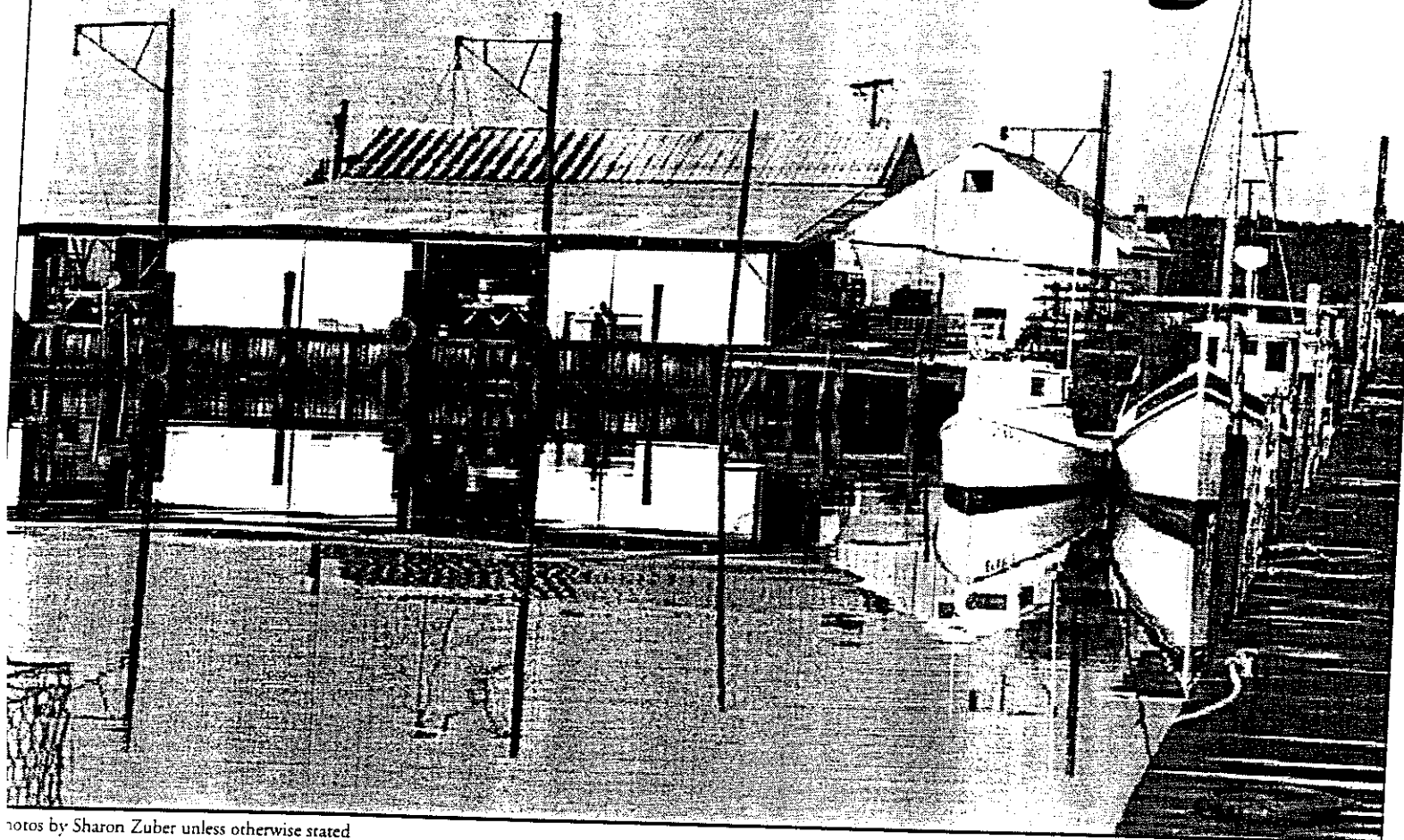



# Writing With Light



photos by Sharon Zuber unless otherwise stated



## Documentary Filmmaking and the Lives of the Guinea Watermen



By Sharon Zuber

**T**HE DAY JONATHAN MEDNICK AND I BOUGHT 150 VHS cassettes at Super K-Mart. I knew my life had taken a new direction. We had just begun the principal filming for the Guinea Waterman Film Project, and we were in the process of transforming my den into the screening room. Two sophisticated recorders replaced my VCR, wires snaked across the desktop, and a dry-erase board stood propped against the bookshelves. The television blinked AUX. For the next six weeks, this room would be the temporary technological headquarters for the film project.

