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CROSSROADS

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Salt in Their Blood: The Spirit of Community Down East

Lawrence S. Earley and Karen Willis Amspacher

"HERE AT the water's edge, where the land meets the sea with marsh and shoal, sandy beaches and muddy bottom, is where life begins for all coastal people," writes Karen Willis Amspacher, a Down East native. Even now, the area still bears a resemblance to the New World as it first appeared to the ancestors of the families who live there today. The inseparable connection to the water makes it a "different world," as one fisherman says.

Long-haulers Hugh Styron, Jr., Shane Moldenhaur, Luke Salter, and Brandon Gavetti maneuver skiffs to attach a staff to the footing stake in Core Sound. The run boat *Miss Bettie* appears in the background. Photo by Lawrence S. Earley.

Atlantic, perched on the landward side of the shallow waters of Core Sound near the very northeastern tip of Carteret County, is such a world. Yet, in many respects, Atlantic is like any other small community in North Carolina. People here are church-goers, they attend college, they join the armed forces. They are Tar Heels and Americans linked in the larger web of allegiances that bind us together as a state and nation.

As you enter town on the main drive, you will see a Red & White, a chain grocery store being a necessity even among the independent fishermen of the town. You'll also find the Atlantic Missionary Baptist Church across from the cemetery and the United Methodist Church just up the road from the elementary school.

The sign at the edge of this town, however, declares its difference: "Atlantic — Living from the Sea." Between the community's name and its motto, the designer has placed the image of a boat's wheel to graphically reinforce the town's identity. Living from (and with) the sea means fishing, and fishing is at the core of Atlantic's self-definition. As fisherman John T. "Buster" Salter says of his Atlantic forebears, "They were fishermen. That's what we've done all our lives here, our fathers and grandfathers and their fathers before them."

The fishing life is a harsh one, full of tedious hours of hands-on labor and frequent disappointment. But fishermen are known for their native optimism. For most of them, there will always be another day, another season, another year. And even when nets were half-full, they lived a life that was so rich in the sights and sounds and smells of the sea that they wouldn't willingly trade it for a desk job and a steady salary.

"That's the thing that most people don't understand about fishermen; they're free spirits," says J. M. Brown of Marshallberg, another Core Sound community well-known for its fishing and boatbuilding traditions. "That's what my daddy said. He'd say, 'I don't have one hour that's for sale.' He didn't think much of having to work at a job where he had to be in at 8 o'clock."

Fishermen are fierce competitors, but they also recognize that they are ultimately brothers engaged in a life of common purpose and shared hardships. Often, that link is more important than a day's success. "I've seen a lot of people throw down a day's work to give somebody a hand working on an engine or a net or towing somebody back in," Jonathan Robinson of Atlantic says. "I don't think they do that on Wall Street."

In many small towns, the most important public buildings aside from the school and the churches are the court house and the municipal building. In Atlantic, the most important public places have traditionally been the harbor and the fish house. If there's a beating heart to this changing community, it throbs at Atlantic Harbor where the white fishing boats are tied up in a long row, bows pointed out, ready to embark.

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

"People say there's salt in their blood," Carteret County Commissioner Jonathan Robinson says of the fishermen Down East. He's describing an elemental aspect of the commercial fishing communities that line the North Carolina coast along Highway 70 and Highway 12. It's a statement about who they are, that they cannot be anybody else because they are born and raised into it; it is where they exist. As Jonathan's friend John "Buster" Salter explains, "That's what we've done all our lives here, our fathers and grandfathers and their fathers before them."

"That's who they were," continues Salter. "They were fishermen." Down East, that statement is sufficient. Anyone who lives there understands that "fishermen" means more than a profession or job. The word encapsulates layers of experience, history, culture, and identity and captures the intimate connection between place, people, and landscape. But it is harder to see just how intertwined this life is if your encounter with Down East is only as a place to invest in financially, vacation in, or enjoy for just a while.

How does one understand that the culture and values of this place are at once psychological, spiritual, and physical? One fisherman refers to it as a "different world." Stories about this world are more than just sea tales. As Bland Simpson has said, "Stories keep people alive."

In March 2008, the North Carolina Humanities Council, with additional support from the North Caroliniana Society, cosponsored "The Workboats of Core Sound Symposium and Photography Exhibit" at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center on Harkers Island in Carteret County. The exhibit was based on photographs taken over a period of twenty years by Lawrence S. Earley, scholar and former editor of *Wildlife in North Carolina* magazine and author of the award-winning *Looking for Longleaf: The Fall and Rise of an American Forest* (2004). The symposium featured remarks by Earley, museum Executive Director Karen Willis Amspacher, scholars, and local fishermen.

In his presentation for the symposium, Simpson described the event as a "soulful ballad of boats and the people who make them, work them, depend upon them, and love them." This *Crossroads* aims to rehearse that "soulful ballad," particularly the lives, history, and concerns of the commercial fishermen, their families, and their world. It is not just a story celebrating the independence, resilience, and integrity of these North Carolinians, though it does that, too. The stories that follow reflect deeply on a centuries-old culture that today is threatened by a web of interrelated factors, making it difficult for fishermen Down East to sustain the world they have made and been made by. Here are some of their stories.

Harlan Joel Gradin

Atlantic, NC: Long-haul workboats, ca. 1960. Photo by Jerry Schumacher. From the Fulcher Family Collection.

One can still come here at 3 a.m. and watch the long-haul workboats head out of the harbor, bright lights stabbing the darkness, sea birds providing a noisy accompaniment as the boats work the long passage up Core Sound toward Ocracoke. You can see the pound netters, the crabbers, the shrimpers and the oystermen depart, tying up in the evening after a long day or night on the water, engines finally falling silent for the first time in hours.

A returning fisherman invariably heads to the fish house. The fish house is where the fishermen sell their catch and buy their fuel and ice. It's the fisherman's indispensable connection to the larger world of commerce. Until recently, there were two fish houses in Atlantic, Luther Smith & Sons behind the Baptist Church, and Clayton Fulcher Seafood Co. just up the shore. At one time, they would have been the busiest places in the community no matter what the season, especially when a runboat docked, iced fish brimming from its holds. Men and women from the community gathered around the conveyor belt and sorted by size and species whatever came ashore that day (or night) — fish, clams, shrimp, blue crabs. Old-timers dropped in for a while to feel the excitement again, measuring the catch of the day against the catches of their memories, gauging a fisherman's reputation at the same time.

