



A SETTING SUN is mirrored in the Intracoastal Waterway at Ocean Isle Beach (above) and in the calm Atlantic Ocean waters just west of Shallotte Inlet.



Bird's-Eye View

BY ERIC CARLSON

"Hey, guy," said the voice on the phone. "Wanna punch a hole in the sky?"

"Let's do it," I answered, bounding out the door with camera bag in tow.

It was one of those crisp, clear, autumn days when sunlight radiates from everything you see. Not a breath of wind. Not a cloud in the sky. A perfect afternoon to fly. The pilot, Ocean Isle Beach chiropractor Skip Davis, was methodical in his pre-flight inspection. But today, he moved more quickly than usual. This had the makings of a memorable flight.

And it was. The view from upstairs was incredible. We climbed above the trees and saw the world neatly divided between a lush green carpet of forests, fields and marshland to the north and a mirror-flat expanse of slate gray ocean to the south.

The Shallotte River was a great blue snake slithering through golden grasses aglow in setting sunlight. Thirty miles to the north, still clearly visible, Lake Waccamaw was a mere puddle.

Even the flight controllers seemed envious, punctuating their radio chatter with comments like, "Boy. It must be nice up there."

Beach walkers and fishermen shared the same stunning sunset from the strand. They looked up and waved, imagining our view from on high. Skip wagged the wings in greeting as we skimmed low across the gentle surf.

We glided along in silence as the sea consumed the sun. Words could only belittle such beauty. For we had slipped the surly bonds of earth and touched the face of God.



TIDAL STREAMS meander through the Oak Island marshes (top) toward the ocean and Bald Head Island. The lighthouse at Caswell Beach (above) casts a long shadow from the U.S. Coast Guard Station. Wide beaches and long walkways mark the West end of Holden Beach (below).



The Shepherds' Story

BY BILL FAVER

The Shepherds' Story has always been my favorite part of the Christmas narrative. Many years ago in Sunday School my teacher helped



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the story come alive for me by telling of the "heavenly hosts of angels" appearing to the lonely shepherds watching their flocks.

I could visualize the cold winter night with stars shining brightly and the shepherds hovering around a small fire to keep warm. The welfare of their sheep depended upon their alertness and attention to every cracking twig or unknown

sound. They must have been frightened of the unknown in the night. They must have feared what would happen if the sheep were lost or killed while they kept watch.

We think of the calm and peacefulness of the terraced hillsides near Bethlehem. Or we think of the

bleating of sheep and the calls of the shepherds and the unknown sounds. Into either of these nightly routines came a most unexpected happening telling the shepherds of the birth of a Savior.

According to the story, they were overcome with fear at the sight. We think of it as a "Hallelujah Chorus" kind of thing, complete with choir and organ. Perhaps it was much less than that, or much more than that. The awareness which came to them was a life-changing event. They left their routines to come and worship the new born king.

I've always liked the Shepherds' Story because it was in the out-of-doors and close to nature. Like young David of earlier times, who was inspired to write many of the Psalms, the shepherds were shaped by their outdoor environment. They knew about the natural world because it was their home. They weren't camping out for recreation or fun—this was their way of life.

They lived with the sheep, taking turns at being on watch for wild animals, or thieves, or other perils of the night. The solitude of their way of life must have given them a lot of time for thought and reflection. They were sensitive to the land and the shrubs and the skies and seas.

The shepherds had no Christmas season—no TV or radio, no toy stores, no shopping crowds. They had time and silence and awareness. Perhaps we, too, need some time, and silence and awareness this Christmas. We, too, could benefit from some time outdoors—a stroll in the woods or a walk along the beach.

We may or may not be confronted by the singing of the "heavenly hosts," but we could be helped to put Christmas values in a new perspective. Merry Christmas to each of you!



PHOTO BY BILL FAVER

THESE HILLS near Bethlehem are believed to be where shepherds were "keeping their watch."