What began in 1992 as a response to at-risk children in an elementary school had taken me into a community struggling to maintain its identity, onto the waterways of the Chesapeake Bay, and on a journey into filmmaking. Yet, even after spending the past five years working on this project, I feel a bit like an imposter when the press releases refer to me as a "filmmaker." Photography has been my life-long hobby, but I have had no more training in moving images than watching late-night movies in college or taking bad Super 8 home movies of my sons' first steps. Gradually, I came to realize that what prepared me

most for producing this documentary was not my interest in photography but my teaching composition. Each stage of the filmmaking process mimics the writing process: brainstorming, composing, revising, and publishing. I may not have known what the word "distribution" meant when we began filming, but I understood how to organize, see relationships, and recognize a good idea.

## The Idea



"ALL NOTABLE FILMS BEGIN WITH A GOOD IDEA," pitched Patricia Rozema, director of the film *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, as she spoke to the W&M production club. I couldn't have imagined that volunteering in my son's class at the Achilles Elementary School in Gloucester, Virginia, would lead to a good idea for a film. Yet, my days picking glue off kindergarten tables introduced me to a group of teachers who wanted to find a way to reach out to the local community. Initially, this outreach took the form of a \$148,000 grant to redesign the early childhood curriculum targeting at-risk children.

The at-risk children at Achilles are the children of the watermen. Achilles is located in the Guinea area of Gloucester, a community of farmers and fishermen, nestled near the marshes along the York, Perrin, and Severn rivers and the Mobjack Bay. Traditionally, sons of watermen would follow their grandfathers, fathers, and uncles onto the Bay where they could make a decent living with only a few years of school; formal education was not a priority. Today, these children can no longer follow their fathers easily onto the water and make a good living.

We decided to weave the theme of the Chesapeake Bay into the curriculum as a way to celebrate the local culture hoping that both parents and children would feel more comfortable about coming to school. While doing research for the grant, I kept hearing people say, "The watermen's way of life is dying—we need to do something to preserve it."

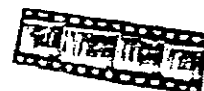
The idea for a film about the watermen solidified when I attended a film conference where my colleague, David Essex, introduced me to a friend from Charlottesville—Jonathan Mednick, a Director-Cinematographer. After telling Jonathan about my idea of filming the Guinea watermen as a way to preserve their history and culture, we

made plans for him to visit the area during the summer.

At this stage, I thought all I had to do was come up with the good idea; if Jonathan thought it was worthy, then he would just make the film. It took almost a year before I felt comfortable saying that I was helping to produce a documentary.

My discomfort stemmed not only from being new to filmmaking; I was also a "come here" in the community. Although I had lived in Gloucester for almost twenty years, I was neither a native nor a Guineaman. Yet my position was unique—I was raising a family in the community, I cared about the people and the issues they were facing as both a parent and an educator, and I now knew a person with film experience who was interested in telling the story of the watermen. I realized I couldn't just give the idea to someone else to develop. I wanted to help shape the story, to be sure the Guineamen's voices were heard.

## Composing



AFTER TOURING THE AREA AND talking to the watermen, we were even more

Jonathan Mednick (with camera) and Benjamin Brand filming haul seining.



convinced of the importance of telling their story. We learned that in 1924 there were approximately 2,000 pound nets in Virginia's portion of the Chesapeake Bay; today there are 75. In the 1960s, there were close to 12,000 watermen in the same region; today that number has dropped below 4,000. We felt a sense of urgency about documenting this way of working before it vanished, in part, because no one knew exactly what was causing the problems within the fisheries.

