

Jubileed! Jubileed!

Every summer, an extraordinary
phenomenon hits the waters
of Mobile Bay, but you better
get up early to catch it

by RICK BRAGG

COURTESY DAPHNE HISTORY MUSEUM ALABAMA

FISH ON
This jubilee took
place in Daphne,
Alabama, in the
mid-1950s.

He can try to tell it to you,

tell how Mobile Bay goes calm and slick just before dawn, how the tide pushes in beneath a gentle easterly breeze that just smells different—like salt. He can tell how the mixing salt water from the Gulf of Mexico and fresh water from the Mobile–Tensaw Delta to the north just fracture somehow in that great, warm, stagnant pool and a heavier, saltier layer, low in oxygen, sinks to the bottom of the bay.

He can tell you how the living things there, some of the best seafood in the world, feel that water go bad and seem to panic and swarm to the shallows and even pile up on the brown sand of the Eastern Shore. He'll tell you how some old fishermen, who felt it all coming, will see the water writhe to life, and shout out a single word: "jubilee!"

He can tell it, can try to make you see it, but you have to be able to imagine, says Joey Gardner. People who can't imagine can't believe in such as this, not until they see it come ashore with their own eyes. And even then, he says, "It's more like a dream."

"I was 5 or 6 years old the first time I saw it," says Gardner, who has lived on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay since he was a boy. His grandmother warned him it was coming. It did every summer, at least once and sometimes two or three times as the heat settled hard onto the Alabama coast and the water warmed to something like blood. "When the hurricane season arrives, the jubilee comes... and that's when all the fish will come," she told him. He said his grandma was a twin, and twins just naturally know things like that.

But it would last only a little while, an hour, even less. Then the ecology of the bay would just right itself, and that bounty of sea creatures (the ones not beached or gathered) would slip back into the safety of the brackish bay. The jubilee was like a gift, maybe even a blessing, the old people here liked to say, but you had to be quick to get your part of it. Late sleepers never ever witnessed a jubilee.

He remembers the first time, how he woke to a great commotion in the usually quiet little city of Fairhope. People drove up and down the dark streets, shouting, mashing their car horns. Phones jangled. "Jubilee," was all the caller had to say, and then the phone would go dead or be left swinging

from the wall. People half asleep and hastily dressed, hurried from the bungalows and cottages and old bayfront houses and down to the shore, bare-legged, with flashlight beams bouncing in the dark.

"It was me and Johnny Miller that first time," Gardner says. "His mama treated me like a second son. He came up out of the dark when we were in the yard and said, 'So, you thought you'd slip off to the jubilee without me?' I sure miss Johnny. Cancer. He was a good friend to me," and then he goes quiet for a moment—the jubilee is how he marks time. "I remember I had a kerosene lamp, what they called a chromium lantern," like coal miners used to wear. He recalls how they chased its circle of light down to the bay and played the beam across the shallows. The water, murky even in daylight, was teeming, alive.

Flounder, some as big as hubcaps and in numbers beyond the counting, piled up like dinner plates in the shallows and on the sand itself, flopping, wriggling, so many that you could gig three at a time. Eels tangled into a twisted mass, so thick that a man could not plant his feet to scoop them up in a 5-gallon bucket. Catfish, thousands of them, seemed to be struggling, not to stay in the water but escape it, only to be gathered up by old women and laughing children with nets or even pots and pans. There were shrimp, rays, and other things that dwell on the bottom. But it was the crabs Gardner would never forget. "All of them were just fightin' to get out of that bad water," he recalls. "On the seawall, the crabs were crawling over each other. You could see them pile up, like they were trying to climb that wall. I thought it was the judgement."

He is 66 years old now and has seen many jubilees. He has been the herald himself, tipping off newcomers, sharing the secrets and the lore. As with so many people here, it has become part of him. "I had a chance once to work for the railroad, the L&N. But you know how it is when you're young and want to chase women," he recalls. There was one lady whose mother, when she learned he lived here, made him promise to call her whenever the jubilee came. And a man can't watch the water from a rail yard, of course. "I've been a carpenter and a plumber; I've driven a forklift and a bulldozer. I even worked at the paper mill," Gardner says. He never made it on the L&N. But one or two mornings a year, he is a great fisherman with a bucket in his hand.

