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Fishing with Jimmy

“H’lo, Bub,” Jimmy said, as I approached.

“H’lo, Cap,” I answered.

“Ready t’ go?”

“Yup.”

“You’re it today. My regular crewman Joe’s got another job this mornin’.”

“Then you’re in trouble, with a scien’ist for a crew.”

“Sometimes you’re good luck, if the boat don’t sink.” I’d heard that one before.

On the East End

“I do remember a fall day a few years back when you took a big bunch of striped bass, because *I* was there. *Somebody’s* gotta help you catch fish,” I replied

“Wearin’ those cheap lab boots? Hope you didn’t bring that damn clipboard! Let’s go.”

It was 5:30 AM during the spring in the mid-1980s. My family was visiting old friends in Amagansett on one of our visits to the East End. I walked to bayman Jimmy Lester’s home on Montauk Highway from our friend’s place off Schellinger Road. Jimmy and I climbed into his pickup and drove east toward Montauk. The drive from Amagansett took us along Montauk Highway and down onto the several mile long sandy isthmus that connects the Village of Amagansett with the Village of Montauk to the east. Montauk is as far east as you can go in New York State. There used to be a sign along the roadway pointing easterly and saying “Montauk, Last Stop Before Portugal.”

The sandy isthmus runs easterly from Amagansett, with the Atlantic Ocean beach at Napeague to the south and the estuary of Napeague Harbor to the north. Locally, the isthmus is called the “Napeague stretch.” In geological terms, it actually is a tombolo, a low lying sandy spit between two landmasses or islands. The Napeague stretch tombolo was formed when the last glaciers receded about 12,000 years ago. Weathering of the land masses at either end, and the action of the ocean currents and surf, washed and shaped the sand form in between what was the mainland at Amagansett and the land that may have been two islands now forming Hither Hills and Montauk.

During the 1800s, the farmers from East Hampton and Amagansett would drive their cattle along the Napeague stretch onto Montauk’s grasslands for summer grazing. Entering Montauk felt very much like arriving at an island, thus the cattle were driven “on,” or “onto,” Montauk and not “to” Montauk. They then went “off” Montauk as



View of Montauk in the 1970s. An aerial view looking southeasterly across the center of the Montauk peninsula circa 1971–1972. The Atlantic Ocean is seen running across the entire top of this view. The body of water to the upper left is a portion of Lake Montauk, where the harbor is located (but out of this view). The body of water to the right center is Fort Pond, a fresh-water lake running north to south. At one time, Fort Pond had a narrow neck of water reaching northerly almost to Fort Pond Bay, which is shown running along the entire bottom of this view. That narrow neck of water sometimes opened to the Bay during spring allowing the influx of both salt water and migrating alewives. Just prior to 1900, the railroad came onto Montauk and its tracks permanently blocked any connection between Fort Pond and the Bay.

well. Those expressions still held in the 1970s, for people visiting Montauk, especially among the local people. Those expressions and feelings appear to be changing today, however, as “going to” Montauk seems more common, as does referring to what’s happening “in Montauk” village.

That morning in the mid-1980s was fair and sunny, with only a light wind blowing. We drove along the Napeague stretch, onto Montauk, and went straight to Montauk Harbor through Hither

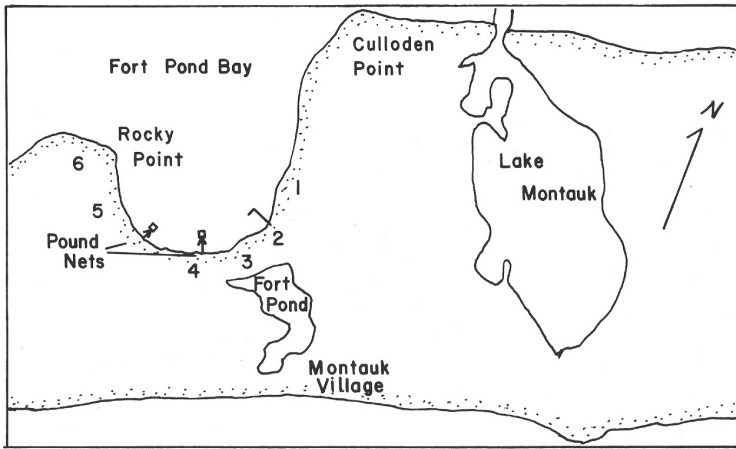
On the East End

Hills on the main highway. In Montauk Village, we turned north on Edgemere Road and drove past the old New York Ocean Science Laboratory site. It was right next to the Montauk Railroad Station, the end of the line for the Long Island Railroad. I could not help looking at it as we passed by. I strained to see as much of the site as I could, wondering what was going on there, if anything. The grass was cut. No cars in the parking areas. No flag flying. Empty and kind of spooky. The Lab had closed in 1982 due to financial problems. I turned and looked forward. Jimmy glanced at me. Nothing was said.

