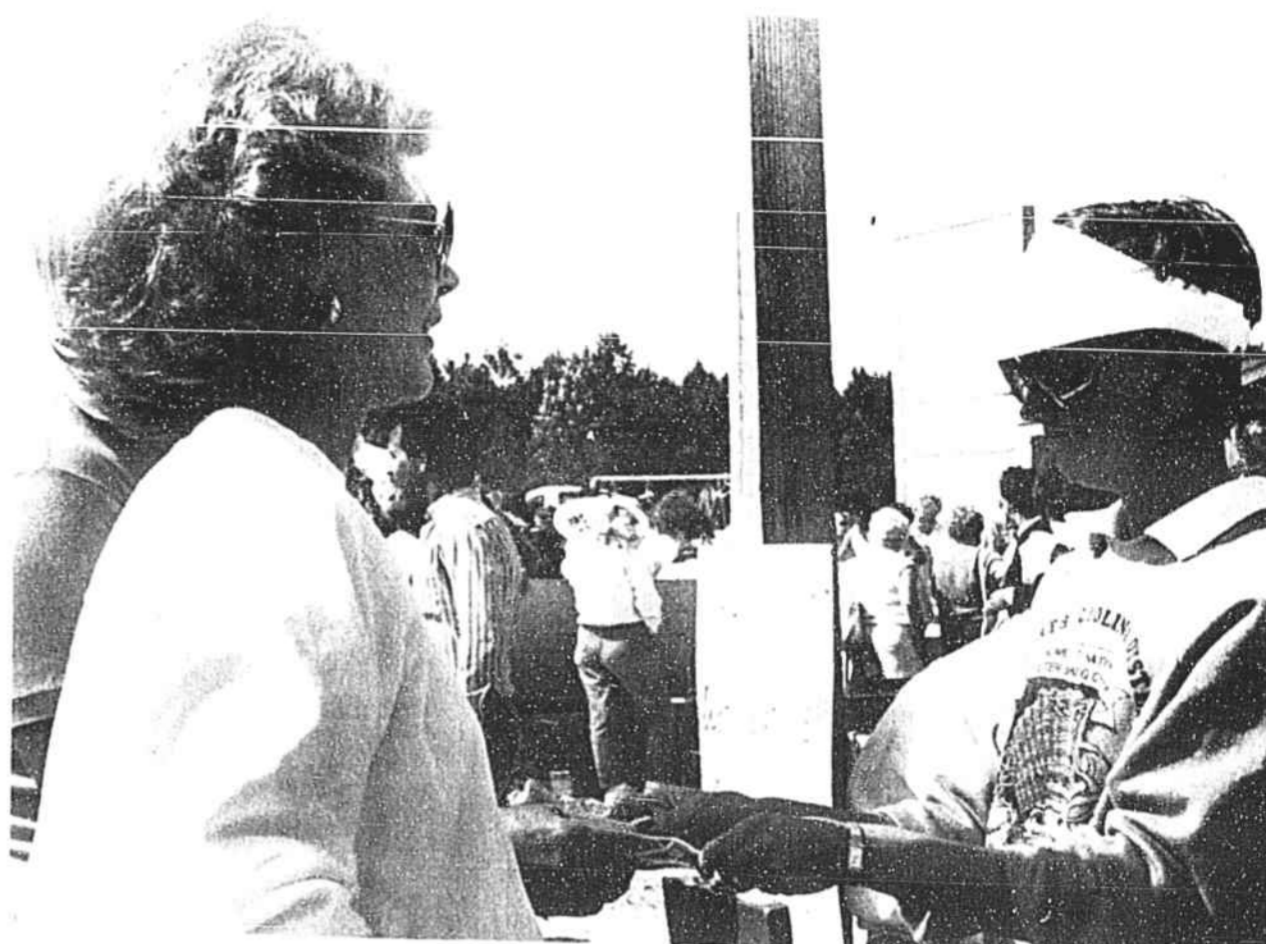




ALAN LEWIS drops hushpuppies two at a time into a vat of grease as Bill Breeding waits to dip them out, hot and golden brown.



ELSIE VUKOVICH and her husband, Jake, of Seaside, exchange smiles—and cash for food tickets—at volunteer Judy Evans' Oyster Festival booth.

Oyster Festival Draws Record Size Crowd

BY SUSAN USHER

It was incredible. An army of at least 200 volunteer workers watched in amazement as 200 bushels of roasted oysters, 50 gallons of clam chowder, 2,000 hot-dogs, 500 pounds of coleslaw, 60 gallons of raw oysters, "oceans" of soft drinks and 2,500 pounds of flounder disappeared in a matter of hours as an enthusiastic crowd of more than 15,000 crowded onto the grounds of the Seaside Community Market for the N.C. Oyster Festival Saturday and Sunday afternoons.

"The crowd was pleasant and had plenty of time and plenty of things to do," said Chamber President Don Evans. "They could actually spend four or five hours at the festival."

And stay they did, browsing among approximately 70 arts and crafts and

civic booths, eating, people-watching and enjoying a full schedule of entertainment.

