

Carolina Country

Native Culture

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Saving more than a fish house

By Heidi Jernigan Smith

The island community of Ocracoke has turned back a tide that has been washing away traditional working waterfronts from the North Carolina coast

Wind and tide are always at work molding Ocracoke's pliable shore. It's a tireless tug, alternately revealing and concealing petrified skeletons of shipwrecks long since picked clean by islanders who, leaving nothing to waste, salvaged the marooned timber to build homes and docks. Mother Nature has favored Ocracoke more than many coastal communities, making more deposits than withdrawals along her banks. During the last 400 years the island dwindled to a mere 8-mile stretch then grew to the 14 miles of shoreline it has today. With most of it designated as a national seashore, the island's topography is as secure as it can be given Ocracoke's precarious posture between sound and sea.

Nevertheless, Ocracoke faces serious erosion on a different front: the loss of native culture. Although the island's living history is as colorful and captivating as its most famous visitor, the swashbuckling pirate Blackbeard, Ocracoke is not for every visitor. There are no chain stores or golf courses. So far, you can't even buy a lottery ticket here. But those who make the watery pilgrimage to this village of 800 year-round residents do so as much for what they leave behind on the mainland as for what they gain while here.

The inevitable give and take that accompanies growth and development has changed the face and even the voice of

Ocracoke. The once robust dialect of native O'cockers, heavily influenced by Elizabethan English, has been watered down along with the familial bloodlines of the O'Neals, Styrons and Gaskills. As real estate values continue to rise, many year-round residents work multiple jobs to pay the price of living here. The island's K-12 school recently expanded, but the local board of education has the difficult task of recruiting teachers with no promise of affordable housing. Even the U.S. Coast Guard has reduced its island presence to limited seasonal operations, ending a year-round vigil that had endured since 1904. The doors of the Community Store, a favorite gathering spot for locals and tourists, were shuttered, further stretching and thinning the island's social fabric. Then in 2006, the island's last fish house was closed and put up for sale. Suddenly, in true O'cocker fashion, all hands were on deck in an effort to turn back the tide.

"A daily theater unfolds in small community fish houses: scenes of humor, advice, teasing, disappointments, obligations, expectations and familiarity. The players are fishermen, dealers, neighbors and kin, but roles blur and relationships intertwine in a small town. The wooden floors, one moment slick with scales and slime and the next hosed down clean, form the stage. Fish boxes stacked neatly, "poly-dac" rope

Photos of Ocracoke's fleet and fish house are by Susse Wright, Sensible Design, Ocracoke



snaking across the floor, and work gloves dropped here and there serve as props. The gurgle of diesel engines mixed with static from VHF radios plays a background symphony to the subtle dramas that unfold."

—From "Fish House Opera"

Casting a Wide Net

A commercial fisherman without a fish house is like a farmer without a grain bin. And time is of the essence when you are battling the threat of rising temperatures. One degree over posted regulations and every bit of the commercial fisherman's catch must be pitched. With the fish house closed, the Ocracoke fleet shrank to virtual non-existence. Those who did stay on motored northward to unload their precious cargo, the additional fuel charges sucking up their already dwindling profits. The time and fuel they spent seeking fish houses farther away could have been used in the fishing grounds. The closing also meant no dockside source of ice, and with each trip requiring 400 pounds of ice, both the commercial and recreational charter boats were left scrambling for cubes. To top it all off, with less real fishing activity on the docks, Ocracoke's lucrative tourism identity as a "quaint fishing village" was in serious jeopardy.

The irony was not lost on Robin Payne. Moving to the island in 2003, Payne had left behind a Washington, D.C., career in construction management. In her short time on the island she sensed the impending losses facing the community and culture and won-

dered what, if anything, she could do. She found encouragement from local captain Rudy Austin who, as his wife tells it, "is good with women." Actually Cap'n Rudy is good with all audiences and is often the island's spokesperson on everything from mosquito control to island history.

Robin began taking cues from Karen Willis Amspacher, who had successfully established the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center, Down East at Harkers Island. She garnered enough local support to begin forming the Ocracoke Foundation. The non-profit organization's long-term goals include employment diversification, affordable housing, funding for youth programs and cultural preservation through education and research.

Foundation organizers met with the fish house owner who agreed to a one-year buy-out if the group could raise \$325,000. In the meantime the fish house was re-opened as the Ocracoke Seafood Company and managed by the fishermen themselves who had formed the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association (OWWA). Today more than 30 fishermen belong to the association. The youngest member is 13-year-old Morty Gaskill, who has had a commercial fishing license since the age of 9.

Gone forever are the days of Ocracoke fishermen working in total isolation of one another. For the fish house to succeed, and if the fishing families hope to continue to do the work they love so well, even when it doesn't love them back, the fishermen must routinely meet to decide on business plans and fundraisers. It's Fish House Economics 101, and neighbor-

ing communities struggling to save their own fishing traditions are keeping a watchful eye on this burly bunch to see what lessons can be learned.

