

Sea of sadness: Remembering all the fishermen lost in the gulf

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[Photo courtesy of the Costello family]

Shirley and John Costello pose with a model of a sculpture called The Hand of Fate, a planned tribute to those like their son, Mike, who set sail on Feb. 25, 2005. His body was never found.

Mike Costello holds a gag grouper in 2003. A commercial fishing trip in 2005 would be his last. Costello's mother is part of the group raising money for a Fishermen Lost at Sea memorial.



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Captain Missing

Sam Renneys' Boat "Miss Detroit" Wrecked At Sea



SAM RENNEY'S BOAT, THE MISS DETROIT

Captain Sam Renney, who lives at 5030 28th avenue, Gulfport, and captained the "Miss Detroit," operating out of Earl's Boat Basin, has been missing since Monday morning. When he did not return Monday night, they were worried, but they felt that he might have run out of gas or had engine trouble and that he would be picked up by one of the fishing boats on Tuesday. When no word was received from him by 3 p.m., the Coast Guard went into action to look for him and other boats joined in the search.

About 5:30 p.m. Tuesday a Cuban wreck signaled Captain Ed Taylor, who pilots the "Amberjack" owned by the Mullins fish company, asking him to come along side. They told him that they had a gasoline tank on board and that they had run through some wreckage and debris floating on the water. They threw the tank overboard to his boat to be picked up. This happened about five miles west of the wharves about 10 miles southwest of Gulfport. (Continued on page 2)

Bill Renney was 10 years old when the Gulf of Mexico erased his father.

On March 29, 1943, Sam Renney took four men fishing on the *Miss Detroit*, a 37-foot cabin cruiser. When he didn't return, young Bill didn't worry. Authorities were rationing gas in wartime and he had probably run dry, his mother told him.

The next day, a fishing boat found a gas tank and a charred life preserver — but no sign of the rest of the *Miss Detroit* or her crew.

Sixty-seven years later, Renney still wonders what happened to his father. Dozens of other people bear the same sad burden, pining for loved ones who died or vanished while fishing in the Gulf of Mexico.

A group of John's Pass Village merchants has been raising money for a memorial to the Tampa Bay fishermen who have died in the gulf waters. They want to pay homage to the dead but don't know how many there are. While the true number is unknowable, we wanted to get as close as possible.

The *St. Petersburg Times* reviewed newspaper archives and arrived at a disquieting number: at least 142 since 1933.

Fifty-five percent were recreational fishermen.

The other 45 percent were professionals, including longline fishermen who knew how to lean into waves standing at 45 degrees while their boats spooled out 2,500 hooks on 10 miles of cable. But their experience could not save them from explosions at sea or the rogue waves fishermen call "widow makers."

Of 142 known local fishing-related deaths, the bodies of 87 — nearly two-thirds — were never found. The absence of a body can leave family members with a thin hope that their loved one is alive somewhere, which exacerbates the anguish.

Tourists who know the island communities for sand beaches and tourist-trap shops may not be aware that a sizeable commercial fishing fleet still exists. An estimated 100 commercial boats unload cargo in Madeira Beach, according to the Southern Offshore Fishing Association, bringing tons of fresh fish and hundreds of jobs to the area.

In the late 1980s, SOFA erected a sign honoring fishermen who died or were lost. For about a dozen years, the sign greeted shoppers entering the boardwalk on John's Pass Village.

Then in 2000, John's Pass underwent renovations.

Like so many fishermen swept to sea, the sign disappeared.

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Up and down Gulf Boulevard, signs link Madeira Beach to its founding occupation. The Friendly Fisherman. Dockside Dave's. Madeira Beach Seafood Company.

The Church by the Sea served as a beacon for fishermen, who used the light on its steeple to guide themselves home.

But accounting for the fishing community's maritime tragedies — those who didn't make it home — is not easy. The U.S. Coast Guard declined to release a list of names of fishermen who have died at sea. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission also didn't have a comprehensive list.

