

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

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Introducing 'The Bonackers'



Joanne Friedland Roberts, director of "The Bonackers," in her Barnes Landing home with some decoys carved by her neighbor Dave Bennett. Among the important figures in the film are, counterclockwise from top left, James Bennett, who comes from a family of clammers, Brent Bennett, seen with a handmade device for measuring striped bass, Albie Lester, who is known for his carved clam shells, which he calls wampum, and Arnold Leo, a former head of the East Hampton Baymen's Association.

Mark Segal

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The bad news is that Friday's premiere screening at LTV Studios of Joanne Friedland Roberts's documentary "The Bonackers" is sold out.

The good news is that the 60-minute film about the men and women who have fished and farmed the East End for almost 400 years is so compelling, and so seamlessly put together from interviews, archival footage, and photographs from private collections, that LTV is hoping to schedule another screening in the near future.

During a conversation at her Springs house, Ms. Roberts discussed the genesis of the project. “I was meeting all these people and I thought they were fascinating, and when I was talking to my friends about it, none of them knew about the Bonackers, even though they lived in the Hamptons. I was like, ‘Are you kidding me?’ And they asked, ‘What’s a Bonacker?’ I thought, ‘I’m changing this.’ So I started doing these community gatherings.”

The first Celebrating Bonac event happened at the Arts Center at Duck Creek in Springs in October 2023. At that event, baymen and other longtime locals shared stories, songs, and traditions, including centuries-old crafts such as decoy carving, fishing traps, and wampum jewelry.

By then Ms. Friedland, who had worked in television for many years, had already begun filming with her iPhone. Many of the locals at that event, including Albie Lester, Brent Bennett, Dave Bennett, and Arnold Leo, either had been filmed or would have prominent roles in the finished film. Four more community events followed, concluding last October with a program at the Springs Historical Society and Community Library.

The roots of the project can be traced to the 1980s, when Ms. Friedland’s parents rented a house on Louse Point in Springs. Dave Bennett did the landscaping and served as a caretaker for the property.

When she moved to Barnes Landing in 1995, she discovered that Dave Bennett was her next-door neighbor, and they reconnected. (There are so many different Bennetts, Lesters, Millers, and other first families in the film that first names, rather than honorifics, are critical.)

An 11th-generation Bennett, Dave appears briefly in the film carving decoys. Ms. Roberts said he has a veritable decoy museum in his basement, with hundreds he has carved himself and collected up and down the East Coast.

Dave introduced Ms. Roberts to Suzie Petykowski, one of his closest friends. She in turn introduced Ms. Roberts to Brent Bennett and Albie Lester, and that's how the project took shape, "one person leading to the next," said Ms. Roberts.

In addition to the chain of introductions to members of the Bennett, Miller, Lester, and other families, Ms. Roberts's daughter, Lola, was working at LTV helping Genie Henderson organize the archives, which contain interviews with baymen and Bonackers, as well as film footage of an older East Hampton.

"Genie put together all of this really cool footage on a hard drive, so I started thinking, okay, I have to raise money." With the help of Don Lenzer, a documentary director and cinematographer who also lives on the South Fork, Ms. Roberts put together an eight-minute concept trailer that outlined the scope of the project and included footage she had already shot with her iPhone.

She developed a typical television budget for a one-hour documentary — \$350,000 — and applied to the New York Foundation for the Arts for fiscal sponsorship, which allows artists and organizations to raise funds using NYFA's tax-exempt status.

As the pieces were starting to come together in October 2023, she went to a screening of "Forgotten Founders: David Hempstead, Senior," a short documentary about the slave who was born in Southold around 1774 and freed upon his owner's death in 1805. The film was directed by Sam Hamilton and Julian Alvarez, who met at the Ross School.

“I told Julian what I was doing and that we had just had a community gathering.” They started filming that month, and wound up, a little more than a year later, with approximately 30 hours of footage. Because the crew was so small — Mr. Alvarez, director of photography, Mr. Hamilton, editor, and Amelia Garner, story editor — the film came in for less than \$50,000, a fact that’s hard to believe given the quality of the production.

The film opens with a short segment featuring archival footage of Stuart Vorpahl taking some sea robins out of his pound traps in 1985. “I don’t work for any union,” he says. “I don’t have any sick pay. I don’t have any vacation time. None of that trash, just go to work, that’s all.”

What was true for Vorpahl, whose fish packing station set up in 1955 became Stuart’s Seafood Market in Amagansett, is true for many of the fishermen and farmers interviewed in “The Bonackers.”

Brent Bennett, an 11th-generation Bennett and Lester, quit school at 16. Filmed at his pound traps, he says, “The principal said to me, ‘You’ll be sorry.’ And I said, ‘I don’t think so. You can’t teach me what I want to know.’ And I’ve been fishing ever since.”

Later in the film, his grandson Will Lester Bennett says fishing is a hard way to make a living, but nothing else has made him as happy. “You’re away from everyone, you’re away from the chaotic things of this place. You don’t have to see anyone. The day I stop fishing is the day they put me in the ground.”

Charlie Niggles, who married Lisa Lester of the Round Swamp Farm Lesters, is both a fisherman and a farmer. Seen in the family’s acreage off Three Mile Harbor Road, he catalogs the costs of fishing and farming, including having to pay for his own health insurance, but says, “I can survive on either.”

Context is provided by extensive interviews with Hugh King, the East Hampton Village Historian and historic site director. Over footage of old East Hampton, Mr. King notes that in the 17th century farmers “started trekking down to Accabonac because of the salt hay there. Small farming, fishing, raising animals, I think that’s where Springs began.” He adds that originally “Bonackers” was a term of derision, but, he adds, “Bonacker is a revered term now.”

Arnold Leo is another major figure in the film. After losing his job at Grove Press in New York, he moved to his cottage on Accabonac Harbor, became interested in the issues facing baymen, and eventually became head of the East Hampton Baymen’s Association. As such he was deeply involved in the group’s struggles against what they considered overregulation of commercial fishing. Peter Matthiessen, the author of “Men’s Lives,” and the musician Billy Joel also appear in archival footage in connection with that issue.

The film immerses the viewer in the world of its subjects, whether on the water or on land, where they talk about how and why they work, and the challenges they face. Collectively, they form a portrait of resilience and determination while at the same time not harboring delusions about what Hugh King called “a hard-knock life.”

While “The Bonackers” is Ms. Roberts’s first directing credit, much of her career has been spent in the television industry. After college, she taught for several years before landing a job as an “assistant to an assistant editor” at Universal Commercial Industrial Films in Los Angeles.

That led to a job as production manager, which in turn led her back to New York City, where she produced “The Lives We Live,” a daily CBS talk show for women. She was hired by the Children’s Television Workshop (now Sesame Workshop) for “3-2-1 Contact,” a science education show for children, and went on to produce “Dr. Fad,” which featured Ken Hakuta, the inventor of the Wacky Wall Walkers, and had a six-year run.

While other shows followed on television and online, she eventually created, with Peggy Doyle, What Now What Next, which was aimed at helping women entrepreneurs launch and grow their small businesses.

But after 10 years the partners closed the business in order to pursue other interests. For Ms. Roberts, who said, “One of the things that drives me is that I like to learn new things, and when I learn them I like to share them,” the next new thing was “The Bonackers.”