In a fishing village like Atlantic, these community rhythms governed the lives of all the people, young and old, as basic as the pulse of blood running through their veins. Children played their parts in this common enterprise. Boys were expected to become fishermen and they took their lessons early, in a boat or a fish house. Fisherman Buster Salter remembers that "from the time I was a little boy I used to go to the [Outer] Banks with my grandfather who clammed over there, and I used to go with him in the summer months when I wasn't going to school. From the time I was six years old on, he would go over there clamming in a dory skiff and I would go with him. Me and my cousin."

Girls were expected to join in this world of fishing-related work, too. When her father started making nets as a business, recalls net maker Heidi Harris Roberts, "He used to get us kids to come out here and work and help him while we went to school. We all worked in the net shop." The girls would marry

fishermen as had their mothers and grandmothers before them, and their families would settle into a familiar life. In a fishing community, things were expected to stay the same.

The closing of Clayton Fulcher Seafood in February 2007 was like a door slamming shut on the past, an acknowledgement that things would not remain the same, that they were changing beyond recall. The fish house had been a mainstay in Atlantic for more than 70 years, a seat of political power Down East when Clayton Fulcher, Jr., was alive, but it could no longer function in the new world that had come to pass in which fish populations have been dwindling for the last decade and belief in the future of commercial fishing has dimmed.

Clayton Fulcher, Sr., started his fish house in the 1930s and it flourished for decades after that. He began with six or seven boats that picked up the catch from crews, buying from fifteen different locations and sending boats to Ocracoke and Hatteras. Business was peaking by the late 1970s and there were seventeen or eighteen fish houses in the area including Fulcher's. By the mid 1980s, the Fulcher fish house employed as many as 50 workers.

Roger "Bubba" Harris, Jr., describes his life and work as "peaceful, quiet, come and go and do as you want. Ain't nobody telling you what to do. You're your own boss." Photo by Susan Mason.

Fully one third of all North Carolina's fish houses have locked their doors since 2000. In 2007, Fulcher's had only three employees. "It tears me up," says Ann Fulcher, former co-owner of the fish house with her husband Harry Michael and his brother Tommy. "My grandchildren will never know this life. They'll never see the fishing boats come in or play with the fish and see the process from the beginning to the end."

"I hate this," adds Clayton Fulcher, III. "I have been here my whole life, but the fish house can't survive because we don't have enough fishermen."

How did this happen? It's a complex question with few clear answers. Fish catches have declined over the past decade; and to protect the fish populations, state and federal regulators have placed increasingly restrictive limits on the harvests of many commercial fish species, which has greatly hampered fishermen. Fishermen point to other factors in the disappearance of fish: increased water pollution from booming residential developments along the coast, devastating hurricanes that struck the region in 1999 and 2003, an imbalance of fish populations caused by the restrictions, and even climate warming.

More recently, imported fish from Asian and South American fish farms are being sold at prices so cheap

Radio Island near Beaufort 2007. Photo by Maury Faggart. Courtesy of *BusinessNC.com*.

The venerable Clayton Fulcher Seafood Co. in Atlantic, NC, closed in early 2007 after more than 70 years of buying and selling fish. Since 2000, one-third of North Carolina's fish houses have gone out of business. Photo by Lawrence S. Earley.

the native wild-caught fish are at a price disadvantage. And the price of diesel fuel has risen inexorably and catastrophically. In 2006, shrimpers were complaining, "You can't make money on a dollar and a quarter [paid for a pound of] shrimp and $2.25 [for a gallon of] fuel." In 2008, with fuel prices hovering around $5 a gallon, the complaint seemed merely quaint.

Real estate speculators have roamed coastal communities offering outlandish prices for waterfront properties that they can resell for even higher prices to retirees seeking a place by the water. As a result, many fishing communities are in the midst of profound changes.

"Ultimately, what is even more significant is the change that will occur to the social fabric of the village," says Capt. Ernie Foster of Hatteras, a sister fishing community turned resort. "A village is not barren rental structures, but, rather, a village consists of the people who live there, people who have homes, families, jobs and businesses. They are people who belong to churches, volunteer fire departments, and civic associations. They are also people with roots, people who are interconnected to each other in ways both large and small."

The Western writer Wallace Stegner described a community as a place where people were born, lived, and died over more than a generation. Then it was truly a community. A community shapes people through its unique culture, he said, and its culture is created by the people who lived there. Atlantic was once such a place and it is still such a place, but its character and that of many other fishing villages along the North Carolina coast are changing fast. What it will become is not yet evident.

Long-Haul Fishing

Down East fishermen employ many different methods to catch the wide diversity of fish available. One particular process is long-haul fishing. Fisherman Jonathan Robinson describes this arduous work.

Typically a haul rig is comprised of two boats. We use net skids on each boat and three men on a boat. There are four nets on each side, and the nets from each boat are tied together and towed, usually covering an area of about a square mile. It's more to corral the fish — we don't gill them. We kind of corral the fish. The process of taking them out takes about two-and-a-half, three hours taking the nets up. We encircle the fish and keep making the enclosure smaller until we get to a point where we can bail the fish up on the boat. It's an interesting process. It's primitive — it dates back to when they first started putting power on boats. I'm sure they had gill nets and discovered that by pulling the ends around that they could cover more bottom and catch more fish. And then naturally, two fellows got together and tied their nets together and worked in unison. It's a gear that has limitations. You can't go out and set it randomly, you have to be in close proximity to shallow water or shoals. Usually you can only cover about a mile and it takes from three to six hours to pull and then two or three hours to get the nets back. It's restrictive, very restrictive where you can use one. You usually go where you've historically landed fish under certain weather conditions and certain times of the year and you fish those places.

Technically you start from two to five a.m., depending on how far and the time required to run to specific fishing grounds. Sometimes it's late in the evening when you get home if you make day trips. Of course early when I first started fishing, we spent a lot of time away from the island. We'd leave on the weekends, on Sunday afternoon, and most times return on Friday night.

A crew pulls in the net in the final stages of a long-hauling operation. The fish are corralled within the loop of the net. They will be bailed into the run boat seen in the far distance. Photo by Lawrence S. Earley.

For Fishermen, It's Everything

Karen Willis Amspacher

TO TRY AND EXPLAIN the multitude of issues facing commercial fishing in North Carolina is impossible. The reality is, as Bubba Harris says, "It's not one thing; it's everything." That simple statement pretty much sums up a very complicated situation.

The force and complexity of these challenges are making it increasingly hard for commercial fishing communities throughout the United States to persevere. Down East Carteret County is but a microcosm of the greater reality for commercial fishing families around the country, up and down the Eastern Seaboard, the Gulf Coast, and the Pacific Northwest. The issues are universal and the determined spirit of commercial fishing continues to be at the core of each community's values, history, and cultural identity.

