

BY BILL MORRIS

the fishhouse WAY OF LIFE

Down East, once-thriving commercial fish houses stand abandoned, wood-and-tin shacks shoved aside for more modern facilities. Along these docks cling the last vestiges of a fast-disappearing enterprise.





The road off the coastal highway is a sandy track that disappears into a hole of shade cast by the wind-rounded canopy of live oaks. In low spots the ruts are reinforced by crushed oyster shells, and here and there a smattering of roof shingles, blown off in some named or unnamed storm and recycled as homemade macadam. The shade of the grove is welcome at first, but in the stillness the mosquitoes could soon chew a man down to gristle, so it's best to keep moving. The destination is the marshy edge of the sound — Stump, Core, Pamlico, or Bogue, take your pick. Chances are, at the end of the sandy trail, there's a leaning, faded, wood-and-tin structure, one of the last remaining monuments to the fish house way of life.

"Good Fresh Seafood"

Non-barter commercial fishing began in North Carolina shortly after the Civil War, and for more than a century, fishermen have brought their catch to fish houses to be packed (in salt at first, now it's ice) and shipped. Fish houses are also where the fishermen get paid. According to North Carolina Marine Fisheries, in 2001 our state's fishermen landed more than 137 million pounds of fish and shellfish worth \$88 million. Most of that catch was sold at a fish house.

A modern facility may have concrete flooring and conveyor belts, but the fish house way of life is best enjoyed in what amounts to little more than a shack built out over the water, with a tailgate-high loading dock in front and a rickety boat dock out back. The door is a slider, made of several sheets of roofing tin fastened to some wood framing, hanging on U-bolts from a length of pipe. The handle is a pigtail of heavy dock line with a granny knot in either end. Inside it is dark and moist with light leaking in through wall chinks and the smell of the sound coming up through holes in the floor. The classic fish house buys from the

With no frills but freshness, Yeomans Seafood holds its own on the Harkers Island waterfront.

local saltwater cowboys and sells to everyone from the Fulton Street Fish Market in New York City to dingbatters in flip-flops who weave in the door on sunburned legs.

Fifteen years ago, it was my good fortune to discover L.D. Smith's Seafood World on the back side of Topsail Island. I walked past the hand-painted sign ("Good Fresh Seafood is Our Biggest Bargain") to see an old glass-front deli case on the left with whole fish and shrimp laid out on a bed of crushed ice. In the heat of summer, the shade of that dark wooden building was a welcome oasis, its flow-through breeze and dank corners a pleasing alternative to being cooped up in a cottage with the air-conditioning roaring.

What I remember most about Smith's place was the old clawfoot, white porcelain bathtub that sat in the middle of the floor. A spring scale with a dial the diameter of a basketball was bolted into a ceiling timber above the tub. Along one wall was the cleaning station with a short piece of garden hose and through-holes to the sound where fish heads and guts went to become food for crabs.

Above it all was the ice machine in the rafters, the whomp-whomp of its compressor like the double-time beating of a mechanical heart. The suspended machine spilled out its load of flake ice inside a walk-in cooler that had been created in the simplest way imaginable, by blowing yellow foam insulation against the rough plywood walls, building it up layer by layer to an R-factor that could withstand any Topsail summer.

The North Carolina commercial fishing fleet includes more than 9,000 watercraft of all sizes and descriptions, and Seafood World bought from a representative sample. Fresh flounder came from giggers, who worked nights on tidal flats near the inlet from generator-equipped aluminum boats, sticking their prey with long forks. Inshore gill netters brought in croakers and spots. Shrimpers came in the morning, ready to sell the catch their channel nets had snagged on the night's falling tide. Offshore boats came in loaded with grouper and

