

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: TRADITIONS IN TRANSITION:
THE EROSION OF CUSTOMS
ON TANGIER ISLAND

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Tangier Island, a tiny crabbing community off the coast of Virginia, is in the midst of a transition. Over the past several decades, Tangier has experienced profound changes that have significantly impacted its culture, from introduction of television to growth of tourism. While positive in some respects, these developments also have eaten away at many aspects of Island life.

This cultural erosion is seen clearly in the transition of three Island customs — New Year's Giving, the Halloween carnival and Homecoming. Using oral narratives from residents of the community as a primary source, I explore islanders' memories of these customs and how they view the changes that have occurred.

New Year's Giving, which is still practiced today, involves young boys going from home to home New Year's morning asking for money. The Mardi Gras-style carnival on the Island's main street, a custom long associated with Halloween on Tangier, died off in the 1960s and has since been replaced with more structured Halloween celebrations. Homecoming, a three-day reunion

held on Tangier each year since the early 1800s, has failed to make the transition to present day.

The erosion of these customs highlights a much deeper dilemma facing Tangier — namely, survival of the community in the 21st century. Islanders are facing many challenges that will determine their future, from erosion of the Island itself to commercialization of the qualities that make Tangier unique. If the community — and its customs — are to survive, residents must confront and resolve these challenges.

TRADITIONS IN TRANSITION:
THE EROSION OF CUSTOMS ON TANGIER ISLAND

by

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DEDICATION

To my Mother, Patricia Ann Scott

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I am grateful to the people of Tangier Island for their hospitality and for allowing me to become a part of their community, if only for a short time. In particular, I owe a debt of gratitude to Vanessa Dise, who served as my guide and liaison to the Island community during my research.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The first time I traveled to Tangier Island, I wasn't sure just what I would find. Friends who knew of my interest in oral history and folklore had suggested that I visit Tangier before deciding on a subject for my master's thesis. They described to me a small fishing community on an island in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay; a community whose simple lifestyle and remnants of old Elizabethan speech evoked images from days gone by. My curiosity piqued, I decided to find out what Tangier was all about. A quick search of the Internet yielded little information about Tangier Island, but the woman who answered the phone at Tangier Island Cruises was happy to provide the details I needed for my sojourn. She told me that between the months of April and October, two boats make daily trips from Crisfield, on Maryland's Eastern Shore, to Tangier. Both the mail boat and the cruise boat leave at 12:30, she said. The cruise boat would return about four hours later, but the mailboat would not come back to the mainland until the next morning.

This woman also offered to put me in touch with a Tangier native, who could help arrange my stay. Vanessa Dise was more than accommodating, referring me to one of Tangier's bed and breakfasts and mailing me a small booklet on the Island. Armed with this information, a notepad and a tape recorder, I set out on my journey one summer day, only to arrive at the Crisfield dock just as the *Stephen Thomas*, a 90-foot cruise boat, was pulling away. The mail boat had already left. Distraught, I ran into a nearby eatery,

where a waitress expressed sympathy, offered me a cup of coffee and suggested I “catch a ride” with a waterman, as the Bay crabbers are known. Standing on the dock, feeling out of place, I waved half-heartedly at a couple of passing boats. The watermen waved back. Becoming more desperate with each passing moment, I finally managed to convey my message to one captain, who pulled his well-worn but tidy fishing boat close to the dock. He listened carefully as I struggled to be heard above the din of the motor, then nodded. “I’ll take ye,” he said matter-of-factly, his accent thick. “Roight after I driap these oiff.”

Relieved, I swung my bags onto the boat’s deck, which was piled high with crab pots (pots is a misnomer; they’re really double-chambered cages). As we headed toward Tangier, the waterman (whom I soon learned was Dean Dise — Vanessa’s cousin), radioed ahead to his wife, who then relayed a message to Vanessa that I was on the way. So began my first visit to Tangier Island.

I knew right away that Tangier was a perfect subject for my work. It was clear immediately that the islanders were unique in many ways (their odd accents the most readily apparent). I also had learned first-hand that the Tangier folk were friendly, even if a little wary of strangers, and I surmised that a small, close-knit community like the one found on Tangier would reveal a history rich with customs brought from the Old World and passed down from generation to generation.

I was right, but I also was wrong. For what I found on Tangier was a dichotomy. I saw a community in transition, a hardy breed of individuals descended from a handful of core families who in some ways clung to the past while in other ways embraced the present. I discovered a hard-working, God-fearing people just beginning to struggle with issues long ago faced by most mainland communities, issues such as whether or not to lock their doors at

night or what to do about drinking on the Island. Liquor is not sold on Tangier, and most natives are devoutly Methodist. At the same time, however, beer and liquor manage to find their way to the Island, contributing to occasional rowdiness on the part of some young men. Still, crime is almost non-existent, restricted primarily to isolated occurrences of vandalism or theft, and order is kept by a single policeman who patrols Tangier's tiny streets.

I also found a community that in many ways is not so different from the rest of society. As in other parts of the world, technology has made an impact. An electric plant built in 1945 supplies the Island with a constant flow of energy, almost every home has a television and a telephone and a few islanders now have computers and fax machines. Though automobiles are rare on Tangier, many islanders do keep vehicles on the mainland. A small "airport" allows visitors to come to Tangier on small plane.

In this thesis, I attempt to illuminate this dichotomy in terms of the Island customs, showing how certain traditions have made the transition from the past to the present while others have died off or been replaced by new versions. Though this dichotomy can be seen in many different aspects of Island life, for purposes of this project, I have chosen to limit my research to three specific customs, all of which have undergone some degree of change. Customs, as used here, refer to practices carried on by tradition. In this paper, the terms "custom" and "tradition" are used interchangeably.

One of the customs examined, referred to as "New Year's Giving" or "New Year's Gift," continues to be practiced today though it has been modified slightly over the past few decades. This custom involves the Island's boys, who go from house to house on New Year's morning, seeking gifts of money. The other two customs explored here have been phased out, and newer versions have taken their place. The custom of a community "Halloween Mardi Gras,"

held on Tangier's main street, has been replaced by organized parties, and the annual "Homecoming," a reunion for current and former islanders, died off altogether in the early 1970s.

This paper shows how the residents of Tangier Island have adapted to changes in their community by modifying or creating new traditions while at the same time maintaining crucial links with their past. Using islanders' narratives as a primary source, I explore the needs these customs met in Tangier society and examine how and why and how these needs have changed. I argue that the community's increased exposure to the world outside of Tangier, combined with a desire to retain the old ways, has created tension on the Island. This tension is evident in the community's failure to maintain some customs while striving to maintain others.

Methodology

I began my research on the customs and traditions of the Tangier community by determining what had already been written about the Virginia island. Initial research at the University of Maryland pointed me toward a few books and articles on Tangier. The Library of Congress provided little more. Searches on CompuServe and the Internet resulted in a few magazine and newspaper articles. A trip to the Virginia Historical Society and the Library of Virginia, both in Richmond, turned up several small booklets and pamphlets on Tangier. Residents of the Island, particularly Gerald Wheatley — Tangier's self-appointed historian — provided additional written materials on the community, ranging from booklets sold in the Island gift shops to one-page leaflets designed for tourists containing interesting tidbits and recipes from Tangier.

The second phase of my research consisted of interviews with residents of the Island. Initial interviews were broad as I tried to learn more about the community and thus narrow the focus of my research. Vanessa Dise served as my primary contact on Tangier, recommending subjects, and in many cases, making the initial contact. Informants were chosen based on their knowledge of Island history and customs, the role they play in the community and their willingness to talk to a stranger. The only restriction was that the informants be natives of Tangier or have lived on the Island for most of their lives. With one exception, all informants were born and raised on Tangier. Roger Evans was born on Smith Island but moved to Tangier as a young man when he married his wife, Dottie, a Tangier native.

The third phase of my research involved study of customs and holidays in general. In order to place Tangier's customs in context, I first had to understand how different American holidays and traditions had evolved from their largely European roots to their current forms. For this I turned to such books as Jack Santino's All Around the Year: Holidays and Celebrations in American Life, J. Walker McSpadden's The Book of Holidays and George William Douglas's The American Book of Days. I also reviewed rituals and practices associated with holidays. Henry's Glassie's All Silver and No Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming helped provide a solid overview of the practice of mumming, a type of parading in which participants dress in costume and go from house to house in return for some kind of gift, usually food or drink.

Over the course of a year, I traveled to Tangier about half a dozen times, staying for one to three days each time. The first couple of visits were spent learning more about the island, meeting people and getting a feel for the community. Later visits were focused more on collecting information on specific customs and traditions. Altogether, I conducted formal interviews with

about 15 residents although I spoke informally with more than twice that many. A Ladies' Social at Swain Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, to which I was invited, allowed me to chat with a group of Tangier women about holidays on the Island. A few informants I interviewed more than once, and in some cases, I conducted follow-up interviews by phone. As is typical in conducting field research, some informants were able to provide more information than others. Interviews with a couple of the Island's older residents, who knew much about the customs but whose memory was failing, were of limited use.

Interviews with informants were designed to elicit information both about their lives and experiences on Tangier, including historical knowledge, and their involvement in and knowledge of particular customs, such New Year's Gift or Homecoming. Subjects were asked to read and sign a consent form agreeing to participate in this research, then were asked a series of questions. In most cases, interviews were limited to two hours to avoid informant "burnout." Interviews were then transcribed and reviewed to determine relevance, usefulness and need for follow-up, if any.

In many cases, informants gave conflicting versions of events, were unsure of specific dates or offered wide-ranging views and interpretations of a particular event or custom. When possible, I have tried to find common threads in stories in order to develop a solid framework for this discussion of traditions in transition. At the same time, I have let the islanders tell their stories, conflicts and all. The diverse perspectives, I believe, lend color and flavor to discussion of these customs. Through the islanders' stories, we learn of the importance of these practices to the community, the impact of progress and technology on them and how residents view the transitions that have taken place.

Tangier has been profoundly affected by the rapid pace of change. In the past 40 years alone, islanders have experienced the development of a constant

energy supply, along with the introduction of television, telephones and a soaring increase in tourism. Exposure to people, practices and ideas of other communities, understandably, has had an impact as well, particularly on the younger generations. Tangier is becoming more and more like other small towns throughout the country. At the same time, however, the people of Tangier retain a certain pride in their difference. Islanders are aware that their community is viewed as “quaint” and “simple” by outsiders, and they use that belief to draw tourists to the Island. But as Tangier continues to modernize, the differences that make it special and that draw tourists are likely to fade. Just how islanders will resolve this dilemma is a challenge the people of Tangier must begin to face as they move into the 21st century.

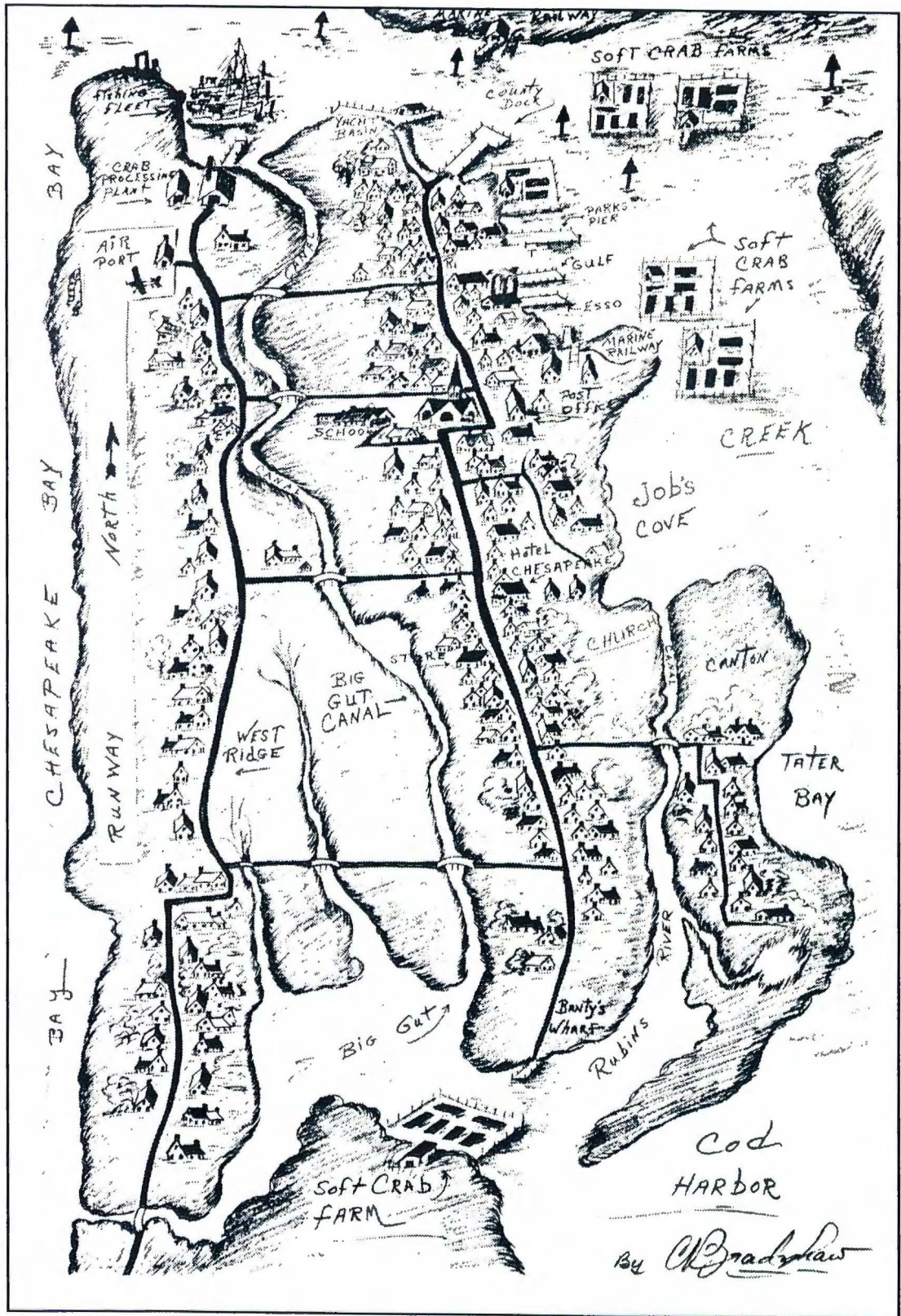


Fig. 1. Illustrated Map of Tangier, Virginia.