Why and how fishing communities are struggling goes beyond just the fishing issues to encompass the changes in land use, the local economy, an aging population, the cost of living, the price of land — all the factors facing coastal communities. The fishing industry has realized the impact of those changes more intensely than any other segment of the coastal economy. Yet, fishermen inevitably carry more than their share of the burden of these changes. They are often blamed for the declining stocks because of over-fishing, and they are considered resistant to sharing and protecting the resource.

In sharp contrast, fisherman Buster Salter says, "Really we aren't the culprits."

After the run boat *Miss Bettie* arrives, Danny Mason's long-haul crew attaches the fish-laden bunt net to the run boat and hauls the other side into the skiff. This constricts the loop and makes it easier to bail out the fish. Photo by Lawrence S. Earley.

Heidi Harris Rogers continues her family's netmaking business, serving fishermen throughout eastern North Carolina from her homeplace. Photo by Susan Mason.

It is hard for those who have not lived in a fishing community that understands a commercial fisherman's dependence on the weather, whose seasonal cycles dictate the work of the day, to completely appreciate the uncertainty of this industry. Fishermen (and their families) accept the fact that some harvests are going to be severely reduced by adverse weather conditions, while other seasons are so strong that fishermen are reminded of what has held them to this industry for generations.

During the past several decades, however, additional factors have been just as intense as any weather pattern that has ever collided with the fishing industry. Many fishermen are leaving the industry, reluctantly and with great dismay. When faced with the uncertain future of fishing as a viable occupation and the growing financial demands of living in the changing economy of these coastal communities, young men feel they have no choice but to go to other, more secure jobs where their maritime skills can be useful. For the children growing up here, their parents are encouraging them to look elsewhere.

Since the enactment of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976, government agencies have developed a comprehensive series of regulations along with enforcement organizations whose intent is to preserve fisheries. For most commercial fishermen, however, this intervention has resulted more in the management of fishermen than of fish.

While fishermen will be quick to say that fisheries management has become fisheries politics — a tangled mess of faulty science and special-interest groups competing for this resource — all agree on the need to protect nature. Fishermen, scientists, and government agencies have struggled to develop workable management plans that protect the fishery without destroying the fishing industry and the country's source of fresh, wild-caught seafood.

This struggle is further complicated by a global market that literally dumps millions of pounds of imports into our country. Competing with imports that sell for half the price of American wild-caught seafood is made impossible by the constant increase in the

"It's pollution, it's regulations, it's the...low prices for the product... high prices for the fuel. It's everything, everything altogether is running the fishermen out of business. And it's a shame because it's a heritage."

Netmaker Heidi Harris Rogers

price of fuel. As fuel has gone from approximately $2.80 a gallon to almost $5.00, too many fishermen are keeping their boats docked.

A powerful (and sometimes political) factor in the decline of fisheries is pollution. Buster Salter explains, “It all has to do with water quality and the effects that different things do to cause that pollution. What’s going to happen in the future,” he asks, “if we continue to do the things we do to the water, because everything we do on the land affects what happens to our water quality?” According to the North Carolina Coastal Federation *State of the Coast Report for 2008*, 351 bodies of water in our state’s 20 coastal counties are “impaired” under the standards of the federal Clean Water Act.

Fishermen blame much of the pollution on the unchecked growth of development. It is hard for men earning $25,000 or less a year who have to work multiple jobs to meet expenses to forego the temptation of million-dollar offers for coastal properties. And, as more and more people are drawn to the scenic beauty and appealing quality of life of the coast, developers are building homes in numbers that are using up available land. Land prices, taxes, and housing cost increases are beyond the means of long-time Down East working families who make up these fishing communities.

A consequence of continuous building is a significant increase in stormwater runoff from asphalt, cement, and other hard surfaces. Runoff picks up metals, chemicals, and other contaminants as it drains into the creeks, rivers, and tributaries that empty directly into the sound. Core Sound fishing, like all other inland fishing, relies on clean water.

In recent years, as the commercial fishing industry continues to decline, so has the local infrastructure that sells, ships, processes, and markets fresh seafood from fishermen to consumer. The closing of so many fish houses, which breaks down the complex network of relationships that sustains this process, is emblematic.

Paraphrasing her brother, Harris reiterates that “it’s pollution, it’s regulations, it’s the real low prices for the product, it’s the high prices for the fuel. It’s everything, everything altogether is running the fishermen out of business. And it’s a shame because it’s a heritage.”

Facts from the National Marine Fisheries Services and the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries

- 81 percent of all seafood consumed in the U.S. is imported (NC DMF).
- 92 percent of shrimp consumed in the U.S. is imported (NMFS).
- 40 percent of imports come from overseas fish farms or shrimp ponds (NMFS).
- In 2006, the U.S. seafood trade deficit was $9.5 billion (NMFS).
- The mean age of fishermen is 50 years old. The average length in active fishing of these men is 27 years (Crosson).
- Many fishermen earn less than $25,000 a year (Martin).
- A third to two-thirds of North Carolina fishermen cannot make a full-time living and also must work other jobs (Martin).

NC Commercial Fishing Trips (NC DMF Annual Report 2007):
January – April 2007 = 35,619
January – April 2008 = 31,898

NC Commercial Fishing Landings (NC DMF Annual Report 2007):
1997 = 228.5 million pounds
2006 = 68.7 million pounds

Core Sound Commercial Fishing Landings (Crosson):
1997 = 12 million pounds
2006 = 2.3 million pounds

As recently as thirty years ago, the poundage of commercial catch in the Core Sound area exceeded that of any other region of the North Carolina coast, with the exception of the Atlantic Ocean (Crosson).

Learn More

Crosson, Scott. *A Social and Economic Analysis of Commercial Fishing in NC: Core Sound*. Morehead City: North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources 2007 <http://www.ncdmf.net/download/CoreSound2007.pdf >.

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Factsheet compiled by Hatteras author and journalist Susan West.

From Water to Market

Karen Willis Amspacher

FOR COMMERCIAL FISHERMEN, nothing is easy — or simple. The process and equipment, the skills and experience required for gathering the harvest is as diverse as the many different finfish and shellfish found in the ocean, sounds, rivers, creeks, and marshes. Much depends on the season, the weather, the tide and moon, the perseverance of the fishermen, and most importantly they will tell you, the blessings of the Lord.

