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"The charm of fishing is that it is the pursuit of what is elusive but attainable, a perpetual series of occasions for hope."

The History of Fishing on the Five Mile Beach

Capt. Ehlko Friesenborg

by Shannon Maurer

The true essence of history is not really the broad sweeping facts and figures, but the people and events that lie underneath. By following the story of someone's life you can really understand true history. The story of the Friesenborgs is probably one like many others of a fisherman earning a living for his family, but it can really shine a light on what fishing in the Wildwoods was truly like.

Ehlko Siefried Friesenborg was born and raised in Germany, but when his home country was going through financial hardships he was forced to find a living elsewhere. He came to America first as a farmer in Iowa. After returning to Germany to care for his ailing mother for a short time, Friesenborg came back to the United States, but this time to New York City, where he worked on a boat as a rum runner during prohibition. It was at this time, that he met a man named, **Charlie Aspenburg**. Ehlko, who by now had married, went to fish for Aspenburg in the Wildwoods, and so the story began.

In the early through mid-1930's, Friesenborg partnered with **Gerhardt Meyer**, who he knew from Iowa, to build a boat of their own. The offshore dragger called the *Meta Margaret*, constructed at **Harry Mogck's** boat works in Cape May, was 56 feet long and ran with a diesel engine.

Boats like the Meta Margaret were known as offshore draggers and spent an average of 5 days at sea depending on the weather, food supplies and other factors. During their nearly week long trips, Friesenborg and his men used a fishing method called trawling. Long "V" shaped nets dragged along the bottom of the ocean. A chain was put at the bottom edge to weigh the net down while a cow skin purse string would make a pouch where the fish got caught and were not able to escape. When the net was raised the purse strings would be pulled and the fish would fall out, flopping all over the deck of the boat. The crew would then roughly separate the fish by size and species into holes on the deck filled with ice. This work was done in rotating 4 hour shifts, with each fisherman doing 4 hours on and 4 hours off.

The fishermen did not have much free time on the boats. When they weren't actively fishing or separating fish, they would be repairing the nets which would be damaged from dragging along the rough ocean floor. To mend these nets the fishermen used lightweight needles and twine, skill that is antiquated and many, today, no longer know how to do.

When the boat would come back from its long exhausting trips to Otten's Harbor, it was rare that families would even know of their return. Mrs. Friesenborg had a marine radio with an antenna that she would snake out the window in hopes of hearing of a possible homecoming time. If, by some chance, Mrs. Friesenborg and her three children, **Irma, Inge, and Siebo**, discovered the time of the arrival, they would run down to the bridge to wave to the fishermen below as the boat maneuvered underneath.

A different radio was also used to determine whether a storm was coming. In those days there was no weather channel, only an Atlantic City station that would play the marine forecast at just after noon, daily. Everyone in the Friesenborg household would have to be quiet so the Captain wouldn't miss the forecast. Even this wasn't always reliable as we all know the unpredictability of the weather, and occasionally the fishermen would get caught in a precarious situation.

While weather was the main danger there were also many others that came along with the hazardous profession, as Frisenborg and his family were well aware of. Ehlko's second boat, the *Irma Pauline*, is a great example of this as it seemed to have a bad luck streak.

Once, aboard the *Irma Pauline*, Ehlko and his men caught a big shark. While wielding his knife, Friesenborg's hand slipped and the blade went through his calf. The crew had to wait for the Coast Guard to come by boat as there weren't helicopters at the time. It took months for the injury to heal.

Later, back on the unlucky vessel, a crewman was steering and smashed the bow of the *Irma Pauline*. Yet another time the fishing net got caught in the propeller. While the Coast Guard was towing the boat a freighter ran across the tow line, almost completely overturning the *Irma Pauline* except that the boat's steel structures hit the side of the freighter.

In a fourth separate incident, the Irma Pauline was second in line to come under what was once the Rt. 47 Bridge. The bridge operator did not see or hear the Irma Pauline and shut the bridge on top of the mast. Upon viewing the damage, Ehlko's daughter Inge said it was shocking to believe that no one aboard had been killed or injured.

Finally, the ill-fated boat sank on a foggy morning when it rammed into the end of the Cape May inlet rock pile. The boat sank and since it could not be recovered, was blown up.

Soon after this accident, and after a long and successful career for Ehlko, huge Russian trawlers and big factory ships began to fish off the coasts of New Jersey, processing their massive catches more efficiently than any of the smaller, privately owned ships could. This transition led many fisherman in the Wildwoods to change over to clamming, and thus led the Friesenborgs into a new stage.

When looking back on their chapter, or the chapter in the history of fishing, or even a chapter of the Wildwoods on the whole, one thing can be certain. Whether it is through the experiences of a single fisherman, the experiences of a family, or the life of a boat, history comes alive when seen through the eyes of those who experienced it.

If you have a story to contribute to the History of Fishing on Five Mile Beach, please contact The SUN at sun-by-the-sea@verizon.net ~ 609.522.2721 ~ P.O Box 2101 Wildwood, NJ 08260

Irma, Inge & Siebo Friesenborg

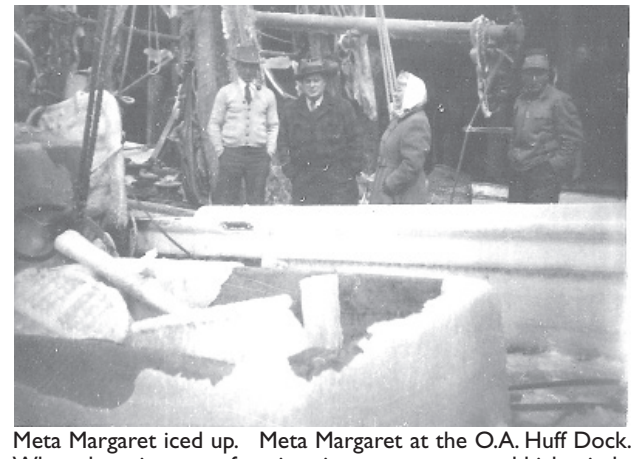
Capt. Friesenborg on left with friend, Ollie Buchler~holding a very large lobster

Capt. Friesenborg with insurance company photographer assessing the damage to the Irma Pauline after the George Redding bridge went down on the masts.

Capt. Friesenborg and a gannet, a pelagic sea bird, one that only comes to land to rest or nest on steep cliffs. During storms they sometimes become exhausted and will land on anything, in this case Ehlko's lap.

Irma Pauline and Meta Margaret, O. A. Huff dock at Otten's Harbor in Wildwood. Both are docked side by side.

Meta Margaret or Irma Pauline heading out to sea. Both boats look so similar it is hard to tell which is which on the photo.



Meta Margaret iced up. Meta Margaret at the O.A. Huff Dock. When there is severe freezing air temperatures and high winds, the salt spray will freeze to the surfaces of the boat. If it gets too thick a boat will get top-heavy and capsize. Obviously it is a dangerous condition. Standing on the dock looking at the boat are **David Sollenberger** (crew member), **Capt. Hans Groon**, **Caroline Rodenberg and Partner Gerhardt Meyer.**

Thank You to Inge F. Laine,(above) a volunteer at the Wildwood Historic Museum, and daughter of Capt. Ehlko Friesenborg, for contacting us and for sharing this story.