Chapter II

Timeless Tangier

*Heaven and Earth seemed never to have agreed better
to have framed a place for man's inhabitation.*

— Captain John Smith

In the middle of the broad Chesapeake Bay, just south of the line marking the Maryland-Virginia boundary, lies Tangier Island, a tiny crop of land with a dwindling population and a rich history.

Discovered in 1608 by Captain John Smith during his explorations from the colony of Jamestown, Tangier is one of several islands that sits mid-Bay, along with Smith, Deal and Watts Islands. Smith and 14 companions came upon Tangier and the other islands as they searched the Chesapeake for a route to the “South Sea” and for a source of salt for the colony. Smith named the islands “Russell Isles” in honor of the group’s surgeon, Dr. Walter Russell. Smith and his men did not stay on the islands, though, and Tangier was not actually settled until about 70 years later (Wilson).

Just how Tangier came to be settled, as well as how it acquired its name, are the subject of some dispute. Some accounts hold that the island was purchased in 1654 by a man named Ambrose White, who sold it in 1676 to two investors — Anthony West and Elizabeth Scarbough (Parks 14-15). According to other accounts, the island was granted to White in 1670 by King Charles II

and was “conveyed” to Lieut. Col. John West and Col. Charles Scarborough, who left the island to their descendants when they died (G. Wheatley, History: Past and Present 4). Ultimately, however, the island was sold to John Crockett, an English farmer. Crockett, his wife and one child became Tangier’s first white permanent settlers.

Altogether, the Crocketts had eight children — four sons and four daughters. John, Zaccharia and Thomas found wives on the mainland and brought them back to the island. The fourth son left Tangier and settled somewhere along the Rappahannock River in Virginia. The daughters all married men from the mainland and brought them back to the island, bringing with them as well four new surnames: Dize (Dise), Evans, Hopkins and Parks (Dize 12). Except for Hopkins, these names remain the prominent surnames on Tangier today.

The name “Tangier” did not appear in public records until 1713, and there again is some uncertainty about how the island got its name. According to one story, the name came from Captain Smith, who had fought in Transylvania against the Turks before his explorations to the New World. Smith reportedly observed Indians on the island using red clay for earthenware, and the clay was similar to the tanja — red clay — in Turkey. Some believe, however, that the island was named by Alexander Spotswood, who served as Lieutenant Governor of Virginia in the early 1700s. Spotswood was born in Tangier, Morocco, in 1676 while his father, a British Army surgeon, was stationed there (Virginia 10).

During the early 1800s, according to reports, Tangier was a “place of picturesque beauty with luscious green grass and beautiful woodlands.” Over the last two centuries, however, erosion and severe weather has claimed much of that woodland. In fact, erosion has whittled several miles off the Island since

it was first discovered. Today, Tangier is only about two and half miles long and one mile wide (Waugh 34). For much of the first century after the Island was settled, farming and raising cattle were the community's mainstays. Not only were residents able to feed themselves through their efforts, but they also used fresh meat and vegetables to barter with mainland residents for other goods and services (Wilson). Fishing constituted a relatively small part of Tangier's livelihood.

The British Have Landed

During the war of 1812, the British took over the island, using it as an operating base until the war ended in January 1815. Between 12,000 and 14,000 troops were stationed on the island during this time, according to historical accounts. The British built a fort, several gun emplacements, a hospital, officers quarters and supply warehouses. The troops cut down many of the island's trees and pitched tents in the cleared area. They also commandeered the livestock and gardens for their own use (Wilson).

The first British attack from Tangier — known as the Battle of Pungoteague — was on May 30, 1814. The main purpose of the British occupation, however, was the infamous attack on Baltimore's Fort McHenry (of "Star-Spangled Banner" Fame). Legend has it that before the troops left the island for the assault, the Rev. Joshua Thomas — known as the "Parson of the Islands" — told them he had been "informed by the Almighty that they could not take Baltimore and would not succeed in their expedition" (G. Wheatley, History: Past and Present 10). In fact, the British did meet with defeat in Baltimore, and the war ended a few months later.

A few years after the war's close, there was little evidence of the British occupation of Tangier, save the many graves of deceased soldiers. Today, even

those graves have disappeared, along with the British campsite, which eventually fell into the Chesapeake Bay as erosion continued to eat away at the Island's edges (Wilson).

Between the War of 1812 and the end of the Civil War in 1865, the islanders peacefully resumed their quiet life of raising livestock, gardening and fishing. The island, however, grew even smaller, making it increasingly more difficult to farm and maintain grazing land.

Darkest Hour

Disaster came to the island in April 1866 in the form of a cholera epidemic. The fever spread quickly, and federal health officials were called in. On May 8, the Island was completely evacuated. According to one version of events, reported by Rick Parks, who grew up on Tangier but now lives on the mainland:

Each person left the island to a destination of his own choosing, with the state giving financial help to the needy, which included almost every family. All the cats, dogs and livestock were killed and burned. No one was allowed to step foot on Tangier for one year. Those infected with the Cholera Fever were taken to an isolation ward in a Washington Hospital. All but one elderly lady died. Legend has it that every man, woman and child wept bitterly as they boarded local and naval vessels for the mainland. Our beloved island was experiencing its darkest hour in history (Parks 37).

The quarantine lasted more than 13 months. When it was lifted, only 300 people returned to Tangier. Eventually, almost 400 more islanders made their way back home. More than 600 never returned, choosing instead to settle on the

mainland just across the Bay. In fact, their descendants form a sizable portion of Crisfield's present population (Wilson).

The Railroad and the Sea

That same year brought another major change for the people of Tangier, one that would forever change their way of life. The Eastern Railroad Company extended its rail to Cape Charles, Virginia, about 38 miles from Tangier. The coming of the railroad to the Eastern Shore, and the steamboat line shortly thereafter, for the first time gave the people of Tangier access to the market for crabs, oysters, fish and clams. Combined with the continued erosion of the Island (according to some estimates, land mass actually shrank by seven miles between the early 1600s and the late 1800s), this new access to interstate transportation led residents of Tangier to abandon farming and turn to commercial fishing as a means of support (Parks 38).

Tangier was ideally situated in the Chesapeake to benefit from this economic boom. This prosperity lasted until the early 1920s when the supply of seafood in the Bay began to decline. Nevertheless, Tangiermen have continued to make their living from the Chesapeake, selling their daily catch to seafood dealers on the Maryland shore. The invention of the crabpot in 1925 has allowed the watermen to focus their attention more on crabbing and less on oystering. Watermen typically set out 300 to 400 crabpots and fish them six days a week from April through November. Some dredge for crabs in the winter months. The average catch, however, has continued to drop over the years. In 1968, watermen were limited to 100 bushels per day, and it was not unusual for a resident to catch the limit in just a few hours. Today, however, watermen are limited to 50 bushels of crabs, and on an average day might bring in only 15 to 20 bushels (Parks 43).

The prosperity generated by commercial fishing in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century created an economic boom on Tangier, allowing residents to build a new church and school. Construction of a movie theater in 1908, known as the "Opera House," brought motion pictures (albeit silent ones) to the Island for the very first time.

Keeping the Faith

Construction of the Swain Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church in 1899 was a significant achievement for Tangier. Deeply religious, Island residents had long gathered in various meeting places to worship but quickly outgrew each location. Tangier's first church was built in 1835 by 16 members. It was enlarged in 1842, again in 1860, rebuilt in 1870 and enlarged once again in 1890. In 1899, the old church was replaced by Swain Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, a neat white frame clapboarded building with stained glass windows (Wilson). The church still stands today and is a focal point for much activity on Tangier, whose residents, by and large, remain devout. A smaller interdenominational church, the New Testament Church, was built in 1956 after a group of islanders split off from Swain Memorial. In fact, Tangier's only church had split into two factions at least 20 years before the New Testament Church was constructed. According to a sociologist who conducted a study of Tangier in 1939, two distinct groups of people existed on Tangier at that time: the "church people," led by the older, more conservative residents, and a group of younger people who opposed the conservative views of the first group (Hall 93). Ultimately, those who refused to accept those conservative teachings united to form the more liberal New Testament Church.

On any given Sunday morning or evening, more than half of the Island's population can be found in one of the two churches. Harold Wheatley, the

former principal of the Island school, described religious life on Tangier in a report he wrote for National Geographic in 1973:

Many of the watermen are lay preachers and Sunday school teachers. Religion to such devout men is a part of everyday life, and they talk of their faith in familiar terms. I well remember hearing one lay preacher tell his listeners with fervor and conviction: "Chroist was willin' to take all the sin of the world, no matter whose. Now, you can't ask for a better deal than that!" (Wheatley 723).

The islanders' deep devotion and tradition of preaching can be traced to the Rev. Joshua Thomas, that same "Parson of the Islands" who predicted the defeat of the British in 1814. Born in Somerset County, Md., in 1776, Thomas attended the first camp meeting held on Tangier in 1808 and became a preacher about 1814. Legend has it that he traveled from island to island in the Chesapeake during the first half of the 19th Century in his log canoe *The Methodist*, preaching the gospel to anyone who would listen. Thomas died on October 8, 1853, and is buried beside the Methodist Episcopal Church on Deal Island. On his tomb is inscribed the following epitaph:

Come all my friends, as you pass by,
Behold the place where I do lie;
As you are now, so once was I;
Remember you are born to die.

(G. Wheatley, History: Past and Present 38).

Just behind Swain Memorial Church, a little ways off Tangier's main street, sits the Island school, which plays almost as big a role in meeting the cultural needs of the islanders as the churches do. Unlike on Smith Island, where youngsters travel to the mainland to go to school, all of the children on

Tangier attend the Tangier Combined School, K-12, built in 1932. The school is scheduled for replacement next year.

The Old and the New

Tangier is a curious blend of the past and the present. While the primary mode of transportation on the Island is a golfcart or the ubiquitous bicycle, there are a few motorcycles and about a dozen small cars and trucks, including a church van, a fire engine and an ambulance. Because the roads are so narrow, typically about 12 feet wide, it is necessary for pedestrians to step aside to let a golf cart or car pass.

Also unique to Tangier is the practice of burying the dead in front yards. Years ago when there were few people living on the Island and each family owned considerable land, families buried those who died in small family graveyards discreetly distanced from their homes but within the family property. As the Island's population grew, and unused land became scarce, homes gradually were built in closer and closer proximity to the graveyards and the newer graves were placed in the actual front yards (Jander 99-100). Most of the bodies are placed in cement vaults that sit partially above ground level. While placement of these graves is one aspect of the Island that tourists find fascinating, residents of the community are sensitive to the gaze of outsiders upon relatives' tombs. Many families have placed signs in their yards requesting that tourists refrain from taking photographs of the family burial plots.

Also ironic, given its dearth of automobiles, is the fact that Tangier does have a tiny "airport," built by the Navy in 1969 as a air strip for use by its aircraft based at Patuxent. Consisting essentially of a 3,600 foot runway and apron, the airport is now used primarily by tourists and serves as a landing

area for emergency medical helicopters. During the summer months — the height of the tourist season — up to 80 small planes land on the Island each day, bringing visitors hungry for fresh seafood. Almost all tourists leave Tangier a few hours after they arrive, but for those who choose to stay overnight, there are three bed and breakfasts — Hilda Crockett's Chesapeake House, which serves breakfast and dinner, Shirley's BayView Inn and the Sunset Inn. The Chesapeake House, which delivers food family style — all-you-can-eat, served on big platters to be share by all those at a table — is popular with tourists. Also catering to tourists are several other restaurants and gift shops, including The Fisherman's Corner, the Islander Seafood Restaurant and Spanky's Place, an ice cream parlor. Several small markets stock basic food supplies. In keeping with the "early to bed, early to rise" philosophy on Tangier, almost all the commercial establishments close by 5 p.m. During the off-season, some close even earlier or don't open at all. The two exceptions are Lorraine's Sweet Shop and the Double-Six, which are favorites of locals. Lorraine's, which typically stays open until 10 p.m., is popular with the young people. The Double-Six, which is open from about 2 a.m. until 8 a.m., serves breakfast, sandwiches and coffee-to-go to watermen, who typically start their day well before sunrise.