But once the day's catch is hauled in, then what? Moving that product from the deck of a workboat to the consumer entails another set of challenges that varies from species to species. Additional variables include the season, geographic location, the ever-changing market, and, as in the catching, the skills and experience of the fisherman.

In the earliest days of the commercial fishing industry, fish products were shipped by rail. In the early 1900s mullet was salted and shipped in wooden barrels. Fish, along with fowl, were the first "exports" of coastal North Carolina to northern markets. Train stations at places like Beaufort, Edenton, New Bern, and Washington would serve as the loading docks for barrels of product brought there by boat from the shores of communities like Wanchese, Atlantic, Hobucken, and Manns Harbor.

Fisherman Ronnie O'Neal, Pamlico Sound, outside Ocracoke Village. March 2007. Captain O'Neal is fishing for flounder. Photo by Susse Wright.

About the Author: Karen Willis Amspacher

KAREN WILLIS AMSPACHER is a native of Harkers Island, where her family has been a part of the boat building and fishing traditions of that community for generations. A graduate of Appalachian State University, she has taught middle school in Buncombe, Craven, and Carteret counties.

In 1993, Amspacher left her teaching career to become executive director of the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum on Harkers Island. Since then, she has led a grassroots effort in raising more than $5.5 million to build a heritage center and has developed community-based programming recognized for bringing rural community members together to "tell their story their way."

In addition to editing the community journal *The Mailboat*, Amspacher has worked extensively with the Folklife Division of the North Carolina Arts Council, the Coastal Heritage Workshop at NCSU, the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching at Ocracoke, and students from UNC and Duke in documenting and sharing the heritage of coastal communities.

A resident of Marshallberg, Amspacher lives with her family in her maternal grandmother's house, which was built in the 1870s.

Karen Willis Amspacher would like to thank Larry Earley for his vision for this Core Sound project and Harlan Gradin for his passion for this issue of Crossroads. *She also thanks Gretchen Bath Martin of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, Wayne Martin of the North Carolina Arts Council, Jonathan Robinson, John T. "Buster" Salter, Bradley Styron, Danny Mason, Susan Mason, Barbara Garrity-Blake, Susan West, Pam Davis Morris, Steven Taylor, David Cecelski, Heidi Jernigan Smith and Michael E.C. Gery of* Carolina Country, *Chris Hunter, and Jimmy Amspacher.*

Once roads and bridges began to connect these remote fishing villages to the mainland economy, dealers and trucks began to move fresh fish, clams, crabs, oysters, and scallops to world markets. Ice proved to be the fisherman's most important tool, so much so that each fish house owned and operated its own ice plant. Processing houses that would open and can clams, scallops, and oysters, as well as pick and package fresh crabmeat, employed women and children once the fishermen unloaded on shore. Hundreds of cans with local family labels would be loaded nightly and shipped north.

In the 1960s–70s, the peak of the commercial fishing industry in eastern North Carolina, every fish house (and there were more than two dozen east of Beaufort alone) owned its own fleet of tractor-trailer trucks that rolled into Fulton's Fish Market in New York every morning as the market opened. Young men were hired to drive those trucks and they learned quickly of a culture of business that was totally foreign to their simple life back in their community. Stories of what these young men from these isolated fishing communities saw and learned along the way are legendary.

Dealers controlled all of this, and even though their role in moving this seafood to the market was key, any fishermen will tell you that his relationship with the fish house owner-dealer was a delicate one, and often a strained one, as the fisherman was in reality at the mercy of the man who sold his catch. The fish

house controlled the price to the boat, and therefore often controlled the fisherman. Not unlike the role of the mill owner in a milltown, fish houses were the economic mainstay of these communities providing the financial backup for the fisherman's family. It was not unusual for the fish house to serve as bank lender and insurance (health, disability, fire, burial) for its fishing fleet. Dealers were as dependent on the fisherman as the fishermen were on them.

To be a successful fisherman, this link between catching and selling was — and is — vital. That is even more the case with the dwindling number of fish houses (and reduced catch and increasing costs of fuel) making it harder and harder for fishermen to get their product to market. Today, fish houses continue to move large-volume catches of shrimp, fish, scallops, and soft crabs to world markets but instead of several trucks nightly, it has been reduced to maybe weekly, and even that is not every week from every fish house. Processing houses that once provided incomes for local women are no more, limiting even further the transportability of this fresh seafood. All of these factors are evidence of a changing and challenged industry.

So, today the fishermen work harder to sell what they work harder to catch. Direct sales to local restaurants and roadside stands provide many of them a way to make a living but require a whole other set of licenses, permits, and regulations. Each species of fish (determined by the season) requires a different way of handling, distributing, and selling, necessitating the help of wives, children, family, and friends to make it work. The process, as always, is neither easy nor simple.

Commercial fishing has always been, and is even more so today, the hard and determined work of families and communities committed to this tradition. That commitment begins with the making of nets and crabpots and carries through until the seafood reaches the consumer. In all that has changed about the industry, that has not, for it will be that same commitment that will be the determining factor in its future.

Jonathan Robinson: Fisherman and Community Leader

Interview with Jonathan Robinson, Core Sound Waterfowl Museum's Oral History Collection

When Jonathan Robinson speaks of commercial fishing, it is not only about something he has learned. It is about something he has lived. The son of a commercial fishing family in the community of Atlantic, Robinson is a college graduate, former legislator in the NC House of Representatives, and currently a county commissioner for the Down East area of Carteret County.

Most proudly though, Robinson is a long-haul fisherman on Core Sound, part of the shared fishing grounds of North Carolina's watermen. He is one of the fishermen who has roots generations deep in the shallow waters where he has worked his entire life. Robinson's words speak to the deeper meaning of commercial fishing, its place in history, its connection to the people and this place, their hopes — and fears — for the future.

WE'RE ALL kind of willing to share with each other. Maybe that comes from living in a sense of community or being out on the water, the vastness of the water. You're dependent on one another. I've found that most of the people who've fished for a living will always readily share any information they have. Anything I've ever learned about fishing I learned it from a fellow fisherman who willingly shared it with me. I think there's a camaraderie in the fisheries that doesn't exist in some industries.

Today there's more and more demand on our coastal resources. There's a certain appeal about living along the water and magnetism about the shore that draws

Fishermen Jonathan Robinson (left) and Daryl Styron (right) sort fish at Quality Seafood on Cedar Island. Quality Seafood (owned and operated by Bradley Styron) is one of the few fish houses in Carteret County that works year-round. Photo by Susan Mason.

people here. One of the biggest threats, I think, that those involved in the fisheries face will be the loss of access to the water front. We need some immediate — not only long-term — but immediate and short-term efforts by the government and economic developers to ensure access not only for the fishermen, but for the public along our waterways.

