

ENVIRONMENT

## WHY YOU SHAD GIVE A DAM

ADVOCATES seeking a RETURN of SHAD MIGRATION up the BRANDYWINE RIVER are PLUNGING into the fight AGAINST the currents of HISTORY.

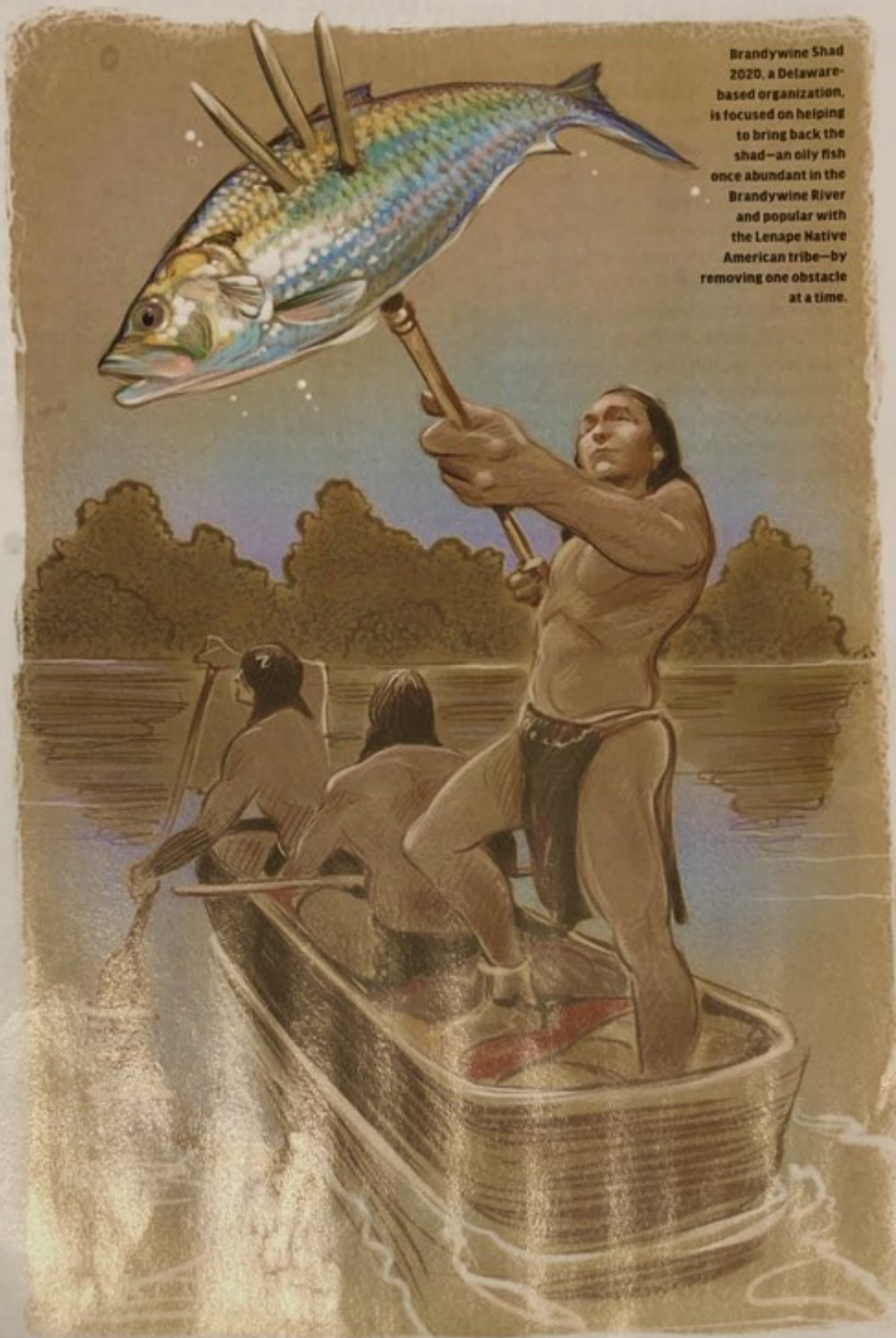
BY ROGER MORRIS  
ILLUSTRATION BY TIM FOLEY

Not many Delawareans know much about shad, and even fewer are likely to have seen one at the seafood counter or fished for one in the Brandywine River.