Almost all of Tangier's residents live on one of three "ridges" separated by canals and connected with small bridges (Fig. 1). Almost all of Tangier's shops, as well as both churches and the school, are located on King Street — the Island's main road — on the Main Ridge. The northern end of the Main Ridge, where one finds Fisherman's Corner and the Islander restaurants, is called "Meatsoup" by islanders though no one knows why. The eastern ridge of Tangier is called Canton and boasts some of the larger homes on the Island. The West Ridge houses a number of homes, as well as the air strip and waste

treatment plant. The far northern part of Tangier, known as the Uppards, has all but disappeared due to erosion. The Point, which sits apart from the rest of Tangier, is now owned and occupied by the Save the Bay Foundation, which has fought to put restrictions on fishing and crabbing in the Bay, much to the dismay of the Tangier watermen.

Tangier has undergone many changes over the years, some of which have been welcomed by Island residents and some of which are not so welcome. Picket fences have been largely replaced by chain-link fences, evenings spent visiting with neighbors have been largely replaced by evenings spent watching television, and a number of old holiday traditions and customs have faded away or been replaced by new ones. Hattie Thorne, who at age 90 is one of the senior residents of the Island, recalls that when she was a girl, residents entertained themselves by listening to music or playing games:

All the boys and girls would come over and we would sit in the parlor. I had a victrola, and we would sit and listen to it. Sometimes, we would play checkers or we'd play cards. Flinch was my favorite. Or we would just talk. We didn't even have the radio then — that was later — but we didn't miss it. Seemed like we were happy with what we had then. Not like it is today (interview).

Gathering at friends' homes to socialize remained the primary form of entertainment for Islanders until the introduction of television on Tangier in the 1950s. Tangier native Barbara Parks recounts how the Island women traditionally would spend their evenings:

It used to be that after supper, after the women had done their supper dishes, they would go out visitin'. They'd go to each other's houses, or a few of them would gather at one house.

They'd talk and things like that, catch up with what was goin' on. Now, people don't go out as much. Mostly, they stay home and watch TV. Seems they're not as interested in talking to each other. We still see each other at church, but not as much other times. It's a shame (interview).

The Island is also no longer as isolated as it once was. Almost every home has a telephone (operated by microwaves), and a 55-foot mailboat makes daily trips to Crisfield, ferrying letters, packages and passengers. While residents in the past did most of their shopping by catalog (the Sears catalog was called "the Book"), more and more they head to the mainland to purchase goods. At the same time, the increase in tourism to Tangier has brought many outsiders to the Island. All these things — phones, television, daily boat service and tourism — have combined to increase the Tangiermen's exposure to the rest of the world.

In some ways, however, Tangier has not changed significantly. There is no hospital on Tangier though the Island does have a health center, which was built in 1955. Tangier had a resident physician at one time, but today relies primarily on medical services from the mainland. When Dr. Charles Gladstone retired and moved away in the mid-1950s, the Islanders' plight received worldwide attention. A Japanese physician — Dr. Mikio Kato — agreed to come to Tangier for a year around 1957. He stayed 21 months, married his local assistant and moved to the mainland (H. Wheatley 725). Today, islanders receive their medical care from two local nurses and from two physicians, each of whom comes from the mainland to Tangier once a week. In medical emergencies, helicopter air service is available to nearby hospitals.

A six-member town council, headed by the mayor, Dewey Crockett, meets twice a month to handle Island business. Currently, the council is focusing its efforts on updating Tangier's waste treatment plant and incinerator.

Declining Population

After peaking in the 1930s at more than 1,100 residents, Tangier's population has been on the decline, in part because of global trend toward smaller families. The U.S. Bureau of the Census began tracking the Island's population in 1820. At that time, there were a total of 74 people — 38 Crocketts, 12 Pruitts, eight Pauls, seven Parks, seven Thomases, one Shores and one female slave. By 1900, the population had grown to 1,064 and in 1930 it was 1,120 (Hall 46-47). The last census, taken in 1990, put Tangier's population at 658. "We like to round it off to 700," says Dewey Crockett. About a third of the population is under the age of 19, a third between 19 and 49 and a third over the age of 49.

Residents worry about the declining population, afraid that the younger generation will fail to maintain the watermen's way of life. Mayor Crockett explains the concern:

Most of the young people leave the island when they get out of school. They either go off to college, or into the service or get jobs on the mainland. Very few stay and follow the water anymore. We're hoping to keep some of them here, but I don't really know what will happen. We have a large elderly population right now. It's something we have to look into because down the road it can be a traumatic change (interview).

Those who do choose to stay on Tangier after high school typically continue to live with their parents. Virtually all available land is being used, so there is little opportunity for construction of new homes. In some cases, young people will put a house trailer in their parents' back yard, or if there's room, build a small cottage on the property.

An Eye on the Weather

Tangier is ruled by the weather. Driving rain, high winds and winter freezes not only keep tourists away, but more importantly, keep the watermen from their work. The Island has experienced many severe storms since being settled, with a few considered legendary. The August Storm of 1933, for example, still is used as a gauge for a storm's severity. Legend has it that the entire island was submerged to a depth of 10 feet. It was during this storm that the communities of Uppards and The Point were completely destroyed. Some of the families who were displaced relocated on the Island, but many moved to the Eastern Shore . Almost every hurricane is a cause for concern for the Tangier community since the Island is only four to five feet above sea level at its highest point. Abnormal high tides usually cover about 75 percent of the Island, and during most hurricanes, Tangier is almost completely inundated (Parks 45). These storms are largely responsible for the erosion that has occurred. A sea wall built along the West Ridge in 1987 has helped slow this process, and residents are trying to get federal funding to build another wall along the southern end of the Island.

Winter freezes can be just as troublesome for islanders and their economy. A particularly bad freeze can completely isolate Tangier for weeks at a time. According to legend, the Winter of 1779-80 was the worst of the Island's history. According to one account, Tangier Sound froze solid and men were able to walk on the ice from Tangier to Onancock on the Eastern Shore. The winters of 1898-99, 1917-18 and 1935-36 also were severe enough to landlock islanders for weeks at a time (Dize 19-21). The Coast Guard dropped supplies from planes, but the hardship caused by those freezes has not been forgotten. Today, when Tangier Sound starts to freeze over, hugh Coast Guard ships move through the water, breaking up the ice so boats can pass through.

"Over the Left"

One distinguishing feature of the Tangier community is its language. Residents still retain some remnants of old Elizabethan speech and turns of phrase. This, combined with the traditional Maryland accent, has resulted in a unique dialect. The pronunciation of the long "a" vowel sound and the long "i" vowel sound are standard on Tangier, just as they are on the British Isles among people of the working class. "Nails" is pronounced "niles," "neighbors" is pronounced "nibors" and "ails" is pronounced "iles."

Anne Hughes Janders, who with her family lived on Tangier from 1943 until 1952 and later recounted her experience in her memoirs, listened closely to the Tangier speech and recorded her impressions:

The short sound of the vowel "a" is somewhat changed by the Tangier tongue. To the little children who shout their greetings as we go along the path to Crab's Hole [the name given to the Janders' house], we are not Mr. and Mrs. "Jander," but Mr. and Mrs. "Jiander." When they have a scrape with one another, they are "miad" and when they do something wrong, they are "biad" boys. . . .

In the musical inflection of the voice, there is similarity between these people and the Welsh people among whom I was raised. Always their voices rise at the end of a sentence; and even in the simple expression, "Well!" — to express surprise or disgust — the word is left curling in the air, rather than pushed to the earth, as others pronounce it (Jander 102).

An interesting feature of Tangier speech is the practice of talking "over-the-left" or "talking backwards." Essentially, it involves saying the exact opposite of what one actually means. Barbara Parks explains it this way: "It's

like when people say something like, 'Did you husband like his roast beef?' and you say, "He didn't like that, over-the-left," it means it's one of his favorites. It's mostly the older ones who say that but everyone knows what it means" (interview).

The turn of phrase is not always signaled by "over-the-left." Sometimes, the tone of voice or inflection is the only clue to the actual meaning of a sentence. Barbara Parks explains:

There was a guy who came here to the school, and you could look up any book you wanted to at the Eastern Shore Library and we could get it, and I saw one on the screen that I had read. I said "That was a fair book." He said, "You didn't like it?" I said, "Of course I liked it. It was one of my favorites." But see, I was saying "fair" in that context, but I can also say it the other way, too. It's the tone and we know the people, we know what they mean (interview).

While residents of the Tangier community are unfamiliar with the origin of talking "over-the-left" or talking backwards, Ann Janders developed a theory of the practice when she lived on the Island:

I think that perhaps I have found, by accident, the mystery of the "over-the-left" twist in Tangier English. One day I was visiting a historic home in Richmond and fell into conversation with the curator of the place, a woman of some sixty-odd years. Telling her about the Island and some of its delightful customs, I chanced to mention "over-the-left" speech, and stated that I had been unable to find out how it began. She recalled that when she was a child in the town of Petersburg on the James River, this usage was common among the young people there. A form of slang, she

considered it. Like other slang expressions, it had its day, as she recollected, and then passed from the speech of the people in that region. We both decided that perhaps Tangier watermen, fishing or oystering in the James River, had acquired this usage and brought it home to the Island. For some unknown reason — perhaps a desire to conceal their true thoughts from prying strangers — the people of Tangier cherished the custom, and made it a part of their everyday language (Jander 104).

In addition to “talking over-the-left” or “talking backwards,” many residents of Tangier — particularly the older ones — have retained some unusual or dated phrases and words in their speech. For example, many residents use “we’re” for “our,” as in, “We were getting we’re boats tied up.” Barbara Parks explains an interesting addition to sentences by many of the Tangier’s seniors:

My mother-in-law uses a term that my family never did. We credited this to some of the poorer people on the Island. It’s the conjunction “even as much,” but you don’t need it. Like you’ll say, I haven’t even as much cleaned my stove today.” But they won’t say “even as much;” they’ll say “inamich,” but that’s what they mean: “I haven’t inamich cleaned my stove” — they mean “even as much.” But she uses it and one of her friends. I hear her quite often, and I’ve heard my best friend’s mother do it; she’s in her 70s (interview).

While the younger generation on Tangier understand the phrase, they don’t use it themselves. They also don’t talk “over-the-left” as much as their elders do. Islanders tend to be more careful about their speech now because of the tourists, as Gerald Wheatley explains:

It could just get too confusing, and get you in trouble. People from off the island don't always understand. Let's say you're getting off the mailboat and somebody says, "Now there's an ugly girl." What they really mean is, "There's a pretty girl," but you might not know that. So now we're just more careful about what we say (interview).

Still, some residents continue to "talk backwards" or "over-the-left," perhaps delighting in the confusion it causes for outsiders. For a community that has found itself the center of much attention in recent years — not all of it desired — being able to hide the true meaning of a statement is one way of keeping the outside world at bay. But just as the influences of the outside world has affected islanders' speech, it also has had an impact on other aspects of the Tangier community, including certain customs. Though Island natives make some effort to keep tradition alive, it is becoming more difficult with each passing year.

Chapter III

New Year's Giving

What I remember most about New Year's Gift was that we'd always use a sock to put our money in. Plastic wasn't really popular at the time. We didn't use jars, though, probably because it was glass and you could drop it and break it.

— Roger Evans

One of the customs on Tangier Island that has changed the least is that of "New Year's Gift" or "New Year's Giving," a practice that appears to be found only on the islands of Tangier and Smith. The tradition is described in this way:

On New Year's morning on Tangier Island there is an early knock on everyone's door. On the doorstep will be one or more small boys who will enter with the query, "New Year's Gift?" Clinging to the ancient superstition — whose origin I have been unable to ascertain — that is its bad luck if the first visitor of the year to cross the threshold is female, but good luck if the visitor be male, the people continue to welcome the early visit of the town's small boys, crossing their outstretched little hands with silver.

Assembling in the streets later in the day, the boys boast of the day's pickings, and I am sure that it will be a long time before this

ancient custom is discarded if the Tangier lads have anything to say about it (Jander 101).

In fact, the tradition has endured, with young boys still making an early morning pilgrimage to Island houses, seeking coins — or if they're lucky — dollars. Rick Parks, who lived on Tangier as a child during the 1950s and 1960s, recalls that "if you were lucky and happened to be the first child to knock on one of the old timer's doors, they would give you a dollar bill. This was a special reward for the early bird. By noon, every child between the ages of five and twelve had visited practically every home on the island. I usually collected about \$20 to \$30 in pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters. Seldom did I get a dollar bill. I do remember some assertive children collecting as much as \$50 to \$60" (Parks 54).