Our founding fathers held our waterways as resources. I've had to live under the umbrella of the public trust doctrine: that these resources belong to all the citizens of the state. Along that same line and under that same thought process, if the waterways belong to the public then we need to protect the public's access to them. And that includes commercial access.

The lingering question of the tidemen of North Carolina is: Is there going to be a place here for us? Many of us see the tidewater becoming a playground for the rich and we feel threatened by that. It's a real threat because we're all struggling here to survive in trades that have been passed down to us by our fathers and have served our communities. Part of our character has been to welcome people here. I always thought it was a virtue, but it seems like it has become a liability.

Down East — From the Inside

Karen Willis Amspacher

DOWN EAST is that string of communities that follow along and near Highway 70 and then onto Highway 12 where you reach the “big water” of Pamlico Sound. It begins with Bettie, then Otway, and turning south takes you through Straits, Harkers Island, back through Gloucester and Marshallberg before heading northeast through Smyrna, Williston, Davis, Stacy, Sea Level, Atlantic, and Cedar Island.

Down East is thirteen communities of men born to be fishermen, boatbuilders, decoy carvers, hunting guides and of women born to be all those things if needed and everything else — mothers, community leaders, teachers, storekeepers, fish house workers, doctors, nurses, preachers. Traditionally, women have been the backbone of these communities while the men fished, and that continues today. Here, there are no such things as rights without responsibilities and here everyone has a responsibility — to God, family, one another.

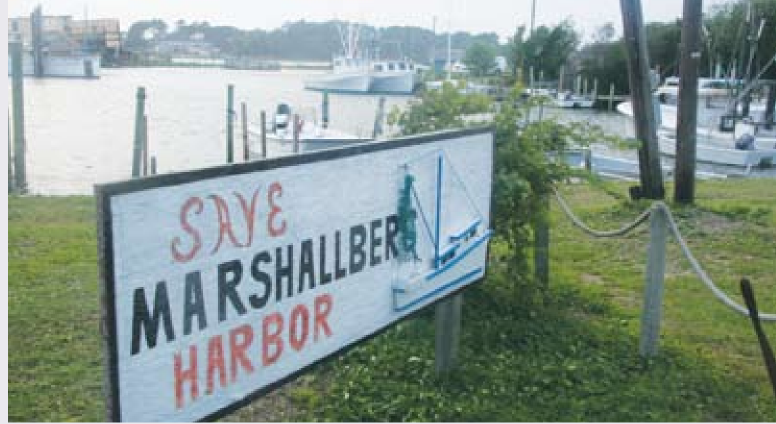
“But, change is a-coming.” We hear that a lot Down East these days. We know it, we see it, we feel it. Every day a new name appears in our community, a new home, a new neighbor. Property values are rising much quicker than local folks’ checkbooks can handle. People are worried about taxes, getting to the water, where to tie their boats, keeping community schools, where and how their children are going to survive in this new economy.

Down East Carteret County is a beautiful, natural, and until recent years, isolated and unspoiled landscape that had already survived all kinds of change including hurricanes, a world war, roads, and bridges. But those changes came at a pace and in a way that local people could still hold onto their homes, their communities, while maintaining a respect for the past and hope for their future and their heritage.

Regardless of what economic development reports may tell or not tell, commercial fishing remains the mainstay of Down East’s heritage, the backdrop for its landscape, a shared bond among Down East people. When this industry is threatened, we all fear together for what this means for the fishermen, their families, and the communities they serve.

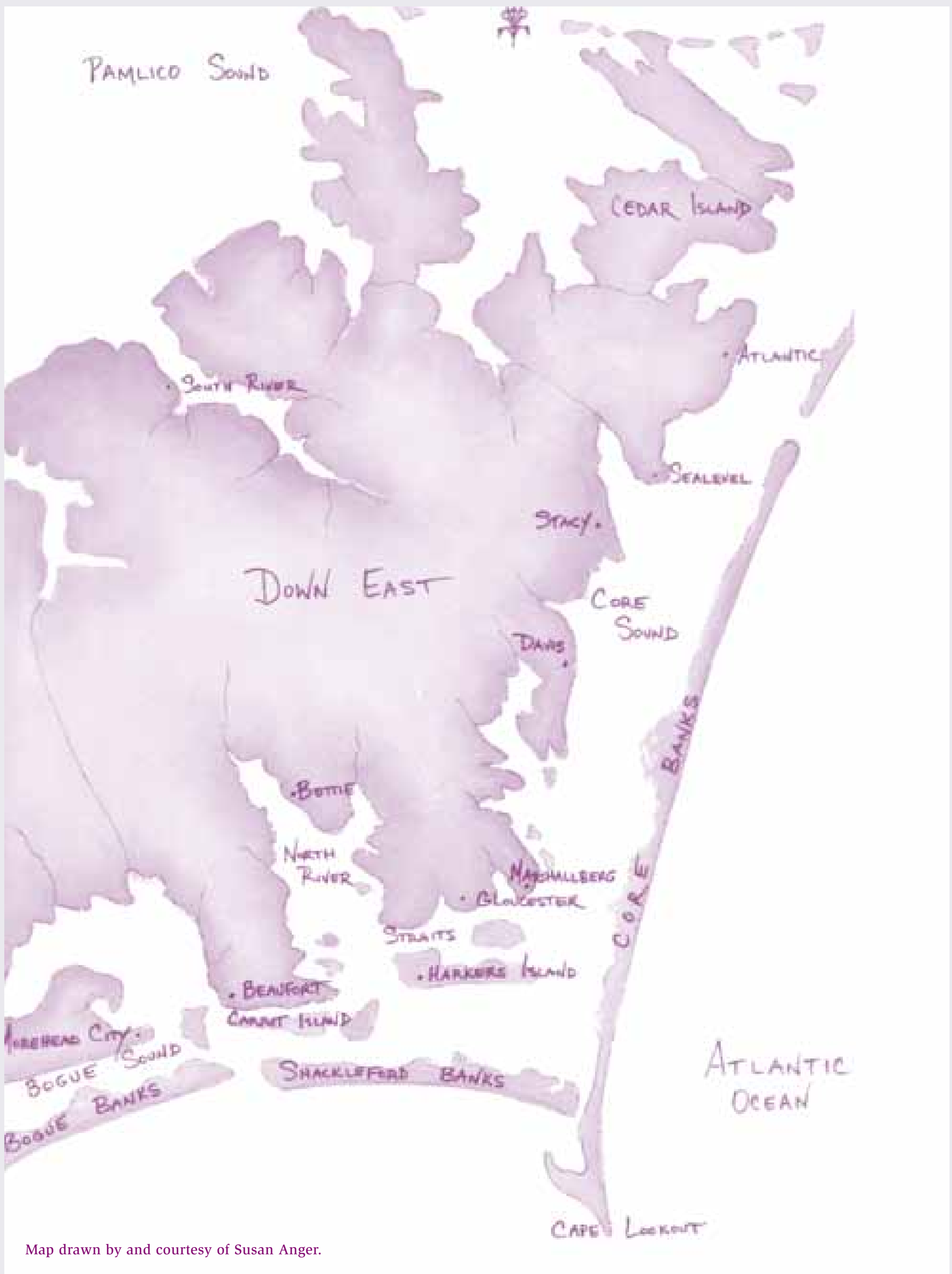
It is more than a livelihood that is at risk. It is what this way of life represents — the tradition, the character that has been instilled in each generation to work the water. It is the underlying and deep-rooted sense of independence and self-reliance that fishermen are made of that we hold dear, that reaffirms our heritage, holds us together as a community, and gives us hope for an uncertain future.