Turns out it was perfect timing. The North Carolina General Assembly dispatched a Waterfront Access Study Committee to develop a plan of action for the state. All along the coast in recent years the traditional waterfront activities—buying and selling fish, tending to working boats and their crews, fetching and delivering boat passengers, serving families who wander onto piers to drop a hook and line into saltwater—have been fading behind the shadows of shiny new condominium and marina developments. OWWA member Hardy Plyler served on the Waterfront Access committee. From Gates County, Hardy became a Morehead Scholar, graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1972 with a degree in American Studies and moved to Ocracoke to work as a commercial fisherman. He serves reluctantly as fish house manager. He'd much rather work his fishing nets than work the network of agencies that have a hand in the fate of the fish house.

Through fundraisers and educational events, OWWA raised almost \$70,000, still a far cry from the owner's asking price. With a plan that calls for expanding and upgrading the fish house, the group cast a wide net looking for funding sources. The island's Touchstone Energy cooperative, Tideland Electric Membership Corporation, was one of the first to respond. Tideland EMC has applied to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for a \$100,000 grant that

would in turn be loaned to the foundation at zero percent interest. As Tideland's chief executive officer Bill Stacy explains, "Upon repayment, the monies will establish a revolving loan fund that we can in turn use for other economic development projects."

Hyde County government provided financing needed to fill the gap and meet the fish house owner's June 1 deadline. North Carolina General Assembly Representatives Tim Spear and Arthur Williams introduced an appropriations bill on behalf of the fish house which, if passed, will secure the fleet's home for the next 70 years.

Hope on the Horizon

Today, there are signs of new life on Ocracoke Island. The U.S. Coast Guard station, which sat abandoned for nearly a decade, is now home to the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT) hosting 40 weeklong seminars annually for teachers who come to renew their love of learning. The island is their classroom, and a waiting list exists for NCCAT's "Salty Dogs and the Lore of the Sea" session where teachers spend two days on the water with OWWA members checking pound nets and crab pots then dining on their day's haul.

Blackbeard's legendary hangout Springer's Point has been acquired by the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust, preserving 120 acres of maritime forest. Sidewalks were poured in the village this spring to accommodate ever growing foot traffic along Hwy. 12. The state ferry division has added an extra run between the island and mainland Swan Quarter during peak tourist season. The volunteer fire department is pursuing a long overdue expansion with the foundation's assistance. With its designation as a "21st Century Community" the entire county has a myriad of resources poised to turn back the rising tide of poverty and declining population. And the fish house is alive with activity: Hyde County crab cakes and Ocracoke favorites like southern flounder, red drum and oysters enjoy brisk sales. There's even a movement underway to preserve the native brogue.

No, you can't buy a lottery ticket on Ocracoke Island. But for those who live and vacation here, every day is a treasure.

"Fragile little worlds rooted in salt marsh and mud still thrive, against terrific odds, ... in heartbreaking testimony to American perseverance. The story is heartbreaking, as every fisherman in the U.S. knows, because it is being revised and rewritten by those powerful enough to change whole landscapes and influence the views of large numbers of people. But fishermen, mediators between the ever boxed-in and regulated life of society and the flux and fluidity of life on the water, manage to keep bringing us the only wild caught food product on the U.S. market. Fishing families live by the values considered truly American—independence, risk-taking and freedom—and get punished for having the audacity to do so. May this scrappy group of survivors sail into the future and garner a little more respect and fairness in the world."

—From "Fish House Opera"

Heidi Jernigan Smith is director of public relations for Tideland EMC.

"Fish House Opera," by Barbara Garrity-Blake and Susan West, published in 2003 by Mystic Seaport Press, describes the life and lore of North Carolina commercial fishing. It is 150 pages and available at Mystic Seaport Museum, N.C. Maritime Museum, Dee Gees Books in Morehead City, Manteo Booksellers in Manteo and online at www.manteobookellers.com.

For more information

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"When you come to our dock, you see the man who actually put the fish there"



We've managed to resurrect our fish house from a very difficult situation. The retail is working as good as it ever has. Some of the support that was lost has now

come back from the community, from the tourists that come who want a fresh product and who are looking to actually see the fishermen who actually do it. Many of the tourists want to see the people who are actually doing the work. In this day and age of everybody wondering where our food comes from, when you come to our dock, you see the man who actually put it there. And I think that has an esoteric value beyond any type of monetary value for their communities.

In the case of my fish house, it's not only just a fish house. It's a coffee shop first thing in the morning for the older folks in the island who just want to gather and talk about life and how our community's going. It's a place to raise money. For our community and I think with a lot of Outer Bank communities, the fish house is a place where money gets recycled back into the community. The fishermen who produce the food get paid by the fish house, and then they turn around and put that money into the gas station, the local grocery store and any other businesses that are there.

We're seeing the inner banks and the outer banks creep from a multi-industry kind of economy where there were a variety of jobs towards a community economy that is totally based on tourism. And that in itself is not bad, because it's helped a lot of people make money and get their kids to college. But do we want an inner and outer banks where the only economy that is left in ten years is tourism? I think it makes us very vulnerable to storms and the pressure it's going to put on our waterways. It's going to continue to put stress on the seafood industry and the people who live by it. ☺

—David Hilton,

Ocracoke commercial fisherman

FROM TESTIMONY BEFORE THE N.C. WATERFRONT ACCESS STUDY COMMITTEE, JAN. 30, 2007