But an archive search of the *Times* and *Bradenton Herald* turned up 142 fishing-related deaths over the past 80 years. Most of the fishermen are from Pinellas County, mainly Madeira Beach, though some left ports in Citrus, Pasco, Hillsborough and Manatee counties.

The stories are harrowing:

Nov. 17, 1933: The *Xios*, a sponge boat, left Tarpon Springs with a crew of four. The boat and crew were never seen again, though another boat reported seeing smoke in the area where the *Xios* may have been located.

June 27, 1948: *Hazel*, a fishing charter, departed Cedar Key with 15 people aboard. Thirty miles out, there was an explosion from the engine room. Thirteen people died.

Oct. 30, 1983: Tony Lathan, a promising outfielder in the Boston Red Sox farm system, was shark fishing off Bradenton when the boat took on water and sank. Lathan, 21, couldn't swim. Two teammates in the boat survived.

Aug. 24, 1984: Tomisene Washington and Larry Griffin left Cedar Key to go fishing. Griffin, 28, was never found. Partial remains of Washington, 31, were found 10 days later — in the belly of a tiger shark.

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At 5:18 a.m. on Sept. 28, 2000, Whitney Taggart disappeared from the *Blue Chip* 50 miles west of Venice Inlet. Four crew members told the Coast Guard they were below when Taggart, the 41-year-old captain, went overboard.

"If you want to know suffering, tell me somebody is off the boat," said his sister, Jane Taggart. "It's the most horrible thing I have ever been through in my life."

Her brother was a lean man with shoulder-length, twisting blond hair.

Taggart, 43, is still carrying the pain of the loss.

"The mind plays evil games with you," she said. "When did he take his last breath? What was he thinking? What happened?"

"You want some answers. You want a body. You want some evidence."

The family held a wake on the beach two days after the Coast Guard called off the search.

Jane Taggart could not bring herself to attend, and has yet to memorialize her brother in any formal way.

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All the deaths occurred in the eastern Gulf of Mexico.

"You think it's like the Atlantic Ocean, where you get big rollers and swells," said Bob Spaeth, an owner of Madeira Beach Seafood Company. "Here we get closer-together waves, but higher."

The difference, said University of South Florida oceanographer Bob Weisberg, is shallower water created by the Continental Shelf — which extends as far west of Florida as the state is wide.

"Twenty-five miles offshore it might only be 100 feet deep," said Weisberg.

When high winds come over the shallow Continental Shelf — and water reacts to the hard ground bottom — seas have nowhere to go but up.

"Deeper is safer," Weisberg said. "Waves are not feeling the bottom. In deep water, those waves tend to be not as steep and they tend to be longer."

"If you ride down the front of a wave, the bow digs into the wave in front of you," said Mark Hubbard, who runs the charter boat business out of Hubbard's Marina in John's Pass Village. "You have no time to recover from one wave to the next."

But Weisberg said fishermen bear some of the blame.

"A lot of times you have boats that are not in the best of repair," Weisberg said.

For years, Richard Wabberson fished in a 69-foot boat, the *Missy Cindy*, out of Tarpon Springs.

"I've seen a lot of boats I wouldn't cross the river in go offshore," said Wabberson, 62.

On March 20, Wabberson's son, John, 23, fell over the side of the *Missy Cindy*. Wabberson searched for 18 hours but never found him.

Now Wabberson, who said he captained boats for 35 years on seven continents, lives in Georgia and fishes swamp flats.

"I have no desire to go offshore ever again," he said.

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March 13, 1993: Gene Ippoliti was sitting in his long johns on the captain's chair of the *Mary C* sipping coffee. A mate they called Shorty was rousting up breakfast in the ice box, where the crew had stashed groceries and 450 pounds of grouper. It was a windy morning, the sun shining.

Then something slapped the boat upside down. "I woke up underwater in the dark," said Ippoliti, 48. "I was starved for air."

He saw a light spot in the water. His window. The wave had blown it out.

On the surface, he tasted diesel fuel. Groceries floated by. He grabbed some cheese and biscuits and stuffed them in his sleeve.

He tried to scale the upside-down hull. Too slippery. Neither Shorty nor another mate, Tim Floyd, were anywhere in sight.