"WHEN YOU'RE A KID HERE, you chase jubilees all summer," says Tony Lowery, a marine biologist who grew up on the bay in Fairhope and wrote his graduate thesis on the jubilee. "We slept on the wharf and on the piers," he says. They were waiting, watching for the early signs. "We

would see the eels coming in, sometimes, and see flounder on the surface, like they were trying to lift their heads up out of the water." He and his friends gathered more flounder than they could carry. "We cleaned 'em and put 'em in our freezer and had parties all summer, up and down the bay," he says.

People who have lived here a long time say you could smell the flounder frying and crabs boiling for a mile or so. But it was never certain, never guaranteed. You could stare into the bay all night, all the conditions could be right with perfect timing, but then the wind would change or it would fail to materialize for no apparent reason at all. It was the chance in it that made it fun and has made that wonderment endure. "Even a ripple could ruin it," says Mac Walcott, an architect and fisherman here.

It happens in summer because that is when the bay is the most stagnant. The decomposing plants washed down from swamps and marshes feed microorganisms in the bay, which explode in population and deplete oxygen levels. "Anything that can't float—that doesn't have a swim bladder—will try to escape that ecological trap," says Lowery. The oxygen deprivation creates a kind of stupor in the fish—a languor. They seem to wait to be taken.

The jubilee is not an algal bloom, not like a red tide. "There is no poison in it. It has been happening for as long as anyone can remember. Civil War soldiers who were scanning the bay for gunboats watched it by torchlight, amazed. The *Mobile Daily Register* told of the phenomenon in 1867, though it did not yet have a name. Once, before there were phones and car horns, the old salts would see the bounty approaching and ring a ship's bell. People speak of it here with a sense of propriety—sometimes a little mysteriously, even wondrously—but almost all of them remember how their grand-parents handed them a bucket (or a shrimp net) and marched them down to the shallows to glean. It was a little spooky, but it was also groceries.

"The name jubilee is derived from the Hebrew word for a trumpet made from a ram's horn, which was used to signal a kind of homecoming."

GIFT FROM THE SEA
Locals gig flounder and catch tubs of crabs in just a few hours.



"I grew up with an old man—we called him 'The Duke'—and he taught me a lot of what I know about the brackish water and the nature of fish," says Jimbo Meador, a writer, fishing guide, and naturalist (among other things), who has been wading the Eastern Shore all his life. "Daddy hired The Duke in the summer to do odd jobs, but he also took care of me. We would go out in a rowboat and watch that tide so close when it was right for a jubilee. And when we saw it, we didn't holler 'Jubilee!' We didn't say nothing. We giggered flounder in the head and sold 'em at the fish market."

His friend Skip Jones remembers a slightly more communal jubilee. "My grandparents lived in a house on Point Clear, and I moved into that same home," says Jones, a builder, fisherman, and lover of old boats who

has never lived very far from the water. Like Lowery, over the years, he learned what to watch for in the sky and on the surface of the bay. Whitecaps broke their hearts. The water needed to look like glass. "We kind of just knew, and we'd go wake the neighbors," he says.

Marine scientists say the jubilee occurs regularly, only two spots in the world: It happens here in places like Dauphin, Fairhope, Point Clear, and Mullet Point, and it's said to occur far away in the bay waters off Japan. No one here knows what they call it in Japanese, but they're pretty sure it's not "jubilee."

The first printed reference by name was in the *Mobile Daily Register*, in 1912, when an old fisherman called the heaven-sent flounder and crabs a "jubilee." It just seemed to fit, somehow. Such a thing, of course, had to have been pushed by the hand of God. The name jubilee is derived from the Hebrew word for a trumpet made from a ram's horn, which was used to signal a kind of homecoming. In more modern times, it has become shorthand for a season of celebration. In African-American churches, it is a reference to the heavenly reward, a time of joy.

It comes only in summer, mostly in August, usually once a year and may occur two or three or more times,

always on the rising tide, before or at dawn, when the weather is overcast or the morning after a light rain. Some swear by a full moon. The scope and the makeup of the jubilee can change but rarely its duration. Often, just as soon as word has spread around, they are over.

