

Uncle Arry's Joke

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There are times when work on the water is very rewarding. All men who seek a living bobbing around the sea, view the sun set with a special understanding, urgency, and pleasure. The work is hard and the rewards are mostly poetic, but Arry Fulcher knew no other way of life.

Arry was my cousin's, father's, half-brother's, great uncle so we just called him Uncle Arry. He was old as dirt but he was strong. He had a good heart and his mind was still sharp. He knew every good fish hole in Core Sound and how to get 'em outa there. So, Long Haul captains from Cedar Island to Cape Lookout all wanted Uncle Arry in their crew. He had made 48,435 biscuits in his life time, aboard boats of all kinds. He had heard all the stories, and listened to all the excuses. It is safe to say that Uncle Arry was getting a little board with fishing.

Long Hauling is a method of fishing employed on Core and Pamlico sounds. The procedure involves two boats pulling a mile long net around a deep hole. The net is then shorten up until it is about 40 feet in diameter and in about four feet of water. At this point the crew gets in the water, steps on the foot of the net and holds the cork line out of the water so that the fish don't jump out. This method of fishing is very efficient. So many fish are caught that the fish houses send a special boat out to get the catch. When the day is done the boats raft up and anchor in a safe cove for the night.

One hot August day about a year ago Uncle Arry was working with Ol' Capn Ben aboard the Jenny Belle and Captain Harry, from Davis Shore, who had the Suzie. They had made a good haul that day and everyone on the two boats was in a happy frame of mind. They rafted up the boats and anchored in the mouth of Squash Creek on the back side of Core Bank across the sound from Cedar Island. By sun set supper was over, dishes put away and everyone was starting to feel a little sleepy. Everyone that is except Uncle Arry.

Uncle Arry's boredom was fueled by the warm humid breeze blowing across the bow of the boat as she danced around her anchor and swung in harmony with her airy partner. Ol' Capn Ben snoozed on his bench in the pilot house, head tilted back, mouth hanging open, a slight nasally snore coming from the opening. The warm gentle August breeze came aboard at the bow, crossed the cabin top and quietly entered through the wide open, swung out, pilot house windows.

Suddenly, Arry's brain stirred with an inspiration that he was sure had come from heaven. He felt an uncontrolled smile inch its way across his face. His eyes rolled back in his head and he heard a choir of angles singing in his head. He roused Timmy, the new hand in the crew. Then quietly explained his plan.

There are times in the life of every man when space and time merge into a beautiful slow motion show. During these times he is master of his own life. He may have no notion of what might happen just seconds later, but what he must do right then is clear. He must act. And so, it happened aboard the Jenny Belle that evening with perfect timing.

The sun had been below the tree line on Cedar Island for about five minuets. Long shadows were growing across the sound but there was still a good pumpkin colored sky offering up its sailors delight. Uncle Arry positioned himself on the bow of the boat, about ten feet from the peace-fully sleeping Capn Ben. When Arry pulled his pants down a feeling of freedom flushed through him and mem-ories of the younger man he use to be briefly came to mind. He turned to nod at Timmy who had positioned himself just outside the port side window of the pilot house and was feeling a little queasy at the sight.

From this position Timmy could reach through the window and gently touch the warmed apple butter prepared toilet paper to the side of Ben's cheek. Ol' Capn Ben sleepily jerked his head back and flicked the toilet paper from his cheek. It landed in his lap, brown stain side up, and left some of its sticky wet feeling on his cheek. He open his eyes slowly at first and was greeted by the sight of Uncle Arry lifting his pants just a few feet to windward.

At first Ben was dumb struck. He couldn't believe his eyes. But, quickly logic took over and soon rage filled his old heart.

Back out on the bow, Uncle Arry had just buckled his belt when he slightly turned his head to enjoy the look on Ben's face.

"Hey!" Ben yelled at the top of his lungs. "Watch what your doing." He then suggested a few words and phrases for use at Arry's funeral and tripped trying to bolt through the pilot house door in the direction of Uncle Arry. Homicide was, of course, on his mind.

Arry took off running around the other side of the boat. Around and around the two old men, kinda ran. Arry was laughing with tears in his eyes and saying, "now now Ben it was just a joke." And Ben, still discussing Arry's family tree, was starting to gain on him.

The commotion got the attention of Harry and the guys on the Suzie, which was tied up along side the Jenny Belle. Timmy brought the fellows up to date on the local news and then they just sat back watching the evenings entertainment.

Ben was a little faster then Arry and had pulled to within an arms length when the two reached the mast. In an impressive leap Arry jumped from the starboard side gunnel to the mast and started shinnying like a koala up a tree. Ben couldn't quite make the leap but he soon was on the mast himself. As Arry reached the top he looked down. Ben was reaching for his foot.

The fellows on the other boat were laughing, slapping their knees and rolling on the deck at the two old guys ability to move as fast as they did. Their pleasure reached its peek when Arry, at the top of the mast, reached out, grabbed the forestay, and slid down it like a paratrooper in training, just out of Ben's reach. When his feet reached the bow deck, Arry took one step too wide on the port side and over the side he went. When he hit the water the splash threw a plume of water up on the bow. As he finally surfaced Uncle Arry was still laughing.

Ol' Capn Ben was, at last, winded. The humor of the joke finally hit him. He sat on the cabin top realising it was just apple butter and watching Arry treading water. The two men laughed a deep affectionate, memorable belly-laugh. Then Ben helped Arry back aboard.