Because the first boy to arrive typically receives more money than those who arrive after him, Tangier lads — at least in the past — liked to begin the custom as early as possible. Gerald Wheatley, who went New Year's Giving as a small boy in the 1940s, remembers getting an early start on his New Year's Giving:

On New Year's Eve we'd leave church and we'd hit all of the people coming out of the church then, then we'd go to sleep and get up about 4 o'clock in the morning to be the first to certain homes where they'd give you one lump sum, like the Pruitts would give you \$5, Uncle Fern would give you \$3. You'd get up about 4 and then you'd stay until about 10 that morning and make yourself 40 to 50 bucks (interview).

Not even cold weather would deter the youngsters. Dewey Crockett also recalls getting heading out early New Year's morning, regardless of the temperature outside:

Oh, we'd go out before 5 usually. It would still be dark, but sometimes we would take flashlights. We'd canvass a good part of the Island before we'd stop. It would be so cold and bitter. Sometimes we'd be forced to stop to go get warm. We'd be out all morning, but we'd usually be done by noon. You could bring in quite a bit of money on a good day (interview).

No Girls Allowed

Because of the belief that a female would bring bad luck, Tangier girls are not allowed to participate in New Year's Giving. I asked Betty Crockett McMann, who is now 64, what she remembers about New Year's morning when she was young:

What I remember is that early — ungodly hours of the morning — little boys being in my bedroom. Sometimes I wouldn't wake, but there were three sisters, so one of us would awake and acknowledge them, and Mom would say, "I'm taking them from room to room." We knew what it was. They thought it was good luck to take them through the house, to all the rooms. Not any more. That was when I was a child. Something else I remember is that off in the distance — we didn't have electric at night, it went off at 11 o'clock — and sound carries further in the dark, it seems, in the pitch dark. I can remember a little boy hollering (lowers her voice), "New Year's Gift" and it sounded way off, and I would hear all these boys calling it out and you could tell when they were getting closer and closer. Then lights would go on, and they'd get a gift (interview).

Most of the boys on Tangier still go New Year's Giving though it's no longer the custom to take them from room to room. Generally, they simply come to front door, collect their money and move along. Some boys choose not to go at all. Hattie Thorne has seen many generations of Tangier lads take part in the annual custom:

They don't come as much as they used to. The children have so much more money now than they used to have. I guess they just don't need the money like when I was growing up. And the boys come later than they used to. Sometimes it's not until 9 o'clock. I remember before, a long time ago, when the boys would come in the middle of the night. They would be at my house long before the sun came up (interview).

The hour at which the Island boys begin their journey is not the only thing that has changed over the years. They get more money today, too. Forty or 50 years ago, residents handed out coins only — 25 cents to the first children, nickles or pennies to the others. Now, it's not uncommon for the first boy to get several dollars and subsequent boys to get 25 or 50 cents each. Relatives always tend to get more, as Betty McMann notes:

For the first one, or for my grandsons Joseph and Nicholas, I'll give them a dollar apiece. Then I'll come down to quarters for a while. Finally, I'll drop to dimes toward the end. I usually end up giving out about \$20. It's more now than it used to be, with inflation and all (interview).

Hattie and her sister, Grace, who live together in the house they were born and raised in, live on a limited income, and as such, are more frugal with their gifts. Grace, 86, lived for many years in Pittsburgh, but came back to Tangier

about 10 years ago. The knocks of young boys New Year's morning, she says, brings back memories from when she was young:

It's different in Pittsburgh. Boys don't go New Year's Gift there. I always thought that was strange, but when I came home, it was like I never left. It was like when we were little girls. The boys would come to the door looking for their gift. We always made sure we had something for them, even if we could only give a few pennies (interview).

Tangier boys typically stop going New Year's Giving when they're about 13 or 14. Betty McMann's grandsons are just now reaching that age when they must decide whether or not to keep going:

My son's son, he comes from Richmond a few days after Christmas, and he always stays until the day after New Year's so he can go New Year's Giving, but this year he's in high school, and I doubt if he's gonna go. They get ashamed. Maybe they'll go the first year of high school, which is the eighth grade. Maybe. It depends what makeup they are. If they're bold and don't care what people say, they'll go (interview).

Old World Customs

While Island residents say they don't know how New Year's Giving began, the tradition most likely was brought to Tangier by the early British settlers. Similar customs are found in many European countries, where New Year's Day has long been associated with gifts. The Romans, for example, gave presents to one another called "strenae" — from Strenia, the goddess of strength. Presents were also given to the emperor by those seeking favor. The Christian emperors kept up the custom of observing the new year for some

time but ultimately prohibited Christians from participating in the social customs of the day. Finally, after December 25 had been fixed as the day of the nativity, the church made January 1 a religious festival in commemoration of the circumcision of Jesus. The Feast of the Circumcision has been observed in the Roman church since 487 and in the Anglican church since 1549 (Douglas 2).

The Roman custom of making gifts to the emperor was introduced into England as early as the time of Henry III, and Queen Elizabeth supposedly supplied herself with her jewels and wardrobe almost entirely from these gifts. As late as 1692, the English nobility were accustomed every new year to sending to the King a purse with gold in it. Under the Tudors and the Stuarts, it was the habit of all classes to give presents to friends with the wish that the new year might be happy. Ladies received presents of gloves or pins, which were then quite expensive. Sometimes these gifts were given along with money, hence the terms "pin money" and "glove money."

This tradition of giving gifts of food or money was passed along through generations and evolved into various forms in different countries. Over time, the customs gained in popularity among children. In Scotland, for example, it was an ancient custom for the boys to go from house to house on New Year's Day asking for money or something to eat and singing this ditty:

I wish you a Merry Christmas
And a Happy New Year,
A pocketful of money
And a cellar full of beer,
And a good fat pig
To serve you all the year.
Ladies and gentlemen
Sitting by the fire,

Pity us poor boys
Out in the mire.

The rhyme was brought to the United States by early settlers, and the first four lines were used by boys in some rural areas as a sort of holiday greeting. In some places, a gift of food or money was expected in return (Douglas 2-3).

On Tangier Island, the custom of New Year's Giving may well be related to this Old World tradition. Over the centuries, any rhyme that may have accompanied the boy's annual request for money has been lost, and the superstitions associated with New Year's Giving are unexplained. Still, they exist. Not only is it considered bad luck for the first young visitor of the new year to be female, but tradition holds that if a child with "white hair" knocks first, the household will suffer bad luck all year. Betty Crockett McMann relates that as a child, her husband, who had dark hair, would be asked by residents to come by early New Year's morning to ensure good luck. "There was one old man lived by himself and would always ask Leon to go down there for luck," she says. "He thought he was too old to go, but he did it anyway" (interview).

While many of the younger generation on Tangier do not subscribe to the belief that a child with "white hair" will bring bad luck if the first to knock, most of the older residents still hold to the superstition. Barbara Parks notes her mother-in-law is a firm believer: "If a white-haired boy comes to the door first, she'll make him stand outside until a black-haired fella comes. The ones with white hair know it, too, and they'll wait to go out. They say, "they want ye" — I'm talking backwards now. They mean they don't" (interview).

The superstition that a girl will bring bad luck remains strong as well. Though a few brave girls have attempted to join in the custom, residents still frown on their participation. A number of the women I spoke with did not seem bothered by being restricted from the event as children, noting that "it's

just one of those things.” Others however, do recall being upset when they were not allowed to go. “I used to cry every year,” says Vanessa Dise. “Mom would fix up five jars for the five boys, and they would go with their jars, and I couldn’t go. I would cry every New Year’s. Girls weren’t allowed” (interview).

While fears have eased some in recent years, it still is unusual for an island resident to see a young girl on the doorstep New Year’s morning. The old superstitions, by-and-large, still retain a hold, ingrained over the centuries. The prohibition is clear in a story that Gerald Wheatley tells:

When my wife’s sister was little, this fella — a friend of their family — gave her some money to go down to their Uncle George’s on New Year’s mornin’. She went down there, and she knocked on his door. When he opened it, he nearly fell over. He couldn’t believe there was a girl standing there. He just knew he’d have bad luck all year. Well, he ran out that door and chased her all the way down the street. I think he would have killed her if he’d a got her, I really do (interview).

While no one knows just why girls are considered bad luck on New Year’s, one possibility might be that this superstition is somehow tied to the Feast of the Circumcision, a commemoration of the male. More likely, the belief is secular in nature. In some part of ancient Britain and Ireland, mumming — parading from house to house performing skits in return for food, drink or money — was a practice reserved for men. It was considered improper for young ladies to participate in such activities (Halpert and Story 32). This belief may have been brought to Tangier by the islanders’ Cornish ancestors and passed down through the generations.

Yet another possibility has to do with the role women traditionally played in Tangier society. While it’s not unusual today for the Island women to hold

jobs and earn money, the men still are viewed as the primary breadwinners. As in other communities throughout the world, the woman's traditional role — at least until the past few decades — has been to make a good home for her husband and raise the children (Hall 94). Given this, it's not surprising that girls traditionally have not been allowed to participate in New Year's Giving. While the female's role on Tangier is changing, the superstition that girls bring bad stubbornly refuses to die.

Enduring Beliefs

Superstitions of the kind associated with Tangier's New Year's Giving are fairly common in small, rural communities, particularly isolated villages (Halpert and Story 73). What's more, strange superstitions have long been associated with New Year's Day in England. According to J. Walker McSpadden, who has studied the origins of holidays, in many parts of England it was considered unlucky for any one to go out of the house until someone had entered it. In some areas, it was also considered unlucky to give out anything before you had received something. This requirement can be seen in New Year's Giving as well. Before a boy receive any money, he must first "give" each resident a simple request: "New Year's Gift?" In fact, ditties or verbal formulas have often accompanied customs associated with New Year's Day. In Nottinghamshire, for example, the following ditty was popular:

Take out and take in,
Bad luck is sure to begin;
But take in and take out,
Good luck will come about.
(McSpadden 8).

It's likely that at one time, New Year's Giving on Tangier involved a more elaborate request or display but that over the past 300 years, any kind of skit or ditty that once accompanied the request for money has been simplified.

Perhaps of greatest relevance to the Tangier tradition, however, is a superstition common to the Isle of Man. According to legend, the first person to enter a house on New Year's Day was called the qualtagh. If he were a dark man, no matter how ugly he was, he would bring good luck for the rest of the year; but if a fair man, no matter how good looking, he would be the bearer of all sorts of misfortune (McSpadden 12). It's probable that the Tangier Island superstition of a "black haired" child bringing good luck is somehow derived from this Old-World belief and that Tangier's original settlers brought the superstition with them when they came to the New World.

However the superstitions originated, what's significant is that they have endured for so long on Tangier. Even though many of the younger generation on the Island do not subscribe to those beliefs, many of the older residents still do. Slowly, however, this too is changing. Whether the tradition of New Year's Giving continues, and if so, in what form, remains to be seen. The continued exodus of Tangier's young people is likely to place the custom in jeopardy. If the tradition does continue, however, it's possible that the old superstitions eventually will be forgotten and boys and girls, light and dark, all will participate in this, Tangier's most enduring ritual.

Chapter IV

Halloween

Halloween was my favorite time of year. We'd always get dressed up and go out here on the road. People would try to guess who I was but they never could. One fella would go around pinching everyone, tryin' to figure out if they's a man or a woman.

— Gerald Wheatley

For decades, children all across America have celebrated Halloween by going from door to door “trick-or-treating.” For most Americans, this folk holiday is reserved for children, with adult involvement limited to accompanying the youngsters on their journeys. Slowly, however, Halloween is changing as parents — who fear for their children’s safety — opt not to let their children go trick-or-treating but instead take them to prearranged parties at schools, local recreation centers or malls.

As in those other communities, the customs associated with Halloween on Tangier Island also have gone through a transformation in recent times. Up until the mid-1960s, Halloween was celebrated with a huge, Mardi Gras-like masquerade party on Tangier’s main street. Older and middle-aged island residents still recall Halloween with great pleasure, reminiscing about costumes they wore and taking pride in their ability to fool others with their disguises. It’s unclear just when the tradition began, but it appears that from at least the early part of the 1900s — and perhaps even earlier — until about 20 years ago,

it was custom for the Island adults, young and old, to dress in costume and gather on King Street in early evening. Few mentions are made of Halloween in the little historical information available on Tangier, but Hattie Thorne recalls participating in the Halloween festival when she was young:

I remember getting dressed up, but I don't remember what I would wear. It was a long time ago. I remember it was a lot of fun, though. Everyone would be out, the older people and the young ones. You never knew who was there because they had on masks and all. You could try to guess, but it was hard and sometimes you didn't find out if you were right (interview).

During these Halloween celebrations, the revelers would line up along the picket fences, and the masqueraders would parade in front of them. The goal was to guess the identity of those in disguise. Island residents took this game very seriously. Much effort and imagination was put into developing elaborate costumes in order to fool the others. Many adults would go to great lengths not to be recognized, in some cases sneaking back to the Island when they were not expected. Like Tangier's annual Homecoming, Halloween was considered one of the year's biggest events and often would draw former residents back to the Island.

