

The Birthplace of *Rosie Parks*

Story and photos by Dick Cooper

Wingate Harbor, Dorchester County, Maryland

The hamlet of Wingate is a loose collection of homes on the outer edge of the Eastern Shore where Fishing Bay laps up against the Crapo-Bishops Head Road in southern Dorchester County. The docks at Powley's Marina, in "downtown" Wingate, are tired. Castoff boat parts, old crab pots and worn-out trailers seem to pile higher every year.

The damp air blows through the shells of collapsing vacant houses turned gray by the sun. A half-century ago, Wingate (pronounced WINGit) was a different place. Three seafood factories lined the waterfront. Local stores sold everything from food, to clothing to boat supplies. The B.M. Parks bustling boat shop dominated a large corner lot, 500 feet from the water.

"People kept their houses up to a 'T,'" says life-long resident William "Snooks" Windsor, who now runs Powley's.

Mary Parks Harding remembers a tidy community with manicured lawns where people worked together during the week, worshiped in the Methodist church on Sundays and watched out for each other all of the time.

"It was a fun place to grow up," says the 83-year-old matriarch of the Parks family. The folks who call this part of the Chesapeake Bay home are the descendants of pioneers who pulled a living out of the water. Drudgin' for arsters, haulin' seine and pulling crab pots kept them alive. But to get those fruits from the sea, they needed boats and Mary Harding's father, Bronza M.

Parks, knew how to give them a vessel that would do the job with form, function, and fashion.

Wingate is the birthplace of the Museum's famous skipjack *Rosie Parks*, now being restored on campus as a three-year demonstration and education project. Bronza Parks built the boat for his brother, Orville, and named it after their mother. Orville Parks worked the boat for two decades before selling it to the Museum. Although the project is just underway, saving *Rosie* already has made a major impact on the Parks' extended family.

"It has brought our family together," Harding says. "Grandchildren and great-grandchildren are excited about the project."



O'Neal and William "Snooks" Windsor in Wingate, Maryland.

Several family members have come to the Museum to help master shipwright Marc Barto as he directs the reconstruction of the skipjack. *Rosie's* lines, trim and rig came from somewhere in Bronza Parks' creative and artistic mind. Six years of elementary school education somehow gave him the knowledge he needed to see a boat in three dimensions.

"Dad never worked with drawings," Harding says. "Some people came to him once and showed him the drawings of a boat they wanted him to build. He turned them down. He said, he knew how to build a boat and he didn't need their plans."

"Dad started building boats with hand tools," Harding says. "There was no electricity in Wingate. Back in those days there wasn't five telephones south of Church Creek. His first power tool in the early 1940s was a band saw that had a gasoline engine."

Bronza devised a big-wheeled wagon to transport his finished boats down a gravel lane from the shop to the water. Harding says her father had an old, hand-cranked siren salvaged from a fire truck that was mounted on the shop. When he needed to launch a

boat, he sounded the siren and everyone who heard it came to help.

"In the old days, he used a team of oxen to pull the boats," Harding says. Later he used a tractor or his Ford pickup. The back wheels of the wagon were steered with a long tiller and once the wagon was in place, the boats were launched sideways down logs that had been placed as slides into the water.

"We didn't have a boat ramp back then," Snooks Windsor says. But despite the demands of the job, Harding's father, known to his friends as "Bronzie," established a reputation for building quality vessels that spread across the Chesapeake region.

When *Rosie* was built in the mid-1950s, Bronza and the three-dozen men in his large boat shop were turning out gasoline-powered workboats, sailing skipjacks and in one case, a custom-built sailing yacht. Bronza built *Rosie*, and her sister-ships, the *Martha Lewis* and the *Lady Katie*, in succession, but stopped working on the *Lady Katie* when a young DuPont Company executive from northern Delaware, who had always fancied the traditional lines of the skipjack, hired him to build a sailing yacht.

Irénée du Pont Jr., now 91, great-great grandson of the founder of the company, has fond memories of Wingate, Bronza Parks, and his family. He says he first met Orville Parks while he was shopping for a skipjack to turn into a cruising sailboat for his young family.

