

VINEYARD



GAZETTE



ELIZABETH CECIL

Coop

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The Island is full of fishing legends. And more than a few legendary fishermen. But when it comes down to it, there is only one Cooper Gilkes III.

Barry Stringfellow

The young firefighter entered the smoke filled house, searching for the source of the blaze in total darkness. In his brief career with the Laconia Fire Department in New Hampshire, Cooper Gilkes III - "Coop" - already had his share of close calls. He was one of two firemen at the flashpoint of the 1965 Weirs Beach riot, when 10,000 bikers turned the sleepy lakeside village into a war zone. He'd been cornered by a raging fire, his air tanks nearly empty, in a blaze at an American Legion Hall where 80-proof accelerant kept exploding behind the bar. He'd seen an entire house explode from a gas leak as his engine approached. He'd been bitten by a treed pet monkey.

On this night in 1971, Coop was first-in on a house fire when the floor collapsed beneath him. He somehow managed to grab the firehose to break his fall and eventually felt his way out through the pitch black basement.

"That night I came home and told Lela, "That's it, pack up the kids, we're leaving," he said, sitting at the kitchen table in his Edgartown home with Lela, his wife and business partner at Coop's Bait & Tackle, which debouches off their modest three-bedroom house on Edgartown-West Tisbury Road. The table, which has held countless meals made with Coop-caught fish, fowl, and venison, also serves as Lela's accounting desk. In front of her sat a spiral notebook with lines of meticulously entered numbers, a stack of invoices, and an adding machine from the pre-digital era.

"I always wanted to move back to the Vineyard, but that night I realized I might not make it back," Coop said. "I loved the guys in the department, but I had to get home."

So began the return of native son Cooper Gilkes III to Martha's Vineyard, where he would build an Island institution from the ground up and spread the gospel of fishing to generations of anglers.

Coop was born in Oak Bluffs and grew up on Pennacook Avenue until his father's job with the Boy Scouts of America required uprooting the family to Laconia. There, Coop graduated high school, became a fireman, and met Lela, who was, appropriately, the sister of a fishing buddy.



Cooper Gilkes (right) and Terry Boyd reeled in the big ones during a 1970s Derby: a pair of striped bass that tipped the scales in the upper forties.

“Lela’s brother Hank and I were fishing every spare minute we could,” he said. “Lela and I eventually went out on a date. It was a ‘kidding date’ and soon it got pretty serious.”

Lela didn’t question her husband’s decision to move back to the Vineyard. “I knew he wasn’t happy in Laconia. He’s got salt water in his veins,” she said, punctuating her sentence with a laugh, as she often does. “Cooper has to be near the ocean.”

Forty-eight years later, Coop, who turns seventy-six in October, has established himself as one of Martha’s Vineyard’s preeminent outdoorsmen, and Coop’s Bait & Tackle has achieved landmark status among anglers. It is, as the stickers say, “Where fishermen gather.” Locals and visitors return year after year for gear, bait, advice, and, during the Martha’s Vineyard Striped Bass & Bluefish Derby, Lela’s chocolate chip cookies.

“I always wanted a tackle store. When I was ten, eleven years old, I lived in Clayton Hoyle’s store,” Coop said. Hoyle, a Derby hall of famer, was a skilled rod maker with a store in Oak Bluffs. “I didn’t want a huge business. I just wanted something that we could run, where I would have time to talk to people when they come in. It’s worked out perfectly. I’m living the dream.”

But the dream didn’t come easily. To make ends meet over the years they’ve had to fly by the seat of their pants.

“We still do,” Lela said with a laugh.

After moving to the Vineyard in 1971, Coop, Lela, and their young children, Tim, Tina, and Dan, bounced from rental to rental. For work, Coop drove a delivery truck and cooked at Lawry’s (now Sharky’s Cantina) in Edgartown. Lela waitressed and worked in the office of a car dealership. “For a while we didn’t have a car,” Lela remembered, “and the Edgartown Police would give Coop a ride to Lawry’s in the morning and he’d make them breakfast. Times were different then.”



