

Brunswick Shrimpers Tell Their Stories In New Book

BY ERIC CARLSON

From Maine to Miami, Seattle to San Diego, Key West to Corpus Christi, our coastal communities are undergoing profound and often painful changes. Families who have lived for generations in simple harmony with the sea, gathering its bounties and weathering its storms, see their way of life disappearing in a flood tide of land development, environmental pressures, foreign competition and government regulations that threaten to run them out of business.

I remember watching it happen on North Carolina's Outer Banks, where the once-thriving community of Wanchese saw its fishing fleet—and its sons—driven away by "progress." A new bridge that carried tourists to Hatteras Island also disrupted the tidal flow through Oregon Inlet, slowly filling the channel with sand and choking off their only access to the sea.

When politicians promised to stabilize the inlet, many invested in larger boats and leased dock space at the government's new multi-million-dollar Wanchese Seafood Industrial Park. But the inlet only

'The Carolina Watermen: Bug Hunters and Boatbuilders'

By Richard and Barbara Kelly
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grew more treacherous. Most of the fishing boats left. Today the seafood park remains a rusting monument to broken promises.

Gazing across Roanoke Sound, old timers there can still remember an unspoiled horizon of marsh grass dotted with a few hunting camps and summer cottages. Today they see an endless row of beach-front hotels, condominiums, shopping centers and housing developments.

Here in coastal Brunswick County, the old fishing and boat building families have similar tales to tell; men like Thurman Skipper, the manager of Bellamy's Fish House, a rigger of shrimp boats and a part-time poet who once looked across the Intracoastal Waterway toward Holden Beach and wrote:

"I remember when there weren't nothing over there

And now it's full of mobile homes and folks from everywhere.

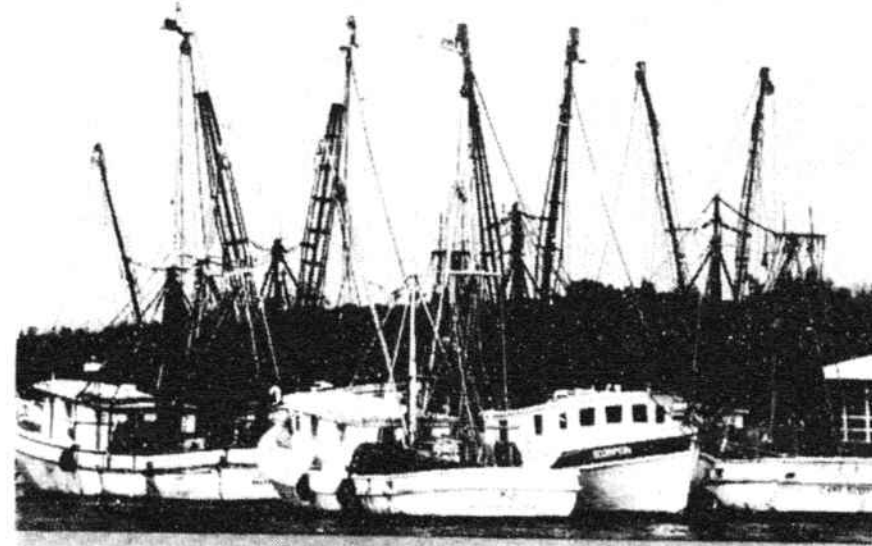
And I remember when you could sit and rock all day.

Only traffic you would see was the mailman on his way..."

Reminiscences like this—from local boat builders, shrimp boat captains and fish house owners—are lovingly recorded in Richard and Barbara Kelly's new book, *The Carolina Watermen: Bug Hunters and Boatbuilders*. Scheduled for July release, this fascinating glimpse below the decks and behind the docks of our local seafood industry will be a treasured addition to the library of anyone who lives or vacations on the South Brunswick Islands.

Regular visitors to Holden Beach, the Kellys found themselves

THE CAROLINA WATERMEN



An Excerpt...

"...The outriggers are lowered, and the nets and heavy wooden doors are pushed overboard. Within seconds after hitting the water and ballooning out, the huge nets create so much friction that they jerk the boat to a slow crawl. The great torque of the diesel engine, however, allows the boat to continue forward despite the enormous drag. The boat is now moving not unlike a plane or an automobile pulling a huge parachute behind it. Fuel is being consumed at a dizzying rate, and unless shrimp are entering the nets, the boat will have to move on to other waters..."

—The Carolina Watermen: Bug Hunters And Boat Builders

mesmerized by the offshore ballet of shrimp boats pirouetting across the water in their hunt for the tasty

crustaceans the shrimpers call "bugs." They grew to recognize familiar names on the classic wooden shrimp boats tied up at local fish houses: the Capt. N.C., the Andrea Dawn, the Miss Caison, the Scorpion, the Cape Fear, the Bug Hunter.

The Kellys began to wonder what the crews do on those boats. Who built them? Who are the captains? How do they use that confusing tangle of nets and cables to catch shrimp? And what happens to those little delicacies between the decktop and the stovetop?

Their curiosity piqued, they started hanging around fish houses, talking to the owners and listening to tales told by the men who build those boats and take them out to sea. Recognizing a story that begged to be told, the Kellys recorded these conversations and created a unique portrait of this once-thriving local industry now threatened with extinction.

Carolina Watermen doesn't pre-

tend to be a scholarly history of the South Brunswick Islands, or a comprehensive treatise on shrimp biology, or a textbook analysis of commercial fishing techniques. Still, in its early chapters, the book offers enough information to help the reader understand the terminology and the context of the personal reflections that follow.

It is here—in the heart and soul of their book—that the Kellys wisely step back and let the watermen tell their own stories.

Captains William Varnam, Danny Galloway, Henderson Caison and Thurman Bass take us aboard their boats and describe how much shrimping has changed and how much it has remained the same.

We visit the craftsmen who build these classic, functional vessels; men like Norman Bellamy, Weston Varnam, Clyde Varnam and Billy Varnam; men who can all trace their techniques back 100 years to John Varnam, the first major boat builder to settle in this area.

We listen in on the conversations at Bellamy's, Fulford's and "Capt'n Pete's" fish houses and hear their owners describe the increasing complexity of buying and selling shrimp in a marketplace that is under growing pressure from foreign competitors who grow their shrimp in holding ponds.

And we meet artistic watermen like painter Bryan Varnam, who uses acrylic and canvas to create serene portraits of coastal North Carolina and to conjure visual memories of his boyhood days on the Brunswick backwaters.

Time and again we hear the shrimpers speak of their frustration with federal regulations requiring them to install turtle extruder devices (or TEDs) in all nets. These trap doors allow endangered sea turtles (and a significant portion of the shrimper's catch) to escape capture.

The Kellys do an admirable job of presenting both sides of this heated controversy. They describe the loggerhead turtle's fascinating life cycle and the efforts of environmental groups, government regulators and local residents to protect nesting sites and improve their chances of survival. And they quote shrimpers who say they are being forced to pay the price for an environmental problem caused not by them, but by overdevelopment of the coast.

With the costs of fuel, repairs, equipment and insurance steadily rising while shrimp prices continue to fall, watermen say the reduction in their catches caused by TED regulations may prove to be the final straw that drives them out of business.

While it carefully avoids taking sides in this emotional issue, *The Carolina Watermen* reminds us that these bug hunters and boat builders—like their sea turtle brethren—are an endangered species, dependent on the sea, stressed by modern pressures and valiantly struggling to survive.

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