Smithsonian's Stories from Main Street podcast

Season 1, Episode 2
Title: "Work and the Water"

Episode Description: These things are certain: the passage of time, the flow of water, and the labor of humankind. In episode 2, we navigate stories of work and the water, stories that highlight the wide range of livelihoods that exist for the water and because of the water.

Stories used in this episode:

- Mississippi Gulf Coast Waterways
- The Ancient Warren River Valley and the Vetter Stone Company, Minnesota--Donn Vetter
- A Winding Career Path Leads to Water, Florida
- A River Girl and her Fly Fishing and Outdoor Business in Todd, North Carolina--Kelly McCoy
- Watermen Community of Crisfield, Maryland
- Watermen: Observers of the Chesapeake Bay, Maryland
- History, Recreation, and Preservation--Bruce Conmy Talks about Minnesota Lakes

Episode Transcript:

Hannah Hethmon [Reading poem]:

A little brook, with beauties grand,
Comes rippling from a mountain spring,
And winds its way o'er stone and sand
Through woods where birds melodious sing.

Through time unknown to days of man,
This murmuring stream has found its way,
And cut a ravine through the land,
A link in nature's grand display.

….

And man looks back through time unknown
To date the wonderous [sic] streamlet hand,
Which sculptured chasm wall of stone,
And wore its chips to grains of sand.

But could the work a life had done
Be seen by eyes of mortal man,
The sands that crumble one by one
Could equal not the busy hand.

Though life is short man leaves the stage,
As though his wonderous [sic] work was done,
Another man, another age,
Proves that his work has just begun.

So like the mystic cataract stream
Which flows a myriad years through sand,
The world's adrift by light and stream,
The work of ages, brain and hand.

Hannah: *Those lines were written by the American poet Dudley H. Davis at the end of the 19th century as he neared the end of his own life. Davis grew up on a farm in rural West Virginia, so he might have been remembering the wooded streams of his childhood home and the hard, cyclical work of farm-life when the idea for this poem inspired him to jot it down.*

Whatever his inspiration, he captures the relationship between three great constants of human: the passage of time, the flow of water, and the labor of humankind.

Wherever people live near water, they have found ways to live off of it, whether directly by fishing and harnessing its power for energy, or indirectly, like scientists who study the water and entrepreneurs who use their water know-how to create adventures and entertainment for others.

These are the stories you're going to hear in this episode, stories of work and water.

I'm Hannah Hethmon, and this is episode two Stories from Main Street: Water/Ways, a podcast from Museum on Main Street.

For 25 years, Museum on Main Street, a program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, has been bringing Smithsonian exhibitions to small towns and asked people in these diverse communities to make the exhibits their own.

Since 2016, Museum on Main Street's Water/Ways exhibition has been traveling all over America, stopping for six weeks at a time in over 100 small towns. The stories in this series were collected as part of the programming around that Water/Ways. They're raw, they're real, and, as such, they're a unique window into America, a country as ever-changing, multi-faceted, and diverse as the waterways that cover our continent.

Valerie Perini: I work in science communication and I try to share all the great research we're doing with the ocean with others.

Captain Bobby Barnett: I'm an outdoorsman. I really enjoy being on the water, commercially and recreational.

Bruce Conmy: Water tourism is Minnesota's economic livelihood. It's such a precious resource and it's disappearing with our growing population.

Kelly McCoy: Here at River Girl Fishing Company, it started off 11 years ago to teach fly fishing, guide fly fishing, sell fishing licenses, and educate about the river.

Jonathan Daniels: That was my first introduction into the maritime industry. And then from that point I was, I was hooked. Once you go to sea or once you do something like that, work in the port, it gets in your blood and ultimately is something that's difficult to get, uh, to get out.

Hannah: *All around the Chesapeake Bay region of Maryland, a dwindling number of traditional watermen still make a living on the water...fishing, crabbing, and oystering. These men and women are primarily independent fishermen who go out onto the Bay all year long in search of a good catch. It's hard work, but for many, they wouldn't have it any other way. Bob Abner of Chesapeake Beach is one such waterman.*

His story was captured in a documentary created by interns at the Bayside History Museum in North Beach, Maryland as part of Museum on Main Street's Stories: YES program for youth storytellers.

