

The History of Surf-lifesaving in the Town of East Hampton

By Helene Forst

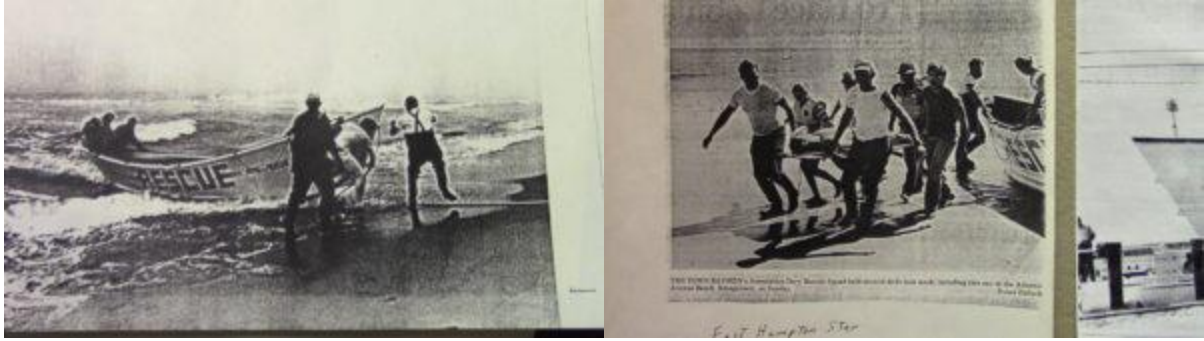
East Hampton has a rich history of everyday heroes, ordinary men and women who do extraordinary things. Since the 1770's, when local volunteers patrolled the coastlines of New York, these heroes courageously saved many lives in the waters surrounding the Town of East Hampton. In 1848, The United States Life-Saving Service, a governmental agency, formed with the mission to save the lives of shipwrecked seafarers and their distressed passengers. Then in 1915, they merged with the Revenue Cutter Service to form the United States Coast Guard.

Fast forward to 1978, when a group of local, courageous East Hampton baymen organized themselves, forming what was to become the East Hampton Baymen's Association Dory Rescue Squad, a volunteer organization that grew out of humanitarian efforts to protect the lives of people in distress in the waters around the Town.

Due to their unique fishing skills of haul-seining, a fishing practice that required specialized knowledge of how to deal with powerful surf, these men provided emergency response teams for the Town's lengthy ocean coastline. Thanks to their unending commitment, their knowledge and skills saved many lives. At its peak, the group had 130 members, all men.



Benny H, Jens L, Tom F, Dan K, Billy H, WallyB, Stuart V, Calvin L, Richard L – Rescue Dory 1979-80 (All pictures in this piece were given to me by Tom Field, one of the original Dory Rescue responders)



Each year, the Dory Rescue Squad would drill with the East Hampton Ambulance preparing for any water emergency.







In 1990, however, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) banned haul-seining, a fishing practice that provided livings for many of the local baymen. Haul-seining was a unique way of fishing that involved the use of 20 to 25-foot flat-bottomed wooden dory boats that had a narrow bow and a narrow stern. The baymen would launch their dory boats from the beach into the surf. Once out far enough, the fishermen laid seine nets in a U-shaped pattern. They would then bring the nets together, and row back to shore where the trapped fish, mostly Stripped bass, would be flopping in the huge nets. With this new ban on haul-seining, the baymen realized that there was no need to pass their skills and knowledge down to their children as this fishing practice was now deemed illegal.

Sadly, in 2005, there were 17 members left when the group disbanded.

In 2003, however, a group of local, ocean certified lifeguards formed a rescue organization called East Hampton Volunteer Ocean Rescue. These dedicated, tenacious lifeguards and ocean rescue swimmers, still to this day, train year-round to carry on the time-honored tradition of surf lifesaving that was passed on to them by the United States Life-Saving Service and the East Hampton Baymen's Association Dory Rescue Squad.

The transition from the use of a dory boat that was rowed by the dory rescue responders, to the use of a motorized dory boat, to the acceptance of a jet ski as a recognized rescue craft took place over many years.

From East Hampton Volunteer Ocean Rescue's inception in the Spring of 2003, the role of the organization was to provide a quick response of certified lifeguards to water emergencies for swimmers in distress. For its first six years, the organization was seasonal, opening May 1st and closing November 1st. The personal watercraft, PWC, was soon to become a necessity after the disbanding of Dory Rescue in the fall of 2005. Without the Dory Rescue Squad the Town and Village realized the need not just for rescue swimmers, but also the value of a vessel that had the ability to handle water emergencies in all types conditions.

In other communities like California and Hawaii, the personal watercraft had proven to be of great value with respects to water rescues. In the Town of East Hampton, the Personal watercraft had also been adopted by the East Hampton Lifeguards to assist in rescues during lifeguarded hours during the summer. As the population of beachgoers grew in the summers, more swimmers migrated away from the over populated protected beaches to the less crowded unprotected beaches. With the launching of a PWC, getting to the victims became quicker and made rescues more efficient. The personal watercraft, not only provided a quick response, but it was also able to be launched from the beach, transport rescue swimmers, punch through shore break, handle large surf conditions, maneuver in and out of the impact zone to pick up swimmers in distress, and return to any area of the beach where emergency personnel were stationed to assist.

The number of triathlons and open-water swim events in the Town of East Hampton has increased over the years. East Hampton Volunteer Ocean Rescue was called upon to provide water protection for these events. Lifeguards were stationed throughout the course on standup paddleboards, prone boards, and kayaks. As swimmers became distressed or required medical assistance, getting them to the end of the course was challenging. The PWC proved to be the optimal vessel to handle this response. Boats with outboard motors could not come in to the course for fear of the propeller injuring a swimmer. The PWC on the other hand has an impeller and was easily able to maneuver in and out of groups of swimmers and transport victims to waiting beach personnel. It therefore became the official recognized rescue craft.