

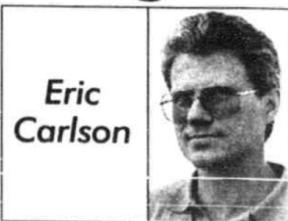
Here's The Big Deal About Sunset Beach's Quaint Bridge

SUNSET BEACH—Three people were killed and at least two dozen homes were destroyed last night by a wind-whipped fire that raged out of control as an abnormally high tide prevented emergency workers from reaching the island across its quaint swing bridge.

Hundreds of people, driven from their homes, crowded the island causeway in hopes of escaping the conflagration. Across the waterway, firefighters from five departments stood helplessly watching flames leap high into the night sky.

"It was like something out of the movie *Apocalypse Now*," said the owner of a summer home leveled by the blaze. "Military helicopters were landing in the marsh. They were hauling injured people on stretchers through the grass and evacuating them. It was awful."

The fire was discovered in an oceanfront home at about 2 a.m. By then, the blaze already had spread to a neighboring house. Driven by a stiff southwest wind, and without fire fighting equipment on scene to slow its progress, the fire jumped to a third home, where a mother and her two children were asleep.



Eric Carlson
The three apparently succumbed to smoke inhalation and were unable to escape, according to one of the many volunteer firefighters who arrived shortly after the blaze burned itself out on the shore of the Intracoastal Waterway.

"We warned them this could happen," he said.

Indeed they have. But luckily it hasn't happened. Yet.

Which reminds me of the story about the eternal optimist who fell off a skyscraper. As he flew past the open windows on the way down, he could be heard to remark again and again, "So far. So good."

So what is the big deal about the Sunset Beach bridge?

It's old. It's falling apart. It needs to be replaced. That we know.

It floats, so when the tide gets really high, it becomes impassable. When that happens, fire trucks and ambulances cannot get to the island. Period. And people who want to leave can't get off. No question about it.

Every day during tourist season, cars back up for hundreds of yards on either side of the bridge. They are waiting for someone to change the red light to green, so they can drive across the rickety single-lane roadway. Hour after hour. Day after day.

Meanwhile, boats line up waiting for the bridge to do its little swing thing so they can continue their passage up and down the Intracoastal Waterway. When the bridge opens, the lines of cars get even longer. Every time.

The N.C. Department of Transportation wants to replace the antiquated Sunset Beach bridge. They want to build a nice, stable, 65-foot-high roadway, two lanes wide.

Which would mean no more lines of cars. No more lines of boats. No more tide problems. No fears of losing emergency access. No mechanisms to break down or maintain.

No bridge worker salaries to pay. Makes sense. Doesn't it?

You would think so.

But some folks on Sunset Beach like the old bridge. They say they don't mind the bother. They say a new bridge would be less attractive. They say it would encourage too many people to visit the island. They are afraid some of those visitors might stay. Just like they did.

Bridge lovers also say that replacing it will spoil the island's charm. As if daily inconvenience and the potential loss of emergency services is somehow charming.

Personally, I think the Sunset Beach bridge is ugly. Approaching it from the water, it looks like an old dredge boat got wedged sideways in the channel. From the road, it has all the ambience of a highway toll booth.

To cross the Sunset Beach bridge, you first have to wait in line behind a bunch of cars whose drivers are burning fossil fuel and spewing carbon monoxide into the atmosphere to keep their air conditioners running.

As you finally clatter across, you see a bunch of boats burning up fos-

sil fuel and spewing carbon monoxide (and the contents of their bilges) into the waterway.

Eventually, you get to drive across the causeway, where there are more bumper-to-bumper cars, more fossil fuel burning and more carbon monoxide spewing. How charming.

Folks on Sunset Beach just don't realize what they're missing by not having their very own high-rise bridge. In fact, I'll bet hardly any of them have ever seen their island from 65 feet in the air.

I love the Holden Beach bridge. I think it's a work of art, gracefully rising and curving and descending in a great arc, not unlike the path a seagull might take across the waterway.