"I've been to crab jubilees and flounder jubilees," says Gardner. Others seem to contain every bottom-feeder in the bay, sometimes even including small sharks.

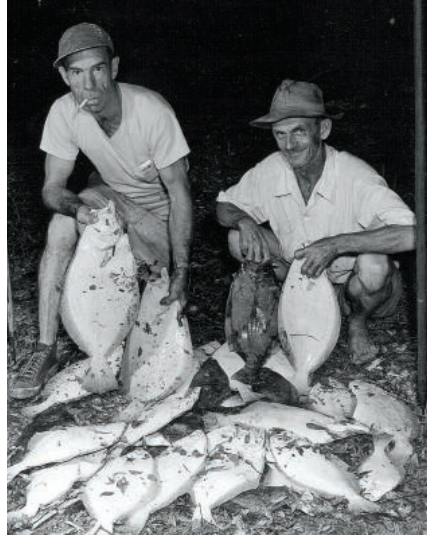
The jubilee is—as far as anyone can tell—mostly a natural thing, not something triggered by pollution. Though some people say that overbuilding here, like everywhere on the Gulf Coast, may have some effect. They say it seems like there are more of them now, not less. Others claim it's due to the warming of the Gulf and Mobile Bay.

Some people might not see the wonder in all of it, but they probably never spent five hours under the Alabama sun with a single line in the brackish water, praying for a croaker or a speckled trout.

"As a kid, it was a phenomenon," says Jones. "I mean, usually, we were just trying to catch a couple of crabs on a line baited with chicken gizzards. Then we got up in the morning and there was a zillion of 'em. All these creatures you would normally work so hard to get ahold of—then, on a jubilee, here would come some guy pulling a skiff along the sand with 500 flounder in it. I remember once there was a family who came through the yard and said, 'Is this a jubilee? Can we come?' And they waded out into the water but didn't have anything to put 'em in. I ended up giving 'em a bucket so they could empty the fish out of their pockets."

Landlubbers might be a little squeamish—at first.

"Imagine all this in 3 or 4 inches of water," says Betsy Grant, who learned about the jubilee from Gardner, who promised to alert her when it happened. She grew up in South Carolina but moved to the Mississippi Gulf Coast later in life, and then to Fairhope in 2011. "I guess I thought it was a little creepy, but I got over that fast," she says. The crabs she saves for gumbo. The flounder she grills whole with just salt, pepper, and a little olive oil.



NATURAL PHENOMENON

There's a scientific explanation for the occurrence, but it feels like magic.

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"Don't overcook it, or it will turn to mush," she says.

It is a natural thing. The people here do not feel guilty or greedy. "I'm not going to just leave fish to rot," says Grant.

The jubilee is so odd and wonderful and—well—distinctive that the residents here have named pretty much everything they can after it, from trailer parks to a cookbook by the Junior League of Mobile. In the Fairhope area alone, you will find a local locksmith, a glass cutter, three churches, a hardware store, two dentists, a pet hospital, a body shop, a photographer, a movie multiplex, a cleaning service, and a pediatrician. There is also Jubilee Print & Design, Jubilee Flooring & Decorating, Jubilee Auto and Marine Interiors, Jubilee Head Start, and more.

It's so prevalent that some of the residents are reluctant to concede that they have never actually seen one. Some might try to lie about it to belong, like pretending to vote Republican.

But there is a rigid local protocol surrounding it all. "I didn't develop my jubilee network," says Walcott. If someone calls to tell you about it, they expect to see you there, a bucket in hand. "If you don't respond—if you fail to cultivate your sources—then the phone won't ring at 4 a.m.," he says.

In most other places, that would seem like a good thing. But not here.

Walcott recalls that in the 1990s, a local radio station reported that there was a jubilee happening in Fairhope at about 8 o'clock in the morning. "Traffic backed up for miles—for nothing. It was long gone. We called it the radio jubilee," he says.

The people who have lived with jubilees all their lives stood beside the line of cars and shook their heads. Tourists. Landlubbers.

Walcott has his own favorite story of the jubilee—about a young man who lives for them, waits for them, but never takes more than he can eat. In a short essay, Walcott wrote that he believes, "fish should always swim ashore, and wait at men's feet." **SL**