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MOBILE BAYS' SUMMER jubilee

I love a good story as much as the next person. Being from the south, a love of story telling was encoded into my DNA. But I know most of the stories my uncles used to tell were...how can I say this without offending the family... “embellished” to some degree. A certain amount of embellishing is expected in a good story. Even completely making up a story is acceptable, as long as it sounds plausible. So I can spot a good, embellished story when I hear one.

It was at dinner a couple of weeks ago that I met Ms. Jane Finger, a friend’s mother, who was visiting from Fairhope, Alabama. Fairhope is situated on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay. Ms. Finger is a fine storyteller in her own right and regaled us with several stories, most involving my friend’s (colorful) upbringing. But towards the end of the evening, Ms. Finger told a story about a miraculous happening in Mobile Bay. She said every so often, usually only once or twice a year, fish, crabs and other sea-life just float up to the top of the water near shore, where anyone can go down and scoop up a whole mess of fish. She said the event was called “Jubilee”. I nodded appropriately, all the while thinking “Riiiiiiiiight”. I knew a lot of embellishing was going on. But Ms. Finger sounded credible on every other subject, so after the evening ended, I retired to the Internet to do a little research.

Darned if Google didn’t have a long list of web sites that discuss Jubilee in Mobile Bay! I visited several and even saw pictures! But it wasn’t until I went to the web site for The Dauphin Island Sea Lab that I was convinced Jubilee was real. Founded in 1971 by the Alabama State Legislature, the Dauphin Island Sea Lab (DISL) is Alabama’s marine science education and research laboratory. According to educational information provided by the DISL, Jubilee occurs due to warm, stagnant water in the bay, usually on the eastern shore, becoming low in oxygen. The low-oxygen bottom water moves to shore as an easterly wind blows surface water away from shore, allowing the oxygen-poor water to creep closer to the beach. Animals, starving for oxygen, are trapped between the beach and the advancing oxygen-poor water. Under extreme conditions, they are forced onto shore – a Jubilee.

Fortunately, my early training provided by listening politely to my uncle’s stories had kicked in while Ms. Finger was telling me about Jubilee. My polite nods hadn’t betrayed the fact I thought she was making it all up. This came in handy when I later called her to get some more information about Jubilee. She was polite, not knowing I had doubted her completely. Ms. Finger has seen a couple of Jubilees in person. One



ABOVE: Jubilee is the name used locally for a natural phenomenon that occurs sporadically on the shores of Mobile Bay, Al. During a jubilee many species of crab and shrimp, as well as flounder, eels, and other demersal fish will leave deeper waters and congregate—in large numbers and very high density—in a specific, shallower coastal area of the bay. A jubilee is a celebrated event in Mobile Bay, and it attracts large crowds, many drawn by the promise of abundant and easy-to-catch seafood. The size, scope, and duration of the jubilee can vary greatly. Sometimes a 15 mile stretch of coast representing most of the eastern shore can be affected, and at other times the extent can be limited to as little as 500 feet of coastline. Most jubilees happen in the pre-dawn hours.

occurred in 2004. She got a call at 6:30 a.m. in her Fairhope home telling her a Jubilee was in progress. “They only last a few hours, so it’s easy to miss one. There is a telephone tree that gets activated when someone learns of a Jubilee.” A telephone tree? Like they have for parents of school age kids, to notify everyone when school is cancelled? “Yes, just like that”, she said. “If you don’t get down there pretty quick you can miss the Jubilee. I guess the fish get their breath back and swim off. At the first Jubilee I saw, there were flounder, shrimp, crabs, eels and all kinds of other critters. The second one I got there at the tail end and there were just flounder, shrimp and crab.”

OK, so what do you do at a Jubilee outbreak? “We had one a few days ago, and I spoke to a fisherman I know, and he said one of his friends got about 400 flounder.” Just walked out into the water and scooped them up? “Yep. By the bushel load. The last one I went to, there were people lined up along the shore for four or five blocks in either direction picking up fish and crab.”

Just when you think you can pick out an “embellished” story from the truth, something like this happens and it shakes your confidence. Jubilee may be true, but I’m still pretty sure Uncle Kenneth never spied for the CIA.