It's in the Disguise

Ruth Wallace Clarke, who recently turned 90, was born and raised on Tangier. She went to college after finishing high school, then returned to teach at the Island school for several years. Eventually, she married and moved to the mainland, but now spends her summers on the Island. Ruth recalls dressing in costume well into adulthood, even covertly returning to the Island for the annual celebration:

My husband and I would always come back for Halloween. We would try to hide, you know; when we would come on the mailboat, we would try to sneak down. One time, my husband brought his sister and her husband. No one knew that we were here. We sneaked down and got into the trailer somehow. We didn't want anybody to see us before we dressed up, and she and I dressed up together. We went out the back door here and went through the gate and came up the lane. We walked together. We got up as far as the boarding house then — the big white house — in front of the Island Gift Shop. People would line up on the sides of the fences, you see, because they wanted to guess who you were. There was a particular woman who was a very good friend of mine, and that particular night I didn't put gloves on for some reason, I don't know. She looked at me, and I had this mask on that covered all of my face, she couldn't see anything but my eyes. And she said, "If I knew Ruth Wallace (they always called me Ruth Wallace) . . . if I knew Ruth Wallace was on the Island, I'd swear this is her because I know her hands. But I know she's not here. I went on. Nobody knew Mary, my husband's sister, and they didn't know who I was (interview).

Hiding one's identity was a crucial element of the custom. Costumes were worn not just for visual appeal but as a disguise. Ruth never revealed her true identity that night, preferring to let the mystery remain. Other residents also emphasize how important the disguise was to the Halloween celebration. Betty Crockett McMann, who's now 64, recalls the lengths she and her friends would go to so they would not be recognized on Halloween:

I remember one time, before I was married, when I was a teenager — that foolish age when you think everybody loves you and nobody don't — anyway, I had a dog and his name was Joe, who worshipped me. He followed me everywhere I went. We would keep him in, we would try to lock him in, he would get out and follow me. But this one Halloween, we locked him upstairs so he wouldn't tell on us. A bunch of us dressed together. And just as we got down to the Chesapeake House, here he came a'tearin' down the road, sniffing at different ones, and when he got to me he jumped all over me, and they all said, "Well, we know who that is." When I got back, I said, "I want to see how he got out." He had gnawed that door! I said, "That's it, no more dressing for me." All that we did! We jumped over fences, go the back way, so they couldn't tell you come from the West Ridge and put two and two together and say, we know who that is. I was about 15 or 16. I didn't ever go back on the road after that (interview).

Ruth and Betty were typical of most islanders in their efforts to hide their identities. According to Gerald Wheatley, Tangiermen took the custom of wearing a disguise quite seriously. He recalls, for example, three mystery men who managed to conceal their identity year after year:

It was the biggest thrill going. I can always remember even the older people like Cap'n Ed Lowe putting on costumes. It would be an old coat with some kind of stocking or a mask. It was always a challenge to see if you could guess who had the costume on. Then there were always three men — we never knew who they were — who would make their appearance. They always had

a little drink cause you could smell the liquor — probably gin, the way it smelled.

They would come off the boat up there at the dock, and they had oilskins on and their boots and a cape and a hat, reeking of fish. And they'd start down that road like a herd of elephants coming. They walk on and on and everybody got the devil out of the way cause they'd run right over you. They would walk down that main street arm in arm, and they wouldn't say nothing to nobody, with their heads down. Walk to the end of the Island and wouldn't let anybody get near them cause I guess they wanted to recharge their system with a little drink. They'd stay about 10 minutes, and we'd ride our bikes by them real fast. Then they'd march back up the road and they'd disappear (interview).

Creating Mystery

The customs associated with the Halloween festival on Tangier's main street can be traced to the ancient origins of the holiday. Folklorist Jack Santino notes that costumed parading in the streets of towns and cities is a standard feature of many celebrations, representing evil creatures stirring on the eve of All Saints' Day, as if they are enjoying a final revel before the day that establishes the primacy of the Christian religion (150).

On Tangier, however, dressing in disguise and parading on the Island's main street represented much more. While the practice of wearing costumes may have originated as an attempt to recreate or mock evil creatures and has become common in Halloween celebrations throughout the world, it appears to have played a larger role for the people of Tangier. Considering that virtually everyone on Tangier knew everyone else, the wearing of a disguise allowed

islanders to create mystery where little existed. Family and friends suddenly became strangers; for just one evening, Tangier became an exotic place, filled with new and exciting personalities.

As with New Year's Giving, the residents of Tangier cannot explain how or when the custom of celebrating Halloween with a community masquerade party began. However, it's possible that the Halloween Mardi Gras custom originated on Tangier as a celebration of the end of the crabbing season, a transition from one season to another, much as the holiday's Celtic ancestor was a celebration of the harvest and a transition from the old year to the new.

While Halloween traditionally has been closely linked with the Feast of All Saints, that day actually was developed by the Catholic Church to replace the pagan celebration of Samhain, which marked November 1, the first day of the Celtic calendar. According to Santino, Samhain was a focal point, the most important of the four major Celtic feast days (the others being Imbolc on February 1, Beltane on May 1 and Lughnasa on August 1).

A transitional day from the old year to the new, Samhain was also believed to be a day of the dead and a night of wandering souls. It was thought that at the time of the transition to the new year, the souls of those who had died during the previous year assembled to travel into the land of the dead. The living lit bonfires and sacrificed fruits and vegetables to honor the dead and expiate their sins (Santino 148).

The festival of Samhain was begun at sundown the evening before — that is, on October 31 — and was associated with the harvest. But along with the natural aspects of the day (the harvest of crops), Samhain was also associated with the supernatural. In one old tale, a hero named Nera is sent begging from door to door on Samhain, and he enters the fairy world through a cave. According to Santino, Nera's ability to enter that other world points to one of

the beliefs about this day, that the doors and gates to the otherworld were open, and that, while the souls of the dead were passing from this world to the other, the spirits and creatures of that world could just as easily find access into ours. Because the barriers between the worlds were down, the night was dangerous.

On Tangier Island, the annual Halloween celebration also evoked a feeling of “otherworldliness.” For the young children especially, who watched as the adult masqueraders paraded by, Halloween was when “demons” and “monsters” would appear, according to stories told by islanders. The youngsters would wait in eager anticipation for their elders, dressed in costume, to appear on the street. Betty McMann remembers the excitement that would build:

I remember it always being cold. Seems like it was always chilly. Everyone gathered on a small part of the street, from the lane by the gift shop down to the Chesapeake House. There would be a few stragglers all the way down. All the mothers, those who hadn't dressed, would stay along the fence holding the kids by their hands. the kids would be daring, darting out to see the grotesque figures that would come down. Very few bought false faces. You didn't buy 'em, you made 'em. You'd put a stocking over your head, or a box over your head or a hood or some way they'd have of camouflaging themselves. The kids would go out and dart across the road as if Frankenstein himself was coming up the road. They wanted to see who was coming. It was thrilling! You'd almost have a nervous chill. It was just so exciting! (interview).

Fear of the Unknown

The figures were not only exciting, but frightening as well. Over the years, Tangier Islanders developed a distinct terminology to identify those unfamiliar apparitions, as Barbara Parks explains:

We would line up around the turn, about from the Post Office down to maybe the turn where you come cross one of those side roads — it was quite a distance. The adults and kids would line the fences and wait for — we called them “niggers” always. They were never monsters, they were “niggers” — the dressed-up people. They dressed in ugly faces, you know, and boxes and blankets and you didn’t know who they were. We never had black people live here in our life, and most of Tangier is not prejudiced. But we’d say, “Have the niggers come out yet?” and we never say “niggers” when we refer to blacks. Never. You might hear a prejudiced Tangierman — there’s a few here. You might hear a few, but not the majority. I’ve never had a prejudiced bone in my body (interview).

The use of the term “nigger” to describe those in disguise clearly points to a fear of the unknown. In the 300 or so years since Tangier was settled, strikingly few people of color have ever lived on the Island. According to available census records, there were a total of seven “colored females” on Tangier during the 1800s: one recorded in 1820, three in 1860 and three in 1870. Figures were not available for the years 1830, 1840, 1890, 1910 and 1920 (Hall 47).

However, only one person of color has ever lived on Tangier as a free man — Henry Frazier. According to one account, Henry Frazier, a black man, was befriended by Capt. Gilley Dize shortly after the Civil War. Dize met Frazier in

Baltimore and convinced him to move to Tangier, where he made a living “tonging” oysters. Frazier built a home on the Island and lived there until his death (Dize 23). Another account holds that Frazier set up house on Tangier during the early months of the Civil War and stayed until 1885 (Parks 31). Both versions make note of the fact that Frazier was a hard worker and was respected by Islanders for his kindness and religious convictions.

While legend has it that Frazier was welcomed on Tangier, it’s not surprising that more people of color did not settle on the Island. In the kind of homogeneous community found on Tangier, where almost all of the residents are direct descendants of the original Island settlers, it’s difficult enough for any kind of outsider to move to Tangier, much less a person of color. At some point during Tangier’s existence, the term “nigger” made its way to the Island. In adopting the term to describe the Halloween masqueraders, islanders modified its common usage and adapted it to their own environment. Used to describe something or someone who is monstrous and frightening, however, the term still retains a disturbing negative connotation.

Out with the Old

Residents of Tangier no longer celebrate Halloween on the Island’s main street. According to islanders, the Mardi Gras-style masquerade down King Street died off in the mid- to late-1960s. Today, as in other communities, the holiday is recognized in structured settings. The children celebrate in school, attending costume parties during the day. In the late afternoon and early evening, the children go trick-or-treating. Tangier adults also continue to celebrate Halloween, but like the children, they do so in an organized setting. The Tangier Parent-Teacher Association hosts a costume party at the Island school. A spin-off of the old custom of masquerading down the main street, the

adult-only party typically attracts more than 100 Island folk dressed in costume. Participants still try to identify each other, and prizes are given for the best costumes. Barbara Parks describes this year's Halloween celebration:

Everyone comes in their costume and you have to give your name at the front door, but when you go inside no one knows who you are. There's food and drink and the whole time you're lookin' at this person and that person, seeing who they are. Then the teachers pick out who they think is wearin' the best costume. This year it went to someone who rented a costume over on the Eastern Shore. I don't think that was right. Anybody can do that. There were plenty of nice costumes that people made, but this was chosen because it was so fancy — it was some kind of king (interview).

While dressing in costume is still an important part of the Halloween celebration, it appears to play a different role than it once did. The emphasis on hiding one's true identity through disguise is no longer as important as when the masqueraders gathered on the street. Now, the visual appeal of the costume is most important.

Tangier's children also wear costumes to their school parties and when they go trick-or-treating. This is a change from the earlier custom, when children typically did not dress in disguise and were more observers than participants. The similarities between trick-or-treating and New Year's Giving are obvious. In both cases, children go from door to door seeking a gift. The differences are also clear. New Year's Giving is restricted to boys while both boys and girls go trick-or-treating. What's more, New Year's Giving involves gifts of money while trick-or-treating involves gifts of candy.

Both the custom of trick-or-treating and the custom of New Year's Giving are a form of mumming. Although there is no dramatic performance involved, there is a verbal formula ("Trick or treat" or "New Year's Gift?"). Halloween's modern custom of dressing in disguise and proceeding from house to home demanding treats is fairly recent. Most historians say trick-or-treating gained popularity in the late 1940s and early 1950s. No one knows exactly how it began, but, says Santino, it is clearly a contemporary version of the British "guising" (from "disguise"), meaning to wear costumes or disguises and roam the community (144).

In the years prior to the advent of trick-or-treating, children wore homemade costumes and paraded around carrying candlelit jack-o'-lanterns. Sometimes they would ring bells, then hold the candlelit face to the door in an effort to scare the resident. In fact, Halloween is a night of inversion, when regular rules are suspended. Children can play tricks on adults and demand treats from them. The adult and the child reverse roles. Adults are told how to behave, told what to do and are threatened with punishment — a trick — if they do not do what they are told (Santino 151).

It's interesting to note that the role fear plays on Halloween has also changed over the past few decades on Tangier. Once, adults dressed in disguise not only to create mystery, but also to excite and frighten the Island's children. Today, however, fear plays almost no role at all. While the children may see the adults on their way to the PTA party, they are not active participants in that celebration. Costumes are worn more for other adults than for the children. And while the girls and boys now wear costumes and threaten a "trick" if they do not receive candy, this practice does not actually generate real fear among the adults. Halloween, by tradition, is meant to be "scary." In fact, it is anything

but scary. Children may dress as witches or the devil, but their costumes are viewed as cute, not frightening.

The custom of dressing as a “scary” figure has its origins in the transition of Halloween from a pagan celebration to a Christian celebration (Santino 150). Like many holidays derived from old celebrations that predate the establishment of Christianity, Halloween was ultimately “christianized.” Samhain, with its focus on the supernatural, was perceived by the church as particularly objectionable. The otherworldly figures were branded as apparitions and manifestations of the devil. In this way, the creatures who roamed on Samhain were defined as more than just powerfully dangerous tricksters. They were deliberately evil and malevolent.

In an attempt to replace Samhain, the Catholic Church assigned the Feast of All Saints to November 1. The saints’ day was meant to replace the earlier Celtic beliefs, but in this it failed. The old beliefs never really died out. Communities in America and in other parts of the world, including Tangier, continue to associate the supernatural with All Hallow’s Eve, and costuming remains an integral feature of the Halloween celebration. Though the custom of going from door to door trick-or-treating is now on the wane, new customs are being developed in its place.

