



Back in Time

By Henry Wolff Jr.

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I was saddened last week by the death of J.N. Fisher of Port Lavaca.

In the short time I knew him, I found him to be a most remarkable person, enjoyable to be around and more than willing to share some of his experiences on the Texas coast with others. I doubt if anyone knows the waters of Calhoun County better than he did.

He took me back to the teens, 20s, 30s, World War II — all in two short visits, the first last summer when I first met him. I was in Port Lavaca looking for something to write about and happened to think that someone had told me that Fisher might know something about the old steamships sunk off Indianola, so I headed by his shipyard to talk to him. He wasn't there, but the man on duty dialed him on the telephone, told him I'd like to talk to him, then he handed the phone to me.

I introduced myself.

"So you're the one who writes all those lies," he said, punctuating it with a hearty laugh. "I read you all the time, but I don't believe everything you write."

Told him I didn't either.

He invited me over to the house and we visited for most of the afternoon, talked about sunken ships, the days during the Depression when he operated a fish house in Port O'Connor, hurricanes, and how he got to be there. Fisher had a good memory for the events that took place during his some 74 years in Calhoun County, a keen sense of history. He was only about two years old when his family moved from Temple.

It was Fisher who set up an interview for me recently with Mrs. Hilda Harris of Port O'Connor, met me on the road and led the way.

"She can tell you more about Port O'Connor than anybody," he said. "You'll enjoy talking to her."

I did.

Mrs. Harris has a good collection of old Port O'Connor photographs, and I particularly enjoyed the two of them pointing out things they remembered in the pictures. There was one picture of some old boats. Fisher named them off one by one, with their owners.

What I really enjoyed hearing were the little stories that came out from time to time during the conversation, like the time he was hauling cattle off Matagorda Island by barge for Lloyd and Alfred Hawes, how one bunch of cattle didn't stay put once he got them on the mainland, swam and waded all the way

back to the island. Had to do it all over again.

How the boys used to go to Seadrift and catch the train, get on the cowcatcher and shoot quail as it steamed toward Port O'Connor.

"The brakeman would stop the train when the guns went off," he recalled.

We talked about the German submarines that operated off the Texas coast during World War II, of the concrete ships built at Rockport during World War I, about the old U.S. Life Saving Station on the east end of Matagorda Island. Mrs. Harris has a picture of the station and the big oar boat that was used in rescue work, took about a dozen men to handle one in rough seas.

I mentioned something to Fisher about Floyd Blake of

Port Lavaca telling me about the time when Will and Harry Smith kept a Model-T Ford on Matagorda Island for fishing. They'd drive down the beach and shoot the big reds in the surf with a shotgun, then load them up on the way back after the fish had washed ashore. Didn't take long at all to get a boatload for the fish house.

Fisher said he also had a Model-T on the island at one time, might still be out there somewheres, least that's where he left it.