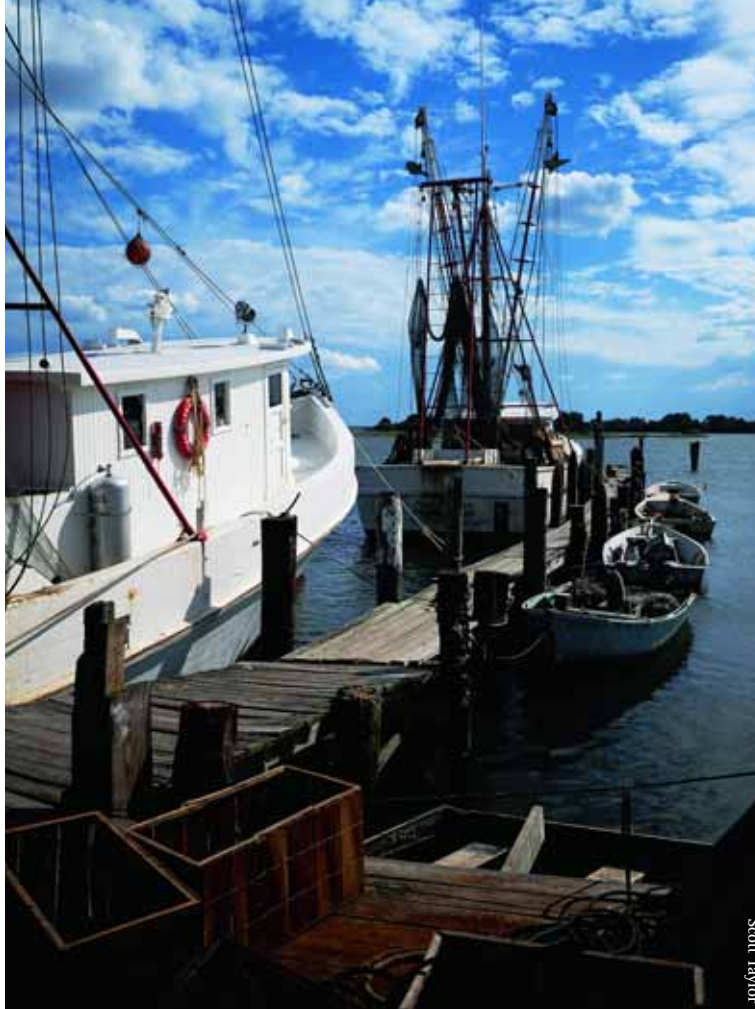
snapper from four-day bottom fishing trips. They had names like *Slo Motion*, *Mach I*, *Dolphin II*, and many were owned by other members of the Hampstead-based Smith family: brothers, cousins, and uncles who all seemed to be in some end of the seafood business.

When a bottom fishing boat came in loaded, sleepy little Seafood World would come to life, and it all centered around that clawfoot bathtub. A man in the boat dug fish out of the icy hold, then tossed them up on the dock, where Smith or another worker separated them by species and general size — sorting the black groupers from the gags, the prized American red snappers from the beeliners, triggerfish, and grunts. From there the

catch was shoveled into the bathtub for a quick hosing down, then into a mesh basket that hung from that spring scale. When the pointer hit 50, the fish went into a waxed cardboard packing box, and ice was shoveled in on top.

On a good day, Smith might pack 160 50-pound boxes. That's four tons of fish. "I sent tractor trailer loads to Canada, and plenty to the Fulton Street Fish Market in New York City," he recalls.

Like many small businesses, Seafood World had a large extended family, and for a short while I was lucky enough to qualify. I wanted to catch fish in the sound, and Smith not only gave me tips, he let me tie my hopeless little boat up at his dock. Some days we sat in his tiny office and talked fishing and baseball, the conversation interrupted by phone calls as he sold fish to distributors up and down the Eastern Seaboard. Certain evenings — you never knew when — the propane cooker would be lit, and whole spots or flounder fillets would be rolled in House Autry breeder and deep-fried next to the dock. That was the fish house way of life at its best, with a



Scott Taylor

cooler of cold beer and our lies and bad jokes floating up to roost in the crowns of the live oaks.

