

THE MAN WHO LOVED LACROSSE

Reginald Truitt & the Chesapeake Biological Lab

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This is the second article in a series about the pioneers of Chesapeake Bay science.

In the summer of 1919, a brand new graduate student carried a borrowed microscope to a creek north of Solomons Island, Maryland, a knob of land near the meeting point of the Patuxent River and the Chesapeake Bay. In a cramped fisherman's shack, he set up a makeshift laboratory, installed his microscope, and began studying oyster biology.

Reginald Van Trump Truitt, already 27 years old, was a man in a hurry. He soon moved his microscope to the parish hall of a local church and in 1924 he began calling his one-room, largely self-financed operation the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory. By 1929 he helped persuade the Maryland governor and legislature to approve the first marine lab in Maryland that would conduct ongoing scientific research on oysters and blue crabs and finfish. It is now the oldest marine lab on the Bay and one of the leading centers in the country for fisheries research.

It began, however, as the unlikely offspring of a self-confident and single-minded man who was better known in his youth for his charm and his lacrosse than for his science. At the Maryland Agricultural College, Truitt was famous as "Rags," the man who brought rag-time dancing to the campus and led the lacrosse team as both captain and coach. After serving as a high school principal and a pilot with the Army Signal Corps, he returned to College Park as a graduate student in zoology where he was quickly recruited to coach the lacrosse team. The little ag college he'd attended was now

reorganized as the University of Maryland, and the new school had big ambitions for its sports teams.

Truitt, however, had his own ambitions about sports and science, and his strong-willed pursuit of them would help shape the future of lacrosse in Maryland and the fate of his new lab on the Chesapeake. When he took the coaching job, Truitt refused any salary. It was the quixotic stance of a classic amateur, an idealist who would coach, he said, for the love of the game — even in an era when college sports were quickly professionalizing. Though his lacrosse position came with no pay, it carried plenty of pressure. The new school wanted to make a name for itself in a state that featured powerful teams from old-line schools like Johns Hopkins, Navy, and St. John's College.

When he decided to study oysters down on Solomons Island, Truitt made a similar move, this time defying the chairman of his zoology department. Shellfish and finfish in Chesapeake Bay were best studied by the federal government's Bureau of Fisheries, according to the chairman, and not by scientists with the state's land grant university. If a grad student wanted to waste his time studying the ecology of the Bay, he was not to use any of the department's microscopes. It was the start of a long disconnect between the University of Maryland and the lab at Solomons Island.

It was also the start of an unusual odyssey. Seldom derailed by rejection, Truitt borrowed a microscope from Washington College and headed for the island. His ambitions there were both academic and commercial. He was a grad student determined to do a thesis on oysters, but he was also the son of sea

captain turned businessman who grew oysters in Chincoteague Bay over on the ocean side of the Eastern Shore. When the young Truitt arrived on Solomons Island, he said he wanted to figure out the best places to plant shells and seed oysters in Maryland's Chesapeake Bay.

It was, in some ways, another quixotic gesture. There was clearly little interest in oysters in academic circles at the University of Maryland. And there was active opposition in the seafood industry to oyster farming in a state where watermen were able to dredge and tong oysters off the great reefs that God and nature had built around the Bay.

In pursuit of his oyster interests, however, Truitt would usually prove adept at finding powerful allies. When he wanted to learn about marine biology, a topic not taught at his university, he talked scientists at the Bureau of Fisheries into training him at their Connecticut Laboratory. In Annapolis, the grad student soon won the support of Swepson Earle, the powerful head of the state Conservation Commission, the forerunner of the current Department of Natural Resources.

For most of the 1920s, Truitt was betting an unusual trifecta: he was an unpaid oyster scientist at Solomons Island, an unpaid oyster adviser in Annapolis, and an unpaid lacrosse coach at College Park. Only two of his bets would pay off. In 1929, the governor and legislature, pushed by Truitt and Earle, approved a state-funded marine lab, and soon after put Truitt on a payroll as director. The Chesapeake Biological Laboratory would soon have new brick buildings located on the island where his first lab had been a fish shack.

His lacrosse job, however, didn't pay off well. It eventually led Truitt into a troubled relationship with the man who might have proved a powerful ally in building his new lab. As a coach, Truitt reported to H.C. "Curley" Byrd, the athletic director and football coach who was so popular around the state that he would soon become president of the University of Maryland.

