

100th Anniversary of the Matawan, NJ Shark Attacks

Gary Lehman, The Scuba Sports Club and for Dive News Network

Dive News Network was privileged to attend the July 6, 2016 Shark Awareness mixer and presentation co-sponsored by the New Jersey Maritime Museum and the Princeton-based Shark Research Institute. Several of the world's leading experts on sharks, the Matawan attacks and NJ maritime history were present, including Deb Whitcraft (Curator and President of NJMM); Dean Fessler (Education Director of Shark Research Institute); Marie Levine (Executive Director of SRI and Women Divers Hall of Fame member); Captain and teacher Stephen Nagiewicz who is also a noted NJ maritime historian, marine archaeologist and Explorers Club Executive Director and author of *Hidden History of Maritime New Jersey*; and distinguished supporters and members of the NJ maritime community.



Dean Fessler of Shark Research Institute

Opening comments were provided by Dean Fessler, who admitted to being somewhat conflicted on account of being a forceful advocate for sharks by advancing public understanding about the nature of sharks (*and* the ongoing human destruction of the species) - and on the *other hand*, commemorating the four very real (and one near) fatalities resulting from the 'twelve days of terror' off the coast of New Jersey in 1916. A skeptic might ask... "If sharks are

not mindless killers, then *why are we commemorating four dead off NJ?!*" The answer of course is that sharks are apex predators; there is necessarily predatory behavior associated with sharks; predations and 'bite investigations' have to be placed into species-specific context; and these behaviors have to be understood and taken into account with our interactions with sharks so as to avoid appearing to be their natural prey (whether fish or marine mammals) and inadvertently triggering an attack. The most poignant moment of Dean's presentation was when he called for a moment of remembrance for the four lives lost 100 years ago during those sultry twelve summer days. Dean then related that after one presentation to some school children, a little girl came up to him, saying that she had always been terrified of sharks and considered them evil; but that after hearing Dean's presentation she now wanted to *help them, save them and study them*. The crowd thereupon burst into applause over the great work that SRI does, changing youngsters' perceptions one kid at a time, and correcting public perceptions slowly but surely. Hat's off to SRI!

July 1 – July 12, 1916 Attacks



Site of Vansant Attack

Most of us know the story. The novel and movie *Jaws* (1974/1975) was co-inspired by the 1916 New Jersey attacks and by Stan Waterman's ground-breaking film *Blue Water, White Death* (1971). On July 1, 1916 Charles Vansant (age 25) was attacked by a shark in Beach Haven NJ (on Long Beach Island). His lower legs were shredded with massive tissue loss, and he bled to death before getting to the nearest hospital at Toms River. On July 6th, another attack (40 miles further north along the New Jersey shore), Charles

Bruder (27) was swimming out beyond the breakers and was attacked with a bite to the abdomen and severance of both legs. Rescuers reached him and had a tug of war with the shark over Bruder. He was variously reported to have bled to death in the rescue boat or on the desk of the fancy Essex and Sussex hotel where he was bell captain. Fast forward to the early afternoon on July 12, and to Matawan Creek where further attacks took place...



Long Beach Island Historical Museum,
Beach Haven NJ, just a hundred yards from
the Vansant attack of 7/1/1916

If this was the same shark which attacked Bruder and Vansant, it would have traveled north along the shore, west around Sandy Hook, and headed west for a total of approximately 24 miles, finding the entrance to Matawan Creek and will have swam up the creek approximately 2 miles inland from the coastal village of Keyport. There *a* (perhaps *the*) shark encountered three boys in the water, and made a predation against young Lester Stillwell. The other boys ran into town screaming.

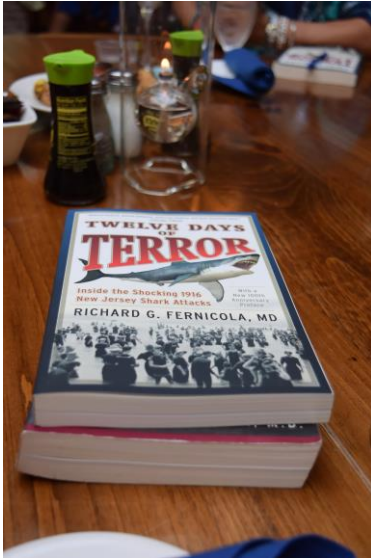
Tailor Stanley Fisher (age 24) and two other individuals responded to the scene. Fisher discovered the shark feeding on Stillwell's body and attempted to wrest the body from the shark, at which time he was grievously wounded by the shark with deep bite to the thigh which severed an artery. Despite having a tourniquet applied, Fisher died en route to Long Branch Memorial hospital. Half an hour after the Fisher attack, two brothers and a friend were swimming further east in the same creek, heard about the attack, and were scrambling out of the water. Too late for 12-year old Joseph Dunn however, who was grabbed by the shark as he attempted to exit the water. Adults in the area – alerted to the upstream attacks – responded in a human chain and had another tug of war with the shark over Dunn, who was badly bitten but survived after treatment at a nearby hospital and fully recovered.