The composing phase took place both in film and print. Jonathan made a second trip in the fall of 1993 to film "watermen" Tommy Leggett and Linda Crewe clamming. The November day was unseasonably warm, the water sparkling, and Linda's claim that working the water was the "best job in the world" seemed undeniable. From the start, we knew we had to be careful not to romanticize the people or the work by forgetting the threat of cancer from the sun and smoking, deafness from the loud diesel engines, and scars from heavy equipment accidents. Yet the images Jonathan captured that day excited us—they were beautiful and powerful.

Convinced that these images of the rhythms and sounds of the watermen working were worth preserving, Jonathan, David, and I began writing grants to fund a one-hour documentary film. Coincidentally, the year we applied to the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities (VFH), their theme was "Understanding Virginia's Communities." Our initial goal was to conserve the history and unique culture of the watermen and the way they work, capturing family stories as we captured the moving images. As we revised drafts of the proposal, I began putting together a film committee while Jonathan, in Charlottesville, edited an eight-minute tape of sample footage that would accompany the grant.

Only when we had to come up with a budget for the production phase of the project did I begin to realize how much money it takes to make a film. What seemed like a simple project took on new dimensions. A "bottom line" of over \$115,000 provided a heavy dose of reality. Clearly, I was so caught up in the excitement of the idea and setting up a production plan that I hadn't thought about how we would fund each stage or get our final product to an audience. In part, just on faith, we went ahead with our project.

As soon as the VFH awarded us \$12,000, we set up a schedule for



*Mike Deal, waterman*

photo by Lenny Gonzalez

shooting. Jonathan and one other person from his production company, Other Pictures, Inc., planned to be in Gloucester for six weeks. This was during the summer of 1994. Cameras, batteries, sound booms, and milk crates of wires littered my living room. My son Phillip gave up his bedroom, and the den was transformed into a screening room for the "dailies"—the daily footage. My job was to set up the shoots: two per day with a possible back-up. Each morning I spent hours on the phone introducing myself to people, getting leads for possible shoots, and continuing to beg for money. In the spirit of historical preservation, I wanted to be sure we had footage of all the fisheries: clamming, crabbing, oystering, haul seining, and pound netting. I found this goal more difficult than I could have imagined. Oystering had been shut down to help the fishery replenish itself; pound net fishing usually took place at night; and haul seiners worked according to the tides.

Without Tommy Leggett's help, my job would have been impossible. Tommy gave up academia to become a working waterman fifteen years ago, after completing a master's degree in marine biology at

the Virginia Institute of Marine Science. He has remained active in helping to preserve the watermen's way of life, serving recently as president of the Working Watermen's Association. His direct connections to the community allowed him to talk to the watermen about the project and then tell me who to call to set up a shoot.

A typical day for Jonathan and his assistant Dan meant getting up at 4:00 A.M., meeting a waterman at a nearby Seven-Eleven, then driving to the waterman's boat where they spent the day filming. I was excited that the first full day of shooting I set up was going to be with Tommy, his friend and fellow waterman Ronnie Crewe, and Bob Croonenberghs from the Virginia Department of Shellfish Sanitation.

The day was beautiful—no one would have to get up at 5 A.M., and because this was a special trip to check out polluted clams on the Elizabeth River, the film crew would be able to ask questions as the samples were being taken. Normally, there was little talk during the entire day as a waterman worked to bring in his catch.

"How did it go?" I asked Jonathan and Dan as they lugged their gear into the house that afternoon. "We almost died," they replied in unison. "Of course—you're kidding, right?" I responded, only to be told the story of the engine "running away." As we watched the footage, I heard Ronnie tell Tommy that something sounded wrong with his motor. They checked the oil pressure and the gauges as the motor became increasingly louder and the rpms soared. Suddenly, Ronnie and Tommy threw the top of the engine box back and be-

gan frantically pulling wires and hoses off the block. The picture tilted within the frame as Jonathan slid in the diesel fuel. Smoke filled the frame and then it went to black. The next image was of Tommy mopping the boat while Ronnie explained that a hose had sprung a leak. It was automatically injecting fuel into the engine. I then watched as Ronnie picked up a diesel-soaked cigarette and started to light up as Dan, off camera, cries out, "No Smoking!" Of course, none of us knew that diesel fuel only ignites under pressure; that was Ronnie's way of teasing the newcomers.

