



The Bucket and Buoy

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE JBLC Dennis M. Kane, Editor AUGUST 10, 2010

In Memoriam

(Editor's Notes: This special edition of the Bucket & Buoy will **only** be published online.

The McGrain obituary appeared in The Long Island Herald on March 10, 2010.

The author, Jim Harmon, works for the Herald and the JBLC. To access the article:

<http://www.liherald.com/eastmeadow/detail/23249.html>)

“The Star-Crossed Life of an All-American “

Steve McGrain (1950-2010) was a swimmer, a surfer, a dreamer ...
and an alcoholic ...

The exuberant Matthew McConaughey look-alike in the photo (on page 4) is Stephen Vincent McGrain, one of the most talented athletes in Nassau County history. In August 1972, McGrain was 22 and a newly minted graduate of North Carolina State University. This was his sixth summer as a Jones Beach lifeguard, and he beamed for the camera after helping his colleagues at Field 6 win that season's inter-beach competition. If beers were not already being passed around, they soon would be.

Few members of the Corps were as strong in a pool or the ocean as McGrain, who grew up in Westbury and learned to swim at the Town of Hempstead's Carman Avenue pool. Recruited by the swimming powerhouse Plainview-Old Bethpage High School, he won New York state titles in the 100-yard backstroke and the 200-yard freestyle, set a state record in the 200 and was twice named a high school All-American. At 5 feet 9, he was not on the scale of the Spitzes and Phelps who would come to dominate the sport, but with sinewy arms and the chest and shoulders of a bodybuilder, McGrain was sheer power in the water, and held in awe by competitors across Long Island.

“He was such a stud,” recalls attorney Roy Lester, an all-county swimmer at Long Beach High in the late 1960s, who had a Newsday picture of McGrain taped on the wall in his room, and lost, by a lot, every time they went head to head in the backstroke.

Offered a full scholarship by N.C. State, McGrain quickly mastered longer freestyle races, won four individual Atlantic Coast Conference titles as a freshman and sophomore, and was named a collegiate All-American. He studied biology and zoology, and as far as anyone knew, he was prepping for medical school. He became an accomplished painter, wrote poetry, dabbled in Buddhism and Hinduism, lifted serious weights. In his summers on the beach, he did all of those things unless there were waves, when he surfed.

Despite all of his success in the pool, McGrain wasn't a big talker, though at Field 6 he liked to crack wise, and was nicknamed "Magoo". Like most of his friends, he had partied hard since high school, but he was mostly a gentle guy, a sweet brother in a big, noisy Irish family. He drove his little sister Maureen and her friends to Jones Beach in a Volkswagen van he'd repainted in swaths of yellow and brown. There were beaded curtains in the back windows, the VW logo in the front had been replaced by a white dove and the tape player regularly blared the Grateful Dead. "It was the peace van," said their younger brother, Kevin. Maureen remembers Steve's playful cultural vocabulary quizzes. "He'd say, 'Maur, do you know what 'out of sight' means?' "

But McGrain's swimming career had ended in disappointment, so perhaps somewhere in his expression there's a hint of his future as well as his life so far. After two seasons of the four he'd planned to compete at N.C. State, a new head coach arrived with many more rules for his athletes than the free-spirited McGrain could follow. The fun was over. He swam unenthusiastically his junior year, adding no more ACC titles, and then left the team, on less than cordial terms with the new coach.

The upside of that, from her brother's point of view, was that he could take off for Montauk or San Diego or Barbados to surf, and keep his ties to Jones Beach. He worked on the beach for 22 of the 42 summers between his rookie year in the Corps, 1967, and what turned out to be the last 11 weeks of his working life, the summer of 2008.

When McGrain was gone not because he was surfing but because he was drinking, he did many of the regrettable things alcoholics do. He'd call distant friends and, with slurred words, ask for money. He was arrested twice for drunken driving in Florida, lost his driver's license, and was once bailed out by his high school swim coach, who had retired there. In California, Florida and New York, he lived in a variety of apartments and sober houses, crashed on friends' couches and porches and for a time camped under the Long Beach boardwalk.

He did not deny his addiction, and sporadically sought help with it. At AA meetings he listened, unflinching, as he was told that if he didn't stop drinking, he would end up homeless, senseless or dead. "I'd say, 'You've gotta do something about this,'" Eileen recalls, "and he'd say, 'I can't stop.'"

But of course he could — at least for a while — and whenever he did, he was the whip-smart, easygoing, thoughtful Steve McGrain, who read microbiology books for fun. He was good at almost anything. For several years he taught swimming on Saturday mornings at Hofstra in the university's continuing education program.