On Days of No Weather

On fair mornings when Jimmy was sure he “had weather” good enough for tending and lifting his pound net fish traps, we went straight to the Harbor to board his work boat. On mornings when the wind was blowing hard and Jimmy had doubts about being able to get to his fish traps and tend them, we would go to Gosman’s Dock, at the west jetty of the Montauk Harbor entrance on Block Island Sound, to check on the sea conditions. If we didn’t have favorable weather and couldn’t get to the traps in Fort Pond Bay in Jimmy’s dragger, I would be a little disappointed at no opportunity to renew my acquaintance with the sea and its bounty. A deck load of fish and squid was an anticipated event, one I waited all year for. Many a cold winter since I left the Lab in 1975 had been spent reading the fishing report and naturalist Larry Penny’s “Nature Notes” in the *East Hampton Star* or reading some books on local East End history obtained during those annual visits. I still had the East End and the sea in my blood.

Even with no weather, Jimmy did not (and probably could not) go right home. We would sit at the jetty for a spell and watch the fishing fleet emigrate from the Harbor: trawlers of all sizes and varieties, lobster boats, and sport-fishers. Jimmy knew many of the captains and fishermen, and answered my questions about the vessels and



Fort Pond Bay, Montauk. Map of Fort Pond Bay on Montauk, and the location of Bayman Jimmy Lester's two pound traps on the Bay's southern shore. Montauk is about 20 miles from the coast of New England and about 130 miles from Manhattan.

their quarry. Other fishermen would come and go by pickup at the jetty and Jimmy would talk with some of them. Then we would make the rounds on Montauk. From Gosman's we would drive along the Harbor, then south on Westlake Drive to Star Island, and go across the causeway and onto the small island that sat amid Lake Montauk. There, we would drive to the end of the road near the Coast Guard Station, turn around and drive out, all the while checking out the docks, boats, and the water. Back to Westlake Drive, north to Flamingo Road, turn south and head toward Montauk Village. At the crest of the hill, we would turn west onto Tuthill Road and drive along the high eastern cliffs of Fort Pond Bay.

Fort Pond Bay is a large horseshoe shaped cut on the northern shore of the Montauk peninsula. It is an oceanic embayment open to the north and facing into Block Island Sound, with Culloden Point to the east and Rocky Point to the west. It's depth drops off very quickly from shore and reaches about 50 feet between the two Points of land. That made the Bay suitable for vessels with a deep draft.

On the East End



Fort Pond Bay Vista. A view of the relatively undisturbed southern and western landscape of Fort Pond Bay in 1979. This vista is looking north-westerly from the dunes near Jimmy Lester's east pound net toward Rocky Point and the bluffs rising 80 feet to 100 feet above the Bay. The leader of Jimmy's west pound net can be seen running across the center of the photo, with some gulls sitting atop a few of the leader's stakes.

Occasionally, the Bay served as an overnight refuge or safe haven for the U.S. Coast Guard training barque *Eagle* or a U.S. Navy submarine from New London, Connecticut. Montauk juts out into the ocean some 20 miles from the mainlands of Connecticut and Rhode Island, with open water clear across Block Island Sound.

On a clear day, those mainlands can be seen from the Montauk bluffs. And the East End of Long Island can be seen from the Rhode Island ocean dunes. Montauk thus is a peninsular point of land 20 miles south of the New England coast and 130 miles east of New York City. It still has an island feeling to it.

At a good vantage point high up on the eastern cliffs of Fort Pond Bay, we would stop, and Jimmy would use his field glasses to inspect the water and his fish traps at the southern end of the Bay, west of the old Lab site. Once he was satisfied, we headed south to Montauk Village. He drove the Old Montauk Highway westward along the ocean, checking on the draggers fishing the Backside. Jimmy would