

The Ghost Ship

by Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

In April of 1919 a fierce storm interrupted ship traffic on the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. Captain Watt Herbert, then a small boy sailing with his father, sought shelter in Machodoc Creek on the Virginia side of the Potomac River and watched as the J. R. Moffett, a large cargo schooner, encountered heavy seas off of the mouth of the Wicomico River on the Maryland side and sank. Captain John Ranier and his crewman, both of Mathews County, drowned. As she sank, she capsized, lost her cargo of oyster shells, then resurfaced and ended up in the shallows with her masts and the remnants of her sails above water. Several days later the storm abated and Watt and his father continued their voyage. Through the early morning mists they could see the masts and sails of the J.R. Moffett materialize as if she had been resurrected. Others also saw the apparition and the legend of the ghost ship of the Potomac was born.

Captain Watt Herbert told the story many times as he worked the waters and boatyards of the Potomac. Eventually it was picked up by Tom Wisner, the Bard of the Chesapeake, and molded into a song. Through the telling and over the years the name of the schooner was transposed to the J.R. Morphy.

THE GHOSTSHIP MORPHY

by Tom Wisner, Arr. Dramtreeo, © Southern Branch Music, BMI

*Can you see the cargo schooner J. R. Morphy
As she beats to windward
To the leeward of the aged Blackistone Island?
We were standing off the cliffs of Nomini
And I could see
Five sails on her running to the lee.
She's a flying jibsail schooner
Close hauled on a starboard tack
One hundred ton of oyster shell a'riding on her
back
John Ranier was her captain
and she hailed from lower bay
And though the wind was nor'west down
She made good time that day.*

*As she beat between Cobb Bar and Blackistone
Island*



*The wind was wailing
Sixty knot and stewing down the old Wicomico
And the old Potomac rose in all her fury
Like a judge and jury
To try the skill of John Ranier's command
You'd a thought he's on a mill pond
The way he trimmed her out
He left the fore and mainsail up
And then he came about
Her bow was driving under
And she dropped six fathoms down
Left her rigging standing
And the crew and captain drowned.*



*We waited out that gale in old Machodoc
My Dad and me
While the J. R. Morphy foundered in the sea
Two days that storm came howling down the river
Then moderated
And the wind came round to blowing light sou'east
We was making headway homeward
And feeling mighty fine
My Dad he held the mainsheet
and we left our cares behind
Dad looked across the river
And I saw him set his gaze
I looked where he was peerin'
Through the early mornin' haze.*



*We could see the cargo schooner J. R. Morphy
As she beats to windward
To the leeward of the aged Blackistone Island
We were standing off the cliffs of Nomini
And I could see
Five sails on her running to the lee.*

*She's a flying jibsail schooner
Close hauled on a starboard tack
One hundred ton of oyster shell a' riding on her
back
John Ranier is her captain*

*and she hails from lower bay
And when the wind is nor'west down
You can see her sail today.*

Tom Wisner taught biology in Maryland during the early seventies and worked with Dr. Eugene Cronin at the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory in Solomon's Island. Best known for his song *Chesapeake Born*, he was an active advocate of Bay restoration and incorporated his songs and art into his presentations. Tom was indirectly responsible for the Chesapeake Bay Program after he challenged Maryland State Senator Bernie Fowler, from Broomes Island, to wade into the Bay until he could no longer count his toes. As a boy, the Senator was able to see his toes and dip soft crabs in chest deep water, but by the early '70s they disappeared in ankle deep water. The demonstration, now repeated every year, dramatically chronicled the deteriorating condition of the Bay resulting in public and political concern and culminating in major research efforts and subsequent recovery programs.

I heard Tom perform this song while I was a citizen advisor for the Chesapeake Bay Program, and I was mesmerized. I knew the Ranier family of Middlesex and knew that they came from a long line of watermen, but no one that I talked to had ever heard the story of Captain John and the ghost ship Morphy. I then found these two entries in the archives of the Mathews Journal: April 10, 1919: "Captain John Ranier of Blakes and Chris Brooks, colored, of the same place are assumed to have lost their lives in the terrific gale of last week. They were bound for Alexandria with a load of shells in the schooner J.R. Moffett and failed to arrive at their destination." April 17, 1919: "Found Schooner but no trace of men. The schooner J. R. Moffett was found at the mouth of the Wicomico River in an upright position with about 20 feet of the masts above water."

Historical note: Blackistone Island is now found on maps and referred to as St. Clement's Island, the birthplace of Maryland. In 1633, on the feast day of St. Clement, fourth Pope and patron saint of mariners, a band of adventurous Catholics left England on two small ships bound for North Virginia in order to claim their rights under a charter granted to the first Lord Baltimore (George Calvert) by King Charles I. On March 25, 1634 they landed on the 400-acre island that they named St. Clement's and held the first catholic mass in the English colonies. Led by Leonard Calvert, son of George and brother of Cecil Calvert (second Lord Baltimore), they then established the town of Saint Mary's. The town and the colony were named after Queen Henrietta Maria, wife of King Charles I: Maria's Land ~ Mary's Land ~ Maryland. Subsequently the island was owned and farmed by a family of Blackistones and for many years was popularly known as Blackistone's Island. The island has now eroded to less than 40 acres, is a Maryland state park and is the site of the annual

blessing of the fleet in October.

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