Bob Abner: My name is Bob Abner. I was born in Washington, DC, and uh, lived here in Chesapeake Beach ever since. Well, I made a brief, uh, attempt to go to college. Didn't work very well. So I asked my father, uh, what was I to be? And he says to me, uh, "You're going to have to be what you really like to be. Don't do anything that you don't like." And he says, "If you do what you really are interested in, you will excel in it." The man was right. Not knowing what you're going to do for the next day as far as harvest and whatever you were going to harvest..it always puzzled me what's going to be in that next crab trap. And I think that's why I've been a crabber for 63 years. What's next? Uh, challenging. Very challenging. Um, you...looking at the way the crabs move, you almost get an idea of what's going to go on. So you might, you might pick up a couple hundred traps and put them in an area. "Oh, we're gonna to get them tomorrow!" Then you come back the next day, "You stupid sucker. What did you do that for? There's nothing there," or it could be the other way around. Jackpot. There they are.

Hannah: *On the other side of the Chesapeake Bay, down in Crisfield, on the very southern tip of Maryland's Eastern Shore, another waterman, Steve Sterling, was interviewed by Crisfield High School students about his nearly 60 years on the water and the decline of the watermen.*

Steve Sterling: When I started in my own boat in '70, we had 17 picking houses, and now we have one. The number of Waterman has reduced drastically. The reason being it's just so expensive to get started now. It cost so much to get it involved in it. Yeah, that would probably be the main reason is the, uh, is the expense

Student: Is there primarily like the same people that still go out and um, go out on the boat like when you were growing up, do they still do it now, or have they changed their careers?

Steven Sterling: Well, it's sad to say most of them that were doing, even when I started are either retired or they had, and that's...that small boat harbor, you know where I'm talking about. I have been in there probably the longest of anybody. The ones, the ones that were there actively working on water when I come along. Most of them are dead now and the other few are retired, but most of them are deceased.

Student: Yeah. So you're basically like one of the only ones left that still go out every day?

Steven Sterling: No. There's probably, there's probably 25 plus boats, but I'm pretty much the oldest.

Student: Wow.

Hannah: *Boats are an important part of Kelly McCoy's livelihood as well, as is hard work. But hers is a very different occupation from the watermen of Maryland. Kelly works in Todd, North Carolina, a small town of 2,100 souls on the South Fork of the New River in Blue Ridge Mountain country, and her customers are folks looking to get on the water for fun, not for work. This is Kelly's story.*

Kelly McCoy:

My name is Kelly McCoy, and I joke and call myself the "real McCoy" and not because of the Hatfield's and McCoy's. I am originally from a little town in Alabama called Hokes Bluff.

Here at River Girl Fishing Company, it started off 11 years ago to teach fly fishing, guide fly fishing, sell fishing licenses and educate about the river. In that 11 years it has turned into a tubing rental company, a kayaking rental company, we do eco-tours where I float the river with people and talk about the health of the river and how to protect it. We do bicycle rentals for Railroad Grade Road….gosh what else? It has turned into a huge outfitting business is what it's turned into because of the need of the community.

I actually started River Girl, not here in this train depot, but over inside the Mercantile Bakery that's here in Todd. I opened it upstairs in a little tiny room...I have a 200-gallon fish tank downstairs in the education room, so it was just me, a 200-gallon fish tank, a desk for tying flies, building rods, and it started off just tiny and quaint like that. Then this building became available, so I moved River Girl over here. And everyone that came in, every two or three people would say, "Can we rent a kayak?" and I was like, "Nope, but I'll take you fishing!" Then someone else would say "Hey, can we rent some inner tubes?" And I was like, "Uh, nope but I'll teach you how to fly fish." Then somebody comes in, "Hey can we rent bikes for the road?" And I was like, "No, I don't have any bikes, but I've got fishin' rods." So I was like, ok, maybe I should get some kayaks and maybe I should get some tubes. So I started the outfitting portion with the Tahoe that's sitting out front, it's over in the corner over there, and a five-by-eight trailer, and I bought two tubes, I bought two kayaks, and as I rented those out I bought more, as I rented those out I bought more. So I've never taken out any per se loans to like buy the equipment. I've bought equipment as I made money, and I just put it back into it and put it back into it. So slowly over the 11 years we're now up to having 150 tubes in the backyard, 50 something boats, kayaks, canoes, tandems, kids kayaks.

It really just fell into my lap and worked out perfectly. I believe in doing the right thing, doing good karma, and everything has come back really nicely.

I really love my job, I love my life, I love living here, I love everything about it, but it's hard! It's really hard, hard work. I think that's what a lot of folks don't realize about this business is that it is a lot of fun, but it's a lot of work too.