Maintaining Order

Though it is not clear why the Halloween festival died off, some on Tangier say that over the years, the celebration became more and more rowdy. According to Ruth Wallace Clarke: “The children got real bad about throwing things at you. Of course, we had the lights then on the street, but the children would get bad. They’d have a bag with stones in and thrown it at you or something like that” (interview).

Liquor also played a role in the rowdiness. It was not unusual for a number of the young men to steal off to one of the soft crab shanties to share a bottle of whiskey, then join in the festivities on King Street where they would poke and prod masqueraders. Edna Pruitt recalls the last year she went out on the main street for the parade:

It just got so bad. We all would dress, put on our best costumes and go out there on the street. But there were always some boys who would have sticks and they'd jab at you. Sometimes they'd run up and touch you all over, trying to figure out if you were a woman or not. Or they'd think you were someone else, maybe another boy, and they'd give you a shove. Once I got a big push and fell right over myself. I said right then and there that's it for me (interview).

Gerald Wheatley, however, blames the demise of the traditional Halloween celebration on an event that occurred one holiday in the early 1960s:

After Halloween ended that night, one of the islanders wanted to play the guitar, which he could do very well. He was down a private lane, minding his own business, and the law wanted him to go in, and he wouldn't go, so the officer set off tear gas. It made a few of the men sick. . . . After that, it wasn't ever the same (interview).

In both cases, moving the Halloween celebration off the main street and into the school met the intended purpose of maintaining order on the Island. With only one police officer on hand, the community leaders felt they could keep better control of the celebration if it were held in a structured environment. According to Mayor Crockett, the decision was supported by the majority of Island residents.

Whatever the reason for the demise of the Mardi Gras-style masquerade down King Street, it's clear that Halloween has gone through major transitions on Tangier over the past several decades. Adults and children now celebrate the holiday separately, the custom of dressing in costume now serves an entirely different purpose than it once did and the element of mystery has faded in importance. The old customs have been replaced with new ones. Still, residents view Halloween as an important holiday and continue to celebrate it through structured events and practices.

Chapter V

Homecoming

It was the best time. We always had good things. You'd see people you hadn't seen in years. And there was always lots and lots of food and entertainment and people singing. It was the time when everyone came together.

— Wallace Pruitt

Another Tangier tradition that failed to make the transition into modern times unscathed is the annual Homecoming. An outgrowth of Joshua Thomas's camp meetings and revivals, held on Tangier's beach during the early 1800s, the tradition of an annual gathering on the beach continued throughout the 19th Century and well into the 20th Century, as Gerald Wheatley explains:

When the Parson died and the other preachers started coming, everyone on the Island and on the Eastern Shore would prepare foods and go over to our beach and make a day of it, then it turned into a three-day event. Each evenin' you'd have the prayers and the blessin's, blessin's for the Island, blessin's for the crabbing fleet for the summer and for the oyster season to come. And then that just gave way, I guess, when both churches sort of split the Island in a religious feud (interview).

In fact, the annual reunion started to become strained during the 1930s when the tensions between the conservative and liberal elements of the

community began to build. The strained relations ultimately spilled over into the Homecoming celebration, with the two factions gathering in different spots on the beach for the reunion.

This split may have contributed to the transition of Homecoming over the years as a gathering with much religious significance to one with relatively limited religious meaning. Over the decades, the annual reunion became less of a church function and more of a social convention. Tangier natives who had left the Island would return home for the event, which was held in August, and residents and visitors would gather on the beach to eat, drink, swim, socialize and play games. Homecoming traditionally began on a Thursday with the raising of tents and opening prayers. On Friday, the visitors would come, native sons and daughters flocking home for the Island reunion. Saturday brought more food and games, along with afternoon and evening prayers and brief sermons by visiting preachers.

Anne Hughes Jander heard many stories of Homecoming during the decade she lived on Tangier and recounted the event in her memoirs:

The celebrations were held on the long strip of beach that separated the Harbor of Tangier from the Bay. On the important day, many boatloads of people crowded the sandbar, and long hours were spent in conversation about old times and in the relating of all the news that concerned the wanderers from home, as well as the Island folk themselves. Enormous quantities of food were consumed at the temporary food counters which the town fathers had erected over on the beach for this happy occasion (Janders 93).

Hattie Thorne and Grace Chambers remember the days when Homecoming was held on the beach. Mostly, they remember it as three days of

fun and games, when everyone on the Island would join together to welcome home those who had moved to the mainland. Adults would spend time catching up with each other while the children would entertain themselves.

Hattie recalls the different games they would play:

We would jump rope, play hide and seek, play ring around the rosie. There'd be swimmin', too, but I never could swim. Just afraid of the water, I guess. But my sister would swim, jump right in with the other children. I stayed back and watched. I wasn't about to get my feet wet. I was happy doing other things (interview).

Ruth Wallace Clarke, who was a young girl when Homecoming was held on the beach, remembers heading to the celebration on the family's houseboat:

When we were kids growing up, my father, he was not only a merchant, he was in charge of the roads over here. People over on the shore would bring over scads of lumber and things for bridges. My father didn't do it, but he had charge of it all. One time they brought a big scow over with lumber. He would go out and hire the men to build the bridges and things like that. One year Pop was left with this scow, and they said, "We don't need it, you can have it." My father built a houseboat, and when we were younger, we used to go over to the beach and spend a week at a time on this houseboat. The people would come over and they would have Homecoming for two or three days. I can remember that very well (interview).

But while Homecoming was a time for fun, games and socializing, the religious aspect of the celebration never disappeared entirely. Gerald Wheatley was not yet born in the days when Homecoming was held on Tangier's beach,

but he's heard many stories from his father and grandfather about what would take place:

In the evenin's, close to the last hour, everyone would gather together and have a prayer. Sometimes you would have good singers from the Shore that would participate. In those days, I'd say that about 90 percent of the Island had Christians on it. Not only this island, but all around the Bay. The Christian community was brought on by the camp meetings. The island is still influenced by religion. We can't have liquor on the Island. You can't sell a beer in a restaurant. You're like an outlaw if you don't go to church all the time (interview).

After most people had turned in for the evenings, there would always be a few men who would stay on the beach drinking and talking. Gerald continues:

At night the older men would come out with their bottles. Of course, we weren't allowed to participate in that, you know, but Draketail Charlie and Spike and Noinky and all the ones that grew up in that era — it was anywhere from 20 to 35 would stay over there and drink after everybody else had left (interview).

Though proceeds from Homecoming had traditionally gone to the church, the early 1940s were good years for crabs and oysters and the church treasury was healthy. Thus, when the town council began a drive to raise funds for an electric plant around 1945, church officials agreed to let the town take charge of the annual Homecoming.

With more emphasis on the money-raising possibilities of the celebration, the location of the Homecoming festivities was transferred from the beach, which was continuing to erode, to a vacant lot near the docks on the Main

Ridge. The Janders, who spearheaded the drive for an electric plant, worked on the Homecoming committee for several years, and along with their daughter and three sons, helped provide entertainment.

“The Janders were very talented and could do flips and acrobatics,” recalls Ruth Wallace Clarke. “They could put on a show of their own. I remember everyone loved to watch them do their tricks.”

Betty McMann grew up across the street from the new location:

We were fortunate. We lived right across from it. You know the Double Six Shop? I live in the house just above that; it was my Daddy’s shop. Now it’s my sisters. Anyway, right across from me — Wanda’s Gift Shop, the house next to her and the house next to that were not there. That was sand. That’s where the Homecoming was. Mom would be telling us to hurry up and get our work done because it was like a holiday. I remember always having a ham, which was not an everyday occurrence. What she was doing was making stuff that didn’t require a lot of cookin’.

We’d be busy and all of a sudden they’d start that music on the loudspeaker, and it would be a magnet, drawing you to it. It was just a wonderful time. They had booths and games — pitching horse rings, they had a podium — a built-up wood stage — for dancing and if somebody wanted to get up and tell jokes or something. The main big part was right directly opposite us, that was where the cooking was done mostly, like clam fritters and oysters and cold drinks that were in tubs with ice (interview).

Like with many celebrations whose focal point is a reunion, food played a big role in the Homecoming festivities. The mainstays of the celebrations were fried chicken, crabs, oysters and clams, supplemented with hamburgers,

hotdogs, coleslaw, potato salad, soft drinks and ice cream. Tangier residents all pitched in, contributing food and drinks, which were then sold to the hungry throngs.

Elaborate Celebration

Gradually, after Homecoming was moved to the Main Ridge, the celebration became even more elaborate, with one resident stringing lights from his Delco generator to brighten the Homecoming lot and then installing a loudspeaker system on the speaker's platform. Speakers from the Eastern shore, town boys who "made good" in the outside world, were urged to step to the microphone to share their experiences (Jander 94)

Another main attraction at Homecoming during the 1940s and 1950s was the annual baseball game between a team from Tangier and a team from Smith Island or from the mainland. Children also lined up for "jeep rides" arranged by the Janders in 1945, the first year Homecoming was held on the Main Ridge, as Anne Jander recalls:

With no automobiles on the island, all forms of land-traveling motor vehicles are all but unknown to the children here, and so a ride on a Jeep was bound to be a hit with the kids. Through the aid of Mr. West, our country commissioner, contact was made with the naval base at Chincoteague Island, and an "exhibition" Jeep, in charge of a most cheerful navy officer, was generously lent to Tangier to help out with our Homecoming (96).

Many residents of Tangier, who don't recall when Homecoming was held on the beach, have fond memories of the celebration when it was held on the Main Ridge. Betty McMann is one:

I remember one year (my sister would kill me), anyway there was a Miss Tangier contest, and how it was voted on was how many people bought a ticket for you. There were no judges or nothing. Well, she won and she would never take the credit; she was very pretty. She always said it was her boyfriend just bought that many tickets. But anyway, the Jander boys carried her on their shoulders, and she was mad enough to spit nails because she didn't want that much done about it. But we kid her sometimes and say, "You've come a long way, Geraldine." I remember that (interview).

Betty also recalls dancing and watching gymnastics being performed by a young boy whom she did not know, possibly a friend of the Jander children. She also recalls an incident involving one of the boy's of the Island, out of which developed a common saying on Tangier:

I remember one other thing because we still use the saying when we're very tired or something. We say, "Like Harold Gordon said." After it had all been taken down one year, there was a cement foundation where a home was starting to be built and he (Harold Gordon) was sitting there looking so dejected and somebody came by and said, "Harold, did you know that we're going to have Homecoming again this week?" He was either so tired of it, or else he really wanted it and he was sad, he said, "You have told a lie." We still use that terminology sometimes. We say, "Like Harold Gordon said, you have told a lie" (interview).

Connections to Church

While by the mid-1940s, Homecoming had more social than religious significance, the festival still had not completely lost its connections to the church. "The people of Tangier have long had a truly amazing repertory of traditional gospel hymns," Anne Jander noted in her memoirs. "Returning kinsmen, most of them hungry for such music from their childhood days, enjoy more than anything else at Homecoming the evening devoted to an outdoor old-time hymn-sing" (95).

In addition to singing such hymns as "Abide with Me" and "Amazing Grace," it's likely that islanders welcomed the "wanderers" home with such hymns as "Come Home, Come Home." Grace Chambers recalls singing on the beach as a small child though she does not remember what hymns in particular were sung:

I do know that everyone gathered together in the evenin's, and after we heard from the preachers, we'd sing. All kinds of old songs as I recall. Of course, I was so young I didn't really know them too well. Then when I got a little older, I went away to school. I came back a few times, but then it moved over to the Main Ridge. After a while, I didn't come back as much (interview).

The Homecoming tradition continued after the Janders left Tangier in 1953. In the late 1950s, the festivities were moved from the spot near the docks — which had been designated as the site of the Island's new health center and several new homes — to the apron of the airport on the West Ridge. For several years, from about 1968 until 1971, Ruth Wallace Clarke helped plan Homecoming, even organizing the Miss Tangier Contest. Ruth still has an old yellowed notepad upon which she scripted the pageant narration and direction for the festival in 1971. Ruth recalls Homecoming in those later years:

We would have people perform and we would select the queen. I would play the piano. We would sing and do different things. We had funny skits. That was when they started to the moon, and we would have a make-believe woman who decided she would go to the moon, you know. We would talk to her. We couldn't see her, but we could hear her talking. We also would mock different people on television (interview).

While former residents of the Island continued to return to Tangier for the Homecoming, it was clear that the festival had become less of a reunion and more of a commercial endeavor. The growth of Tangier's tourism industry, while fortunate for the Island in some respects, meant that increasingly more outsiders attended Homecoming, thus diluting the significance of the holiday. Cigarette companies also wanted a part of the celebration and began sponsoring contests. Gerald Wheatley recalls the influence of commercial entities:

You could win Lucky Strikes by throwing something into a ring, or Camels, and you could toss pennies and if it landed on ring of the lucky strike, you would get a carton of cigarettes. They'd also sell hidden mystery boxes that you could bid on. And instead of bringing meals, each family would be told to bring chicken or whatever, then they would sell it (interview).