Today's travelers on NJ's Garden State Parkway would have no idea that all this transpired in the sleepy, marshy, non-descript tidal creek at mile marker 119.8 near Matawan, just east of the Parkway...

Bull Shark? White Shark? Same Shark or Different Individuals?

Both of these species were capable of the attacks. Bulls are well-known to navigate upstream into brackish water, and thus might be under high initial suspicion. However, it is now known that white sharks (among others) *also* have variously-ranging ability to tolerate brackish water while in search of prey, especially for short periods. Dr. Fernicola, author of *Twelve Days of Terror – Inside the Shocking 1916 New Jersey Shark Attacks* noted during his presentation that a drought in 1916 caused the volume of fresh water to be reduced resulting in higher salinity due to increased intrusion of ocean water from Raritan Bay up Matawan Creek. Therefore, a white shark is not ruled out on the basis of brackish water. In fact, the balance of evidence seems to swing to a white shark for *all* the attacks off the beach and in the creek, given the hunting method, the 'tug of war' behavior, and descriptions taken at the time from witnesses describing a flash of a white underside. During the frenzied shark hunting which followed these attacks, a juvenile 8' white shark was caught by a drift net in Raritan Bay (Matawan Creek flows into it). The shark's stomach contained fifteen pounds of human flesh (reportedly so, but apparently never forensically confirmed, and was this in fact *recently-ingested* human flesh?). With this discovery (if true), it seems increasingly likely that a single white shark was responsible for all the attacks. We all now know that sharks (and white sharks in particular) are intelligent; if they find a predation strategy which works for them, they will stick with it.

As to why the shark(s) were making predations in the area, Dr. Fernicola indicated that the US was shipping cattle to our Allies in war-torn Europe, then embroiled in the carnage of the First World War. Many cattle were dying from the excessive heat and were being dumped overboard. Was this attracting large sharks? There were (and are) also meat processing facilities in that part of NJ serving the NYC restaurant industry, and offal might have been occasionally or continuously dumped into surrounding waters. Was this juvenile white shark unable to feed on the offshore carcasses due to presence of *larger* sharks, and thus following the scent trail into the Matawan Creek in search of meat processing scraps? This we cannot know at this point in time. (What *we do know* is that dumping animal carcasses will attract sharks; the Sharm El Sheikh attacks of 2010 by oceanic white-tips and mako were found to be triggered by the offshore dumping of animal carcasses).



Dr. Fericola indicated to me that we might definitively advance the understanding of the shark species (and whether it was a single rogue shark) by exhuming the bodies and conducting a forensic investigation. Under the best circumstances shark tooth fragments might be retrieved from the human remains, and DNA extracted to compare shark tooth samples from different victims. If there were no shark tooth fragments, potentially tooth marks or bite patterns might yet be discernible by forensic experts to help identify the species, and whether it likely was the same or different sharks. However, exhumation of bodies is typically only permitted for murder investigations, and scientific curiosity is not sufficient to justify the procedure. On the other hand, Dr. Fericola advises, if a wave of shark attacks occurred either off the NJ shore or off Chatham, Massachusetts (where a growing population of white

sharks make predations off the proliferating (and protected via Marine Mammals Act) seals, *then* exhumation of the Matawan victims for forensic analysis might be warranted.

However, as Dean Fessler (who has dived with white sharks outside a protective cage) has so sagely, convincingly and definitively asserted, *time itself has established that sharks are not killing machines, and that we humans are NOT on their menu*. For had this been the case, Dean concludes, the Global Shark Attack File administered out of Princeton by the Shark Research Institute staff would clearly demonstrate a growth in *predations* commensurate with radically increased human presence in the water, rather than what can be legitimately characterized as the usual case of occasional, sporadic investigatory bites by whites and other species.

The Scuba Sports Club and Dive News Network thanks NJMM and SRI for an engaging and informative evening, and wishes 'fair winds and following seas' to the NJ Maritime Museum and the Shark Research Institute for all their endeavors benefitting the maritime and marine communities of NJ and NY and the marine environments and wildlife we all cherish.