Fishing family: Coop, son Dan Gilkes, wife Lela Gilkes, the ironically named Jackson “Little Coop” Fersen, and daughter Tina Polleys.

ELIZABETH CECIL

And always, they fished.

“We fished as a family,” Coop said. “Scallops, scup, eels, sea bass, fluke, stripers, blues, clams, quahaugs, you name it. If it came from the ocean, we fished for it.”

“The kids always kept track of their biggest fish,” Lela said. “That was the one they got paid for. The rest of the fish went into a pool and bought the milk and the bread for the family. During the daytime it was just a day at the beach for the kids. But at night when they were little we’d have to pack up pillows and bedrolls. If Cooper was catching fish, they’d go to sleep and we kept fishing.”

Moshup Beach in Aquinnah was a favorite spot for striped bass. “I can’t tell you how many trips I made over those dunes with kids on my back sound asleep, and then have to go back and drag fish out,” Coop said, grinning at the memory.

“I would get so mad when we’d pack up everything, get to Moshup, and he’d say, ‘It doesn’t look fishy,’ and we’d have to go elsewhere,” Lela said. “One night I got so aggravated I said, ‘We’re going to stay anyway.’ Well, he was right. If Cooper says it’s not fishy, we go somewhere else.”

“I remember hauling our sleeping bags over the dunes and falling asleep to the sound of the Coleman lanterns,” their daughter Tina said. She lives in Edgartown, within walking distance from her parents’ house/tackle store, with husband Jonathan Polleys and two of their three children. “It was a pretty special time, but it wasn’t easy. It was very much like farming: living season to season, fishing, hunting, and shellfishing. When things are going well, you have money; when they don’t, you don’t.”

Coop and Lela were also shellfishing partners. Bay scallops in particular helped balance the books during the lean winter months.



ELIZABETH CECIL

“We had a twelve-foot skiff and we dip netted, we didn’t even have a drag,” Coop said. “She used to snag them right out from under me. She’d laugh. We had a ball. It was a lot of work, but it was a lot of fun.”

“We used our eel money to buy a new six-horsepower motor. We were thrilled to death because it didn’t break down on us,” Lela recalled.

“You miss a day of scalloping, that really hurts,” he said.

In 1985 they bought the house where they live today from Coop's uncle, Kenny Dietz. Then, slowly, Coop's Bait & Tackle began to take root.

"There was a shed out back where his uncle kept his paints," Lela said. "We built a lean-to and fabricated an eel tank and became sellers of eels to fishermen. It solved both problems: we were able to sell the big eels, mostly to Italy, and sold the little eels to the local fishermen. On top of the dryer we had a cabinet where we kept the hooks and sinkers and it sort of grew from there. I found a notebook that showed the kids keeping track, 'one six-ounce sinker, three hooks....' It was so cute."

Vineyard-caught eels remained a staple. Sometimes fishermen would come by after hours for emergency eels.

"My bedroom window was next to the old door and once in a while I'd hear a knock at one or two in the morning," Tina said. "Of course, Daddy was out fishing, so I'd take care of them. I'd tell them to pay in the morning and then go back to bed. They always paid."



ELIZABETH CECIL

After an inauspicious beginning Coop added custom rods to his inventory. "I made my first hand-wrapped rod in the living room and I was really proud of it," he said. "I had it on a drying machine and I told Lela, 'Whatever you do, don't let anything get near this rod.' I came back three hours later, there was a sock going around and around. She'd put the laundry basket under it and couldn't get it off."

Eventually they decided to take the plunge and make Coop's Bait & Tackle official.

"I went to the selectmen [for a business permit] and said, 'What do you think?'" he remembered. "The selectmen were like fathers to me and they said, 'Look, Coop, you just bought your house. We just had one guy in the business fold up. We don't want you to lose your home.' When we first opened, we had six rods for sale. That's all that was on that wall."

As the business grew, the Gilkes house became its manufacturing and distribution center, until the late '80s, when a friend stepped in to help.

