stories.



Jay Kinghorn - RGB Imaging

An Adobe Photoshop Certified Expert, Jay Kinghorn draws upon his background as an assignment and fine-art photographer to develop training programs that fulfill the essential needs of photographers. His approachable, comfortable and efficient training style makes Jay one of the most sought-after digital imaging specialists. In 2003, Jay created a landmark digital imaging survey with ASMP Colorado to assess the adoption of digital photography.



David Harp - Photographer

A lifelong Marylander, Dave Harp operates a corporate and editorial photography business from Cambridge, MD. His magazine credits include The New York Times Magazine, Smithsonian, Audubon, Natural History, Islands and Travel Holiday. Dave recently published The Great Marsh: An Intimate Journey into a Chesapeake Wetland, by The Johns Hopkins University Press, and is a past president of the American Society of Media Photographers.



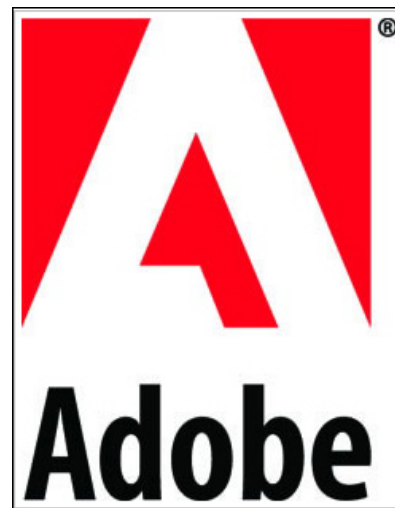
Connie Dines - FirstLight Producer

A photographer who is passionate about the magic of this craft, Connie participated in her introductory FirstLight workshop in Dubois 2006. Growing up in a family of artists the process of photography was a natural. As the producer of the Workshop, she assists in making the behind the scenes arrangements to help it all run smoothly. Watching everyone grow and improve during the workshop is one of the best things about being involved with FirstLight.

A spectacularly subtle destination such as Smith Island provides a rich canvass for FirstLight participants but state-of-the-art equipment and software help bring the images and stunning color to life.

FirstLight founder Jay Dickman, an Olympus Visionary, relies on his Olympus Systems and collaborates with Olympus Imaging America to support visual creativity. Adobe Photoshop Certified Expert Jay Kinghorn uses Photoshop and Lightroom software to help participants become more proficient in improving, cataloging, and storing their images.

“FirstLight would not be possible without our sponsors on more than one level,” Dickman explains. “I carefully select those companies who make equipment that is ‘real-world’ in terms of what is needed for a working photographer. From Olympus to Adobe, Hewlett-Packard, Acratech, Lexar, Lightware, Wiebetech, Singh-Ray Filters, Unique Litho, Soundslides, FotoBiz, and now Mohawk Paper, I use these manufacturers’ products as a working professional and I feel they are the best equipment available. This is from using the gear in every condition imaginable, when no excuses are accepted.”



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BACK COVER: An egret peaks out from the Smith Island marsh as another day fades away. The Chesapeake Bay islands nurture significant colonies of colonial water birds, including populations of species of conservation concern such as Royal Tern, Common Tern, Black Skimmer, Little Blue Heron, and Glossy Ibis.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROGER COLAIZZI

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Judy Herrmann is an Olympus Visionary, award-winning photographer and former ASMP President. Her work has won acclaim from numerous organizations and has been featured in various publications.

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