Valerie Perini: I grew up in Florida less than a mile from the ocean and spent a lot of time beach combing and swimming, that sort of thing. I think my relationship with water back then was more of a hobby and recreational one. As I grew up, I didn't even really realize that you could have a career related to the ocean. So I kind of took a varied path to finally get to the place I am today. I was a biology major at Northeastern. Even though you'd think marine biology would be a natural fit, I actually first explored some other aspects of biology. I did an internship in a pharmaceutical lab, and then I did an internship at a doctor's office. There was not a good fit. I wasn't finding my passion.

Then finally, I did an internship in Honduras, where I learned to scuba dive. Finally, it clicked, and I realized, "Oh my gosh, I love the ocean and I love science so why don't I combine those two loves of mine?" Since then I took every opportunity I could to delve into studying the ocean...got my master's degree studying the seaweeds that live here in Nahant outside the door from the Marine Science Center.

I continued to be really interested in both studying the ocean but also sharing everything I was finding with others. When I graduated, I realized that maybe the sharing everything with others was more exciting for me than studying the ocean. So now I work in science communication and I try to share all the great research we're doing with the ocean with others.

Hannah: *So far we've met folks who work on the water, like waterman Bob Abner, and folks who work for the water, like Valerie.*

What about letting the water do the work? On the other side of the country in the Minnesota River Valley, three generations of the Vetter family have been using sweat and ingenuity to reap rewards from work that the river already started thousands of years ago.

Donn Vetter: The company name is Vetter Stone Company. It was founded in 1954 with my grandfather and then his four sons. So my siblings and I are the third generation, and I am the quarry manager, and I've been here for over 30 years. When the river Warren carved out the whole Minnesota Valley, it carved out enough of the overburden to get close to the stone and still make it economically feasible to quarry it.

Hannah: *No matter how gentle it might look on the surface, water is one of the world's most powerful natural forces — one that has the ability to give shape and form to the landscape around us. Over the ages, the intense power of water has created natural wonders like the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls. Storms, waves, and sea level changes alter shorelines. Rainwater, rivers, and streams slowly whittle away at the land, shrinking mountains and cutting into the landscape. Since the beginning of time, water has shaped and moved land we live on.*

In Minnesota, the landscape we see today was shaped by massive, slow moving glaciers thousands of years ago. Those same glaciers inadvertently created an opportunity for the Vetter family business.

Donn Vetter: The overburden is actually what the glacier did not take - about a foot of dirt and then there is about 5-20 feet of just actual shale rock.

So it's economically feasible to mine 5-20 feet of overburden to get to the stone. As opposed to, if the river hadn't cut through here, we would have had to mine 150 feet of overburden, and then it would be totally unfeasible for anyone to quarry any stone in this area. The stone was formed 400 million years ago in a shallow sea where tiny fragments, mostly calcium and little sea shells and some magnesium, would pile up and then after millions of years it would compress under heat and pressure and form into dolomite stone, which is harder than limestone.

The stone is special because it has a certain very specific color of just the warm, cream, buff, and pinks that you don't find really anywhere else in the world. And it also has a very tight grain so it can pass the tests for being on a building of wind loads and flexural strengths and just the technical part of staying on a building forever without failing. And it's something that architects want to see and specify.

We've done a lot of big things around the world. We've worked on buildings from the Smithsonian Institute with the Museum of the Native American Indian, and we've done a skyscraper in Minneapolis that's 57 stories high.

Hannah: *Down in Gulfport, Mississippi, Jonathan Daniels is the CEO of the port at the heart of this coastal city. In a documentary filmed by Lynn Meadows Discovery Center students, he explained how the port of Gulfport is turning its attention to fixing practices that harm the environment and taking steps to protect the waterways that are the lifeblood of the city and the region.*

Jonathan Daniels: The Gulf absolutely plays an absolutely essential part of what we do here. You take a look and it's, it's the lifeblood. It's the waterway where we see the vessels come in, primarily from Central America, South America up into Mississippi. For us, how the gulf and how Mississippi sound behave, uh, actually determines the way in which we do our operations. So it's extremely important to us. But ultimately it is that waterway; it's that highway that runs from Central America and the shipping all the way up into the Mississippi.

The city of Gulfport actually sprung up around the port of Gulfport. The port was here, and then the city really came in around it. And that, that's not rare. You take a walk a lot at a lot of coastal communities, and they grew up around transportation assets,

And when you take a look at the Gulf of Mexico, ports and industry have not been known to be extremely friendly toward the environment; that is changing and it's changing rapidly. The port, Gulfport, uh, about four and a half to five years ago took a very proactive role of becoming the second salt water us port, uh, behind the port of Seattle to join a group called Green Marine. We take our environmental stewardship and our responsibility to the environment very seriously.

