

Larry Toomer

IF THERE IS A SINGLE FAMILY THAT CAN LAY CLAIM TO AN OYSTERING DYNASTY IN THE LOWCOUNTRY, IT IS THE TOOMERS.



FILTER FEEDERS One oyster can filter more than 50 gallons of water in 24 hours.

Larry's roots here run three generations deep, back to his grandfather Simpson V. Toomer, who arrived in the Lowcountry in 1913 to work at an oyster factory on Jarvis Creek. He eventually opened his own, where the north end Crazy Crab now stands, which produced canned oysters and later raw shucked oysters.

Of Simpson's four sons, three continued in the oyster business, including Larry's father Frank. And it was among this generation that young Larry got his start.

"My father and uncles had oyster houses on Hilton Head Island, and from 2-3 years old that's what I remember. That's where I was," said Larry. By age 8, he was going out harvesting oysters by himself (as long as he stayed within sight of shore). By 13, he was allowed to venture out further, pulling in 125 oysters a day.

While his uncles maintained oyster houses at Buckingham Landing, Jarvis Creek and his father ran his own on Skull Creek, Larry would eventually seek out other waters in which to build his fortune, heading to Key West, Fla., in 1976 where he worked as a shrimper, buying his own boat just a few years later. For a decade he worked the waters of the Gulf Coast before returning to the Lowcountry.

He's called the Bluffton Oyster Company home since 1993, when he was brought in to run the place by the Reeves family. The last oyster shucking house in a state that once lived and died by its oyster industry, the factory had been a Bluffton landmark since the early 1900s. A beautiful park now surrounds it on county owned land Larry leases.

As a member of the Bluffton Town Council, Larry has fought diligently for 15 years to protect the waters that have given so much to his family. He's put contamination in the May River under the microscope – both metaphorically and literally – in his quest to keep our water clean.

"Pollution will kill us all if we allow it to happen," he said, noting that he's helped get funding for studies into contamination in the May River. Those studies have overwhelmingly shown that people are to blame – particularly, septic tanks and drain fields on waterfront areas.

"We're building a solid platform of DNA evidence to prove it's the human presence. It's a hard, complicated battle, but we're winning."

For a family dynasty built on the pristine waters of Beaufort County, it's a battle worth fighting.

