

CHESAPEAKE BAY WEEK

maryland public television
April 19-23, 2009

CHESAPEAKE MOMENTS IN TIME

A TALE OF THE BAY, THEN AND NOW By Michael English

OUTDOORS
Maryland

The year was 1965 and Holly Fisher couldn't pass up the adventure of a new story to tell. As an aspiring young New York filmmaker with a love of boats, she'd heard about the annual skipjack races on the Chesapeake Bay. She and filmmaking partner Romas Slezas packed their car with rented cameras and lights, grabbed their film, and drove south toward the Chesapeake Bay.

Her first taste of Chesapeake life was a sunny, windy day on the water near Deal Island in 1965. Race organizers agreed to put Fisher and Slezas on board the boat of Captain Art Daniels. Fisher said that as she stood on the dock and listened to the reading of the rules, she felt that there was more of a story here than just the race.

"It was all new to us," said Fisher of the legendary culture of life on the Chesapeake, "And it was amazing."

But what she remembered most was the boat's captain, Art Daniels. "He was a profound person," Fisher continued. "The type of person I think who made this country; a man who looked you in the eye - someone you could count on."

Art Daniels won the race that blustery day, and over the next three years Fisher and Slezas returned to the Eastern Shore to film the life of Daniels, his colleagues and his family.

In 1968, Fisher and Slezas finished their film project, and called it *Watermen* - a cinema-verite story-telling of oystering and crabbing and living on the Chesapeake Bay in a time when many families still made a living from fishing.

"It was a very simple film, very straightforward," Fisher said of *Watermen*, which she shot on 16mm film. Selzas ran camera, and she conducted interviews

and recorded sound. Fisher said she knew even then, in the mid 1960s, as did most of the watermen that she spoke with, that the Chesapeake Bay was in trouble.

"We knew fertilizers were polluting the bay. Everything was known then - the interdependence of farming, land use, water use, the need to preserve marshland. It was all very clear."

But she avoided turning the film into a political discussion about the bay, choosing instead to tell the simple but powerful story of watermen's lives.

"We wanted a different kind of film," she said. "I wanted to convey Art's closeness to nature, and his work and his religion," she said of Daniels, who today is the oldest active skipjack captain on the Chesapeake. "He's iconic, I think."

The National Geographic Society

premiered the film at Constitution Hall in 1968, but it has never before been broadcast on television - until now. The world broadcast premiere of *Watermen* will be on April 23, 2009 at 9:30 pm on Maryland Public Television during its annual Chesapeake Bay Week.

Immediately following the broadcast of *Watermen*, MPT's own *Chesapeake Crossroads* will be broadcast. It tells the story of Chesapeake watermen, as well - but from 2005 - and includes Captain Art Daniels, piloting his skipjack some 40 years after Holly Fisher and Romas Slezas followed him with their cameras to tell his story in *Watermen*.

Broadcasting both programs back-to-back draws a striking comparison between current conditions on the Chesapeake Bay and those in the 1960s.

CHESAPEAKE BAY WEEK SCHEDULE

**On the Trail of Captain John Smith:
Rediscovering Chesapeake Bay**
April 19, 10:30 pm

**EcoViews:
Restoring Chesapeake Bay**
April 19, at 11:30 pm

Chesapeake Wine Country
April 22, 11 pm

Watermen
April 23, 9:30 pm

Chesapeake Crossroads
April 23, 10:30 pm

**Eatin' Crabs:
Chesapeake Style**
April 23, 8:30 pm

**Eatin' Crabcakes:
The Best I Ever Had**
April 23, 9 pm

**Bugeye:
A Chesapeake Legacy**
April 23, 11 pm

Marion Warren