



# A strong lure for fishing

Story by Jimmy LaRoue  
Photos by Troy Cooper

**A**s a child, Alan Schubert would tag along with his father on fly fishing trips to Back Bay. His father, Alfred Schubert, would wade in the water to fish and pull his son in the 24-foot boat behind him.

The lure for both was strong nearly 60 years ago when they were out on the water together.

And the lure is strong now in the memories of the son, tying together past and present.

But it was not until 2014 that 66-year-old Alan Schubert, who lives off of Whaleyville Boulevard, got into the intricacies of tying his own flies.

That's when he started watching videos on it, and the converted bedroom-turned-workspace got a lot more organized over time with binders of records of each fly he tied — nearly 12,000 now — as well as all the feathers, threads and other materials he uses in his corner of the workspace that he shares with his wife, Connie, an accomplished sewing master in her own right.

"I tied flies before that, but not like I'm doing now," he says. "Just one or two when I needed something. And I'd use a cork and whittled it down, just a piece of feather I found somewhere, just to do something."

See LURES page 20



LURES continued from page 18

Schubert got into making the ties, though, because it was less expensive than buying them, and because it caters to both his creative and meticulous sides. He says he couldn't make the flies without either quality.

"That was my job at the city," says Schubert, who worked as a land surveyor, a traffic engineer and also in public utilities before he retired in September 2018. "I reviewed plans, and I kept all the archives for the department, and so, I'm very organized in that kind of way. On my computer, I've had everything I've ever spent on this stuff, and who I bought it from, and all the pictures and all the images, and everything that I've tied."

It's the only way he could make the ties, and do as many as he does.

"Otherwise it'd be a total disaster up here," he says.

Each binder has a table of contents and then an image of the fly. Without instructions to make many of the flies, he says it's up to each individual to figure out how best to re-create it. Schubert watches the videos, makes notes, and then types them up as he prepares what he needs to make that particular fly. Each fly he makes isn't an exact copy, just his rendition of it.

"It's just very relaxing for me," Schubert says. "And I love that there's so many different flies that you can tie. There's literally thousands, and they're all different."

It's satisfying for him to watch someone else use a fly he's tied to catch something, and he likes catching something from his own fly, too.

"When you go out and catch a fish on a lure that you made yourself," he says, "that's the best."

It's hard not to think of his father when he puts together the flies, and then uses them on his fishing trips. But it's when he goes down to his garage to shape materials with the lathe that his father's influence comes to the fore.

See LURES page 21



LURES continued from page 20

The lathe was handmade by his father some 45 years ago, and it gets a regular workout.

"Every time I use it, I think about him," Schubert says. "He made it for me shortly before I moved out when I was 20. My dad was an awesome guy."

It takes a high level of imagination to be creative, his wife says, and make the variety of ties necessary to work in the region's waters. It also takes a level of detail and organization to keep track of all the materials he uses to make them.

They sit together a lot in their shared workspace, and she talks with pride about what he did to create it. He notes the variety of material he's collected over the years, marking them all in labeled drawers and clear boxes to make finding them easy. And he goes far and wide to get them.

"I like using all kinds of different materials. I find stuff in fabric stores, everywhere, Walmart, Michaels. I spend more money in Michaels than she does," Schubert says, laughing and looking to his wife.

For instance, they both use spools of thread, but his is different. While hers is a sewing thread, his is a polyester thread — a thousand little, seemingly invisible strands, he said. He has many different types of feathers from different birds and uses many different materials, including wood and flip-flops, to make his flies.

He taught himself how to tie flies the modern old fashioned way — through YouTube

videos.

Schubert watches experts such as Davie MacPhail of Scotland — he ties what he describes as "super fancy trout and salmon flies" — and Barry Ord Clarke of England.

When he gets going on making flies, Schubert can get lost in his work for hours at a time.

"I watched a guy do a video of this particular fly — it's a Japanese-style fly that I'm doing right now," Schubert says. "I took notes and then I typed them up, so at the top is the material I'll need to tie it, and then below is how I will tie it. So, I do that on every fly."

