

VOICES FROM THE WATERFRONT

The Last Fish House

By Robin Payne

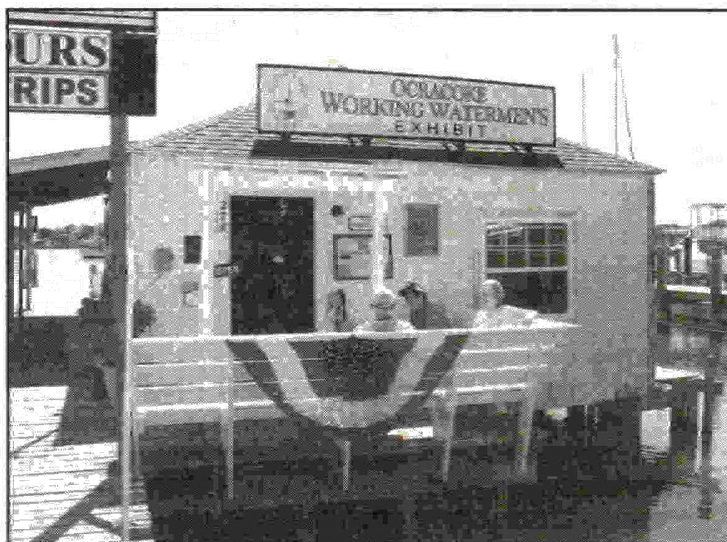
THE OCRACOKE WORKING Watermen's Exhibit sits on a pier over Silver Lake Harbor, on the un-bridged island of Ocracoke, on North Carolina's Outer Banks. From the rear window and door visitors see a postcard view across the harbor of the 1823 lighthouse. They watch watermen in their boats heading to and from the fish house.

Originally the home of the Will Willis store and Fish House, the exhibit building is one of two remaining historic structures on piers, a remnant of days when deliveries to Ocracoke arrived by freight boat. The store sold general merchandise, fuel and hand-chopped ice. The daily mail boat, which also ferried passengers, unloaded here. It was a community hub.

In 2006 the community of Ocracoke came together to save its last fish house. Now the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association, or OWWA, manages and owns the Ocracoke Seafood Company. Over 32 watermen work from the fish house, selling their catch locally in the retail market, and sending the truck loaded onto the ferry to meet wholesalers who await them on the mainland. OWWA preserves jobs and a traditional lifestyle, and puts fresh food on everyone's table.

OWWA realized educating people about their work was key. Visitors wanted to watch the fishermen unload their catch, and they loved hearing the watermen talk in the island brogue. Since 2006 OWWA has participated in the North Carolina Seafood Festival, hoping to connect consumers to the face of watermen. They prepare a traditional island seafood dish and share their experiences fishing and living on the island. The warm reactions and satisfied stomachs after eating Old Drum (boiled red drum, eggs and potatoes, topped with diced onion and salt pork) and fish cakes (leftovers given a new shape the next day) reinforced our conviction that a personal connection is the best marketing tool.

The mission of the Watermen's Exhibit is for people to walk away educated and enlightened, feeling there is something good happening here. Most museums portray the past. The watermen's ex-



The Ocracoke Working Watermen's Exhibit is housed in what was formally a store and fish house. PHOTO: ROBIN PAYNE

hibit tells their story. Mullet fishing, pound netting, and crabbing weave vintage photos with current. Oystering focuses on the restoration efforts recently undertaken by OWWA. The largest display is about Ocracoke Fresh, OWWA's fresh seafood brand. The watermen themselves worked with a graphic designer to design their logo – a pound net being fished by hand. Here fresh seafood knowledge and recipes always create interest. Whether it is a vintage recipe or a native explaining the best way to cook a trout, food is captivating. One quote that visitors like is my recollection of learning about island bartering, a typical practice on Ocracoke. Gaynelle came into the fish house one day with one of her fig cakes. I was so excited—and ready to have a piece. She said, “Oh, no this is for Morty. He brought a drum to my house yesterday.” At the time Morty was 13 and Ocracoke's youngest fisherman.

During the peak season people sit for hours reading books about Ocracoke or just relaxing in the shade with the harbor breezes. This project establishes connections. In today's hurried society, it is easy to lose the connections between people and place. We are the steward of the working watermen. Our mission is to ensure people continue to value the unique cultures that derive from unique environments. ▼

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