

# The Capital South County

## Fleet blessing spotlights watermen

By MICHAEL HOFFMAN, For The Capital

For the third year in a row local crabbers and fishermen will team up with Discovery Village in Shady Side to draw attention to a dying breed: themselves.

At Saturday's third annual Blessing of the Fleet Festival on the shores of Parrish Creek, watermen will compete in a boat docking contest and anchor toss while thousands of people enjoy live bluegrass music and seafood.

But it isn't really the third annual event. From 1955 to 1974 Parrish Creek was lined with hundreds of oyster boats the Sunday before each oyster season in September for a blessing from local clergymen.

"As the oyster industry died, the blessing died," said Bob Evans, president of the Anne Arundel Waterman's Association.

A quarter-century later, the event was revived by fourth-generation waterman J.R. Gross and Adam Hewison, president of Discovery Village, a research and educational facility spread across 8 waterfront acres.

Mr. Gross came up with the idea to bring back the blessing after his mother, a teacher for more than 30 years, told her son how one of her 6-year-old students didn't know what a crab was.

"There used to be a fleet of watermen in Shady Side, but now there are a lot of people who don't realize that this was once a watermen community," he said.

At one point watermen made up the majority of the south county community, but now Mr. Gross said they make up only about 10 percent of the population.

"I think it's a great way to teach the community about the watermen in the area," he said. "Plus, we need as much blessing as we possibly can. We ain't saints out there."

About 4,000 people from all over Maryland attended the event the past two years. Jane Eylward, a director at Discovery Village, is expecting just as many people, if not more.

"Last year we didn't have the best weather, so hopefully it will be nice and even more people will be there to see the boats," she said.

The festival will run from noon to 5 p.m., and the actual blessing will occur at 2, when 30 to 40 workboats parade in Parrish Creek under a 200-foot stream of water provided by the Avalon Shores Fire Department.

The blessing will be given by the Rev. Jim Stafford of Cedar Grove United Methodist

Church in Deale.

Visitors can ride a 1955 skipjack, the H.M. Krentz. The 52-foot vessel was once used for oyster dredging.

Other visitors will go on the water just to get to the festival. To combat the parking shortage the past two years, a free water taxi will shuttle people to the festival from the 10 acres of free parking at Clark's Landing.

Busses will also run from Clark's Landing. Parking at Discovery Village will cost \$5.

In the boat docking contest, watermen maneuver their boats to and from a bulkhead as fast as possible.

"Sometimes people forget how amazing our watermen are," she said. "They are the best boaters in the Chesapeake, but sometimes we forget that because they are on those slow boats out on the water. When I watch that even I can't believe they don't slam into the bulkhead."

*Published August 03, 2004, The Capital, Annapolis, Md.*

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