

StoryWays

The Unforgettable Legacy of Kermit Travers, Sr.: Journeying with the Last Black Skipjack Captain

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2 Comments



Early Life:

Kermit Robert Lee Travers, Sr. was born August 13, 1937 to Mable Pritchett Travers and George Travers in the Blackwater region of Dorchester County, eighteen miles east of Cambridge, Maryland. He was a part of a blended family of 12 children, but he was the only boy of nine children born to his parents. Kermit grew up in the poor, segregated backwater neighborhood among the water marshes and creek edges of the Honga, Blackwater and Choptank Rivers.

Born just two years before the end of the Great Depression (1929-1939), when banks collapsed, businesses closed, homes were foreclosed, some people were reduced to starvation, and many of those who were employed as share-croppers and tenant farmers were forced off the land they worked. Even the most enterprising individuals found it difficult to care for their families. Few government agencies existed at that time to help families in dire straits. In many instances, those few who found employment were hired but were never paid.

Kermit's family was extremely poor, and they lived in an old two-story house that had little or no insulation as they could see through the cracks in the structure, which forced them to put paper and rags into the holes when it snowed. Nor did they have plumbing or running water, so the family trekked about a quarter of a mile to Kermit's uncle's residence for water. The rule of thumb was that there was no wasting of water. The family lived off the land and hunted for squirrels, rabbits, black birds, turtles, and raised ducks for subsistence. Just before Christmas, they killed 6 or 8 hogs and stored the meat. The family's struggle to survive was so acute that for Christmas, Kermit often received hand-me-downs as gifts. As early as six years of age, Kermit learned to shoot a rifle to hunt animals in order to help feed the family and to cut wood to heat the house and to use it as fuel to cook their food. He also helped his father cut wood and hauled it on his shoulders out of the woods to sell to others.

Education:

Kermit began school at the age of six, but the survival of his family was a major concern. At the age of seven, he began to seek ways to help the family, and found employment in crab houses shucking oysters. He sought any type of work that would benefit the family, which meant that his desire to obtain an education and to become the first in the family to obtain a high school diploma became secondary. As a result, Kermit's attendance at school was sporadic at best, as he worked on any job he could find to help support the family. Survival of the family was his major concern, coupled with his father's illness, forced Kermit to quit school in the 10th grade, and he was forced to become a man before he wanted or truly understood the reason.

At 15 or 16 years of age, he continuously sought gainful employment, and he was introduced to work on the water. By eighteen, he actively began to work on the water, but it did not produce enough funds for his family to survive. By the age of 18, he began to have a family of his own, but he was not making enough money to properly care for them, his mother, and siblings. Kermit even went to Florida in search of sufficient employment, but he soon returned to Cambridge because the situation there was no better than when he left Cambridge. In 1958, at the age of twenty-one, he accepted a job working with his uncle in New Jersey and learned to work on a tonging boat.

No job was beneath Kermit. He soon found employment with Captain Eugene Wheatley, who taught Kermit all of the tasks that were required to operate a skipjack. Captain Wheatley was not in the best of health, and Kermit realized that someone had to be knowledgeable about the operation of the boat in an emergency if Captain Wheatley became ill or incapacitated. Wheatley taught Kermit the duties and responsibilities of being a captain, even though he did not want to be one at that time. Kermit worked with Wheatley and remained on his boat, the *Lady Katie*, for 15 years, was installed as a skipjack, and became one of only five known African Americans to captain a skipjack on Chesapeake Bay waters.

Work on the water was not easy. In spite of the dangers of the job, Kermit survived many situations, including: a number of serious injuries, that caused life-threatening accidents, explosions, and fires on board; capsized boats that included the drownings or near drownings of close friends, relatives and associates; governmental regulations that threatened the future of oystering; and the future employment of watermen prompted by the death of the seafood industry. For example on one fateful day in 1975, the captain of the *Somerset* ran into Kermit's boat and injured his crew. The accident busted a 55-gallon drum of gasoline, broke the sails, and set the boat afire. No one came to their aid because of the fire. One member of the crew was so severely burned that when the wind hit him, his skin began to peel. As the fire continued to blaze, someone on the Tidewater Fishery threw two fire extinguishers on board the boat. Kermit and the crew threw the drums overboard, but no one could get close to their boat. Kermit went below deck and put out the fire, and he never got a singe. Kermit's hands were so firmly attached to the fire extinguishers that those who came on board the ship to help them used a screw driver to pry Kermit's hands from the extinguishers. From that point on, Kermit was called "The Devil," because he had walked through the fire to extinguish it. The reason Kermit did not jump overboard and abandon the ship during the fire was because he could not swim. He had rationalized that over the years that he could not swim and save himself, but he had learned to balance himself, or he would fall off the boat and drown.