At one point Saturday, the line for oysters in the shell was so long ticket sellers were suggesting that patrons try again later unless they wanted some other menu item.

For the Saturday supper crowd, the menu choice was reduced by one; the last oysters in the shell had been served by 4:30 p.m.

Inside one of three sheds, several hundred devotees diligently picked out oysters with varying levels of skill throughout the afternoon, one group replacing another as spaces opened up.

"People who come to festivals like this seem to enjoy the crowds and clutter. They like sharing a table with other people and getting to know

them," said Anne Marie Schettini, executive director of the South Brunswick Islands Chamber of Commerce, which sponsors the annual festival. "Having measured portions makes it easier for that to happen."

For some shucking was really warfare, man against oyster, with battle scars the proof. Others dived in confidently, sliding meaty oysters down waiting throats without benefit of sauce or seasonings.

"They're great!" said Mark Lechner of Myrtle Beach, S.C. "You'd better get some quick before they run out."

Carrying his son Bart in a pack on

his back, Lechner was shucking a milk crate full of oysters as his wife, Amy, fed Bart spoonfuls of slaw. Their daughter, Megan, was almost hidden from view by the long plank table.

Some people traveled long distances for their first oysters of the year, like Bernice and John C. Dalby of Toledo, Ohio. The two stationed themselves in a well-lit corner with several crates of oysters and three grandchildren. "You tell them we came all the way from Toledo for this," said Dalby. "Last year we came on Sunday and there weren't any oysters. So this year we came on Saturday." The Dalbys are spending the Columbus Day holiday with family members in Sanford.

This year the fresh oysters, though more limited in quantities, were more of a draw than ever, offering a legal opportunity to sample this year's crop before the official harvest season opens on Oct. 15.

Now in its 7th year, the festival drew double the attendance of last year's event, an estimated 15,000 over the weekend.

Attendance was fueled not only by pre-season oysters but also by the highly-publicized skills of Cathy Carlisle of Boone's Neck, the state and U.S. oyster shucking champion. Chamber President Don Evans said excellent weather and increased promotional efforts by the chamber also were contributing factors.

A nervous Carlisle took the stage Saturday to successfully defend her state shucking title before TV cameras and an audience of hundreds—and against five competitors.

Emerging with an adjusted time of 2:40:27 after judges added 36 seconds in penalties, she goes to the U.S. Shucking Championship in Leonardstown, Maryland, this month as both returning national champion

and second-time state champion.

While entries were up for the shucking contest, participation in the Brunswick County Veterans' Bullshooting Contest was off, with only four contestants. Warren Sing, "the redneck from Belmont" and last year's first runner-up won the trophy with his tale of a hunt through the Green Swamp for "Big George," a 104-point buck that at the critical moment, he couldn't shoot, and his encounter with a nine-foot long cat killed by "water on the brain."

He also challenged Brunswick County's "international" reputation for bullshooting, announcing the first Gaston County Bullshooters Contest to be held in Cramerton on Saturday.

First runner-up Kathleen Poole of North Myrtle Beach, S.C., the first woman to enter the contest, heard about it on the radio and entered at her husband's urging. "I never dreamed there weren't women that did that," she said later. "My friends at Sunset Beach are always razzing me about BSing. I'm in their territory now, so I decided I'd do it. They'll be shocked."

A tractor-trailer driver from Salisbury, Robert "Cowboy"

Willard, was second runner-up. He said it was his first public speaking experience. Fellow driver Dean Troutman got him to enter. "We get to lying and carrying on over the CB," said Willard.

The only local entrant was Lawrence Floyd, a fisherman from Grissetown, who told of a snake so big it took two chain saws to cut it up.

A new addition—a stage—provided a focal point for the shucking and bullshooting contests and for a continuous stream of entertainers, some scheduled, others unscheduled, including two popular area groups, Tina Smith and Crossroads and the Old Dock Cloggers, and on Sunday, several area gospel groups.

Evans attributed the overall success and smooth operation of the festival to the chamber membership and the leadership of Festival Chairman Allan Dameron and his committee.

"We have a very active chamber membership. That's the reason for the success of the festival. It was nice to have 200 volunteers. But everything was there in place ready for them to work. That was what the festival committee took care of."



TEEN MISS BRUNSWICK COUNTY TAMMY SMITH of Leland treats Sunday's crowd to a gospel tune.



EMPLOYEES of two local co-ops, Brunswick Electric and Atlantic Telephone, rack up the last of the 200 bushels of oysters served in the shell Saturday. The oysters ran out about 4:30 p.m.



BOY SCOUT TROOP 287 of Shallotte provided the N.C. Oyster Festival with plenty of volunteers for Sunday's cleanup. This foursome includes (from left) David Horne, Jason Horne, Mark Logan and Chris Arnold.



WARREN SING of Belmont tells of his hunt through the Green Swamp for "Big George" to take top prize in the Brunswick County Veterans Bullshooting Contest Saturday. He's challenging Brunswick's claim to international bullshooting fame with the first Gaston County Bullshooting Contest, to be held in Cramerton on Oct. 17.

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