

The Jaws of History: LBI's Last Shark Attack

By JULIAN WILLIS

Summer started ominously off Gulf Shores, Alabama this past June. Two men were training for an upcoming triathlon in the Gulf of Mexico, when they were attacked by an 11-foot, 500-pound bull shark. One swimmer lost his right arm a few inches below the elbow and the other was bitten all the way up the right side of his body.

Somewhat unnerved after reading this, I wondered what my chances were of meeting a similar fate in the water off Long Beach Island. Remembering Norman Cousins, the late American author's comment that "history is a vast early warning system," I turned to the Island's early history.

The last shark attack in these parts was nearly 85 years ago, in the summer of 1916. This confrontation resulted in death, and was the first of four fatal attacks along the New Jersey coast that summer.

July 1st - Beach Haven

Although the human fear of sharks is as old as history itself, 85 years ago no scientific proof existed in North America that a shark would attack or even kill a "living human being." In fact, in 1885 Herman Oelrichs, a New York banker, offered a \$500 prize — worth approximately \$10,000 today — to anyone who could prove that a human had ever been attacked by a shark north of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. As of 1915, Oelrich's bounty had gone unclaimed.

On July 1, 1916, the speculation surrounding sharks came to an ending in Beach Haven. According to *Shadows in the Sea*, a comprehensive shark anthology, the terror began on a July Saturday. Charles Epting Vansant, a 25-year-old graduate of the University of Pennsylvania was wading in the ocean off Engleside Avenue, 20 yards from shore, when a large dorsal fin was seen behind him. Within seconds, Vansant was flailing and immersed in a pool of his own blood. Two men rushed to his aid and attempted to beat back what they believed was a large white shark in waist-deep water.

Vansant was only mauled on his left leg, but flesh was torn off his bones from his upper thigh to his heel. Two hours later, he died on his way to the nearest hospital in Toms River; doctors were unable to stop the massive hemorrhaging. Although a tragedy, many considered it a singular event. That was until word spread of a second attack just five days later and 40 miles north.

July 6th - Spring Lake

The second victim of LBI's rogue shark was a bellboy from one of Spring Lake's hotels. Charles Bruder was known to be a strong swimmer, and accustomed to swimming outside the rope lifelines that Spring Lake installed to rein in bathers.

Familiar with Bruder's antics, life-guards Chris Anderson and George White made little effort to whistle him in. Bruder was nearly a quarter mile offshore when Anderson and White heard the cries. They rowed out through the surf in their dory and found Bruder floating in a swirling patch of blood, both legs sheared off at or below the knees. Ed Brown describes it in a 1976 article in *Philadelphia Magazine*: "The two young guards frantically tried to stop the bleeding from Bruder's badly mauled body. But by the time they reached shore, Bruder was dead — his open eyes staring a last time at the sky."

July 12th - Matawan

What happened in Beach Haven and

Spring Lake was bewildering, but what occurred six days later in Matawan is unimaginable. Located 10 miles west of Raritan Bay, Matawan is significantly inland, and the town's creek is relatively narrow, just 35 feet across at its widest point and 17 feet at its deepest. On a hot July Wednesday in 1916, a retired sea captain, Thomas Cotrell, was peering

frantically to the shallows, before he was pulled under by an "unseen force." Fisher was helped onto a nearby boat, but like Vansant and Bruder, suffered severe injury to his lower extremities and died soon after.

The town of Matawan erupted in a frenzy of activity after the fatalities, and dynamited the creek. Shark hunters con-

ditional publicity," a nine-foot great white shark was finally caught in Raritan Bay. Michael Schliesser, a New York taxidermist, boated the monster, after dragging a drift net behind his boat. When the shark's stomach was split open, it was found to contain almost 15 pounds of human remains in varying states of decay, including bones — one a section of rib and a fragment of Charles Bruder's shin bone. While there was no absolute proof that all four deaths were the work of this single shark, the attacks ceased immediately.

The *Matawan Times* reported that Schliesser put his catch on display the very next day to over 3,000 people and charged them ten cents each for a look at the killer. Soon after, the jaws of the "The New Jersey Man-eater," as the shark came to be known, were hung in the window of a Broadway Avenue fish shop in Manhattan.

Three months later, the debate over whether a shark would attack a person came to its official end, although Herman Oerlich's bounty was never claimed. In October 1916, three prominent scientists, including Doctor Lucas of the Natural History Museum, finally conceded in the *Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* that the New Jersey incidents of 1916 brought "the whole shark question before us in a new phase." The country's foremost experts agreed that a shark had indeed killed four "living men."

Today, marine biologists agree that while most sharks are harmless and even docile, three species — white, bull and tiger — will attack man on rare occasion. In addition, "the rogue-shark theory" — the premise that a solitary, malevolent shark (like the New Jersey Man-eater) could be responsible for a series of adjacent attacks within a short span of coast — has been substantiated. Dr. V. M. Coppleson, an Australian shark expert, has since the 1940s documented the theory repeatedly with great whites and tiger sharks in the South Pacific.