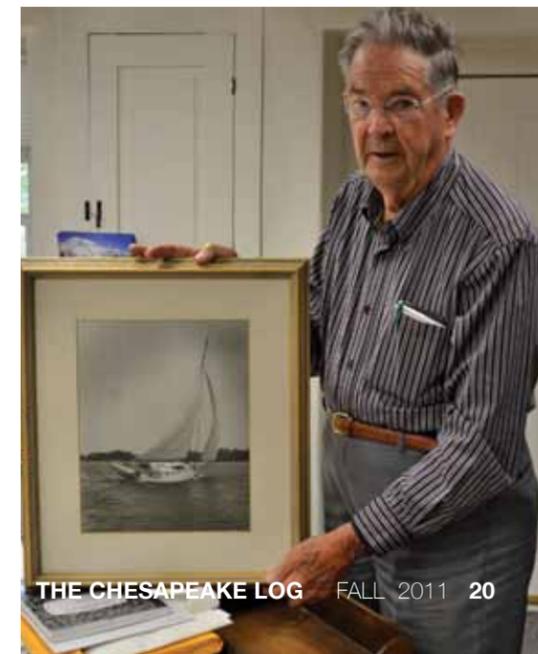
Orville wanted to sell him his old boat, the *Joy Parks*, but du Pont thought it

was too big. Orville told him that his brother was building him a new skipjack and could build du Pont any boat he wanted.

In 1955, the best way to meet Bronza was to be in the Cambridge Acme at 9:30 on a Saturday morning, when he did his grocery shopping. Du Pont says he asked the store clerk to point out Bronza, and when a tall, muscular man walked in, the clerk gave him the nod and du Pont introduced himself.

"He was big. Broad shoulders locomoted by narrow hips," du Pont recalls. "He was the personification of a man who could build wooden boats with a broad axe."

Du Pont says he arranged to meet Bronza at his shop the following Sunday to talk about building his yacht. Over the next week, a severe storm flooded southern Dorchester County and isolated Wingate. Du Pont drove his 1936 Oldsmobile through the deep water and was the first person to reach the village in days. (Du Pont still has the Oldsmobile in his garage and several other old cars. He explained, "I'm not a car collector, I just never get rid of them.")



Irénée du Pont Jr. holds a framed photo of the yacht *Barbara Batchelder*, named for du Pont's wife, built by Bronza Parks.

When he got to the docks, men were trying to use a mechanical pump to bail a sinking workboat. Du Pont says he realized that the pump's primer had slipped out of place and he hit it with an oar to right the situation.

"The pump started to gush and I was treated like I had saved the day," he says. "By the time I got to Bronzie's shop, he had already heard about what had happened on the dock."

Du Pont says that their friendship started immediately. "He was so amiable," du Pont says. "He was also direct in his manner of speech. I think he was genuinely in love with his fellow man. He addressed people as 'honey,' kind of a quaint thing that people down in Dorchester do, they all call each other 'honey.'"

Du Pont visited Parks numerous times while the yacht *Barbara Batchelder*,

named for du Pont's wife, was being built. "I remember the first time I went to his house," he says. "I was going to head home and he said, 'Come in and have some supper.' He poured scalding hot coffee into a cup and said 'You like cheese in your coffee?'"

"I had never seen that done. He had some really sharp rat-trap cheese and he put a tablespoon or more in my coffee cup and it melted out right away. That was the greatest drink I ever had."

Du Pont says Bronza never drew up plans for *Barbara*. "When he finished the hull he had her pulled out of the shop so he could envision her cabin lines," he says. "He had to stand back and 'see' what she would look like. He was a true artist."

Mary Parks Harding remembers walking with her father in the woods, looking

for trees to turn into boats. "He knew a lot of arithmetic and geometry and could look at a tree and calculate how many board feet he could get out of it," she says.

Less than two years after the *Barbara Batchelder* was completed, Bronza was shot and killed in his boat shop by a customer who was upset over the cost of a boat Parks was building for him.

"That was the worst thing that ever happened in Wingate," Snooks Windsor says. Parks' boat shop is gone now.

The Lakes & Straits Volunteer Fire Company that Bronza founded stands on its site, just down the road from the Parks homestead. But the *Martha Lewis*, *Lady Katie* and *Barbara Batchelder* are still sailing, soon to be rejoined by the *Rosie Parks*.

Photos courtesy of Pres Harding, Jr.



(right) Bronza Parks stands in his boat yard under the bowsprits of the skipjacks *Martha Lewis* & *Rosie Parks* in 1955.

(below) Bronza Parks on the deck of the *Barbara Batchelder* with daughter, Mary, and grandchildren Cande Ruark, Brenda Harding, and Pres Harding, Jr. in May 1956.