"Cooper was wrapping rods in the living room, there was fishing stuff everywhere, and our close friend Bill Hawkins said, 'Lela, you really need a living room.' He came back with blueprints for the shop," Lela said. "They were so intricate, they practically showed where to put in the nails."

With the help of family, friends, and a fraternity of fishermen, the shop went up fast.

"It was a barn raising," Coop said. "It was Columbus Day weekend. We started on Friday and by Monday it was up, the windows were in, the electric was in. The girls cooked and the guys worked; it was a phenomenal scene."



Little Coop fishing at Lobsterville Beach in Aquinnah.

COURTESY COOPER GILKES

"Of course, I still don't have a living room," Lela said. "In the winter our living room is a fly-tying factory."

Today, every square inch of the shop walls, and most of the windows, are covered with tackle and photos of fishermen of all ages holding stripers, sharks, blues, and other piscatorial quarry. Dollar bills also festoon the walls, bets won by Coop from fishermen who were guaranteed a fish if they took his advice. It's fitting that the cash register also serves as a photo gallery, with barely enough room to show the customer the total. Coop's Bait & Tackle is a business, but people always take priority over profit.

"For Coop, it's not all about the buck," Rob Morrison, a ten-year employee at the tackle shop, now one of the Edgartown deputy shellfish constables, said. "I've seen him talk people out of buying rods, saying they can borrow some of his. He has a contagious enthusiasm, and he loves teaching, especially teaching kids."

One of the kids Coop taught is six foot, five inch "Little Coop," who graduated this spring from the University of Virginia. He's one of four summer hires whom Coop refers to as "my boys."

"My full name is Jackson Cooper Fersen, but the only time I ever used Jackson was at college registration," Little Coop said.

Coop pointed to framed photos of four-year-old Little Coop catching his first striped bass, a keeper-sized beauty, on Lobsterville Beach in Aquinnah. "It was right after my heart surgery in 2000. I wasn't supposed to be fishing but...that was really cool," he said with paternal pride.

Less than a month before the photos were taken, Coop had been rushed to Boston for major heart surgery. In the preceding months, he'd made several trips to Martha's Vineyard Hospital for treatment for congestive heart failure. "It wasn't working," he said. "One night I could hardly breathe and we went back to the hospital. I could see the nurses' station when they got my results and all of a sudden they started scrambling."



COURTESY COOPER GILKES

He was rushed to Boston via MedFlight.

“I’m on this stretcher, my face was practically pressed to the ceiling, and I turn my head and see the Vineyard disappearing in the port window, and I’m wondering if that was the last I’d see the Island,” he said, laughing. “But I got a top-notch doctor and he fixed me good.”

The surgery was ostensibly to repair a mitral valve, but when Dr. Lawrence Cohn got a better look, a triple bypass was added to the protocol.

“It was supposed to be a three-hour surgery,” Lela said. “It was a lot longer than that.”

The night Little Coop caught his big bass, Coop was just weeks into the long journey of post-op recovery.

“He couldn’t walk across the street at that point,” Lela said.

“My world had just come crashing in,” Coop said. “Over time, I would walk to the bike path and add one telephone pole a day, but it was brutal.”



In 2000, less than a month after undergoing open-heart surgery, Coop (right) and Paul Fersen (left) helped Little Coop catch his first striped bass at Lobsterville Beach.

COURTESY COOPER GILKES

Coop had no intention of fishing that night.

“They were staying in Lobsterville, and we went out for dinner, and I rigged him up a little trout rod,” he said. “It was my first time back on the beach, so I was ecstatic just to be there. Fluke were everywhere, jumping out of the water – I’d never seen anything like it. We’re playing around with the fluke and he’s having a ball and all of a sudden he hooks up. I’m looking at the rod bending and thinking, ‘This is not good.’ That fish took him down to the knot. But we landed him. Boy, I slept good that night.”