Don't believe him? Just pore through his binders, which date back to when he got serious about tying flies — 2014. For each fly, he has photos and instructions on how he does them, and he has each one in a binder on his shelf. They are also backed up on his computer.

Those 12,000 flies he's tied represent about 700 different types, and he ties about a dozen at a time. Different ones will be used to catch different kinds of fish in different conditions.

"I feel proficient at it," Schubert says. "There's still some flies that I don't tie yet that the pros do."

Some are still a challenge, such as ones with deer hair wound around a hook — "I haven't mastered that yet" — and others, such as salmon flies, that are cost prohibitive for him to do.

He gets to use his creations Friday, except when it is cold. He has a few favorite places, including the lower Chesapeake Bay, a small private lake, and yes, like he did when he was young with his father, Back Bay.

But once out on the water, that's the one area he's not as detailed in tracking.

"I'll just bring out what I want to use that day, and then, if I didn't tear it up, I'll put it right back if nothing hit it or nothing struck it or I didn't catch a fish with it," Schubert says.

That just gives him that much more incentive to get back in the workroom and create more flies.

But don't be surprised if you find him in Michaels, or another store, buying brightly colored flip-flops. And don't be surprised that he won't be wearing them.

"Every time I find a new one, I buy it," Schubert said. "I've used a lot of those, and they work really well."

He'll think often about his father as he's tying flies, and some of those thoughts he's turned into stories. He's not short of them, and his wife notes that his humor comes through.

"It's mostly stuff from my childhood and youth, the stuff that dad and I did," he says.

He's never far from a reminder of his father — never far from a story, never far from his true lure.

It's in those ties that have bound past and present.

# A Suffolk native on the Alaska Highway

Story by Tracy Agnew  
Submitted photos

The world was at war in 1942, and the United States was deeply embroiled in it, with emotions raging following the late-1941 attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese.

The territory of Alaska, with its Aleutian archipelago stretching across the deep blue sea almost all the way to Japan, was considered a vital part of the nation's defense from the Axis Powers. As part of the strategy to defend Alaska — and therefore the rest of North America — the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was dispatched to build a land route to Alaska through extraordinarily difficult terrain.

The soldiers encountered hostile working conditions both winter and summer. In

the winter, they struggled to build roads through permafrost and muskegs, generally known as swamps or bogs. They battled temperatures far below zero and the resulting frostbite, and many soldiers died. During the warmer months, voracious mosquitoes and gnats attacked the soldiers as they worked.

Of the 11,000 soldiers working on the project, more than one-third were black, according to "We Fought the Road" by Christine and Dennis McClure. White regiments took the credit, and the black soldiers' contributions were not well known until more recently. White regiments were featured in photographs, films and news reports of the time, while the black ones were ignored, the

McClures wrote. The black soldiers had to build barracks for the white ones, while they slept in tents.

One of the regiments working on the project was the 93rd Engineer General Service Regiment. One of the soldiers toiling in it was Suffolk native James "Bud" Ausby Mitchell.

The 93rd arrived in Skagway on April 14, 1942, according to "We Fought the Road." They completed their section of highway on Oct. 10 that same year, and the entire highway was dedicated on Nov. 20.

The men of the 93rd, Mitchell included, established water points, built and repaired roads and bridges and culverts, constructed POW facilities and more. They faced all of

See ALASKA page 27

The 93<sup>rd</sup>, 95<sup>th</sup> and 97<sup>th</sup> Engineers Corps  
Builders of the Alaska Highway



At top, the engineers' corps of the 93rd, 95th and 97th Engineer General Service Regiments. James Ausby Mitchell, Suffolk native, is second from left in the back row. At left is Mitchell during his service in Alaska. Above is Leonard Larkins, another member of the 93rd who served with Mitchell, and three of his sons at a ceremony in Alaska in 2017.



At top is a picture of soldiers from the 93rd Engineer General Service Regiment posing on a bridge they built; Suffolk's James Ausby Mitchell is in the truck. At right is a picture of Mitchell during his service. At far right is the front and back of the Alaska Highway Black Engineers coin.



