

Ocracoke's Youngest Commercial Fisherman

"I'm glad he showed up when he did. Morty jumped right in, he knows what he's doing," says Tom Payne about Morty Gaskill, who at age twelve is Ocracoke's youngest commercial fisherman.

It was early one morning last week after a load of flounder had been brought in to the Ocracoke Seafood Company. Payne was there early to check on the coolers and when the fish arrived, they needed the extra help. "Those fish showed up and Morty started doing what needed to get done," said Payne.

Morton Lumley Gaskill is the son of James Barrie and Ellen Gaskill. He follows in the footsteps of some of his ancestors of Ocracoke fishermen. Morty's father, James Barrie, is an Ocracoke native. Born and raised with fishing in his blood, he's seen how the fishing industry has changed over the years. Morty's great-



Late afternoon at the fish house. Photo by Robin Payne

grandfather on his father's side, James Lumley Gaskill, ran a fish house that was located on the sound at the end of Lighthouse Road. It was in the area that the Pamlico Inn and The Cedar Grove Inn thrived in the 1930s. It was well before Silver Lake was dredged and fishing boats brought in their catch at the point closest to the inlet. Ocracoke was popular

for sport fishing even then, and is evidenced in old photos taken on the docks of the Pamlico Inn. The Pamlico Inn was lost in the storm of 1944 but the Cedar Grove Inn still stands; it is now called the Sound Front Inn and is privately owned by a local family. Morty's grandfather, "Lum" Gaskill, Jr., worked with the Coast Guard when their primary mission was sav-



Morty and his friend, Andrew, hold up the sign they made to collect donations during the 4th of July parade. Photo by Robin Payne

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It is encouraging to see someone Morty's age fish commercially. There are other youngsters of local fishermen,

who if they see a viable way to make a living, even if it is only part time, may want to do it if they love it. The saving of the fish house definitely helps what is happening today, but for those who want to carry on the tradition, the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association will help see that mission through for

the next generation.

Morty's future ambition? To go to college and be a Marine Biologist but he is quick to say, "I'll always be fishing though".

To make donations to the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association, you can stop in the Ocracoke Seafood Company, located on the Silver Lake. Make sure you sign the book to receive newsletters on future progress. You can also mail in your tax-deductible donations to Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association, c/o The Ocracoke Foundation, PO Box 1165, Ocracoke, NC 27960.



Morty filleting fish for Ocracoke Seafood. Photo by Robin Payne

ing fishermen and their boats in rough seas. He fished whenever he got the chance as much for the enjoyment but also to

make ends meet, as most fishermen need to do these days. Morty's great-grandfather on his mother's side was Albert Styron, also a fisherman but best remembered today for Albert Styron's store, still a thriving local landmark.

This summer Morty is busy helping his father with Fat Boys Fish Company – a mobile seafood retail business that can be found most afternoons at the Pony Island Restaurant parking lot. But in the morning, Morty is out casting nets.

"I have had a commercial fishing license since I was nine. My license now has a shellfish endorsement, which means I can sell clams, crabs and oysters. I have two boats; a 17 ft. Southern Skimmer and an 18 ft. International Skimmer," said Morty.

Morty says he likes pound netting.

"We catch flounder, butterfish and red spade fish the best. It has colorful stripes when you first catch it. We fillet it, salt it over and then broil it. I don't know why its only thirty cents a pound

wholesale; it should be more since it tastes so good." In the hours before he helps his Dad, Morty can usually be found at the fish house helping. Located on the harbor, Ocracoke Seafood Company is Ocracoke's last fish house. Fundraising efforts are underway for a local non-profit, The Ocracoke Foundation, to purchase the business. It will then be run by the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association (OWWA), of which Morty is the youngest member. OWWA has over 26 local fishermen participating – some part time, some full time. Many have renewed their fishing licenses since they now have a way to get ice and sell their catch either to the retail or wholesale market.

Ocracoke's history shows how the islanders are adept at adapting to change, their resourceful and independent spirits at work. As times changed, the fishing industry changed and other forms of work had to be sought: taking tourists out for sport fishing, working for the US Coast Guard, working with the NC Ferry system, or doing construction. Still the desire to fish is alive and so the potential loss of the fish house threatens more than just a way to make a living. It would be a loss of culture, a loss of tradition. With the loss of the fishermen, Ocracoke will lose its heart and soul.