Now, as a people we face a future in a place we locals do not recognize, cannot afford, and feel helpless in warding-off. First one bulldozer at the time and now in 10-, 20-, up to 90-acre tracts, marshland is turned into subdivisions that empty into productive rivers, creeks, and sounds. Fishermen and their families are wondering what this will do to the waters they depend on for their livelihood, their mortgages, their groceries, their children’s education, their tomorrow.



Marshallberg residents have raised over $100,000 to cover legal fees to make this harbor accessible to commercial fishermen. Photo by Maury Faggart. Courtesy of *BusinessNC.com*.

In a haul-net skiff on a stormy October afternoon, Hugh Styron, Jr., (left) and Shane Moldenhaur (right) work the nets at the northern end of Core Sound. Photo by Lawrence S. Earley.



Map drawn by and courtesy of Susan Anger.

Confessions of an Accidental Documentarian

Lawrence S. Earley

TWO FISHING BOATS. One is secured to the dock while a second approaches. I took this photograph in 1985 while exploring the fishing villages on the peninsula northeast of Beaufort, North Carolina, an area known as "Down East." It's an artless photo, with little in its composition or lighting to distinguish it. In fact, I never bothered to print it until 2004 when I was asked to show some of my workboat photographs at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum on Harkers Island, North Carolina. I titled it "Workboats, Core Sound, 1985."

During the weekend, I noticed that a few men had stopped in front of "Workboats, Core Sound, 1985" and studied it intently. One of them told me that he had worked on one of the vessels; it was a boat he knew well. Another said that his father owned the boat on the right, which was called the *Wasted Wood*. Two others stood in front of it, talking quietly. One of them, a boat builder by the name of Jimmy Amspacher, said he was building a model boat like the two boats in the photograph. Then, in the distinctive brogue of a Down Easter, he told me about the scene that I had photographed in 1985.

The boat on the right was the *Wasted Wood*, he said, although it could well have been the *Nancy Ellen*. The boat on the left was definitely the *Linda*. Both of them were built in Atlantic — he called them "Atlantic-built boats" — a fact that was evident in their styling. Because each community in the region was fairly isolated from the others before the coming of roads and bridges, communities had distinct workboat styles based on tradition and the influence of important local boat builders. Both boats in the photo were used to do a particular kind of fishing called long-haul fishing which was characteristic of Atlantic's fishermen. The photograph had a new title now: "*Wasted Wood* and *Linda*, Atlantic, 1985."

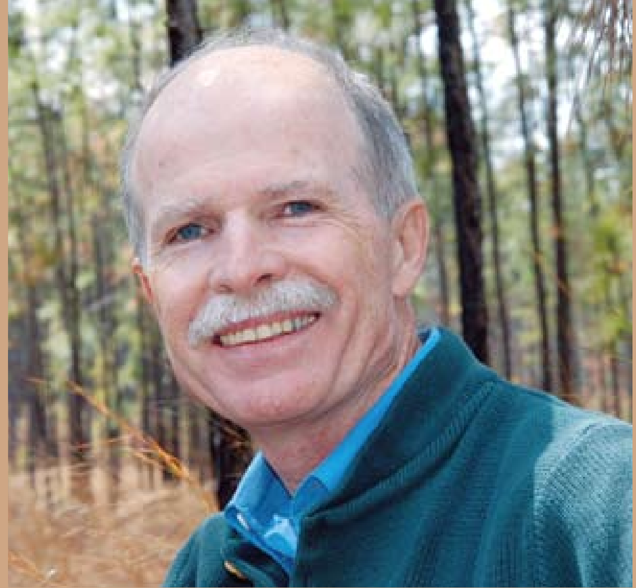
Jimmy Amspacher spent five minutes telling me what was in my photograph, and when he was finished, I had learned an important lesson: I was blind to the very things that made the photo interesting to the

From its very beginning, a workboat lay at the center of a social web that linked the builder, the owner, the person for whom the boat was named, and the place she was built. Photo by Lawrence S. Earley.

About the Author: Lawrence S. Earley

LAWRENCE S. EARLEY is a writer and photographer from Raleigh. He received his B.A. from Holy Cross College in Worcester, MA, and his Ph.D. in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. From 1980 to 2001 he worked with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, where he became editor of *Wildlife in North Carolina* and directed the Wildlife Commission's educational publications unit. Earley is the author of *Looking for Longleaf: The Fall and Rise of an American Forest* (University of North Carolina Press 2004). *Longleaf* won the 2005 Phillip D. Reed Memorial Award given by the Southern Environmental Law Center for the best environmental book of the year.

A sincere thank you to Atlantic fishermen Buster Salter, Danny Mason, and their crews for inviting me to join them with my camera and discover the world of long-haul fishing in Core Sound. Thanks also to all the gang at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum who do so much to keep alive the Down East heritage.



local people. To me, the photograph was an ordinary snapshot; to them, the photograph was layered with stories — historical, biographical, technological, and environmental. My "snapshot" was a portal that opened into a world with hidden depths revealing multiple human relationships. The boats that I had photographed as aesthetically pleasing parts of the landscape were so much more than that.

Many things in the photograph have changed since I took the picture twenty-three years ago. The *Wasted Wood* went to pieces in 1998 or 1999. The weather-beaten *Linda* still sits at the Luther L. Smith Seafood docks, but she is decrepit now and unused; her paint is pealing and debris is strewn over her deck. The last time I saw her, she was half sunk after the bailing pump had failed. In the 1990s, a hurricane destroyed the wooden docks in the photograph.