On paper at least, Truitt and Byrd looked like natural allies. Both were the sons of successful Eastern Shore oystermen: Truitt came from the Snow Hill area, Byrd from Crisfield. Both became athletes at the old Maryland Agricultural College: Truitt lettered all four years in track and lacrosse, Byrd was the school's most famous star in football, baseball, and track.

Both came back to College Park to coach sports teams. Both were handsome, charismatic, and personable. Both were builders.

For Byrd, a key step in building a new university was success in sports, especially in football and lacrosse. "Byrd believed very sincerely that the way for a university to become a great university was for it to become known, for it to become loved by the people," said historian George Callcott. "And the best way for it to become known and loved by the people was to have winning teams."

As an unpaid coach, Truitt did his part for the upstart university — he built winning teams — but he eventually became uncomfortable with Byrd's tactics. By 1924 the *Washington Post* was crediting Truitt with launching the university as a national lacrosse power. As a zoology instructor, however, Truitt resented Byrd's habit of sending football players into his classes for automatic passing grades. According to his daughter, Trudy Guthrie, Truitt came to consider Byrd "academically corrupt" in his quest for



Reginald Van Trump Truitt was a popular lacrosse coach and scientist who founded the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory. He battled with Curley Byrd over the fate of his laboratory. PHOTOGRAPH, COURTESY OF TRUDY GUTHRIE



H.C. "Curley" Byrd was a popular football coach who became president of the University of Maryland. He tried — unsuccessfully — to take control of Truitt's laboratory. PHOTOGRAPH, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND ARCHIVES

winning teams. It was an unlikely animosity that would bedevil Truitt's efforts to build his new marine lab.

The Chesapeake Biological Laboratory would open its first building in 1931 as a state agency, not as an arm of Curley Byrd's University of Maryland. And for three decades it would stay that way. The lab was headquarters for the Maryland Department of Research and Education, the state's first institution to focus ongoing research on the Chesapeake Bay. Perhaps its key mission in its early days was offering advanced summer training in science, and Truitt recruited students and faculty from Johns Hopkins University and St. Johns, Goucher, Washington and Western Maryland Colleges. He also won research funding from the prestigious Carnegie Institution of Washington, D.C.

In attracting supporters, Truitt was able to draw on his family wealth, his political connections, and his personal charm. "He was the Jay Gatsby of the scientific community," said John Wennersten, a historian and author of

two books on the Bay. "He drove a nice car, he wore a nice suit, he was in demand at cocktail parties in Annapolis, he flourished in the highest circles. He'd put his arm around you and talk about bridge or snooker or pool or the latest yachting regatta."

At his new lab Truitt quickly did something fairly spectacular: he saved the oyster industry from a full-scale disaster. In his brand new building, he ran experiments with Japanese oysters, the fast-growing species that was already the mainstay of a profitable West Coast industry and was now drawing the interest of East Coast oyster growers. Truitt placed 10 Japanese oysters in lab tanks with Chesapeake oysters, induced spawning from both species, and examined the larvae that resulted.

When he looked through his microscope, he saw hybrid larvae, and the discovery drove him to end the experiment and drain his larvae onto the ground. If Japanese oysters grew in the Chesapeake, he said, they could cross-breed with native oysters, and their offspring could quickly spread throughout the Bay.

One result, he said, might be a Bay full of unattractive, untasty oysters. Another might be the introduction of parasites, a hotly debated topic that divided oyster scientists into opposing camps. And on this issue, Truitt proved far sighted. Nearly 30 years later, a disease epidemic called MSX would begin devastating oyster populations in Delaware Bay and Chesapeake Bay. Nearly 70 years after Truitt's experiment, scientists would finally identify the cause of the MSX epidemic: a parasite found on Japanese oysters.

In 1932, Truitt told the legislature that the Japanese oyster could be "a genuine yellow peril," and his nativist appeal inspired the legislature to move at warp

speed and ban the planting of Japanese oysters in Maryland waters. Though MSX epidemics would eventually spread through the state's oyster grounds, Truitt's research and lobbying helped buy valuable decades for the oyster fishery.

