

Fishermen Come Together to Save Last Fish House

by Jamie Tunnell

"Watch this," said manager Vicki Harrison with a smile as she reached to answer the ringing phone.

"Ocracoke Seafood Company," she said in the second floor of the only fish house on the island, formerly South Point Seafood.

Recently, the fish house has taken on new life with guidance from Tom and Robin Payne, residents that were encouraged to take on this project and transform the island's last fish house into a working watermen's mission to keep that lifestyle alive.

"This is the last chance for this fish house and for the local fishermen. We need this island tradition to be preserved and the loss of this fish house would mean a lot more than just no fresh seafood for tourists. We're

talking about the need for wholesale to keep some locals working," said Hardy Plyler, local fisherman.

"Working waterfront" is the new buzzword for coastal communities. Payne attended the North Carolina Changing Waterfronts conference sponsored by NC Sea Grant in June that focused on the importance of keeping these waterfronts from development along the coast.

Ocracoke has been fighting development for a few years now, afraid that it's quaintness would be squashed by towering condominiums. Real estate is too high to purchase and most waterfront is privately owned or protected by the National Park Service. Affordable boat slips are a rare find.

Luckily, the fish house lot on Highway 12 is not threatened by development, but rather the expense of running a fish house. The owners of the lot

had the foresight to restrict the lease of the lot for fish house use only and that lease holds for 99 years.

Bertha O'Neal, owner of the lot, says, "We didn't do it for the money then or now. My husband, Van Henry, and I wanted to keep that there as it was and let it be saved for our children and grandchildren and there had always been a fish house there."

Johnny Griffin built the original building in the spring of 1975. It replaced an old metal building

that Calvin Burrus had on the water and used as a fish house. Over the years, Griffin and former business partner Bill Cowper made a few additions to the original structure before selling the lease to Murray Fulcher in March 1982.

"We had good problems back then - so much product that we could hardly handle it," said Griffin. "These numbers are hard to believe, but from March 1981 to March 1982, we handled over 1.5 million

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pounds of crabs, 3.5 million pounds of fish, and over 150,000 pounds of shrimp. Fishing was just different then."

When Griffin sold the lease, it was at the peak of its time with over 50 crab pot crews working at one time. Griffin said that Murray Fulcher was one of his best fishermen, bringing in 300-400 boxes of fish in a few days' work.

"When I was running the fish house, they had over 100 pound nets going at one time in the beginning," said Murray Fulcher, manager of South Point Seafood from 1982-2002. He says that what really hurt the business was that there weren't enough fishermen to keep up the volume needed, but at the same time, there wasn't enough fish because of the moratoriums set into place by state regulations.

"I'm pulling for the new fish house setup to work, but it's gonna cost," Fulcher said. He said it cost him \$2500/week to keep the doors open with trucks, fuel, freezers, clam rooms, ice machines, and utilities. "Retail kept it running the last few years I had it."

For the past few years, the expenses of a local fish house and the volume of fish have made it hard to keep the doors open and the fishermen paid. For full-time fishermen, the success of the fish house affects their livelihood, their job, and



their life on Ocracoke.

Vacationers that come each year don't see the struggle under the surface, but they expect to be able to buy a nice piece of tuna, a pound of crab legs, or a bushel of clams when they are here. Right now, walking around Ocracoke one sees nets being mended, floats hanging from tree limbs, crab pots stacked high, yards that give visitors a glimpse of tradition, a peek into the past. If the fishing community doesn't survive, vacationers will see only anonymous yards, no threads of the local maritime culture that weave throughout this historic village.

The fish house was closed this spring. Island fishermen had no way to get ice and if they chose to fish, they had to truck their catch off-island.

"It would not have been feasible to be open this winter with the amount of fish volume that was coming through. I hated it, but it wouldn't have worked," Harrison said.

Instead, fishermen that were going out had to take their catch to Hatteras or Wanchese.

"That makes for a long day when you have to head all the way to Wanchese and get back.

Once you go and get back and set your nets again, your day is gone," said Bill Evans, local fisherman. Evans made the trip every three days to Wanchese Seafood where the prices were a little better.

To remedy that problem and get the fish house open for the season, local fishermen have been meeting for the past few months to figure out how to save the fish house. The lease for the business is for sale, but coming up with \$428,000 to purchase the business, make repairs, purchase a refrigeration truck and cover salaries, insurance, licenses, etc. is hard to swallow. After that is paid, the business will be able to sustain itself, but the initial purchase payment is hard to obtain.

With the help of organizer Robin Payne, their goal is to set up a nonprofit that would be run by the fishermen, people that really understand the business, really live the lifestyle, really need a fish house to feasibly continue their work on the water. An association that would include the fishermen and their supporters as members, including county government, local businesses, state organizations that have the same goals in mind, could be

formed to support this venture.

On June 2, 2006, Mike Johnson, current leaseholder, agreed to give the group 12 months to pay, providing they cover the monthly overhead and pay a \$20,000 deposit (non-refundable) on or before August 1, 2006 to secure the Option to Purchase. If remaining funds cannot be located within the twelve-month period the business goes back to Johnson.

It sounds like a lot to invest, but the issue is preservation. Preserving the last fish house is job creation for over 25 people, an educational resource for visitors to learn about traditional fishing in this historic maritime village, a focal point for heritage tourism, a way of preserving the island's culture and character, which plays an essential role in bettering the local economy.

The Ocracoke Seafood Company will open on July 1 and operate as a traditional corporation until the association and non-profit status can be finalized. Vicki Harrison will be managing and the fishermen know they are in capable hands with her running the place.

"Our fishing communities are a very important part of the culture in the coast," said Sen. Marc Basnight. "We should do what we can to salvage them, to ensure they will be here for our children's children in the future."

With such an important mission to fulfill, the group agreed that the fish house should be owned by a local non-profit

specifically focused on these missions with the day to day management directed by the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association. The Ocracoke Foundation will be that non-profit entity and is now in its early stages of development, along with a business plan. The business will be trading as The Ocracoke Seafood Company. The Watermen's Association will be comprised of fishermen, crabbers, gillnetters, clammers, charter captains. All of those involved have a voice; it is their livelihood and their community - their family history, their gift to the future of Ocracoke. The fish house not being in private hands allows the Watermen's Association to be its own middleman and with governmental regulations and restrictions, the Association will be a strong voice within the industry - a voice over 20 strong. A CD has been set up at East Carolina Bank for donations. Funds received will be used to match requirements for grants. Those interested in helping can contact Ocracoke Seafood Co. at 252-928-5601, at P.O. Box 1165, Ocracoke NC 27960, or stop by the fish house.

Special thanks to Robin Payne for the information she put together and everything she is doing for this project. Often, people can't see past what's in it for them to look towards the greater good, but she has unselfishly devoted more than anyone knows to see this happen. Support this project, in whatever way you can, for future watermen everywhere.