The last Homecoming held on Tangier Island was about 1971. Residents seem at a loss to explain why the tradition came to a halt, though Gerald Wheatley believes the commercialism ultimately doomed the annual reunion and celebration. Others believe the custom died simply because no one made the effort to perpetuate it. "Everyone just lost interest," says Ruth Wallace. "It's like anything else. Sometimes things just fade away" (interview).

Modern Gatherings

Though there is no Homecoming on Tangier today, islanders have created new ways of bringing everyone together during the summer months. The annual Fourth of July picnic and the annual church picnic, usually held in August, have effectively replaced the old custom. In fact, these picnics are closer to the early Homecoming celebrations than the later ones were. On Independence Day, Tangier families pack picnics and head to the beach, where they swim and play games. It is this day that is most likely to draw native sons and daughters home. At the church picnic, held near the airport, islanders gather to enjoy free food and hear sermons by guest missionaries. "We get a good turn out there," says Gerald Wheatley. "It's more like the old-timey camp meetin's than Homecoming was."

Still, islanders who remember the Homecomings from the 1930, 40s and 50s say they miss the annual reunion, which many considered the highlight of the year. Wallace Pruitt, who was just a boy when the Janders help organize the celebrations during the 1940s, believes the death of the custom has left a void on Tangier: "Everyone still misses it," he says. "I wish we could bring it back, but I don't suppose it would ever be the same."

A Church Homecoming, or "Preachers' Day," is held every two or three years. On this day, Tangier natives who have gone into the ministry return to the Island for a day of worship and communion. In addition to Preacher's Day, both churches also holds revivals, usually twice a year. The animosity between the two churches, by and large, has disappeared, and the two churches often sponsor the revivals jointly. Roger and Dottie Evans are active members of Swain Memorial Methodist and usually attend the church revivals. Lasting about a week, the revivals typically are run by a visiting minister who leads

participants in prayers and sermons. A revival held last year, however, featured local laity, who each spoke on a different night. Roger explains:

That particular one there were over 200 people saved. It was supposed to have been a week event, but it went on for four weeks. This was local preachers and laymen giving the speeches. Everyone went down for it, and it just kind of caught hold of everyone. It was exciting (interview).

Dottie picks up the story:

It was supposed to start on Sunday and end on Sunday. The Sunday it was supposed to end, there were 30 some people saved. They saw no need to close that down, and that started a wheel turning, and for three more weeks after that, there were constantly people being saved. It weren't all that great a number but every night there were some. Altogether, there were 206 people saved. We've never had that great amount in my time. People who didn't even go to church were there and were saved (interview).

The revivals, though they may help meet the religious needs of the community, are not in themselves a replacement for the annual Homecoming celebration, which was not only about worship, but was also about socializing and about raising money for the community. Like Halloween, the customs associated with the traditional Homecoming celebration ultimately changed so much that they lost their appeal. But while islanders embraced new customs as a means of celebrating Halloween, they have been unable to develop a suitable replacement for the traditional Homecoming celebration.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

Tangier Island is in the midst of a crucial transition. A faltering economy, exposure to the outside world and continued erosion — both of the Island itself and traditional customs that have held the community together — pose a real threat to Tangier's future.

Once able to exist in relative isolation, the Tangier community is no longer shut off from the rest of society. Tourism, television and the telephone bring outsiders in, and expose residents to life off the Island. There is no escaping modern technology, not even on a remote island. While a few members of the Tangier community have rejected these advances, most have embraced the changes. The community's younger generation, in particular, views Tangier's links to the mainland of Maryland and Virginia as a path to a better and more prosperous future.

Changing Economy

Tangier's economy, which traditionally has been dependent on the Chesapeake Bay, is in trouble. The crab population that once was so plentiful that watermen could catch their daily share in just a few hours, is now in serious decline. A six-year survey of Chesapeake blue crabs, released in 1994, found that the population has been dropping at least since the survey began. Though scientists estimate that crabbers are capturing up to 92 percent of all legal-size crabs, catches remain distressingly low (Lipske 24).

Vanessa Dise, whose used to help her husband run the family's soft crab farm, has felt the effect of the decline:

Used to be we'd get 60, 70, 80 bushels a day. My husband would catch the crabs, we'd put the peelers in the floats and wait for them to shed. I'd be out there all day watchin' 'em. Then we'd pack 'em up and send them over to the mainland. Now, he's lucky if he brings in 20 bushels a day. The crabs just aren't out there any more. Doesn't matter how long you're on the water or how hard you work, you're only going to get just so many. It's a whole lot harder now than it used to be (interview).

As a result of the drop in her husband's catch, Vanessa now works two part-time jobs to help supplement the family's income. In addition to serving as a tour guide for Tangier Island Cruises, she also works most evenings delivering food for one of the Island's two "fast food" operations.

Wallace Pruitt once worked as a crabber, but he gave up fishing the Bay more than 10 years ago to become a barge captain for Sonoco, a job he finds much more lucrative:

I worked the Bay for a long time after I finished school. It seemed like I kept working harder, but gettin' less for it. We moved to the Eastern Shore for a while, and I started workin' as a barge captain. We came back a few years ago when my mother died, but I stayed on with Sonoco. I wouldn't go back to working the Bay now. I see what the other men bring in. It's too much work for too little money (interview).

Though income varies from family to family, crabbers typically receive, on average, about \$20 a bushel. Male crabs, known as "jimmies" bring in more than females, known as "sooks." Soft-shell crabs sell for more than hard-shell

crabs. On a good day, a waterman might make \$400, but once overhead costs are figured in — boat maintenance and fuel, fishing fees and a hired hand — he nets considerably less. The soft-shell crabbing season runs from May to September. During the winter months, which are less productive, watermen use a dredge to dig up crabs that have gone into hibernation. Bad weather can ground watermen for days to weeks, taking a big chunk out of their yearly income. The overall effect is a drop in the average income on Tangier, which Mayor Crockett estimates has fallen by 15 to 25 percent over the past few years.

The continued decline in both the Bay crab population and the watermen's income is forcing the boys of Tangier to think twice about following in their fathers' and grandfathers' footsteps. Many young men are leaving the Island to join the military or find jobs on the mainland. Few are planning to make a living as watermen. Young women are leaving as well, in pursuit of college, jobs and husbands. Mayor Crockett says the threat to the Island's economy from this exodus is real:

We're losing more and more of the young people, but you can't really blame them for leavin'. It's gettin' harder and harder to make a livin' off the Bay. I don't know if it's gonna get any better. Hardly seems that it will. Lots of families are hurtin' (interview).

Traditions in Transition

The erosion of the status quo on Tangier is seen clearly in the transition of the Island traditions. Three customs in particular illuminate the changes taking place on Tangier. Each of the customs — New Year's Giving, the Halloween community masquerade and Homecoming — has gone through an evolution that can be linked, in large part, to islanders' increased exposure to the outside world. While these customs once played important roles in the Tangier

community — from entertaining the Island children, to raising funds, to uniting the community — they no longer serve the same functions.

New Year's Giving, the custom that has changed the least, still serves as a way for Tangier boys to make extra spending money on New Year's Day though this has lessened in importance over the years. The increase in tourism on Tangier has provided the children with new opportunities to make money by helping with tours, transporting tourists and working in Island restaurants and gift shops.

Though the actual practice of New Year's Giving has changed little, some of the superstitions associated with the custom, however, are evolving. Boys with dark or "black" hair still are considered good luck, but they no longer are paraded through a house to "spread the luck" as they were half a century ago. Older Island residents still consider boys with blonde or "white" hair to be bad luck if the first to arrive on New Year's morning, but the younger generation is beginning to reject that theory. While the superstition that girls bring bad luck on New Year's Day also is changing, the prohibition against girls participating in New Year's Giving has been slow to disappear.

As a form of entertainment for the boys of Tangier, New Year's Giving is no longer as popular as it once was. Unlike 100 years ago, or even 50 years ago, when entertainment options were limited on the Island, children on Tangier now have many entertainment options, from watching television to playing video games. Getting out of bed in the early morning hours and venturing out in the cold to seek a New Year's gift is less appealing for some boys today than it was for their fathers, grandfathers or great-grandfathers. In fact, some boys today don't even bother to go at all.

The customs associated with Halloween on Tangier, particularly the practice of a community masquerade party and parade, have evolved more

than the New Year's Giving tradition. Once a means of entertaining the Island residents, as well as a way of uniting the community, the custom of celebrating Halloween on the Island's main street has been replaced by more structured and separate celebrations. Adults, who once donned costumes and paraded down King Street, now attend a party sponsored by the Island's PTA. Costumes, once worn as a disguise, now are worn primarily for their visual appeal. The children, meanwhile, participate in Halloween parties in the school or go trick-or-treating in the early evening.

Although the structured activities are entertaining for both children and adults, they do not unite the community in the same way that the main street celebration once did. In fact, the celebrations tend to be separate, with the school parties held for the children and the PTA party held for the adults.

Homecoming has undergone the most profound evolution on Tangier. Once serving to unite and entertain the community, as well as help raise money for specific community needs, Homecoming went through several transformations before dying off altogether. First held on Tangier's beach, then on the Main Ridge, then by the airport, the reunion was kept alive by community leaders for almost 200 years. Ultimately, however, the custom's primary purpose — that of reuniting the community with those who had left the Island — was overshadowed by commercialization of the celebration. The religious aspects of Homecoming also faded in significance over the years.

As a money-maker, Homecoming also became less important over the years. While at one time it was a means of raising money for such initiatives as construction of an electric plant or church repairs, the community ultimately found other ways of paying for town projects. Residents pay more in taxes than they did in the past, and many residents tithe 10 percent of their income to their church. In addition, the community receives financial support for municipal

operations from both Accomack County and from the State of Virginia. Tangier also has benefited financially from the increase in tourism over the past 25 years.

Tourism has had another impact on Homecoming as well. August — the month when Homecoming traditionally was held — is one of the most popular months for tourists to come to Tangier. Many of the women and teenage girls who in the past would have been busy planning the Homecoming celebration and cooking the food now are busy giving tours and working in the restaurants and gift shops.

Tourism

As seen in its effect on Homecoming, tourism is playing an increasingly important role on Tangier, both in terms of the Island's economy and effect on the community. Each year brings thousands of tourists hoping to catch a glimpse of a fishing village frozen in time. They come by boat in the early afternoon and are carefully guided to the Chesapeake House, where they are promised some "home cooking." Visitors then spend about two hours wandering Tangier's tiny streets, snapping pictures and exploring the gift shops.

For a small price, a native islander — typically a young girl — will give a golf-cart tour, pointing out such attractions as Swain Memorial Church, the school and the airport. Though signs ask tourists not to take photos of family burial plots, many do anyway. At 4 o'clock, visitors are ferried back to the mainland. Shortly after they leave, almost all the commercial establishments on Tangier shut down, and islanders return to their homes.

Tangiermen tend to have mixed feelings about tourists. While visitors are encouraged to come to the Island because it is good for the economy, many

natives — particularly the older residents — are still wary of outsiders. Hattie Thorne prefers not to mingle with the tourists:

I don't like talkin' to strangers too much. I know they don't mean no harm, but I'd just as soon stay inside. They ask so many questions, and act like we're different. I think they're different. I 'spose it's good for the people who have the shops, but I can't see the need in bringing all those people over here every day (interview).

Ruth Wallace Clark, on the other hand, welcomes tourists to Tangier. Not only does she help transport visitors to and from the Bay View Inn, owned by her nephew, but she also is happy to talk with tourists:

I don't mind those folk comin' here. Gives me a chance to meet people from all different places. Most of 'em just leave you alone, but sometimes there's one who wants to talk. I don't mind. I'll answer their questions; whatever they want to know. I get lots of people comin' and knockin' on my door, cause someone told them I like to talk. Just like you. Most people, they just want to see what we're all about (interview).

The irony of tourism on Tangier is clear: while the community presents itself as one unaffected by the outside world, tourism — a fairly modern institution on Tangier — is having a profound effect on the community. A brochure touting the charms of Tangier promises that “little has changed since its first settlement by John Crockett, his wife and four sons in 1686.” In fact, more has changed than islanders care to admit, much of it due to the influences brought to Tangier through tourism. Still, islanders have been able to retain some important links with the past. The speech of the Island remains distinct even as residents try to “speak proper” for outsiders. Despite the decline in the

Bay's crab population, crabbing is still the Island's primary source of income. And the residents of Tangier remain close-knit, well aware of what's happening in each other's lives and helping out in times of need. Even so, there is no denying that many of the traditional elements of the Tangier way of life are slowly being replaced by "new ways."

Challenge for the Future

While the people of Tangier mourn the loss of customs that once helped define the community, they have been unable to hold on to many of those traditions. Outside influences, in many cases encouraged and even welcomed by residents, have taken their toll. The introduction of new technologies and increased reliance on tourism, in particular, has affected how Tangiermen interact and how they see themselves. At the same time self-conscious and proud of their differences, the island's residents, by and large, are ambivalent about changes that are taking place. They want to hold on to the past, but they also want to move into the future. They want to retain that which makes them unique — namely, the ways they are not like the rest of society — but they also want to be more like those they see coming to the Island.

