

Old Dominion Insurance Company, "and the company was getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And when I first worked there they knew you by name, they called me Newton. And that last year, when I won that trip (to Acapulco), they didn't even know what my name was. My number was 6135, and that's all they knew you by, by your number." That's when he and Frances went into the fish business full-time.

And that worked fine until there was the wreck. It was Aug. 23, 1991, 7 p.m. Newton, driving a brand new truck, was coming home from another full day selling fish. "A drunk hit me head on."



Photo by Susie Audibert

Longtime weekly customer, Page Sullenberger tells a story when she and the late Judge Lloyd Sullenberger would buy rock fish from the Fish Man, he would always throw in the state tag to prove to the jurist that his fish is legal.

bought a house in Mechanicsville so that Frances could be closer to the hospital.

"You get 78 years old, you don't feel like working as much as you used to," he says a tad wearily. "Orange was the first place I ever come when I started in business...If it hadn't been for Orange, I never would have made it. But Orange was a good spot and always has been a good spot...Orange has been good to me....This will be the last place I give up." And when will that be?

"Till I get a hundred," he winks mischievously. "When I get a century, I'm going to quit." He laughs out loud at the very thought of it.

"Three pounds of medium shrimp, please," a customer, correction, a friend gives his order. "300 pounds," he deadpans in return.

It happened on Rt. 33 near Montpelier in Hanover County. "It busted me up right smart bad...chest, neck, everything else...Everybody thought I was dead because it tore a brand new truck all to pieces." The drunk driver had no license; the Olds 98 he was driving was registered to a dead man. "It was a mess." A sympathetic state trooper straightened it out, but Newton was out of work for three months.

But he recovered. He also recovered from an aneurysm in 1998 that left him almost completely blind in his right eye. Two surgeries later, he has regained most of that sight. And then Frances had a stroke. Eventually, Newton sold the farms out near Saluda and they



Photo by Phil Audibert

Another satisfied customer, Tarsha Branch, came all the way from Woodbridge to buy fish from Newton Williams in Orange. People also come from Culpeper to buy from the Fish Man.



Photo by Susie Audibert

The Fish Man weighs snow crab legs at the back of his refrigerated truck in Orange. His day starts at 5 a.m. and continues long after he has packed up and left town at 6 p.m. on Fridays. Once home, he spends two hours sanitizing his truck.

# the FISH man

It's cold and rainy this cruel March day, yet a line of people snakes from the back of a refrigerated panel truck parked next to Altman Furniture on Byrd Street. "He comes in the darndest, coldest, roughest weather," says Johnny Altman shaking his head from side to side in incredulity.

"I've been coming here a long time," chimes in former town treasurer, Barbara Scott. "We're old buddies."

"He's a legend," adds Dr. Randy Merrick, who, by the way, has played a significant role in saving that legend.

"I guess I've been coming for as long as he's been coming," says Fred Sherman, who comes, well...every Friday. In fact if Newt doesn't see Fred on Friday he assumes Fred's either sick or away, or worse...dead.

Newt's full name is Newton Williams. ("Some call me Newton, some call me Newt. Some call me Fig Newton. I answer to anything.") But most know him simply as Mr. Williams or the Fish Man.

He is almost 78 years old and he has been coming to Orange and selling fish out of his truck every Friday since Sept. 15, 38 years ago. "This is the first place I came, right here," says Newton emphatically. And it will be his last too. When it's time for Mr. Williams to hang up his scales, Orange will be the last place he gives up, because of his loyalty to his loyal customers.

"They don't call themselves customers," he points to the growing wait line of people. "They call themselves friends... because they are friends. If I break down, it doesn't worry me a bit in the world, because people will loan me



Photo by Susie Audibert

Not everything on Newton Williams truck comes from Virginia waters, as evidenced by the salmon and tuna in one cooler. But it's all fresh, with the exception of just a few frozen items. All in all, the Fish Man can offer as many as 47 different items for sale.

During his heyday, Newton and Frances Williams were traveling 70,000 miles a year in his refrigerated truck, supplying grocery stores, restaurants, and lines of people just like this in parking lots from Culpeper to Goochland, from Louisa to Lynchburg, from Roanoke to Appomattox. But he always came to Orange on Fridays, because that's where he started.

a truck or carry me home." And that is no lie.

Take Neal Robertson of the Ruritan Club in Barboursville, for example. "We buy a lot of fish from him now and used to buy a lot of oysters from him, 10, 12 gallons at a time," he relates a story from years ago. Newton called him one Friday morning to say, "I've got the oysters, but they're not shucked." Instead, he said he'd found someone to shuck them near his hometown of Saluda, adding, "I'll bring them back to you on Friday night."

