

River Is Varnum's Teacher And Subject

BY DOUG RUTTER

For someone who had to quit school in the fifth grade to go to work to help his family, Herbert "Midget" Varnum knows an awful lot about rivers.

The Lockwood Folly River is his specialty. And what he lacks in book knowledge, he more than makes up for in years of experience as a fisherman.

The 58-year-old native of Varnamtown said he's seen a lot of changes in the Lockwood Folly in his lifetime. Many of those changes have been for the worse.

As a child, Varnum could gather loads of oysters without moving his father's skiff. Now fishermen must drift from one rock to another to scrape up two bushels on a low tide.

"Back then, anything you could sell you could catch," Varnum recalled in a recent interview. "The river looks to me like it's on a downward run and it's not getting any better."

Oyster harvests in the Lockwood Folly have dwindled in recent years. The state has frequently closed sections of the river to harvesting because of bacterial pollution.

Varnum blames the river's ailing condition on a number of things—many of which relate to increasing population and development along the river banks where he was born and raised.

"Population has increased so much on the river until you really can't say it was John over here or Mary over there," Varnum said. "There's so many things involved. You just can't name it."

As a child, Varnum said there were about 21 families in the community. "I could tell you everybody and their names, and now I can't hardly tell you who my next door neighbor is."

The increasing number of commercial and recreational fishermen has put a strain on the oyster population. "The river's not big enough to support but so many people," Varnum said.

Varnum also says the lack of restrictions on clambers has hurt the oyster harvests. Clammers can kill oysters when they cover them with sand or punch holes in the oyster shells with their rakes.

Other causes of the river's condition include septic tanks, golf courses and landfills that drain into the Lockwood Folly River, he says.

Varnum said things have gotten bad, but that it's not too late to bring the Lockwood Folly back to its glory days. "It would replenish itself if they would put controls on it and do it now."

He suggests local fishermen follow the example set by people in Snead's Ferry, who work with the state to close certain areas to oyster harvesting when the oysters need time to replenish themselves.

Opening certain sections of the river to shrimping also would help the shellfish. Varnum said nets dragging on the bottom would stir up silt that chokes oysters, and river currents would carry it into the ocean.

"Unless they do something or other it's going to get to a point where you don't have anything," Varnum said. "Some people say that will never come to pass, but they never thought it would get as bad as it is ei-



HERBERT "MIDGET" VARNUM (foreground) gathering oysters from a Lockwood Folly River mudflat earlier this year. STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG RUTTER

ther." When he talks about hard times ahead for fishermen, Varnum speaks from experience. His father died when he was young, forcing him to quit school and get a job to help pay the family bills.

"I only made it through the fifth grade, but I've always been able to hold down a job," Varnum said he's always tried to learn from his mistakes and do the best he could.

Varnum said his wife, Jeanette, also saw lean times as the daughter of a sharecropper. "Somehow we've managed to raise four sons and get them through high school," he said.

Along the way, Varnum has survived six operations, including four on his stomach and one for cancer of the esophagus. "Every day that I wake up's a good day," he says.

Despite his personal struggles, Varnum still enjoys helping others through his work with Coastline Volunteer Rescue Squad.

A charter member and former chief of the squad, Varnum has been getting people to the hospital since September 1976, when an old Army Jeep was used as

"The river to me looks like it's on a downward run and it's not getting any better."

—Herbert "Midget" Varnum

an ambulance.

Varnum got involved in rescue work after his brother was killed in a car accident. "I think my brother's death showed me something, and it stuck."

Volunteer rescue work has become a big part of his life. "It's just the feeling you get when you get back home that you've helped somebody," Varnum said. "We've lost people, but we've also saved quite a few."

Varnum said his family has been traced back to 1637. His forefathers were fishermen and settled on the banks of rivers.

The spelling of the family name has been the subject of light-hearted debate for years because some people spell it Varnum and others spell it Varnam.

Varnum said his ancestors from England and Norway spelled the name with a "u." Over the years, however, he said the "u" has been accidentally changed to an "a" on some birth certificates.

A few weeks ago, Varnum said he met a man named Charles H. Varnum from Manistique, Mich., a town outside Detroit that is full of Varnums who all spell their names with a "u."

"This man told me he had never seen it spelled with a 'u' until he came here," Varnum said. "But I've got brothers that spell it with an 'a'."

THE CAPE FEAR FOOT CENTER

SHALLOTTE
HIGHWAY 179
VILLAGE PINES OFFICE PARK
SUITE 4 • 754-8848

Professional, Thorough and Gentle Foot Care

- Heel Pain / Heel Spur
- Bunions, Corns, Calluses
- Warts, Ingrown Nails
- Running / Sports Injuries / Broken Bones
- Diabetic Foot Care / Nail Care
- Alternatives to Surgery
- In-Office Surgery
- Insurance Forms Filed For You
- Blue Cross Costwise Provider
- Most Insurances Accepted
- Medicare Assignment Accepted

Dr. Gregory Young, DPM
Medical & Surgical Specialist of the Foot and Ankle

By Appointment Only 754-8848

©1990 THE BRUNSWICK BEACON



UNC Alumni and Fans:

Plan to attend the inaugural meeting of the

University of North Carolina
Educational Foundation
UNC Rams Club

The newly formed Brunswick County chapter of the University of North Carolina Educational Foundation will have its inaugural meeting May 30 at the Sea Trail Golf Course Jones-Byrd Clubhouse.

All Carolina fans are invited to come hear former Carolina basketball player and current assistant Coach Dave Hanners and Assistant Football Coach Donnie Thompson review the football and basketball seasons.

Become a part of the Carolina Athletic Family by joining THE EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION. For as little as \$50 a year, you can join the team that has provided an education for over 5,000 student-athletes. Membership provides you football and basketball ticket priority and press guides, plus many other benefits. It's not required that you be a UNC GRAD, just a UNC FAN.

Becoming a member is easy. Just contact our local representative, Kendall Suh at 579-9989 or call the Foundation Office at 962-2393.

Reserve your place today and join a great team!

Sea Trail Golf Course Jones/Byrd Clubhouse
Thursday, May 30

6:30 PM – Social Hour and Cash Bar
7:30 PM – Buffet Dinner and Program
Cost \$12 per person (includes dinner, tax and tip)

Space is limited, so make your reservations today by returning this form with your check by May 24.

Enclosed is my check in the amount of \$_____ (at the rate of \$12.00 per person), made payable to the Brunswick County Educational Foundation for reservations for the Educational Foundation meeting on Thursday, May 30, 1991 at the Sea Trail Golf Course Clubhouse.

NAME _____

If you make reservations for anyone in addition to yourself, please list their names below:

SEND TO: Kendall Suh, MD, PO Box 5189, Ocean Isle Beach, NC 28470. Call 579-9989 for further information.

J&R Development, Inc.

"Your Professional Full Service Construction Company"

Sewage Disposal & Water

- Consulting/Permit Application
- Designs/Plans/Installation
- Conventional Septic Tanks/LPP Systems
- Drainage Plans/Fill Dirt Plans
- Maintenance Agreements
- Water Line Installations

Site Preparation & Paving

- Clearing Chipping
- Fill Dirt Grading
- Sock Tile Installation
- Minor Paving
- Home Driveways
- Parking Lots

Ricky Parker – Owner

842-4003 Mon.-Fri. 9-5, Sat. by appointment only

Hwy. 130, Holden Beach Rd., 4½ miles from Shallotte



©1991 THE BRUNSWICK BEACON