Little Coop’s father, Paul Fersen, has been friends with Coop for twenty-five years. Fersen, a former professional football player from Georgia, whose love of the outdoors took him to Vermont and on to a long career with the Orvis Company, recalled the evening. “Coop wasn’t supposed to be fishing, but he got permission from Lela and Tina to take out Little Coop,” he said. “I was sure that fish was going to break off, but Coop kneeled next to him, put his arms around him, and coached him in a calm voice, practically a whisper. We all stood around and watched. There wasn’t a dry eye in the house. It was the greatest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Explaining why he named his son after Coop, Fersen said, “Coop had become for me the most wonderful guy you could ever meet. He has every positive attribute a human can have; he’s so incredibly kind and humble. His whole family is like that. You see

how much he's done for the community and all the lives he's touched over the years, and you name your child after him in hopes that they even come close. The term legend is drastically overused, but in the case of Coop it's warranted."

Slowly, one telephone pole at a time, Coop regained his strength and fully recovered from the heart surgery. Looking back at that time, he recalled Dr. Cohn's notoriously brusque bedside manner. "If you asked a stupid question, he let you have it. I asked a few stupid questions and he let me have it, and it ticked me off a little bit," he said. "About five years later, I get a call from a doctor on the Island. He says, 'Hey Coop, Dr. Cohn is coming to the Island. I'd love to have you take him out fishing.' I said, 'No problem' - and I walked his fanny off. We walked all the way down to the great pond opening, he caught a twenty-five-pound bass on his flyrod, he was ecstatic. When we got back to the truck, he said, 'Cooper, I fixed you too damn good.'"

While Coop downplays his own fishing accomplishments - they could fill a book - he lights up when he talks about teaching kids to fish. The Kids' Trout Derby, in its forty-seventh year, and Kids' Derby Day, in its thirty-eighth year, are events that he created and runs with Lela. "The numbers dropped off for a while, but the last two, three years the kids have been coming back," he said, visibly pleased. "We love it, we take them outside and give them some pointers. If you get a kid started out right, he's going to have a good time. It's going to stick."

Coop and the late Ed Jerome were also largely responsible for resuscitating the Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass & Bluefish Derby, which was languishing in the early 1980s under the aegis of the Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce. "The chamber got tired of us using their people and decided they were going to get rid of the Derby," Jerome recalled, not long before he succumbed to a heart attack while shellfishing on Sengekontacket Pond last summer. "It was 1986, there was a meeting at The Newes [from America pub] and Coop was with me, even though going to meetings wasn't his cup of tea. We didn't want the Derby going into the hands of other people. We told them what we wanted to do with it - create scholarships and become a registered nonprofit - and they sold it to us for a dollar."



If it's fall you'll find Coop fly-fishing for false albacore at the Gut on Chappaquiddick.

DAVID SKOK

“Ed and I walked out of that meeting and I said, ‘What the hell have we just done?’” Coop recalled, laughing. Since then, the number of entrants and the money raised for scholarships has steadily increased. A record 3,541 anglers participated last year, with \$30,000 in scholarships awarded to graduating students from the high school this past June. Since 1986, proceeds from the Derby have generated more than \$600,000 in scholarships for Island students.

“Cooper is a natural when it comes to teaching,” Lela said. “The knowledge is important, but being able to communicate it, I think, is more important.”

For his part, Coop unabashedly credits Lela for making his childhood dream a reality. Their partnership in all facets of life has been the foundation on which their iconic business was built. “Lela is the boss. She’s at this kitchen table eight hours a day,” he said. “To this day I don’t know how she does it. Without her I would be lost.”

“I really feel that God had his hand in it,” Lela added. “We’ve been exceptionally blessed. Nothing came easy but....”

“We always worked it out,” said Coop.

There’s also a side to Lela that many customers don’t know. “She knows more about fishing than most of the people coming in the shop,” Morrison said. “She’ll forget ten times more than these tough old guys that come into the store. But she’s really modest

about it. Coop and Lela are from a different time. You won't see something like them on the Vineyard again."

Asked how many years he and Lela have been married, Coop took a long pause.

"You're going to get me in trouble now."

He guessed fifty-three years, then looked hopefully to Lela. She tapped out some numbers on the well-worn keys of the adding machine.

"Fifty-four years," she said.

"See what I mean?"