Now it's Neal's turn to shake his head in incredulity. After the day was done, Mr. Williams was going to drive home to Saluda, load up on the now shucked oysters, and drive all the way back here like he promised. Neal arranged to meet him in Zion's Crossroads, and he remembers saying, "'You mean to tell me you're standing in Louisa County tonight, and you're going to be back here tomorrow morning? I could have come to Louisa tomorrow morning,'" Neal protested.

"He said, 'that's not the point.' He said 'I told you I would have them Friday.'" Neal pauses a beat; shakes his head again. "That's the kind of guy he is."

When reminded of this story later, the Fish Man simply says, "I always say you know a person by his word."

He dips his hand into a cooler, extracts a plastic bag full of the

biggest scallops you ever saw, places them on the scale and turns the scale so the customer can see the weight. "That'll be \$3,500," he jokes. Everyone in line laughs. They've heard this before, because Newt likes to see if you're paying attention. This dynamo with the infectious grin and piercing blue eyes, greets most of his customers by name. He inquires after their spouses, pokes gentle mischief, softly expresses condolences to a grieving widow.

And they return the greetings. "How's the wife?" asks one. "Back in the hospital," shrugs Newt, resignedly. Next week, they'll ask the same question and he



Photo by Phil Audibert

Although he looks the part, Newton Williams was never a waterman in a former life. Instead, he farmed, owned a service station and bus stop, and sold insurance before he became the Fish Man.

will brighten and relate that Frances has come home and is feeling better. Newt's customers—friends—are relieved.

Frances had a stroke some time ago, but before that, she and Newt ran this business together. In fact it was one snowy morning, "My wife said, 'let's do something.'

"And I said, 'Alright, let's get some oysters and start out.' We went and got 100 quarts of oysters that day and sold them," he remembers. They went back to the supplier and sold out again...and again. And because he had two pick-up trucks, Frances issued a challenge.

"'You work one store and I'll work one; see who can get the most,'"

she reportedly said. His eyes crease in mirth and he bursts out laughing. "Ha, ha ha...competition!" he roars.

From there, this promising mobile oyster sales sideline morphed into a full-blown business. During his heyday, Newton and Frances Williams were traveling 70,000 miles a year in his refrigerated truck, supplying grocery stores, restaurants, and lines of people just like this in parking lots from Culpeper to Goochland, from Louisa to Lynchburg, from Roanoke to Appomattox. But he always came to Orange on Fridays, because that's where he started. And nowadays, all those other towns, except for Louisa and Orange, have been dropped from his route.

Newt's day typically starts at 5 a.m. at his home in Mechanicsville, when the truck from Sam Rust Seafood, his steady-eddy supplier in Hampton, pulls up with today's order. As many as 47 different items (it just depends on what he thinks will sell best today) are transferred to the Fish Man's bleached and sanitized refrigerator truck.

"We carry two kinds of shrimp, large and medium, we carry crab meat—different kinds, scallops, you got four kinds of oysters; you got salmon; you got tuna; you got sword steaks; you got flounder; you got Tilapia; you got catfish; you got perch out of Canada; you've got

rockfish, dolphin; then dressed fish: you got trout, croaker, spot, perch, clams, steamed crabs." Newt ticks off the list. Most, but certainly not all of what he sells, comes from Virginia waters. He even carries frozen snow crab from the Pacific Northwest and frogs' legs from India and China.

With the obvious exception of the frozen items, is what he carries fresh caught? "I get my fish everyday," he emphasizes. Even the Gulf shrimp, which he prefers to Atlantic, are so fresh they're hard to peel. "I've been in business 38 years and you've probably heard more complaints than I have," and we haven't heard any. "Very, very, very, very rare have I heard complaints." He tells a story of a Lynchburg restaurant that pulled seafood from its menu when he decided to drop that run.

Much of this reliability and freshness has to do with Sam Rust, who gives our Fish Man preferential treatment. "He'll tell you I come first," says Newton proudly. "He calls me every morning 6 o'clock and says 'What do you want? because we're going to give you the choice'....I always get the first choice."

Sam Rust has even called Newton Williams at Altman Furniture to say he's running low on oysters. "'Newton, I'm getting really short. How many more are you going to need for Christmas?' I'll tell him and he says, 'you got 'em.'" Newton smiles and adds, "Everybody else gets cut off, and a lot of people don't like it, but I've been with the man that long. I've always paid him and I've never had a complaint. And another thing, he packs my oysters a little bit

better than he packs anybody's." The Fish Man stops to consider this for awhile. "Sam Rust is good to me. I've bought a lot of stuff from that man."