ALASKA continued from page 24

the same challenges as the white soldiers, only with prejudice on top.

Mitchell drove a truck, operated earth-moving equipment and helped build bridges. In all, the construction of 1,600 miles of highway took only eight months and 12 days.

Mitchell's legacy lives on, not only on the Alaska Highway but more importantly here in Suffolk. He and his loving wife, Terease E. Mitchell, raised 10 children: Beulah M. Robertson, William Boyette Jr., Ceylon N. Mitchell, James T. Mitchell, Arvis L. Hall, Connie P. Gay, Dedra O. Mitchell, Kathy L. Hart, Ausby N. Mitchell and Lynn T. Parker. His brother is the well-known "Mr. CIAA," Abraham Mitchell. He also has numerous grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren. He went on to work in the Naval Yard in Portsmouth and died in 1981.

His son, Ceylon, retired from the U.S. Air Force after 24 years of service and lives in Alaska, did much of the research on their father's service.

Mitchell's DD-214 tells the details of his service. He was in for three years, 11 months and 23 days, from August 1941 to August 1945. He earned the American Theater Service Medal and the Asiatic Pacific Service Ribbon. After the 93rd moved to the Aleutians in 1943, Mitchell was injured by exploding ordnance and came home with a limp, according to a website run by the McClures, [www.93regimentalcan.com](http://www.93regimentalcan.com).

But what it doesn't tell is what the family knows about his legacy — how his work ethic and faith in God got him through the difficult work in the Yukon and Alaska wilderness.

"He talked about how cold it was," said Arvis Hall. "His toes and fingers were frostbitten (when he came home on leave). He said he hated to go back, but he knew he had to finish the highway."

That was a part of his character, Hall said, and he passed it down to his hardworking children.

"He never started anything he didn't finish, and he brought us up the same way," she said. "My dad had the fortitude, and he took God with him everywhere he went."

Daughter Kathy Hart also honored her father for his hard work and character.

"Our dad was a proud man," she said. "He instilled in us that we were never to ask anybody for anything and to work to get your own, making it impossible for anybody to take what you earned away from you. We salute him and will always remember to share his legacy to all generations."

Hall said their father will always be their father, but it's great to know he and his comrades are finally getting the credit for something that was greater than the sum of all of their parts.

"It just brings tears to our eyes," Hall said. "Realizing the impact of something that big — my dad did that in Alaska. It's amazing my dad was part of that."



At top, Ceylon N. Mitchell, left, holds a photo of his father, Suffolk's James Ausby Mitchell, posing with Christine and Dennis McClure, authors of "We Fought the Road." Above, Ceylon Mitchell, right, poses with Leonard Larkins Sr., who served with the elder Mitchell, at a ceremony in Alaska in 2017.

# An Eclipse totally of the heart

Story by Jimmy LaRoue  
Photos by Jimmy LaRoue & Troy Cooper

If you think of Eclipse as a sleepy village, you'd be missing the point.

To those flying up and down Bridge Road in North Suffolk, it might be easy to roll through the intersection with Eclipse Drive and not give it another thought as they cross the bridge over Chuckatuck Creek.

But you'd miss Ed and Mary Milley's house, its backyard close enough to hear the roar of progress rolling across the bridge above. (Pst: Don't get Ed started about the bridge, though.)

You'd miss their beds of oysters by the dock — an oyster restoration project, as the shellfish is in the midst of a resurgence in the creek after nearly dying off due to a pair of diseases in 1988. You'd miss their fig and apple trees near the bridge, and you'd miss their efforts to preserve the land they live upon.

You'd miss Wayne Martin and his wife Myra, who cans what they grow in their yard that backs into the creek. And you'd miss the story of how he made a living off the water during the good years, and took a job outside the village in the bad.

You'd miss Johnson and Sons, where they sell soft and hard shell crabs and oysters that come from the creek. Before that on the same property, there was J.R. Dixon's Oyster Company, owned by Claudia Holland's great-grandfather and a place where she hung out as a child.