The filming continued for six weeks and most days were less eventful. Jonathan and Dan or Ben would get up very early, pack a lunch, check the equipment, then head out to meet a waterman. My days were spent writing more grant applications, sending out letters to potential donors, tracking down waders for the crew so they could get in the water to film the haul seining, or finding someone who could make a map that would quickly orient an audience. When Jonathan and Dan or Ben returned from a shoot, they transferred the Hi-8 tape to two sets of time-coded VHS tapes, cleaned equipment, and watched the dailies, critiquing their camera technique as they went. After dinner, they would make sure the batteries were in the recharger and that all the wires were in good shape. Then they went to bed so they could get up in the early morning darkness the next day. I quickly learned not to romanticize filmmaking.

Filmmaking is a process of discovery. What began as historical preservation turned into an exploration of the contemporary forces

*Billy Lett's crew pulling in the haul seining nets.*





*Vernon Carter checking his handiwork on the Arlene Gail.*

that endanger the watermen's culture and way of life. I remember sitting at the kitchen table, while Jonathan and Dan checked the equipment, realizing that the film was taking a new direction. When people were more interested in talking about the current crises on the Bay than about family histories, we followed their lead and added VMRC meetings to our list of shoots. And what began as an idea about the at-risk children has no footage of the school or the children. In part, that choice had to do with timing—we were filming during summer vacation, and Jonathan didn't want to stage a shoot. The way the film turned out, we probably wouldn't have used that footage anyway.

Throughout the summer of 1994, I went with the crew to check on the progress of the building of the Chesapeake deadrise boat, the *Arlene Gail*. Tommy had found out, almost accidentally, that waterman Billy Kellum, his wife Gail, and stepson Derek were building the boat up county in a friend's barn. The launching of the *Arlene Gail* was scheduled to be the last day of principal filming.

The launch, however, kept getting postponed: finally, in August, after six months of work, the boat was eased out of its barn and began its journey down Route 17 to Jordan Marine. When the boat and her entourage arrived, the feeling of relief was palpable. All that was left was to have Vernon Carter, local sign painter, design and paint on her name. Just before the *Arlene Gail* was lowered into the water, family and friends celebrated the boat's birthday along with Derek's twenty-first birthday.

At that moment of hope and beginnings, we also celebrated a successful summer of filming.

## Editing



OVER 60 HOURS OF RAW FOOTAGE NOW HAD TO BE honed to one hour. David and I wrote another grant proposal to get money for the editing and distribution phase. When David Bearinger, Associate Director of the VFH, called, he announced that the board, for the first time ever, had approved the full \$15,000 of their grant limit for film and video. I was almost as pleased by their confidence in our project as I was with the money. We could move into the next phase—editing and post-production.

Jonathan and I had watched all the footage as it was being shot; now, along with David, we watched the footage for a different purpose. What were the strongest stories? What were the most powerful images? Whose voices would best represent the watermen?

We all agreed that three stories stood out: the conflict over regulating the oystering, Ronnie and Linda Crewe's year of working the water, and the building of the *Arlene Gail*. To provide continuity, we decided to use the footage from Buck Rowe's store, a local community gathering place, to anchor the other stories. Over the next several months, Jonathan sketched out these stories in a ninety-minute rough cut. I was almost afraid to watch it: What if I didn't like it? What if

the watermen didn't like it?

Instead, I was overwhelmed by the impact the images had—even at this rough stage. Jonathan did a wonderful job weaving the stories together—memories of the days spent scheduling shoots and the people we had met came flooding back.

Over the next few months, I screened the rough cut for different groups of people including the watermen who played significant roles in the near-final version, teachers from Achilles Elementary, the film committee, and a few friends. At the same time, Jonathan was showing it to his partners at Other Pictures, Inc., which had moved its headquarters to New York City. At each screening, we took notes from the comments and used these to rethink sections or transitions. By September, 1995, we had a seventy-minute fine cut that we screened for the watermen during the Guinea Jubilee, a local celebration of the community.