Hannah: *"The world's adrift by light and stream/ The work of ages, brain and hand."*

Hard work, whether by brain or hand, that's a value that Americans in towns and cities of all sizes hold dear. We may not always like our work, and we may not always live up to that value of hard work. And sometimes there isn't always work to be had, no matter how much you want it. But, for better or worse, hard work is something we aspire to and admire...especially on the water.

Captain Bobby Barnett: A typical day on the boat would be you come down to the boat this afternoon, get everything checked out, crank up, go fishing, work all night, come in in the morning, have your catch pre-weighed, everything in order, and customers start typically coming down at the pier pretty early. Or people will be waiting on you sometimes. You sell your catch for two or three hours or till you sell out. Lock the boat up, secure the boat, go home, sleep for five hours, come back and do it again seven days a week.

Hannah: *But even when it's hard, there's a joy in doing work you love. That's the case for Nicholas Alfonso, a crabber in Louisiana.*

Nicholas Alfonso [not online]: When I was in high school, I played sports and I thought my career would be in football. But once I've learned the marshes and the challenge, the industry, I forgot about football. I learned from my daddy. My daddy was a fisherman all his life and his

family was...his mom and dad...they fished all their life. So it's, it's a tradition that's been passed on and passed on and passed on.

When you're out there, it's one of the beautifulest things to see mother nature in action. You see all the birds, you hear them singing, you see the fish swimming, you see everything that you wouldn't see on land. It's something on water that once you see it, you'll go back to see it again. It's beautiful. At one time, my wife used to come with me, and I loved it. And then when our kids came, they used to come with me, and I call that the glory days. Cause now they all grown up. They all married, they all got kids, they all have their own little families. And the memory I have on my two little girls playing on a deck of the boat with the fish and the crabs and laughing and throwing fish to the birds. And that's a memory that nobody can take away from me. And I hope I remember that for to the end.

I would love for my kids' kids to do this, my grandkids. I do have a grandson...I would love for him to take over all of, all of this one day. I'm hoping it's here for him. I have created something that I'm proud of. My family's proud of me, and I hope I could be proud enough to pass it down the line.

Hannah:

Work and the water and the passage of time. These are things that can bring us together, if we're willing to share our stories and hear what work and water really mean to each other.

If you want to add your story about work and water to the Smithsonian collection, you can learn how to record and share it by visiting museumonmainstreet.org/stories. That's museumonmainstreet.org/stories or you can use the free Be Here Stories app to upload a story directly from your phone. That's the Be Here Stories app. In both places, you can hear the full collection of stories from all over America. On the Museum on Main Street website, you can view hundreds of stories contributed to the Stories from Main Street initiative and watch documentaries created by rural youth through Museum on Main Street's Stories: YES project.

Museum on Main Street is an outreach program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service that engages small town audiences and brings revitalized attention to underserved rural communities. In partnership with state humanities councils, Museum on Main Street brings traveling exhibitions, educational resources and programming to small towns across America through their own local museums, historical societies and other cultural venues.

These exhibitions are designed to engage communities and become a catalyst for conversation about life in small-town America, to start dialogs, build excitement, facilitate connections, and open doors to your community's history, culture, people, and sense of local pride. See a full tour schedule for Museum on Main Street exhibits and learn more about the program at museumonmainstreet.org.

Thank you to our storytellers whose voices can be heard in this episode. Several stories in this episode were recorded by Pamela Ferris Olson as part of the Women Mind the Water project as well as from Williard Watson, on behalf of the Blowing Rock Art and History Museum in Blowing Rock, North Carolina. Stories also originated from recordings supported by the Minnesota Humanities Center and the Water Bar and Public Studio. This episode also included stories developed by students at Crisfield High School, Bayside History Museum, and the Lynn Meadows Discovery Center.

The rest of the stories in this episode came from the Most of them came from the main Stories from Main Street archive. You can see a full list of story credits, links to all the stories used in this episode, and an episode transcript in the episode description.

Thank you to all the collaborators who helped collected these stories. A special thanks to the MuseWeb team, Nancy Proctor and Heather Shelton, who have been instrumental in gathering and curating stories for Museum on Main Street.

This episode was produced for the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service by Better Lemon Creative Audio. It was produced, written, narrated, and edited by me, Hannah Hethmon. See you next time.