



JOSHUA CORSA PHOTOS/SPECIAL TO THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

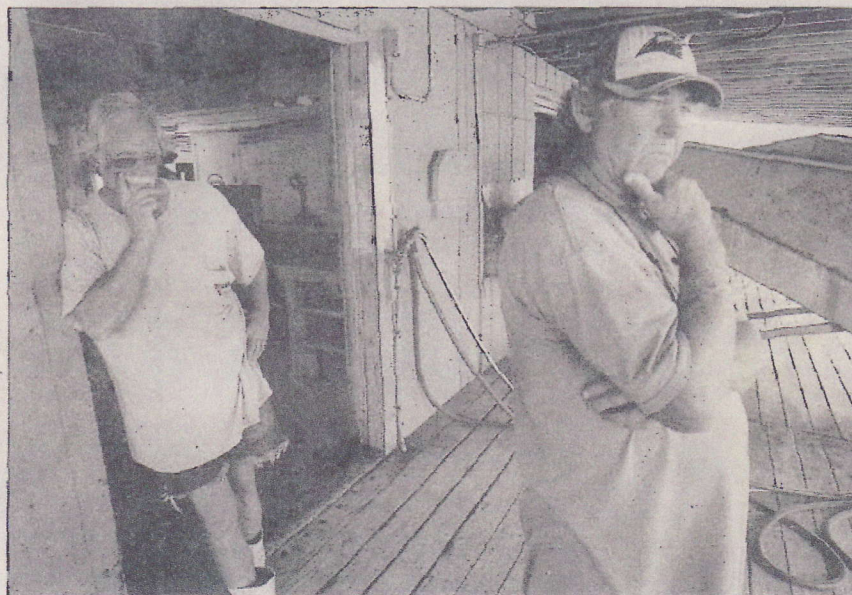
Fisherman Bill Evans brings a freshly caught sheephead into the Ocracoke Seafood Co., which is being refurbished for a July 1 opening. The nonprofit Ocracoke Foundation has agreed to purchase it.

The life that almost got away

BY CATHERINE KOZAK
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

O CRACOCKE ISLAND —

Here is this group of working men, oblivious to stains on their clothes, unconcerned about how blunt they may sound.



Danny Worsley, left, and Rex O'Neal take a break from renovating Ocracoke's fish market, once again giving local fishers a retail outlet for their catches.

With postcard-pretty Silver Lake harbor as their backdrop, these fishermen on the dock of The Ocracoke Seafood Co. talked like men given a reprieve, because surely, they said, they had been facing the demise of their livelihood.

"There's people here that rely on fishing for a living," said Danny Worsley, wearing white PVC boots and leaning casually off the dock, his arms wrapped around a beam. "If we had a solid fish house, there'd be a lot more people fishing. ... This piece of property here is the last chance for a fish house in Ocracoke."

Now a new nonprofit group, the Ocracoke Foundation, plans to take that chance and buy the fish house and the business for \$425,000. In an agreement signed June 2 with owner Mike Johnson, the group has 12 months to pay, as long as a nonrefundable \$20,000 deposit is provided by Aug. 1.

The Ocracoke Seafood Co. will open July 1 and will be managed by the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association.

Vince O'Neal, owner of the Pony Island Restaurant and a part-time native fisher, said the agreement will do a lot to preserve the cultural heritage of the island as well as its economic health. Tourists who visit Ocracoke, marketed as a traditional fishing village, expect fresh, locally caught fish, after all. "This is a cog in the wheel of those special things that people come here for," O'Neal said. "Businesses need to wake up and smell the roses. They need to protect this. To lose the fish house would be a low blow."

When what was then called the South Point Market closed in December, fishers found themselves with no place to sell their products or even to get ice. Used to be that boat after boat would motor through Silver Lake with their holds filled, aiming to offload at the fish house. Used to be that that's where a fisher could catch up on gossip and share notes about the weather.

Those who didn't leave the business altogether were forced to go to Hatteras to offload their haul. The three-hour round trip ate up time and money for fuel, making it barely worth the hassle.

Built in 1974, the fish house, which has gone through several owners, is situated on valuable waterfront property in the village, but its 99-year lease restricts its use to a fish house. The building includes a winch, conveyor belt and washing vat, coolers, an ice machine, and a cutting room with sinks. After fish are cleaned, they're weighed, iced, boxed, labeled and put into storage until a refrigerator truck picks them up.

In its heyday during the 1970s and '80s, as much as 50,000 pounds a day of shellfish, sea mullets, ocean flounder, trout, spot or croaker would go through the fish house. Nowadays, tuna and mahi-mahi are more popular. Cheap imported shrimp and crabs have put a big crimp on the local market, the fishers said.

Once The Ocracoke Seafood Co. is operational, manager Vicki Harrison said, the retail shop in the front will be open to sell fresh, local seafood to the public, including some unusual local catches such as spadefish and sheepshead. The entire business is expected to employ 15 to 25 people through the fishing season.

Fishing is not as good as it used to be, and many watermen supplement their work with other jobs. Ferris and Erick O'Neal, for instance, also run a parasail and jet watercraft business.

Rex O'Neal, the young men's uncle, said he now fishes part time and also works in construction. The 53-year-old native waterman said he remembers 15 years ago when there were about 43 crabbers working on the island. Now there are about four.



Danny Worsley, left, and Rex O'Neal talk business on the docks of the Ocracoke fish house. "There's not many places that are quaint like this," O'Neal said.

"The volume of fish is not here anymore," he said.

Bill Evans, a local waterman who also is a member of the North Carolina Department of Commerce 21st Century Fishing Committee, said there are still plenty of good fishing opportunities. The reopening of the last fish house on Ocracoke will go a long way toward anchoring the local fishing industry.

"They told me in '89 when I started fishing that I wouldn't be fishing in 10 years," he said. "The only saving grace is if this is done with a preservation aspect."

Every time a boat would come to the dock of the fish house, tourists walking around the village would line up to watch, enthralled at the

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TAKING A CHANCE

The purchase

The Ocracoke Foundation, a new nonprofit group, plans to buy The Ocracoke Seafood Co. and fish house for \$425,000.

Local catches

The retail shop will sell fresh, local seafood, including some unusual catches such as spadefish and sheepshead.

When

The Ocracoke Seafood Co. will open July 1.



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Robin Payne of the Ocracoke Foundation goes through paperwork in the empty sorting room of the Ocracoke Seafood Co.

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sight of watermen at work, pelicans perched on nearby pilings waiting for scraps.

"There's a lot of plain-Jane places up and down the coast, but there's not many places that are quaint like this," Rex O'Neal said.

Of the 80 or 90 seminars offered by the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching, the "Salty Dog" seminar held twice a year on Ocracoke that focuses on the fishing industry is the third-most popular, behind those on Lewis and Clark and the Broadway theater, said Alton Ballance, coordinator of the Ocracoke campus.

Seafood: Purchase keeps Ocracoke's heritage alive

The former Coast Guard station on Silver Lake is being renovated to be used as the center's coastal campus. It is targeted to open in the spring of 2007.

The teachers enjoy hands-on experiences with working watermen, Ballance said, and seeing the fish processed at the fish house. Plus, they are able to eat the local catch.

"Teachers love that experi-

ence," he said. "And sure, they do associate Ocracoke with the fishing community."

Robin Payne, an organizer of the nonprofit effort, said the hope is to create a program that will market the local catch in restaurants. The point is to support the watermen, the industry and the infrastruc-

ture, and in turn, the heritage of the island.

"If the fish house ceases to exist, and the fishermen cease to exist," she said, "it's the social aspect that's also lost."

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