And he's sold a lot too. Newton's day does not end at 6 p.m. when, usually sold out, he packs up and heads for home in Mechanicsville. "Then I got two hours of work when I get home to clean the truck up. It takes two hours to clean it up. I got to bleach her down every night."

Looking at Newton Williams with that weathered face, those piercing blue eyes, and stooped back, you'd think he was an old hand waterman who'd hung up his oyster tongs for a scale and a refrigerated truck; someone who had switched from the supply side to the demand side of the seafood business. But he's not.

"I was born and raised and lived in Saluda...." he squints his eyes and counts back... "60 years, just about." Saluda is located on that spit of land between the York and Rappahannock Rivers known as the Middle Peninsula. "I was a grain farmer and raised hogs," he says with a twinge of that distinctive Tidewater/Eastern Shore accent that can be traced back to Elizabethan England. But he was never a commercial fisherman. "I lived on the water all my life. I had a farm on the water. My old home place; that was on the water, and I can't even swim."

In addition to three farms, Newton "worked for an insurance company, had a service station, and a Greyhound bus station too." Is there anything he hasn't done? "You name it, I done tried it."

Newton Williams had spent 20 years with



Contributed photo

That's a picture of Newton when he was in High School.



Contributed photo

Frances and Newton Williams currently live in Mechanicsville to be closer to a hospital. Some years ago, Frances had a stroke. They started the seafood business together on a dare who could sell more oysters in one day.



The Fish Man gratefully accepts payment from a regular customer. He prefers colder weather because the bees aren't buzzing around yet. Newton Williams is deathly allergic to bee stings, particularly yellow jackets which are attracted to crabs.

Photo by Susie Audibert

"Me and a bee can't get along for two minutes," says Newton Williams who goes into anaphylactic shock whenever he is stung. "Me and bee have a hard time of it."

Yellow jackets are the worst. Wasps aren't so bad, but a honey bee sting will fling a hurting on him too. The problem is bees love crabs, and during the summer, where the crabs are is where Newton is... on his truck at Altman Furniture every Friday starting about 1:30 in the afternoon. It's no surprise that Newton likes cold weather; no bees.

It didn't always used to be that way. A long time ago, while he and Francis were doing a fish run together, "a bee stung me up in Appomattox, and I didn't pay no attention to the bee because working on a farm, you always get stung." They checked into a motel room, and around midnight he woke Frances up and said "you better call someone and call them quick. Something's wrong." They told me when I got to the hospital, I'd had a heart attack. And they kept me up there for nine days...for a bee sting." Weeks later, after he'd come home, tests showed no evidence of a heart attack.

"You get short-winded; can't get your breath," describes Newton of his reaction to bee venom. Currently he keeps an 'epi-pen' in his truck. "Just jab yourself right through the clothes," he says, adding, "Oh yeah, I've done it three or four times."

Bee stings would have killed our beloved Fish Man at least twice here in Orange, were it not for some fast thinking customers, like former funeral home director, Tony Preddy.

"I tell you the truth, that man was mighty good to me," says the Fish Man gratefully. "Last time I got stung, Tony stayed all evening with me."

It was Tony who came bursting into Randy Merrick's bathroom one summer day as the good doctor was taking a shower. "You gotta come quick, the Fish Man's been stung," Randy remembers Tony exclaiming. "I threw on some shorts and a T-shirt and said 'take me to Grymes so I can pick up some epinephrine; I don't have any in my bag.'" Dr. Merrick tells this story as he stands in line as he does every Friday to buy fish.

"Mr. Morris throws me a syringe of epinephrine and I get here and Mr. Williams is swooning on a box. I jump up and give him a shot of epinephrine and he starts recovering there and I said, 'Well I'm here, I might as well start passing out some fish.' People thought I was breaking

in line. They weren't very happy," laughs the doc as he relates this—scout's honor—true story. "So I started selling some fish and there was a man there (believed to be a preacher) who said, 'Well Doc, if you lose him, I'll pray over him.' And, Tony in the back of the line said, 'I'll bury him.'"

The Fish Man listens to this tale for the umpteenth time. He points to Dr. Merrick, who, by most accounts has saved his life twice and has convinced him to carry the 'epi pen' at all times. "Him and the undertaker come together. Before long, the preacher come. I said I'm ready to go now. I got all three."

You may be ready to go, Mr. Fish Man, but we're not.

“Me and a bee have a hard time of it”



Photo by Susie Audibert

Every Friday, starting about 1:30 in the afternoon, a line of customers forms at the back of the Fish Man's truck next to Altman Furniture.