Kermit had been injured more than once, was incapacitated for 6 or 7 years, and emphatically stated that he was not going back on the water. However, the lure of the water pulled him back. The love of the water and the sense of freedom he found on the water kept him there. He believed that there was little or no racism or discrimination on the water because work on the water demanded that Blacks and Whites cooperate with each other for survival. It was only when the watermen returned to the land that racism and discrimination existed. For Kermit and other watermen, life on the water was relatively color blind.

When work on the water was unfruitful or out of season, Kermit worked as a Dorchester County Sheriff Deputy. He was employed from 1976-1985 by the Dorchester County Board of Education in conjunction with the Sheriff's Department, primarily at Cambridge High School, because some of the children were disorderly, fought each other, set off cherry bombs, vandalized the school, and committed other offenses. The goal was to maintain peace in the school. For many years, Kermit did not wear a uniform while working at the school. He did not believe that suspending students from school was beneficial because he felt students needed all the education they could get. He understood the value of education because he did not have the opportunity to acquire the education he so desperately desired in his youth. When things were relatively quiet in the school, Kermit often visited the classrooms and listened to the teachers as they taught various lessons. He used those opportunities to deal with the students directly and encouraged them to learn as much as possible.

Kermit found employment whenever and wherever he could. He also worked as a contractor. He went to Hattiesburg, Mississippi for five or six months and while there, he trained and became a contractor. While there, he also took night classes in Criminology and earned his high school diploma. His original goal was to remain in Mississippi, but due to a death in the family, he returned to the Eastern Shore of Maryland, obtained a contractor's license, and began his contractor business. His work as a contractor required him to find able-bodied employees to work in the fields to harvest cucumbers, beans, tomatoes, and other fruits and vegetables. Kermit labored as a licensed contractor from 1973 to 1985. He was so well-known that within 24 hours he could get over 200 or 300 employees in the fields. As a result of his speed in delivering workers for big producers, he obtained a reputation for getting a job done. The workers were loyal to him because he transported them to and from the fields, paid them daily and paid them more than the other contractors, which assured him that he would have an ample supply of workers. Those workers included Mexicans, African Americans, Haitians, a host of unemployed individuals, and high school students who used their funds to purchase school clothing and to pay for extracurricular events. Kermit also got people out of jails and prisons and found jobs for them.

However, once the harvests were over, Kermit found employment in other ways. He worked on a farm with a local family, split logs, worked in various crab and oyster houses, painted houses, and sold wood for Dorchester County Social Services. He was so swift in shucking oysters that numerous restaurants, such as Suicide Bridge, the Hyatt in Cambridge, and others paid him to shuck oysters on the half-shell on some Friday nights because the workers could not keep up with the demand from the customers. In short, Kermit Travers was as he called it a "Hustler," as he found various means to care for his family.

Regardless of the many jobs he held, his love was always the water, the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. He often stated, "He would rather work on a boat than anywhere else," because he loved being around boats, oystering and everything associated with the water, due to the sense of freedom it provided. Being on the water became so much a part of his being that if you observe Captain Travers and other watermen, you will see that even when many of them are not on the water, they still rock or sway as if they are still on the boats because it is a part of their rhythm of life. He and they also stand with their feet apart so that they are sure-footed and are firmly planted on the boat. After more than three decades on the water and many years as the last African American Skipjack Captain, Kermit Travers will never lose his love of the Chesapeake Bay and the bounty of its resources.

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Barbara S Graves 7/23/2024 10:46:14 am

Incredible story. I would like very much to purchase the book about his life. Please advise where I may find it. Thank you!

Reply

Clara L Small 7/23/2024 12:52:52 pm

The book about Kermit Travers can be purchased from the publisher Salt-Water Media, in Berlin, Maryland. Their telephone number is 443-513-4422 and their email is www.saltwatermedia.com. The book may also be purchased from the Greyhound Book Store in Berlin, the Harriet Tubman Cultural Center on Race Street in Cambridge, and the Harriet Tubman Visitor Center in Church Creek, Maryland.

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