Truitt used those decades to develop techniques for farming oysters — only to see his work used to save the traditional public fishery for wild oysters. He set up a large experimental oyster farm on the Honga River on the Eastern Shore where he was able to plant 1,000 acres with shells and other substrates, then bring in seed oysters and close off the grounds to commercial harvest. His farm allowed him to test ideas about the best places for growing seed oysters, the best times for planting shell, and the minimum time for raising marketable oysters. His strategies turned an overfished area of Bay bottom into a productive oyster ground.

His findings would outlast his farm. Responding to the political clout of watermen, the state later reopened his Honga River farm to public harvesting and tongers quickly overfished it. Over time, however, the state of Maryland would adapt Truitt's strategies to restock and revive public oyster grounds, turning a wild fishery into something close to a sustainable "put-and-take fishery" that helped support watermen and seafood packers for nearly 50 years.

His research success, however, didn't win Truitt much support at the University of Maryland. He would remain on the zoology faculty until 1941, and for many of those years he would try to shift the lab to the university, a connection that would, he thought, turn the lab into a major research center. By 1935, however, the new president of the university was his old boss, Curley Byrd, who was now proving hugely effective at political deal making and fundraising in both Annapolis and Washington. As president, however, the ex-football coach steadily resisted pleas from the ex-lacrosse coach to link up the university and the marine lab. When Truitt scheduled visits to the president's office, Byrd kept cancelling. And when he didn't cancel, he some-

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times kept Truitt waiting for hours.

According to Gene Cronin, the scientist who would succeed Truitt as lab director, Truitt came to see Byrd as an enemy and competitor.

That competition shaped the fate of Truitt's lab for two decades. When Byrd was finally ready in 1940 to absorb the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory into his growing university, Truitt was no longer interested. Citing a decade of indifference from the university, Truitt said he would stick with those who stuck with him during the early days: namely the state of Maryland's Department of Conservation and the other colleges around the state that sent him students and faculty and funds.

Truitt was still, in his core, the man who loved lacrosse, the classic idealist who saw himself leading a crusade. He was, he said, "selling the movement" to pursue science in the service of conservation, and he apparently wanted true believers by his side. He told Byrd that in building the lab, "I used my own personality, all that I stood for, and all that my vision indicated the future to hold for hydrobiology and conservation." He was not about to turn his lab over "bag and baggage, even to my own institution, the University of Maryland."

Truitt's lab would live apart from Byrd's university. In his campaign to popularize hydrobiology, his term for marine biology, Truitt gave speeches and wrote newspaper articles, eventually making himself "Mr. Chesapeake" for his era, the man the press, the public, and the politicians turned to for advice on Bay issues.

In 1954, Byrd tried to make himself "Mr. Governor." He retired from the uni-

versity and ran for the job — only to lose, much to Truitt's satisfaction. Assuming his lab was safe, Truitt retired that year as director.

But the battles with Curley Byrd had not ended. After his defeat, Byrd was appointed Chairman and Director of the state's Tidewater Fisheries Commission and in those jobs he lobbied — again unsuccessfully — to bring the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory (CBL) under his department.

Truitt was gone but, according to *The Baltimore Sun*, scientists at the laboratory still opposed any connection with Byrd. The result was a turnabout: to escape Byrd, lab scientists now preferred to finally merge with the University of Maryland. In 1961 the Solomons lab became part of a new university program called the Natural Resources Institute. And in 1973, it became part of what is now the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science.

Idealism sometimes carries a cost. Truitt created his lab by "selling" his vision that science could help save the Chesapeake, but he might have built faster and larger by cutting a deal with his own devil: namely Curley Byrd, the master deal maker of his era. When the university connection, long delayed, finally came, it proved important in transforming CBL from a small research group and summer teaching center into the kind of major marine science center that Truitt wanted from the start.

Byrd soon retired from his state jobs to run — unsuccessfully — for the U.S. Senate. Truitt retired to write a series of regional histories about the Eastern Shore and lead a campaign to turn Assateague Island into a national park.

And he never lost his love for lacrosse. In 1959 Truitt was elected to the National Lacrosse Hall of Fame. The award cited him as a player, as a coach, as a frequent official for lacrosse games, and as a key member of the U.S. Inter-collegiate Lacrosse Association.

There is no record he ever accepted any pay in any of these roles. ♡

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