In March 2008, at the symposium on the "Workboats of Core Sound," Jonathan Robinson spoke as one of the panelists. Jonathan's opening words were mournful:

> ***I came here today expecting to see some photographs of the old boats that Larry Earley has been taking for some time and I was looking forward to it. But as I looked at the photos I became sad. I know these boats and I know the people who worked them, and when I see them and read the words of people I know it seems that what we're doing here today is like visiting a dying person in the hospital and trying to extract as much information from him before he passes away….***

My photographs brought him face-to-face with a world that he knew and loved but that was dying. It was a fear that he and others had admitted to themselves for years; it was something they told me over and over again in my interviews. But to see it in pictures was a little like looking in the mirror in a strange light and not recognizing yourself.

Glossary of Down East Terms

Lawrence S. Earley

Dory skiff. A small, open boat; a skiff.

Fish house. An establishment that buys fish from fishermen and then resells them to fish dealers and other buyers. The fish house often provides ice to the fishermen and docking facilities and in some cases sends "buy boats" or "run boats" to offload a catch directly from the fisherman.

Fisheries. The term is used variously to refer to areas where certain fish populations are harvested and to the fishing effort itself. Thus, "shrimp fishery" can refer both to the inshore waters where shrimp are caught and to the shrimp fishing industry.

Gill nets, gill-net fishing. Stretched across a body of water, gill nets can entrap fish when they try to pass through the net's meshes. Fish bigger than the opening of the mesh cannot move forward, and when they try to move backward to escape, they are caught by the gills.

Grading. A catch is graded by size or weight in the fish house or fish market.

Long-haul fishing (long-hauling, long-haulers). A form of haul-seining in which two workboats haul linked nets of different sized meshes between them. They head toward shallower waters where the boats crisscross, creating a wide loop that is gradually tightened as the nets are pulled out of the water. In the final stages, the fish are corralled in a small enclosure and are bailed out into a larger boat (called a "run boat" or "buy boat" sent by the fish house). Long-haulers fish for spot, trout, flounder, and other species.

Core Sound's shallow waters invite a remarkably diverse fleet of workboats, large and small. These are sheltered in North Harbor at Davis, NC. Photo by Lawrence S. Earley.

Johnny Willis holds a nice speckled trout that he has plucked from the bunt net. Speckled trout migrate through Core Sound in the fall and are prized for their flavor. Photo by Lawrence S. Earley.

N.C. Dept. of Marine Fisheries. The DMF is the state agency entrusted with the stewardship of the state's marine and estuarine resources. In essence, DMF establishes management plans for specific fish populations that include setting size limits of fish and the length of seasons when commercial and recreational fishing can be done. Its authority extends throughout the state's coastal waters up to three miles offshore.

Net skiff. A skiff in the long-hauling operation that carries the nets. The fishermen set out their nets from the skiffs.

NOAA. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is a federal agency under the U.S. Department of Commerce. Its mission is to understand and predict changes in Earth's environment and conserve and manage coastal and marine resources to meet the nation's economic, social, and environmental needs.

Public Trust Doctrine. The doctrine states that nations manage natural resources for the benefit of their citizens and that private owners cannot deprive the public of access to the resources that belong to everyone. The public trust doctrine originated in Roman law, entered English common law, and has become an important part of American law.

Shoals. Shallow places in a body of water formed by shifting sand.

Trawler. A workboat that pulls a fishing net behind it at a specified depth for specific kinds of fish. Trawlers can be large or small, depending on where they fish. In the shallow waters of Core Sound, most trawlers are smaller boats that fish for shrimp.

Workboat. Any kind of boat used for commercial fishing purposes. Generally the term refers to boats of 40 feet in length and greater, but it can also refer to skiffs.

Another Community's Story: Saving the Ocracoke Fish House

Heidi Jernigan Smith

EROSION IS A FACT OF LIFE along the Outer Banks where wind and tide wage an endless topographical tug of war. Ocracoke has been more fortunate than most barrier islands gaining 10 miles of shoreline in the last 400 years.

But Ocracoke has not escaped erosion on another front: the loss of native culture. The inevitable give and take that accompanies growth 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. Real estate prices have inflated the cost of living and year-round residents work multiple jobs to make ends meet. With no promise of affordable housing, the island's school has trouble recruiting teachers. Even the U.S. Coast Guard has reduced its island presence to limited seasonal operations, ending a year-round vigil that endured since 1904.

In 2006, the island's last fish house was closed and put up for sale. A commercial fisherman without a fish house is like a farmer with no grain bin. Ice is essential to keep fish fresh as it is prepared for market. Time is of the essence when you are battling the threat of rising temperatures. One degree over posted regulations and every bit of the day's catch must be pitched. The closing meant no dockside source of ice. With each trip requiring 400 pounds of ice both the commercial and recreational charter boats were left scrambling for cubes.

With the fish house closed, the Ocracoke fleet shrank to virtual non-existence. Those who kept plying the waters saw profits further eroded by fuel costs as they motored to markets northward. That in turn meant valuable time away from the fishing grounds. Clearly Ocracoke's lucrative tourism identity as a "quaint fishing village" was in serious jeopardy.

In true O'cocker fashion, all hands were on deck in an effort to turn back the tide. Community organizers met with the fish house owner who agreed to a one-year buy out if the group could raise $325,000. Through fundraisers, fishermen raised almost $65,000, still a far cry from the owner's asking price. The group cast a wide net for off-island funding.

Bill Evans sorts fish at the Ocracoke Fish House. Photo by Edward Martin. Courtesy of *BusinessNC.com*.

The North Carolina Rural Center responded with a jobs creation grant. The Golden Leaf Foundation has pledged its support for a plan that will allow the fish house to upgrade and expand its lucrative retail market.

In the interim the fish house has re-opened as the Ocracoke Seafood Company, managed by the fishermen themselves who formed the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association (OWWA). The fishermen routinely meet to discuss business plans and fundraisers. It's Fish House Economics 101 and neighboring communities are keeping a watchful eye on this burly bunch to see what lessons can be gleaned as they fight to save their own fishing traditions. Today more than 30 fishermen belong to the association.

Adapted from "Saving More Than a Fish House," *Carolina Country* (July 2007) by Heidi Jernigan Smith.

Ocracoke Fish House. Photo by Edward Martin. Courtesy of *BusinessNC.com*.

The back of the Ocracoke Fish House. Photo by Heidi Jernigan Smith. Courtesy of *Carolina Country*.