This ambivalence has created tension on Tangier, particularly between the older and younger generations. While older residents want to maintain the old ways, younger islanders want to move ahead, forging a new life. They are less concerned with maintaining old customs than they are with finding jobs and supporting their families. Though islanders continue to live in relative harmony, this tension lies just below the surface of their seemingly serene lives.

Tangier must face and resolve its identity crisis. If the Island's leaders truly want to keep customs alive and stem the flow of its young people to the mainland, they will need to create new opportunities for employment and

emphasize the importance of tradition to the younger generations. Survival of the community and its people, however, most likely will require the community to strengthen its ties with the mainland and to resolve its ambivalence toward outsiders.

The erosion of Tangier — both as an Island and as a community — probably cannot be stopped. The flow of tourists to and the exodus of young people from the Island is likely to continue. How the people of Tangier resolve this dilemma is the challenge that faces them as they move into the new millennium.

LIST OF INFORMANTS

Ruth Wallace Clarke, 90, was a school teacher on Tangier as a young girl. She left the Island after she was married but returned after her husband died. Ruth now spends the warm months on Tangier and the cold months in Salisbury, on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Dewey Crockett, 49, is Tangier's mayor. Dewey left Tangier after high school to pursue a college degree. He became a minister and worked in Virginia and on Deal Island before returning to Tangier 13 years ago. He has been mayor for 11 years.

Vanessa Dise, 44, works part-time as a tour guide on Tangier and part-time for one of the Island's two evening food-delivery services. She's also active in both church and school functions.

Dottie Evans, 56, is active in the fellowship at Swain Memorial Methodist Church. As head of the Ladies' Social Group, Dottie helps organize functions and gatherings.

Roger Evans, 55, is one of the few men on Tangier who don't make a living as a waterman. Roger works for a tugboat company. When he's home, he's active in church functions.

Betty McMann, 64, works in her sister's shop, the Double-Six, serving sandwiches and coffee to watermen heading out on the Bay in the early morning hours. Betty also is active member of Swain Memorial Church.

Barbara Parks, 43, works part-time as a substitute teacher in the Tangier Combined School. Barbara also is active in Swain Memorial.

Edna Pruitt, 66, helped her husband with his soft-shell crab business before ill health forced her to curtail her activities.

Wallace Pruitt, 56, is one of the few men on the Island who don't make a living as a waterman. A barge captain for Sonoco, he typically works off the island for two weeks, then is home for two weeks. He converted the house he grew up in, an old Victorian on the West Ridge, into a bed and breakfast run by his wife, Shirley.

Grace Chambers, 85, left Tangier as a girl to go to school in Pittsburgh, where she stayed and worked as stenographer for much of her life. She returned to Tangier about eight years ago to live with Hattie Thorne, her older sister.

Hattie Thorne, 90, has lived in the same house on Tangier her entire life, a fact of which she's quite proud. "I've had eight children in this house," she says. "Five people have died here."

Gerald Wheatley, 57, is Tangier's self-appointed historian. Having done extensive research on the Island's history, Jerry has written several booklets and pamphlets that are sold in the gift shops. A "jack of all trades," Jerry serves as the Island notary, publishes the Island's newspaper and offers copying and fax services to residents. Jerry attends the Island's New Testament Church.

Harold Wheatley, 75, retired about 10 years ago as the principal of the Tangier Combined School. In 1973, Harold penned an article on the Island that ran in National Geographic. The article helped contribute to the increase in tourism on Tangier.

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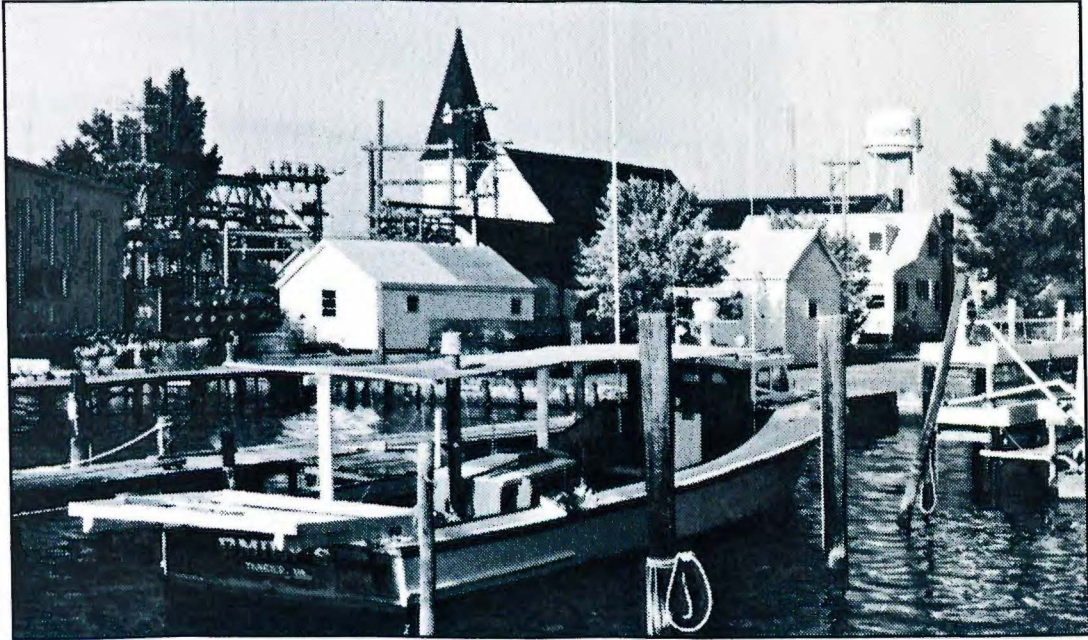
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APPENDIX A — PHOTOGRAPHS



The steeple of Swain Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church and the Island's water tower are visible from Tangier's main dock.



The most popular form of transportation on Tangier is walking or riding a golf cart or all-terrain vehicle.



After a long day out on the Bay, Tangier watermen like to gather near the dock for some relaxation and good old story swapping.



A Tangier waterman's life is dependent on the Chesapeake Bay, his boat and his crab pots.



Full Circle: When young, Tangier residents attend the Island's only school, above. Those who have died are buried in cramped plots, often located in the front yard of a descendant.





Built in the late 1800s, Wallace Pruitt's family home — located on the West Ridge — has been converted into a bed and breakfast.



Not far from the Bay View Inn is this old house, a constant reminder of days gone by.

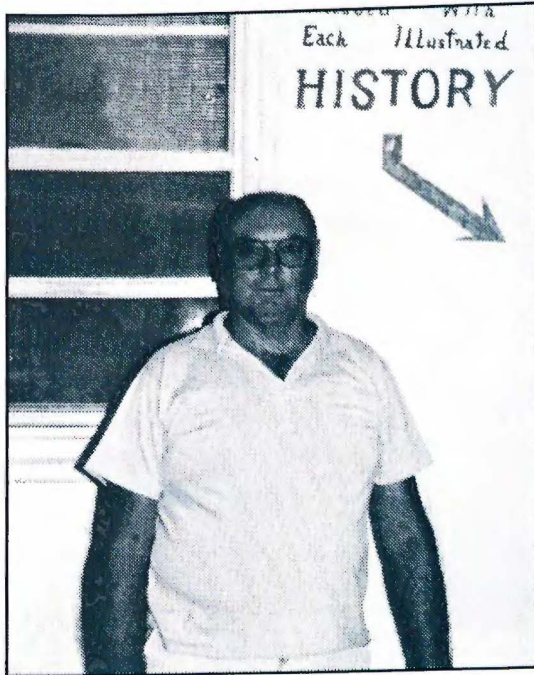


Grace Chambers left Tangier as a girl to go to school in Pittsburgh. She's back home now, living her with her older sister, Hattie (shown below).

Hattie Thorne, at 90 one of Tangier's oldest residents, still lives in the house she was born in.

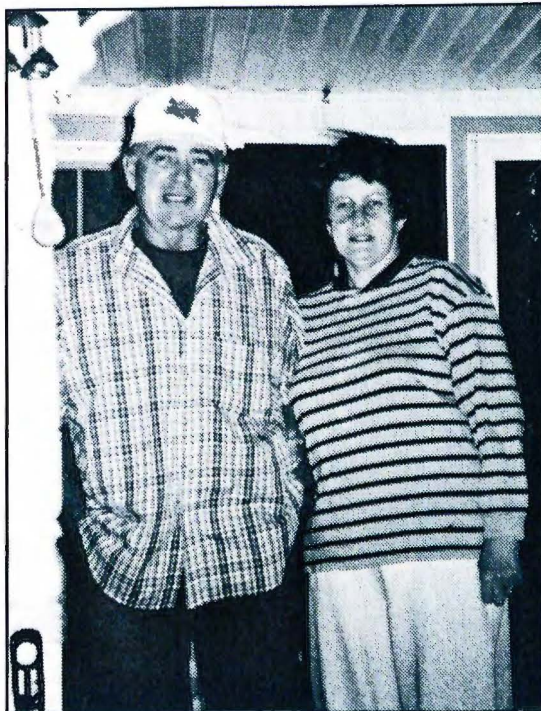
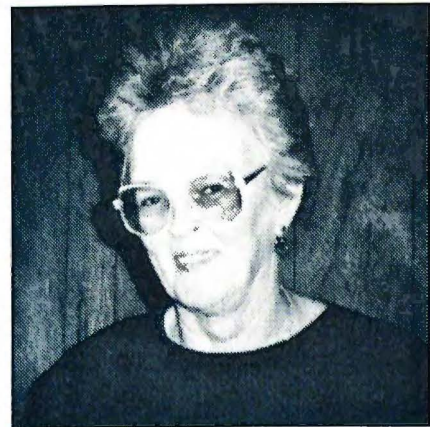


Ruth Wallace Clarke, who grew up on Tangier and later moved to the mainland, now spends spring and summer on Tangier with her cat, Pitty-Pat.



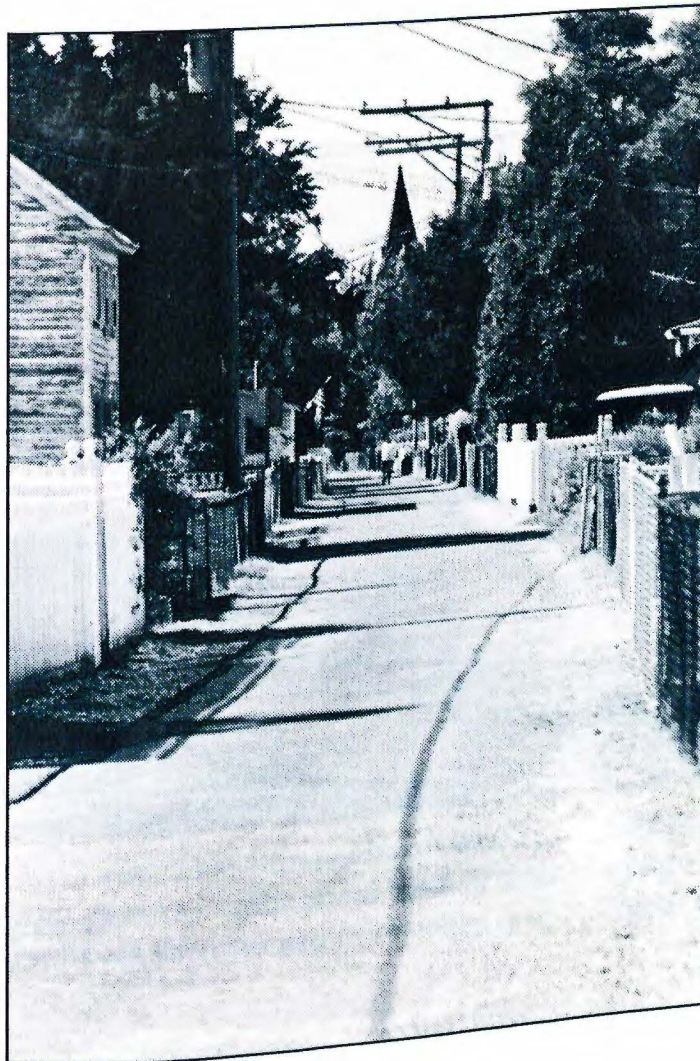
Tangier's self-appointed historian, Gerald Wheatley publishes the Island newspaper and is happy to share a bit of Tangier's history with outsiders.

Dottie Evans, President of the women's social group at Swain Memorial Church, is active in church functions and revivals.



One of the few Tangier men who isn't a crabber, Wallace Pruitt works for Sonoco Oil in two-week shifts. His wife, Shirley, runs Shirley's Bay View Inn, one of three places to stay on Tangier.

Vanessa Dise, left, and her sister, Michelle, right, shown here at a potluck held by the United Methodist Women, are active members of the Swain Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church fellowship.



The narrow streets of Tangier leave little room for two-way traffic. When two golf carts arrive at the same spot, one must pull over to let the other one pass.



Tangier Island's "airport" consists of a 3,600-foot landing strip, originally built as an emergency runway for military planes.



Most Tangier watermen have their own "crab shanty," where they monitor "peelers," crabs about to shed their hard outer shells. The soft-shell crabs are then packed in seaweed and delivered to the Mainland.