Carrying on

"I did a great retail business in those days," Smith says. It is years later, and we are sitting in his office at Century 21 Real Estate in Surf City, the ever-growing metropolis in the center of Topsail Island. "There were many summer weekends when we'd sell more than 2,000 pounds of shrimp."

Smith is telling me this in a realtor's office because that's where he works these days. In 1995, he sold Seafood World — all 1.7 acres of it. Bulldozers knocked down the fish house, and dump trucks hauled it away. "Road-to-sound parcel," the listing said. "Deepwater sound frontage." Today, the sandy lane that disappeared into the live oaks has become the driveway to a 4,000-square-foot vacation home.

Selling Seafood World was not something Smith was eager to do. He is the son of a Pender County fisherman and the grandson of two more. Beyond that, he is a thinking man who has done more than most for

After a day's net of shrimp and flounder, boats dock at Clyde Phillips Seafood in Swansboro.

the stewardship of our coast, having served as an appointee on the very first Coastal Resources Commission in 1974. But even though the fish house way of life was his heritage, he could also read the writing on the wall.

"The land just got too valuable," he says with a shrug.

The fish house way of life isn't over, though. Not as long as I can pull my skiff into the dock on Harkers Island and be greeted as "Cap'n" by Ellis Yeomans Sr. as he sits in the shade at the back of Yeomans Seafood. He's balancing a grandbaby on his lap, feeding her oyster crackers, and under their chair a red dog is pouncing on dropped

crumbs. His fish house is right where it's been for 38 years, the third location in which Yeomans has operated.

"I had two before that were out in the sand," he says in his Down East brogue, pointing toward Back Sound, the body of marsh and shallow water behind Shackleford Banks. "Storms washed 'em down."

The blue-and-white building sits just down a crushed shell drive off Harkers Island Road. The front forms an "L" around the loading dock, and to the left a large pane of glass opens onto the tiny retail area where a reassuring tableau of flounder, speckled trout, mullets, and spots lie on the wooden display counter in a bed of ice. The counter drains down through the floor, into the sound.

On one side of the building a mountain of oyster, scallop, and clam shells stands ready, should the driveway ever need repaving. A squad of calico cats, fat from a diet of fish heads, rubs against the stem of an old-fashioned counterweight scale on the loading dock before going off to sleep in the shade. A wooden

boat, the *Easy Layin'*, sits listing on its keel, held in place by a stack of chicken-wire crab pots on one side and the shell pile on the other.

Another boat, the *Capt. Pat*, is on the beach as well.

"*Capt. Pat* was my last boat,"

Yeomans tells me. "Built by a man down the road here." A pause. "He's dead now." A respectful pause. "She had a diesel in her, but I took that out and put a Chevy motor in."


Most of the time Yeomans' daughter Aggie is running the retail side. She has curly hair, a pleasant disposition, and no visible aversion to hard work. Between rushes of customers crowding the cramped shop, Aggie will talk to you about how the fishing's been or the price of shrimp or sometimes about life on the other side of the drawbridge.

"I might leave this island some day," she says, her rich accent stretching the word to sound like "oyland." She makes the claim, but it doesn't sound very convincing.

"Business is tough now," her father says. "People go out on the road and sell shrimp and oysters out of a truck. They don't need no fish house." Aggie's brother, Ellis Jr., works at commercial fishing, but he's also seen what's happening to the life he grew up in. A few years ago he opened another business up the road, a ferry service that carries tourists over to the Cape Lookout National Seashore. "The Local Yokel," he calls it.

When I ask Yeomans how many fish houses were once on Harkers Island, he squints in concentration and stabs the air with a worn, sun-spotted index finger, seeing in his mind the friends and competitors that were strung down the island from the Straits to Shell Point.

"Thirteen." Then he points toward the front door and adds, "and one on the back side that Ottis from Beaufort messed with for a while, so I guess that makes 14." Today there are two, Yeomans and Fulcher's, and a waterfront lot on Harkers Island might sell for close to \$200,000.

I don't look forward to the day Aggie crosses that bridge for good. 

Bill Morris lives in Chapel Hill.