

The Bay From Above

by

Glenn Uminowicz

Executive Director, Historical Society of Talbot County

The Chesapeake Bay is not tar-black and dead. It is not bright green and toxic. It looks just as beautiful as ever. What the Chesapeake has become is emptier. It has fewer crabs, oysters and watermen than it did 25 years ago, when government officials first pledged to restore its health.

From David A. Farenthold, the Washington Post, December 28, 2008

In a frontpage article published just before New Year's Day, Washington Post staff writer David A. Farenthold reported on the "Way of Life Slipping Away Along Chesapeake's Edge." Two of the three representative communities chosen for the article are in Talbot County - Tilghman Island and St. Michaels. Culturally, Farenthold classified Tilghman as a "place in the middle." As the skipjack fleet and the number of watermen decline, the affluent culture of St. Michaels migrates toward the island. As for St Michaels itself, the reporter described its evolution from a typical "crab town" to its status as the Cape Cod for for nation's capital. The local economy now relies on the Bay "mainly as scenery" for newcomers and visitors to the area.

Hunter H. Harris maintains a different view of Chesapeake Bay than that from a waterfront condo or hotel room. For decades, Harris has taken striking aerial photographs around the Bay. From his catbird's seat high above the estuary, he has observed the impact of development pressure and documented environmental concerns.

Beginning in 1928, photographer H. Robins Hollyday pioneered the use of aerial photography on the Eastern Shore, including the use of aerial "mosaic" mapping for the Maryland State Roads Commission. Hollyday, for example, photographed the path of what is now Route 50. His aerial photography career extended into the 1950s and his images are now part of the H. Robins Hollyday Collection at the Historical Society of Talbot County.

At the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, Hollyday's work has been combined with new photography by Harris in the exhibit *The Bay From Above: Aerial Views of the Bay Then and Now*. The exhibit pairs images from the 1930s through the '50s with photographs of the same stretch of the Bay taken by Harris last year.

What is abundantly clear from these contrasting images is the impact of the automobile on the Shore.

In *Talbot County: A History* (1983), Dickson Preston insisted "The gasoline engine was as truly revolutionary a force as the Paris mobs or the discovery of

electricity. It would change literally everything about how Talbot Countians lived and how they thought about themselves." The automobile spelled the demise of steamboats and railroads, freed farm families to visit larger towns for shopping and recreation, and forced the creation of paved highways that brought an influx of tourists to the area after the opening of the Bay Bridge in 1952.

At the turn of the 20th century, Talbot County was hardly ready for the automobile age. Most roads remained mud and sand. Things did not appear much improved thirty years later. Based on research conducted in the late 1930s, sociologist Frank Goodwin noted that transportation problems were the principal drawback to economic development on the Shore. The only U.S. highway was Route 213, which meandered through the area along an old Indian trail. Goodwin observed, "The modern traveler over this route wonders if the Indians were not under the influence of the white man's firewater when blazing the trail."

In *The American Small Town* (1982), cultural geographer John Jakle provides a broader context for Preston's recounting of the "gasoline revolution" in Talbot County. Jakle drew sharp distinctions between pre- and post-automobile landscapes in and around small towns. Images in *The Bay From Above* illustrate many of those distinctions. A Hollyday photograph from the 1930s, for example, shows Chestertown laid out largely on a grid with a distinct downtown and residential areas. Hunter Harris himself remembered the community's first shopping center built outside of town, surrounded by farm fields. His own contemporary photograph taken last year illustrates how small-town development has extended around the shopping center as houses were constructed in the former fields.

Other images reinforce the changes brought about by increasing population and tourism. Contrasting Hollyday's photo of the Tilghman Island Bridge with Harris' contemporary image documents the contention that the island has become a "place in the middle" where pleasure craft mingle with workboats and waterfront development is evident. The aerial photographers' images of the Inn at Perry Cabin illustrate the evolution of the historic "manor house" into a resort and spa located just a pleasant drive away from Washington D.C., and featuring Water View Master Suites. Referencing St. Michaels' transition to a tourist-based economy, Farenthold noted that communities on the edge of the Bay need to change to survive economically.

On the Chesapeake itself, Hollyday snapped a compelling image of the oyster fleet in the 1950s with boats filling the picture space. The photograph is paired with one taken by Harris of tongers working an oyster bar. Maritime Museum curator Pete Lesher observed that the paired images illustrate the dramatic decline in the number of working skipjacks on the Bay.

Leshner also noted that not all changes in the landscape around the Chesapeake involve built structures. At the time of the Civil War, much of the land on the Eastern Shore had been cleared for agriculture. Since shade trees are desirable in residential development, Harris' photographs illustrate how parts of the Shore are being reforested. Unfortunately, his images also reveal streams of oil from poorly maintained boats, the impact of farmland runoff, and the growth of algae blooms. While evident from the air, some of these impacts are not readily evident viewing the Bay mainly as scenery at ground level.

Over three decades, H. Robins Hollyday documented life on and around the Chesapeake before it became "emptier" of oysters, crabs and watermen. Ironically, he also helped facilitate the "gasoline revolution" on the Shore through his mapping work for the Maryland State Roads Commission. Recognizing that the results of our actions are not always clear-cut, *The Bay From Above* is intended to spark conversation through a series of questions: What have we lost that we can't replace? What have we gained that we would not give up? And, What do we want our impact on this place to be? Our answers will be better informed by sitting in the catbird's seat with Hollyday and Harris.

The Historical Society of Talbot County has made arrangements with Hunter Harris for interested purchasers to obtain the then-and-now images in *The Bay From Above*. A portion of the proceeds support HSTC. To purchase the then-and-now images or the contemporary photographs, contact Hunter Harris at Aloft Aerial Photography at 410-770-5253 or via e-mail at hunter@flyaloft.com. For Hollyday images only, contact HSTC curator Beth Hansen at 410-822-0773 or via e-mail at curator@hstc.org.