"I knew they were done," Ippoliti said.

As he scanned the floating rubble, he saw a long lid of the boat's ice box float by. A competitive swimmer as a child, he jumped at the chance for a life raft.

"Mark Spitz couldn't have caught me that day," he said.

For the next several hours, he fought waves. They broke over his head and pushed him under. Between them, he took deep breaths and thought about his 6-month-old son, Derrick.

"I talked to God. This is what I said: 'It's Gene again. I know I only call you when I need you. I'm not going to bull---- you and say I'm going to go home and be a priest because I'm not. Just let me go home and kiss my kid again.' "

That afternoon, a Coast Guard plane passed directly overhead — and kept going. Twenty minutes later it reappeared to the north.

If he was not rescued by nightfall, he would no longer be able to see the waves before they broke.

"I just felt like, 'Damn, I'm dead.' It was total gloom and despair."

The ordeal ended after six hours when a Coast Guard helicopter came to him and lowered a basket. Once on board, the crew put him in a neoprene suit and gave him an apple.

The winds that capsized Ippoliti's boat — known forever after as the "no-name storm" — killed at least 171 people, most of them on land.

A month later, another boat found Shorty, whose real name was Loring Bryant, 42. Floyd's body was never found. A joint seaside service was held for both fishermen.

After a year away, Ippoliti agreed to captain another boat, but had to return after three days. "It was just total paranoia."

He has since returned to commercial fishing, but has no illusions about the gulf's dangers.

"You think it's never going to be that bad. But on any occasion it will kill you. As soon as you get offshore and it's over your head, you are in peril."

The common-law rule called for a seven-year waiting period before a person could be declared dead.

That standard has since been replaced by a law presuming death after five years if diligent efforts have been made to find the person. But legal authorities will make exceptions when there is reason to believe death occurred sooner.

"If someone sees a miner walk into a mine three minutes before it collapsed, he could probably be declared dead without much waiting around even if the body is never recovered," said Bruce Howie, a Clearwater lawyer.

A fisherman whose boat vanishes could be seen as having died, Howie said, provided there is no competing set of circumstances that would also explain the same set of facts.

"If the fisherman's boat is found drawn up on the shore of Costa Rica and the fisherman had withdrawn his wife's life savings from their joint account just before leaving," Howie said, "there is a countervailing, equally reasonable inference that he didn't drown in the gulf."

To declare a Florida resident dead, a person with legal standing (such as next of kin) must file a petition with the circuit court in the county of the person's last known address. Any potential creditors or anyone else with an interest in keeping the person alive must be publicly notified.

If a judge determines that death has occurred, he or she issues a final order stating that a death certificate can be produced. The date of the order is considered the date of death. Then claims such as life insurance can be made.

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Feb. 25, 2005: The Gulf Coaster, a boat captained by Mike Costello, pulled out of a marina at Bay Pines. Costello, 29, and his mate, John Molina, 42, planned to spend several days at sea fishing amberjack. They sought that fish because grouper season had been pushed back — part of recent government restrictions on commercial fishing.

For years, efforts to shorten seasons, set trip limits and cap maximum allowable catches for the year had divided the fishing community. Recreational anglers supported them; commercial fishermen said they threatened their livelihood. Occasional fistfights broke out on the docks over the issue.

Some of those efforts have succeeded and are now in place. In 2005, they were just getting started.

Costello had told his mother he needed to take one more trip to make ends meet. On Feb. 27, Costello reported that he was 73 miles west of John's Pass, in an area fishermen call "the Elbow."

He would head back home soon, Costello told his brother. When the *Gulf Coaster* did not return Feb. 28, the boat's owner called the Coast Guard.

On March 1, they found remnants of the boat and Molina's body 58 miles west of Anna Maria Island. Costello's body was never found.

His mother, Shirley Costello, blames the closures and restrictions for tempting fishermen to press their limits, to go out when they otherwise wouldn't, to pick the wrong side on judgment calls they used to get right.

Five years after the accident, Shirley Costello, 56, has not sought a death certificate. Her son was unmarried, had no children and no life insurance.