"Every time I saw him teach, I learned something," said the program's director, Joe McCabe, 74, an educator for 50 years. "Steve knew how to relate to kids, and he was just an instinctive, intuitive instructor. I describe what great teachers have as magic, and he had that magic."

In 2004, he returned to the Nassau County Health Department, and fielded complaints from people with no heat or who needed exterminators or had sewage backups. The following year he rode along on tobacco stings, in which underage teenagers were sent into convenience stores to try to buy cigarettes. Both jobs were gritty and confrontational, but a co-worker, Dave Forte, recalls that McGrain did them well.

When the two men discovered they both loved surfing, Forte invited McGrain out to Point Lookout, not knowing what to expect. Steve was 54, had to borrow a board and had a paunch over his surf trunks — and proceeded to humble everyone in the water. "He was phenomenal," says Forte. "There were a lot of surfers that day, much younger guys, and he owned everybody out there. He was physically superior to most of us. I've only seen a few guys who could paddle like that."

In the summer of 2008, which he spent at Jones Beach's Field 5, McGrain had a new surfboard, and he decided to build a rack for it and a dozen more boards in the lifeguard shack. "And he didn't just slap together pieces of wood that he found," says Field 5 Boatswain Justin Martinich. "He probably spent over \$100 for the wood, and worked on it for a week or two. It's a great rack."

McGrain never asked for help; he started and finished the project himself. In the navel-gazing world of lifeguards and their precious boards, this was the most selfless of acts, one almost worthy of a plaque. "That's one way we'll remember him," said Martinich. "Even the young guys, years from now, will say, 'McGrain built that.' "

And perhaps it was more than coincidence that instead of starting medical school after Labor Day 1972, McGrain was taking off for Hawaii to surf, and then California, and might not get back to New York until the following spring. In the space of two years, a life seemed headed steadily in one direction had turned unsteadily in another, and over the next four decades, for weeks or months at a time, who was buying the Heinekens became as important to McGrain as where the waves were breaking — and both were usually higher priorities than everyday considerations like jobs and relationships. Episodic drinking became part of the pattern of his life.

On Jan. 17, 2010, after weeks of dialysis to keep his blood clear because his kidneys no longer could, Steve died of heart failure at the Nassau University Medical Center in East Meadow. He was nine days short of his 60th birthday.

The post-World War II history of suburban Long Island was written by families like the McGrain's. Steve was the fifth of John and Muriel McGrain's eight children, and they moved from a one-bedroom apartment in Richmond Hill, Queens, to a Levitt house in Westbury when he was a toddler. John was a New York City Fire Department fireboat pilot with a landscaping business on the side, and his new house, with a single bathroom and all the radiators downstairs, eventually hosted a mostly convivial crowd of 10. "It was madness," says Jimmy McGrain, 61. "I took all my showers at school."

"We had a quorum for whatever sport was in season: two brothers on this side, three on that side," says Mike McGrain, 66. "Steve played everything. He was a tough kid. He never cried; he never bitched and moaned. Whatever we were doing, he stuck his nose in."

John McGrain, a lifelong athlete and a lifeguard in the Rockaways in the 1920s, drank heartily into his late 50s, and three of his sons did, too, with decidedly less self-control. John Jr., a star running back at Clarke High School who went on to play for Mississippi Southern, died in 2001 at 60, of cancer complicated by alcohol. Jimmy, a standout in the quarter-mile for the Clarke track team, has been treated for bipolar disorder and counseled for habitual drinking. Then came Steve. In the McGrain family, the Salvation Army is known, in the shorthand of familiarity, as "the Sally".

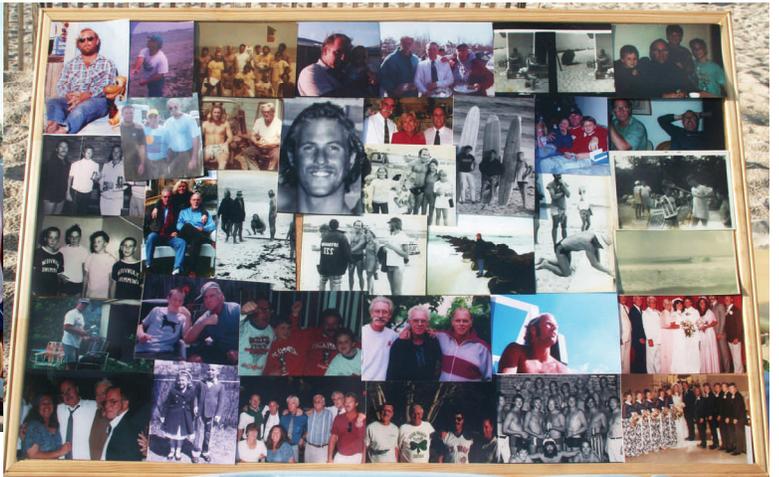
The other siblings, however, had no need for the place. Mike played football, and was All-Middle Atlantic Conference as an offensive guard at Hofstra. Peter, 64, was the family's first swimmer, recruited to North Carolina State four years before Steve. Eileen McGrain Blomquist, 58, was one of the first female lifeguards to earn a spot on an ocean crew at Jones Beach. After working for 21 years at the Long Beach Recreation Center, Eileen now teaches phys. ed. in the New York City schools. She did her best to keep track of Steve through his working years, which, given his wanderlust and his penchant for dropping out of sight for large chunks of time, are difficult to document precisely. "There are gaps when I really don't know what he was doing, to tell you the truth," she says.