Fishermen Profiles

Lawrence S. Earley

JOHN "BUSTER" SALTER lives in Atlantic and has been fishing for a living since about 1975.

"My name is John Salter, they call me Buster. I long-haul net fish, just like my family before me did. I'm captain of the crew, that's about all I know what to tell you. I've been doing it since 1975, I been a-haul net fishing. I do it mainly as a seasonal thing, six to eight months of the year. It comprises setting out about three quarters of a mile of net, pulling it maybe a half a mile, six-tenths of a mile a part, maybe pulling it anywhere from a mile to three miles. You got to know a little about the wind and the tides so that you can pull the nets, you can't pull it against the tide. You got to know how to set it. We have different areas that we set. We set it in the deep, pull it to the shoal and then start cutting each net out, what we call 'cutting out,' taking sections out of the net at a time and right out to the bunt net. Then we put the bunt net up. The big boat comes along side — I say the 'big boat,' the run boat or the buy boat, whichever you want to call it — he comes alongside and we tie that net onto him and bail the fish out, just like the purse boat used to, and dip 'em out of the net alive onto the ice and send it to the market. That's basically how we do it."

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"The fishery around the world is declining. I think [fisheries managers] done all sorts of things, put all kinds of restrictions on fishing and it keeps declining more all the time. And they know now that it's not the commercial people that's causing the problem. The problem is other things that have been going on around the world. Environmental issues mostly. Water quality. It's true that the world is heating up. It's true that we're putting more people onto the coast, and it's true that we've got more runoff going into the water. I tend to believe that it's what people are doing to the world and we're paying with our resources because of it."

Buster Salter (left), captain of the *Miss June*, bails the fish from nets into the hold of a run boat, where they are iced and transported to the fish house. Photo by Lawrence S. Earley.

DANNY MASON, 58, lives in Sea Level. He has been a full-time fisherman since he graduated from high school.

Photo by Lawrence S. Earley.

"I'm Danny Mason. I've been fishing most of my life, long-haul netting. Occasionally I'll shrimp a little bit, sometimes I'll oyster a little bit in the winter, I have been scalloping in the winter. I used to kick clams with Leonard Goodwin's son, Charles, for a few years, and that's sort of played out now; there's not much to the clam kicking any more. I got started with my stepfather when I was 13, 14 years old and got interested in the work and I sort of grew up in it and I know more about it than anything else on the water and I'm sort of stuck into it. It seems like it's a dying process but I'm trying to hold on. It's hard to find a crew, and price of fuel is going sky-high and the things we sell it seems they don't go up much. But I'm trying to hang in there."

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"I reckon there's a little bit of guess work to it. At certain times of the year fish are more available than they are at other times of the year. Like in the spring, gray trout are more abundant, and in the fall the big fall spots are more abundant, and, I don't know, we've fished those same areas for years and years and years, and there haven't been a whole lot of changes. Generally speaking over the years the places have remained the same — a place for trout, and a place for spots, but most of the time here in Core Sound, in September and October, we know the spots are coming through and according to the weather we pick out a place and go for it."

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"Back in the early '70s to the mid-'80s, and the fishing kept dropping off and it kept dwindling and dwindling away and people kept getting out of it, but back in the late '70s, I'm sure there were more fish caught in one day...I believe this... there were more fish caught in one week by those nine crews than we catch now all year long. Weren't any problem with selling them, [they brought a] fairly good price and it keeps getting worse and worse every year. I don't think anyone knows why. All we know is it keeps getting worse and worse and worse every year."

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"It's either glutton or famine in the fall. You'll either catch a lot of fish or you'll catch nothing. There weren't anything there Sunday, and there weren't anything there that Monday. Buster come down there Tuesday morning, drops a net and sees a big sign of fish. He calls his crew, they get out there and they catch the fish. And there was a lot of fish there the next day, on a Wednesday, and probably a couple of three days that week, and then the spot was gone for the fall."

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"Particularly in late October, we know that the fishing is about to get over with. We don't want to miss a day, we might miss out on a big catch. And it's getting late in the year and we're trying to go every day we can go. To give you an illustration, to Harkers Island about four years ago, we fished on a Sunday morning, caught practically nothing. That Sunday evening at 5 o'clock we set out and caught 2,200 boxes of spots [each box contains 500 pounds of fish]. Had we waited until Monday morning, the fish probably wouldn't have been there. But we saw them about Sunday evening and set around and caught them. That's fishing. They're moving a whole lot in the fall of the year. They get in schools and the cooler the water gets the more fish get in the school. I reckon they think that safety's in numbers, I don't know. They'll school up. You can make a year's work in one day."

BRADLEY STYRON lives in Cedar Island. He owns Quality Seafood in Cedar Island and is also a member of the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission.

"Five or six years ago, any evening, from Monday through Friday, until they closed Friday night shrimping, you could sit right here on this deck and watch 20 boats leave here to go shrimping. This time of year, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, when clamming was open, you could have seen 15 or 18 boats go out of here a-morning to go clamming. You don't see anyone going clamming now, and shrimping last summer there were three boats going out of here. So there again it's a sign of the times."

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"Fishermen are the first thing that go. The next thing is the infrastructure. Well, if the resource comes back and you have an influx of commercial fishermen, what'll they do with it? Now, don't get me wrong — what I do is not a sophisticated job, anybody can do it. But, the way the real estate is going now, if something isn't done in five years there won't be a piece of property that's suitable for a fish house that will be affordable. That's something you got to look at — it's coming. They say you have to have change, that's one thing you always have, and sometimes you can't stop it. I know you have to have change and I'm not interested in stopping it, but as far as wholesale development, I think they have to step back and kind of evaluate things a little bit before they let things run rampant."

Bradley Styron speaking at "The Workboats of Core Sound Symposium and Photography Exhibit" in March 2008. Photo by Darrell Stover.

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Buster Salter (foreground) and Adrian Lewis prepare nets for the run boat approaching above. Long-haul fishermen work in the water as well as in skiffs and workboats. Photo by Lawrence S. Earley.

"This is the beginning of it all, as far as I'm concerned, of this country. This is where they [English settlers] came first, in this area. They were farmers and fishermen. They were a proud people. Their tradition has filtered on through the years and many people who were born and raised along this coast, that's what they did. They worked with their hands and they were good people."

Fisherman Buster Salter

The mission of the North Carolina Humanities Council is to support through grants and public programs vital conversations that nurture the cultures and heritage of North Carolina. The North Carolina Humanities Council is a nonprofit foundation and state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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