A part of her doesn't want one anyway. Without a body, she said, she can never be certain.

"Ninety-nine percent of me knows. One percent of me says someone picked him up and he has amnesia and doesn't know where he is. There will always be a slim possibility because nobody ever found him."

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Efforts to memorialize local fishermen aren't new. In the late 1980s, Spaeth, the fleet owner who also directs the Southern Offshore Fishing Association, paid for a sign at John's Pass Village. It consisted of two heavy planks mounted on posts near the boardwalk entrance, with gold-embossed lettering that read, "John's Pass, Dedicated to Fishermen Lost at Sea."

The shopping center underwent renovations in the late 1990s, and the fishermen's plank sign disappeared.

But now, a group of business people want to enhance John's Pass Village — with its touristy shops and restaurants — with a real memorial to fallen fishermen.

For the past few years, the John's Pass Village Association and the Outdoor Arts Foundation have been raising money for a 6-foot-tall sculpture to go in front of the boardwalk. *The Hand of Fate* depicts a sea-green hand rising out of the waves cradling a fishing boat.

The engraved names of fishermen from the greater Tampa Bay area will fill a 3-foot base beneath the statue. The group says it has raised nearly half of the \$50,000 needed to produce the sculpture by Seminole artist Robert Bruce Epstein.

Mark Hubbard, 46, is a driving force to create the Florida Fishermen Lost at Sea Memorial. His family owns John's Pass Village, and he runs the fishing charter out of Hubbard's Marina.

The Hand of Fate, Hubbard said, is as much a warning as a memorial.

"It's a big wave and a boat getting ready to be crashed," Hubbard said. "Its message is to be careful out there. You are at the mercy of the Gulf of Mexico when you go out there. You have to have your game on, because you won't get second chances very often."

A year ago, the planners put up a website inviting people to submit names of lost fishermen. About a dozen people have.

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Questions swirled after the *Miss Detroit* vanished in 1943 with all aboard, including Sam Renney, a Gulfport police officer.

Dorothy Renney's original theory — that her husband ran out of gas — had some staying power. The Coast Guard rationed gas carefully during World War II. Perhaps the stranded boat had been run over by a freighter.

Or else it had struck a mine. Maybe a German U-boat had sunk it.

Renney's 10-year-old son, Bill, knew submarines were on the horizon. One time, he had climbed a tree and seen one.

Dorothy Renney simply set one less place at the dinner table. She never had a sit-down talk with her son about what may have happened.

He wondered if his father had been taken as a prisoner of war in another country. Over time that theory stopped making sense.

"If he was alive, then he would have gotten word back," Renney said.

Seven years after pieces of the *Miss Detroit* were found in the gulf, a court awarded Dorothy Renney a death certificate. Though her husband had no life insurance, the ruling allowed his widow to sell their modest home.

From time to time, Sam Renney came up in family conversation. His wife remembered the way Sam cleaned fish in the back yard. He always threw the heads and tails to a ring of cats that formed around him.

Bill Renney is now 78 and retired from Ford Auto Co. He lives with his wife in Parrish.

About a year ago, he came across the Florida Fishermen Lost at Sea website.

He thought of his father, then clicked the submissions button on the site and began to type.

The boat Miss Detroit, captained by Sam Renney out of John's Pass, disappeared on a routine fishing trip and never returned. Pieces of the boat were found in the following days but no bodies, there were 5 people on board.

It's far from a eulogy. But in 67 years, it's the first time he has acknowledged his father's death in any public way.

"There is no grave," he said. "No headstone. Nothing. This would at least be something to let people know that he did exist."

Times researchers Mary Mellstrom and Shirl Kennedy contributed to this story. Andrew Meacham can be reached at (727) 892-2248 or ameacham@sptimes.com.

The memorial

Learn more about the Florida Fishermen Lost at Sea Memorial by visiting the website floridafishermenlostatsea.com. You can submit information about fishing-related fatalities of Tampa Bay area residents through the website, or by calling Mark Hubbard at (727) 393-1947, ext. 418.

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