

Spirit Of Shallotte River Association Lives On

BY DOUG RUTTER

The more things change the more they stay the same. Brunswick County has seen unprecedented change over the past three decades. Roads, shopping centers, houses and golf courses have sprung up in areas that once were nothing more than timberland.

An unknown and predominantly rural and agricultural area has blossomed into the state's second-fastest growing county, thanks in part to a thriving tourism industry.

But one aspect of Brunswick County life that hasn't changed over the years is the importance of waterways—including Shallotte River and Shallotte Inlet.

A recent campaign to get the federal government more involved in maintenance of the Shallotte Inlet is reminiscent of efforts made 30 years ago by a group known as the Shallotte River Association.

The association, which was made up of area businessmen and fishermen, formed in 1958 and worked several years urging the Army Corps of Engineers to dredge a wider and deeper channel in the river and inlet.

The organization of about 200 members requested the work to help the commercial and sport fishing industries as well as tourism.

An association survey made in January 1959 said there were between 2,000 and 2,500 people who were entirely dependent on the river and inlet for a living. There were more than 40 shrimp boats and 13 charter

boats using the inlet in addition to sport fishing boats and private yachts.

Members said dredging the waterways would improve fishing for spots, mullet and trout; improve access to the ocean for shrimp boats; and create a freer flow of water that would benefit oyster and clam populations.

The Shallotte River Association also said a wider and deeper river channel would help Shallotte regain the place it once held in the fishing and pulpwood transportation industries. International Paper had operated a pulp loading wharf in Shallotte until 1952.

The group's request was endorsed by the towns of Shallotte and Ocean Isle Beach, the Brunswick County Board of Commissioners and United States senators and representatives from North Carolina.

But Hubert Bellamy, who was a member of the association that presented its findings to the Corps of Engineers at a public hearing in 1960, said very little came out of the group's work.

"They cleared out a couple of spots and it helped for a couple of years," Bellamy said. "But then it filled back in again, and I don't ever remember them coming back."

Although many members of the old Shallotte River Association have died since then, the spirit of the organization lives on today. At the request of fishermen and boaters, local public officials have picked up where the river association left off.

Brunswick County and Ocean Isle Beach leaders have renewed the push to get the Corps of Engineers to take over a dredging project in Shallotte Inlet, stressing the same reasons that were at the top of the river association's list 30 years ago.

In arguing for a clear inlet today, officials still point to the needs of commercial fishermen and recreational boaters. They say the inlet is often used by visitors to the area and is important for tourism, which has become the leading industry in Brunswick County.

As a result of the renewed efforts, the Corps of Engineers' Wilmington district office has asked its division office in Atlanta to fund a study that would determine if there is a need to dredge Shallotte Inlet. County officials should hear in January whether or not the study will be funded.

Bellamy said there was more of a commercial fishing fleet 30 years ago than there is now. But the number of tourists using Shallotte Inlet has multiplied, making the project as important as ever.

Shrimp boats used to travel eight or nine miles up the river to Shallotte for repairs. Bellamy said the Shallotte River doesn't have the boat traffic it used to have, mostly because of the shallow waters and lack of fish.

"There's very few people who can bring their boat up there anymore because of the shifting shoals," he said.

Woodrow Russ, who has run a business in Shallotte for 53 years, said he's seen the role of the river change from being a vital link with the outside world to a waterway used mainly for commercial fishing and recreation.

"Years ago we got our supplies by the river," Russ said in a recent interview. "We didn't have any roads back then."

Sailboats used the river back in the 1920s to deliver fertilizer, flour and furniture to Shallotte. Russ said the boats would leave town loaded with tar, turpentine and lumber.

Russ said the people working to get the inlet dredged now will need some luck to accomplish their goal, and the government will need deep pockets. "You can walk across it on low water now. It would take some money to move that much soil."



STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG RUTTER

COMMERCIAL FISHING VESSELS such as the Miss Angela, out of Shallotte Point, depend on a clear path through Shallotte Inlet to harvest seafood.



A 1938 view of Shallotte River shows a bustling waterfront at the intersection of old U.S. 17 (now Village Road) and Main Street, Shallotte. In a 1960 photo of the same location, buildings and boats had disappeared.



STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG RUTTER

RECREATIONAL BOATS docked near Shallotte Point are evidence of the growing tourism industry

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