You'd miss the life teeming on the water and in the gardens, and what lays shimmering on the surface — its heart.

Mary Milley and her husband Ed moved into their house 12 years ago, coming from the Ghent area of Norfolk, and they have been tending to the oysters in her three oyster beds in the water of the creek next to the bridge for the past eight years.

Like those who've grown up in Eclipse, they appreciated immediately the view of many there as its idyllic nature.

"We took a motorcycle ride to this neighborhood and we saw bikes in the yard," she says. "People were waving, and we're like, 'Had we gone back in time or something?' And that's what started it."

Recently, they began planting live oaks in their yard, they started a raingarden and they have American beauty-berry growing, too.

In the marshy area at the edge of the creek and her yard, they've been



Clockwise from left, oysters raised by Ed and Mary Milley; crabs at Johnson and Sons Seafood; and canned goods at the home of Wayne and Myra Martin. All of this food comes straight from Eclipse.





Mary Milley unloads oysters on her creekside dock.

ECLIPSE continued from page 16

taking out the tall, non-native Phragmites a section at a time. In areas where they've cut them out, the natural grasses have started to make a comeback.

As the sounds of the cars on the bridge over the creek take hold — “We have this,” she says, pointing above her. Though it gets Ed’s scorn, she adds, “You get used to it!”

And they’ve made themselves at home.

“We feel blessed, we really do,” Mary Milley says. “It’s amazing.”

While few work in the creek and the nearby rivers now, it wasn’t the case decades earlier,

and especially before the late 1980s when diseases about wiped out the oyster population.

“When I was growing up, you had the entire industry in this neighborhood,” says Claudia Holland, the fifth generation of her family in Eclipse, living on Rivershore Drive. “I mean, you had some men that worked in the Navy Yard, but most of the men worked in the river when I was growing up, and we were pretty much self-sufficient back in those days.”

This year she grew tomatoes and pickles, a smaller reminder of the big gardens her parents had.

“That’s all we did all summer,” Holland says.

“We picked, pulled weeds and either froze or canned (what we grew) all summer. We canned anything that came out of the garden.”

Though Eclipse might not have to be as self-sufficient as it was decades ago when tolls on the bridges kept folks from venturing out of the village as much, the people in the village tout their resilient and independent, yet sharing spirit.

Evidence the many gardens, the people who can what they grow and the resurgence of the oysters and crabs that keep Johnson and Sons humming at a good pace.

“The tolls kept us isolated for a long time

See ECLIPSE page 19



Wayne Martin worked the waterways for decades and still keeps the tools of the trade on display on his shed.

ECLIPSE continued from page 18

because people didn’t want to move here because they didn’t want to pay the tolls every time they went somewhere,” Holland says. “We stayed isolated a lot longer than we probably would have, and before the bridges were built in 1928-29. Before then, it was like a world to itself.”

Before Johnson and Sons, there was J.R. Dixon’s Oyster Company on the same spot along the creek. It was a place Holland’s great-grandfather, John Robert Dixon, opened in the 1920s, and all four of his sons were oyster-

men and watermen. Her grandmother worked there as a bookkeeper.

“My granddaddy (George Dixon) had a big pile of oyster shells in the yard, and he’d go shuck them. And we used those as coloring books, really. I mean, we took them and painted them and, they were like our toy.”

And oysters and other fish from the creek and river were a staple of her family’s diet.

“They basically ate out of the river most of the time,” she says.

Not her, though.

“Unfortunately, children can be very obstinate and stubborn,” Holland says. “I can’t believe that back in those days I wouldn’t touch an oyster.”

Holland has noticed the oysters returning in recent years.

“I sold some oysters off my ground a couple of years ago, which I probably hadn’t had any moving oysters on it in probably 30 years,” she says. “And I’m hoping to sell some more off this year. I was letting the little oysters grow. I don’t have a very big keep so it’s not like I can

See ECLIPSE page 20



Canned goods prepared by Myra Martin come straight from the garden she and her husband, Wayne, maintain at their Eclipse Drive home.