I never get tired of crossing our

bridge. Going to work in the morning, climbing into the air past the town hall, I can gaze out across Lockwood Folly Inlet and see all the way to Oak Island lighthouse. At the peak, I look down at shrimp boats tied up to the docks and see beautiful sailboats and yachts migrating along the waterway.

Coming home, I often slow to a crawl at the top of the bridge, just to take in the grandeur of that magnificent ocean view. I would hate to pass up all the stunning sunsets I've enjoyed while slowly coasting down to the island's surface.

I don't miss our rickety old one-lane bridge at all. In fact, I can still see it any time I want to. In a painting, on our living room wall, where it actually looks quite charming.

When The Walls Came Tumbling Down

"Storm Decimates Milepost 4 Area."

That was the headline on an October issue of the Outer Banks Current some 12 or so years back. The raging Atlantic had chosen a Sunday afternoon to consume ten oceanfront homes at Kitty Hawk while property owners, police officers and gawkers stood helplessly by. I had a story to cover.

The memories washed in on a rogue wave last Thursday night as I watched a wide-eyed, rain-suited television reporter marveling at the angry sea and stiff wind and waiting for Hurricane Gordon, who never showed. As if the situation were anything for autumn on the Outer Banks—hurricane or no.

That Sunday morning in October dawned battleship gray with the northeast wind howling around the corner of my house and squeezing itself into a screech that would alarm houseguests unaccustomed to the sound. I built a fire in the woodstove to take the damp chill out of the air.

Fall and winter days on the Outer Banks can be open-the-windows-balmy or blow-your-shingles-off



Lynn Carlson
harsh, depending upon the speed and direction of the ever-present wind. The Wright Brothers didn't pick their spot at random.

My friend Gwen—the type of reporter who sleeps with one ear tuned to the police scanner—called and said to get moving; houses were going in at Milepost 4, the area just north of Kill Devil Hills where the dune was long-gone. I bundled up in flannel-lined jeans and lots of layers, rigged a plastic bag to protect my camera, stuffed rolls of film in every pocket, and took off.

When I left home the wind was blowing 70 miles an hour from the northeast, making driving a challenge even on the straight, flat five-lane "bypass." When Gwen and I

approached the oceanfront, it looked to be snowing, but it was 55 degrees. Great clouds of dirty white sea foam whipped through the air and skidded with the seawater across the beach road. Stomping through the water and foam, soaked to the skin by salt spray, I heard for the first time the twist-twist-pop of a house freeing itself from shaky pilings and tumbling into the sea—something like screwing the top off a plastic soda bottle.

It would take four or five good waves for each cottage to break apart, sending boards, appliances and pieces of cheap furniture afloat, some toward shore and others out to sea. Scavengers were having a field day, albeit a pretty chancy one. There was no question the pictures would be great.

We heard the sound four or five more times before the wind got so strong that it was too much trouble to walk anymore.

We drove to Hardee's and got a half-dozen cups of coffee to deliver to the cops on the scene. It was Gwen's modus operandus—if you bring food or beverage, you'll leave

with information. I've seen her take a cake to FBI agents, Christmas cookies to the P.D. at Christmastime, ham biscuits to firefighters at dawn. Worked every time.

We got the name of a woman who'd refused to leave her oceanfront home, despite the fact that the power had been turned off and her septic tank was halfway exposed. Officers had to remove her bodily from the cottage, which shortly thereafter become one of The Ten. We got all the nuts and bolts information, what was going on at the other end of the banks, the fact that winds were sustained at right about 80 miles an hour, gusting to 96.

An officer warned us we needed to get going. It was getting dark and the wind was getting even stronger. Both Gwen and I had children at home who'd be looking for some supper soon.

I stayed up all night afraid the wind would blow the stovepipe off my roof and set my house afire. Sometime just before dawn I dozed off for a few minutes and awakened to a beautiful clear day with a gentle breeze off Kitty Hawk Bay.

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