Field 6 at Inter-Beach Races, 1972. Steve McGrain second from left, top row.

In the late 1970's, Steve worked as a lab technician for the Nassau County Health Department. When his parents retired to Dunedin, Fla., he followed them there, and for a while he tested water for the Florida state Health Department. He earned a contractor's license and went into business building and maintaining pools. He coached swimmers at the Dunedin city pool. "But none of his jobs was a passion," says Eileen. "There was no real career." After Labor Day 2008, McGrain never worked again. He was scheduled to start another lifeguarding job, at the Nassau County Aquatic Center, that fall, but he didn't show up. Last summer, the Field 5 shack surfboard rack got constant use, but its builder never returned.

On Halloween he was admitted to the NUMC, and the hemodialysis began. By the holidays, his brothers and sisters were preparing for the possibility that they would lose him soon, and they took turns visiting him. Days before he died, greatly weakened from the treatments, Steve told Peter that he couldn't wait to get out of the hospital. He kidded his older brother about his thin hair and said, "That's what I'm gonna look like." "I was thinking he wasn't going to make it 30 days," Peter recalled. "Finally, I said I had to go. I told him I loved him, I took five steps and got to the door, and he said, 'Peter' — just like he wasn't even sick — 'I love you, too.' "



Pages 5, 6 and 7: images from the Stephen McGrain ,Memorial, held July 25th at Field 6.







William Listing

1953 — 2010

By Beth Gray, Bill's sister

William Listing, known as "Captain Bill" to many, was a Jones Beach lifeguard in the 1970's. He always said the summers that he spent as a lifeguard were the best times in his life. This is not a surprise, considering Bill's love of the ocean, friends, family and taking charge of all situations.

Bill spent much of his life on the ocean. He was a true mariner, with a U.S. Merchant Marine master and 500 ton sail endorsement, a PADI dive instructor, highly qualified to tackle any task at sea. Whether it be fishing, diving, navigation, maintenance on all vessels, refit or crew management, he could handle it all. Power, sail or steam, Bill literally sailed the seven seas with extensive experience in the Caribbean and Mediterranean waters. He had a second sense about the ocean, like it was in his blood.

Bill would blow into town like a storm, gathering all the elements at hand to embellish life at full tilt. He loved to prepare fabulous meals for family and friends. If you ever found yourself in his culinary company, you were in for a treat seasoned with local color and stories of the sea. Captain Bill was a good guy. He had a big heart. He was a generous and passionate man, willing to share all he had with those he loved.



(All text and photos courtesy of Beth Gray.)

Worldwide cruising/Charter/and Delivery experience 500-3000 ton U.S.Merchant Marine Master with 500 ton Sail endorsement, PADI Dive Instructor with Mixed gas certification, highly qualified Engineer with extensive toolkit, I fish,dive,navigate,drive, don't sleep much and maintain all vessels: Power, Sail, and Steam, have literally sailed seven seas + Extensive Charter experience in Caribbean and Med mostly large power yachts 100'-150' and Sailing Yachts to 95' As a sailor I am willing to relocate immediately to handle any maritime task. My hobby is the preparation of exotic cuisines (Favorite is Thai/French infusion with emphasis on seafood) have extensive refit experience and yacht and crew management skills. Downside is I don't come cheap and do not tolerate Micromanagers. If you want to sleep at night knowing your vessel is safe and in the best hands look no further. Best Regards, Capt. Bill Listing.

mother, mother ocean, I have heard you call
Wanted to sail upon your waters
since I was three feet tall
You've seen it all, you've seen it all
Switch from sails to steam
And in your belly you hold the treasure
that few have ever seen, most of them dreams
Most of them dreams

Captain Bill Listing in loving memory



Editor's Note: The Memorial for Bill, originally scheduled for July, was postponed due to illness in the family. We will update you with the new date.