ECLIPSE continued from page 19

harvest them off this year and then go somewhere else next year and harvest.

“The oyster industry is coming back. Hopefully the pollution won’t kill it this time.”

How are they now?

“Right now, they’re absolutely delicious,” she says, laughing.

The patriarch of Johnson and Sons Seafood, Robert Johnson, can speak well to the up-and-down nature of making a living off of the water, as he has done for more than 40 years, and being able to do so with his sons, Ben and Jacob. It’s why he’s quick and effusive with praise for his wife, Lisa.

“I’ve been extremely fortunate that I have a wife that has put up with all of this,” Johnson says. “Put up with all the ups and downs, the good times and the bad.”

Even with the yo-yo nature of making a living on the water, Johnson enjoys what he does — most of the time.

“When things are going good, it’s good. And when things are going bad, it’s bad,” Johnson says. I think that’s the same for anything and anybody. I’ve been lucky. I’ve had a lot of

good friends that have helped us out. We’re very lucky we deal with good people and that’s all been a big plus for us.”

Johnson, who has lived all his life in the nearby village of Hobson, sells hard, soft-shell and steamed crabs, as well as oysters. He wouldn’t say their oysters and crabs are the best, though they hold their own with anyone’s.

“I won’t say they’re the best anybody could have, but we’re lucky that they’re always, generally, as good or better than anything else on the (Chesapeake) Bay.”

What they have is plenty good enough for acclaimed chef Harper Bradshaw at Harper’s Table in downtown Suffolk, as well as Smithfield Station, among others — both recently gave shout-outs to Johnson and Sons on their Facebook pages.

“This year has been a different year for us,” Johnson said, referring to the coronavirus pandemic. Normally a bad year might mean fewer crabs or oysters caught to sell. “But we’re holding our own.”

Wayne Martin was the sixth generation of

watermen to work in his family, and for more than 400 years, his family has lived within 15 miles of Eclipse.

At his home on Eclipse Drive, Martin sports an exact replica of the boat he used to dredge oysters, the Mary T, and outside, hanging up, the tools of the trade.

“With the crabbing and the fishing and the oysters, it always had its ups and downs,” Martin says. “You had good years and you had bad years. You prospered on the good years and didn’t do so well on the bad years.”

Those bad years tended to coincide with diseases that adversely affected the catch.

“I was off and on with the water,” Martin says. “I had to leave it when Kepone took effect.”

Kepone was produced by Allied Signal Company and LifeSciences Product Company in Hopewell, with the potentially cancer-causing chemical dumped into the James River during the 1960s and 1970s. It’s taken more than 40 years for that chemical to subside in the water.

He had to leave it again in 1988 when Dermo and MSX hit the oysters, causing

See ECLIPSE page 21



Crabs at Johnson and Sons Seafood are sold to individuals and restaurants throughout the region.

ECLIPSE continued from page 20

large-scale mortality, and there were also limits placed on shad fishing.

“That pretty much wiped the oyster business out for several years,” Martin said. “But recently, it’s started to come back, I guess, six, seven years ago, and now that they’ve come back, they’ve come back with aggression now. ... It’s probably better now than it was before the diseases hit, as far as the reproduction of the oysters, the new growth. The (James) River’s full of just small baby oysters like it used to be back in the ’50s.”

He was able to get back on the water about five years ago, but retired for good in 2018, and now, there’s just a handful of watermen left on the creek. Martin, who was born and raised on the other side of Chuckatuck Creek in Rescue, has lived in Eclipse for 35 years, and he spends his time now tending to the garden, painting in watercolor and framing his own paintings. He also has built a number of bird feeders that adorn his yard.

These days, he and his wife tend to their garden, canning much of what they have grown, and they’ll put excess tomatoes on top of their fence for neighbors to take. Though she has shelves of canned goods filling her kitchen, they give a lot away also, and donate canned items for fundraisers.

“We all share. If I catch fish or oysters, I’ll share with my neighbors,” Wayne Martin says. “I raised a garden. I’ll share that with my neighbors.”

It’s a way of life in Eclipse, and one that speaks to its heart.