Shark Odds and Safety

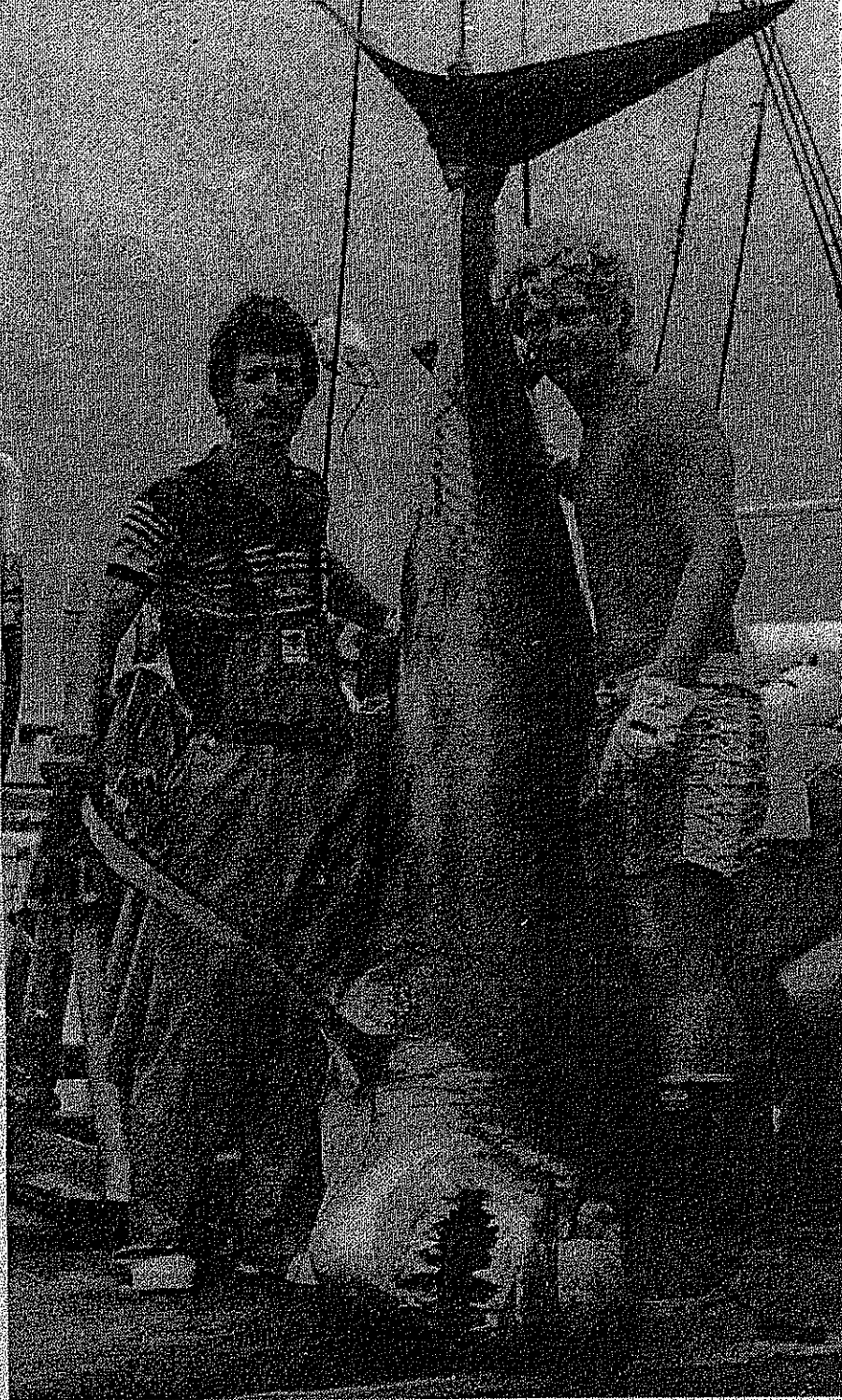
And what are the chances that you'll encounter a man-eater in the shallows while swimming off Island beaches?

For the most part, we can all rest easy. According to *The Worse-Case Scenario Handbook*: "In the U.S., the annual risk of death from lightning is thirty times greater than from shark attack." In addition, although New Jersey and New York waters are considered some of the most shark-ridden in North America, Jersey is far behind states like Florida and California. As of July 11, Florida's Volusia County (home to Daytona Beach) had already notched eight attacks for the first six months of 2000.

In terms of general safety measures the *International Shark Attack File* says bathers should heed the following points:

- Swim or surf in groups. Sharks are more likely to attack a solitary individual.
- Don't wander too far from shore, where assistance from others is more difficult.
- Avoid being in the water during darkness or twilight hours, when sharks and other fish are most active.
- Avoid wearing shiny jewelry; the reflected light resembles the sheen of fish scales and attracts the attention of sharks.
- Stay still if you think there's a shark in the vicinity. They often mistake moving hands and feet for fish.

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MOMA MAKO: Fishermen Mike Karch and Kelly Burns caught this longfin mako shark on a longlining trip out to the Grand Banks.

over the town's trolley bridge, when he saw a dark gray shadow making its way up the creek. Minutes later, at a popular swimming section of the waterway, a 12-year old boy named Lester Stilwell was doing a back float, when his friends saw a large fin approaching him at a terrific speed. Lester disappeared in a rush of water.

Stilwell's friends raced to a nearby bag factory and summoned a 24-year old, Stanley Fisher, for help. Convinced that young Stilwell was merely suffering from an epileptic fit, Fisher dove to the bottom of the creek and resurfaced with the boy's dismembered body. Realizing that he, too, was now in grave danger, Fisher swam

verged upon the town and Raritan Bay, but to no avail. Meanwhile, the attacks were becoming huge news, drawing as much coverage as the European war and pushing the summer polio epidemic off the front page. Dr. Frederick Lucas of the National History Museum, considered the country's foremost shark authority, was quoted in the *New York Times*: "a shark's jaws did not have the strength to take off a man's leg." This was in the face of documented proof, just days old, that a shark had done exactly that.

July 14th - Raritan Bay,

Beginning of the End

Two days later, after what the *New York Times* called "a deluge of interna-