Over 120 people gathered that night in Watermen's Hall at VIMS to listen to Jonathan tell about the project, watch the film, then respond to a questionnaire. Overwhelmingly, the response was positive.

The most difficult editing choices were selecting a title and deciding who should narrate the film. In the end, our decisions were influenced by our original goal of giving the community a voice. We chose Buck Rowe, 75-year-old "unofficial mayor" of Guinea, to narrate the film. The title, *They Live in Guinea*, came from Chris Brown, a waterman in the film who comments, "I wish more people stuck together like the Guineamen. I don't know where they get that name 'Guineamen.' They're not 'Guineamen,' they're human beings. They just live in Guinea."

## Show Time!



AFTER A YEAR OF EDITING, WE STILL WEREN'T SURE IF or when the film would be shown on television. We had been talking to representatives from WHRO-TV, a local public television station, since the beginning of the project, but they hadn't made a definite commitment to showing the film. Unexpectedly, at the end of May 1996, one of the program managers called to say she wanted to premiere the show on July 14th. This date fell during the one week of the summer I would be out of the programming area on vacation. What I didn't know at the time was that the 14th fell during the week of the station's Nielsen ratings.

Excitement and panic hit. Jonathan cleared his schedule for the next six weeks so he could edit the fine cut into a final cut. One week into the editing, however, Jonathan called to say we could not broadcast the piece without a professional sound edit. He had called several studios, and for a sixty-minute film, a sound edit would cost us \$6,000. That left three weeks for me to raise the money.

I made a list of every bank, seafood house, restaurant, and business

in the county that I thought might be willing to support this project. My first success was with Peninsula Trust Bank; they said they would donate \$500 IF I raised the other \$5,500. I made contacts, wrote letters of commitment, and kept a list of the people whom I needed to thank. That list included all my family and many of my friends. I quickly realized, though, how much work it took to get \$1,000 in small donations. The breakthrough came when GTE promised us \$2,000. At that point I only needed another \$1,000 to reach the goal of \$5,500; that's when Applied Innovations donated that exact amount. I immediately called the Peninsula Trust Bank to report that their challenge had been met, then I called Jonathan to tell him to schedule the sound edit.

With only days to spare, the final version was ready for broadcast. Although I wasn't in the audience that night, over 40,000 people registered as viewing on the Nielsen ratings. This ranked our film as the eighth most-watched program on WHRO for the month of July.

## Reflections



I CAN NO LONGER COUNT THE NUMBER OF TIMES I have watched *They Live in Guinea*, yet I am still moved by the images and the feelings they evoke. I feel proud. Although I might change a few things, I think the film does a good job representing the watermen and the complexity of the issues surrounding the problems of the fisheries. I feel sad. Many things have already changed in the three years since filming. Two of the watermen have died. Derek got married but quit working with Billy on the *Arlene Gaik*; he needed a job with a steadier income and benefits. Linda has struggled to keep working on their boat even though Ronnie's back problems have forced him to give up working the water. And Buck Rowe had a heart attack requiring him to cut back his time working in the store.

Some of the changes have been positive. For students interested in filmmaking, William & Mary now offers a summer internship with Other Pictures, Inc. My own research and teaching interests have expanded to include documentary filmmaking. The growing interest about the Guinea community's history has led to the organization of the Guinea Heritage Association, a non-profit group that sponsors the Guinea Jubilee. The money raised at the Jubilee supports a scholarship fund, and the GHA hopes to raise enough money to establish a museum in the area. Finally, the idea inspired by children in an elementary school classroom may help them learn math and science. WHRO contracted to have lesson plans written to accompany the film; this spring they were field tested in an Achilles fifth-grade class.

Some things never change. My den is still cluttered with over 60 VHS time-coded tapes, boxes of research materials, drafts of grant proposals, and memories of a journey taken—a journey I would gladly take again. ❖