Jim Shanahan would like to change that.

This migratory fish once swam up the Delaware Bay from the Atlantic Ocean, and then farther up the Brandywine and other East Coast creeks and rivers to lay eggs. They would then swim back into the ocean to return the following year.

Brandywine Shad 2020, a Delaware-based organization, is focused on helping to bring back the shad—an oily fish once abundant in the Brandywine River and popular with the Lenape Native American tribe—by removing one obstacle at a time.



And shad would still like to do that. But dams, once a crucial part of the Brandywine's industrial network of water-powered mills that produced everything from flour to gunpowder to clothing, now keep shad from completing their journey once they reach the mouth of the stream. While shad can leap, they can't leap *that* high.

Shanahan, who heads Brandywine Shad 2020, as well as many other conservation-minded organizations, is on a mission to clear out these obstacles. Additionally, Brandywine Shad 2020 wants to teach locals more about the region's shad heritage through education projects and public events—so mark your calendar for May 21, 2022, for the second iteration of the annual Brandywine ShadFest.

But first, a little more about the American fish: It is smaller than its West Coast brethren, the salmon, weighing up to 8 pounds when mature. It was a favorite food of the Lenape Native Americans, and early Colonials often smoked or pickled the fish to preserve it. William Penn purchased



*[Shad] was a favorite food of the Lenape Native Americans, and early Colonials often smoked or pickled the fish to preserve it.* ”

shad fishing rights in the Schuylkill River from the Lenape.

One reason the shad is not more popular with fishermen today is that it has about 3,000 bones, and, while tasty, it is a bit odiferous when being cooked because it's also very oily. In fact, one Baltimore aficionado admitted, "Shad is the Exxon of fish; it is loaded with oils."

That said, there has been a continuing but difficult effort over the past two decades to clear the Brandywine of its dams, some of which are in ruins. Shanahan and Brandywine Shad 2020 are trying to accelerate previous efforts. There were 11 dams when they started; now they are down to 10.

"The dams are numbered from the mouth up," Shanahan says, "and Dam No. 1 has been removed. Shad can now come about mile upstream." The big impediment is Dam No. 2, which supports a Wilmington city water intake and thus can't be removed. But there might be an alternate solution.

"A fish ladder like those used with salmon on the West Coast was found not to work

that well, so we are looking at a different solution—a rock ramp,” Shanahan explains, which in theory would allow the fish to swim around and over the impediment.

Funds have been acquired to help remove Dam No. 4 in the Bancroft Mills area, and Dam No. 6 just south of Breck’s Mill; permits are in process.

Most efforts in the past have not involved public support, and that is where Brandywine ShadFest comes in. “We had a soft opening because of COVID concerns in July—a sort of beta test,” Shanahan says. “It was similar to the shad festival they have annually in Lambertville” on the Delaware River.

This summer fest was a combination of fair and festival held in the park beneath where I-95 crosses over Brandywine Creek, and several environmental organizations took part, some with booths. “We had 387 registered participants, and another 200 or so walked in,” he says. There were games and vendors, and Shanahan notes, “We gave fishing lessons to about 75 kids. Some



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even caught fish.”

Next year’s ShadFest is planned to coincide with World Fish Migration Day.

“In fact, our plans are to change Brandywine Shad 2000 and enlarge it into the Brandywine River Restoration Trust to expand it beyond just the removal of dams for shad migration,” Shanahan says. The

new organization’s purposes will include tackling such issues as pollution control, public education and the development of recreation activities.

But for now, the focus is on eliminating one dam at a time. “Every time we remove one,” Shanahan says, “we will open up more territory for shad to spawn.” **DT**