

The O'Neal Family - Peggy, Vince, Katy, Noah, Sue and Carson

Preserving Ocracoke's Commercial Fishing Heritage: *Vince O'Neal, the NC Seafood Festival and "Cooking with the Chefs"* by Pat Garber 11/01/10

The clouds hung low on the horizon, a hint of purple against the October sky, as Washie Spencer left Howard's Reef and steered his skiff back to Ocracoke Island. The boat was full, heaving with the silvery forms of mullets, most of them fat with roe. The rest of his small fleet had already gone in, stopping at one of the island's fish houses to unload before tying up at Lum's Dock. Most of the fish would be shipped out and sold at bigger markets, but Washie took a few of them home to boil with potatoes and fry up as fish cakes for his family. The year was 1936, and these were hard times on the island. Crossing the shallows of Pamlico Sound, he gazed at the marshes and hammocks which lined the shore, wondering what the future would hold for his home and his family.

More than seventy years later, Washie's daughter Peggy and his grandson Vince stood making fishcakes using Washie's same recipe. The fish (red drum, black drum, bluefish and sheepshead) were freshly caught in Pamlico Sound with a skiff and nets not too different from those used by Washie Spencer. Peggy and Vince were not just feeding their family, however. They were representing Ocracoke's commercial fishing community at the North Carolina Seafood Festival, teaching the public about commercial fishing and fresh seafood, and giving out more than 400 fishcakes as samples. Their goal was to ensure, through education and communication, that the heritage of eastern North Carolina's commercial fishing would continue.

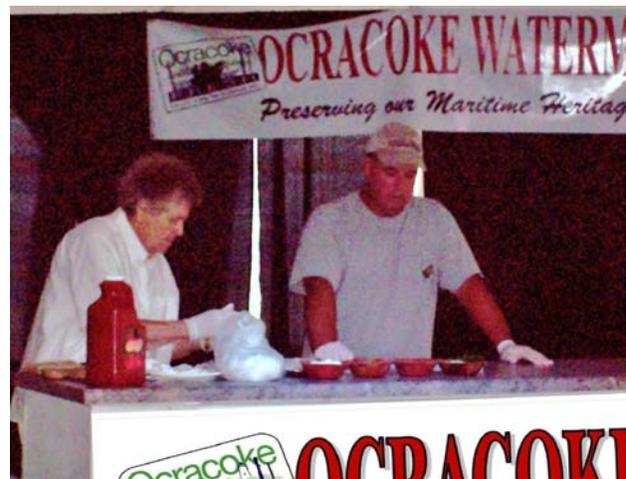
October 1-3, 2010 was the 24th celebration of the North Carolina Seafood Festival and the fifth year that the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association (OWWA) has had an educational booth there. Located in on the downtown Morehead City Waterfront, the festival features the fishing communities from Brunswick, Carteret, Dare, and Hyde Counties. There is a "Blessing of the Fleet" at the NC State Port with a poetry recitation by Johnnie Baum of Hatteras Island. There is also live entertainment, a seafood market, boat show, children's events, and an exciting presentation called "Cooking with the Chefs." This on-going event, sponsored by NC Sea Grant, features cooking by the pros-some of the best seafood restaurants in eastern North Carolina- allowing the public to learn about cooking seafood and sample some of eastern North Carolina's best examples. This year's line-up included the Lone Cedar Cafe from Dare County, serving pan-seared crab cakes with collards and cornbread, the Bistro-by-the-Sea from Carteret County, offering flounder roulade, and of course, Vince and Peggy's fish cakes. The goal is "to introduce coastal fishermen, their catch, and their favorite recipes to the public, thus connecting the public with the seafood they eat and the fishermen who catch it."

Representatives of OWWA have served drum cakes at their booth for the last two years, but this is the first year an Ocracoke restaurant has participated in "Cooking with the Chefs." Vince and Sue O'Neal's Pony Island Restaurant was given the honor. The "Pony," as it is locally known, is the oldest continuously operated restaurant on Ocracoke Island. Alex (Elic) Eley opened it in 1959 and later sold it to David and Jen Esham, who ran it themselves for a while and leased it out to Wayne Teeter and others. (Vince bussed tables there for Wayne in 1974, never guessing that he would one day own it.) The Eshams sold it to Ellen Gaskill, who sold it to Vince and Sue in 1992. Ellen, an outstanding chef, still cooks there at times.

Vince had followed in his father's and grandfather's footsteps, serving in the US Coast Guard and commercial fishing before he bought the restaurant. Through the years he has worked on the water in many capacities, fishing in much the same way as Washie and Washie's father and grandfather before him. He still fishes for flounder, drum and blues, going out three or four days a week in his skiff, the "Miss Katie," named after his daughter, to set and check his nets.

He and his wife Sue run the Pony together, and they take pride in serving locally caught seafood, brought in by Vince himself from his gill nets or bought from the Ocracoke Seafood Company. Vince's mother, Peggy Spencer O'Neal, has cooked there since her son bought it. She now works part-time, preparing the "sweets"-pies and such, and of course her famous crabcakes.

Speaking about their experience in "Cooking with the Chefs," Vince said that "My Mom and I had a great time cooking and talking about fish, family recipes, and the island heritage." According to Barry Nash, Sea Grant NC Seafood Technology & Marketing Specialist, who helped organize the event, their presentation was exceptionally well received. He explained that "what made Vince O'Neal's presence at this event so important was his status as a fisherman as well as a restaurateur- he was the only fisherman on our program. Vince was able to convey what commercial fishing meant to his family from the perspective of a fifth generation Ocracoke waterman...the people who value local seafood do so because they care a great deal about the lifestyle and heritage of commercial fishermen..."



Peggy O'Neal prepares fishcakes while son Vince talks to the crowd.

The story of Ocracoke's fishing heritage is an ongoing one, marked by many ups and downs. During earlier years, in his great-grandparents' time, said Vince, everyone on the island lived off of the water, doing subsistence fishing for crabs, oysters, clams, mullets, blues, drum and other species. Shrimp were not eaten back then, added Peggy-not until around the fifties. Before that, they were considered worthless, and they would bale them out of the nets and throw them away. Mullet was one of the most common catches, not just for bait, but for eating.

There were four or five fish houses before the sixties, buying and selling seafood, but when Vince was a child there were none left. Sometime around the late 'sixties or early seventies, he recalls, "people on the island tried to start a fish coop, each putting \$50 in, but it didn't make it. Ocracoke fishermen sold their catch to Dolan and Calvin Jr. Burrus, who would come down from Hatteras to buy mullets and other fish and carry them off in big trucks. Dad and I took crabs to Wanchese and sold them to Old Man Griggs. They hauled them up there in their pickup trucks. Then Calvin Jr. started buying crabs and then he built a fish house here. Johnny Griffin bought it and added on to it. Things peaked during the mid-seventies-lots of fish and the markets were good, especially for croakers, spot, blues, and mullet. Shrimping became big and there were a lot of trawlers here. My dad thought about buying a shrimp boat. But then it all dried up."

Later the fish house was bought by Murray Fulcher, a commercial fishermen who understood the needs of the fishermen and the importance of sustainable fishing. Upon his retirement, the fish house went downhill, and in 2006 it closed its doors. Recently, under the umbrella of the Ocracoke Foundation, the

fish house reopened as a nonprofit managed by OWWA and Ocracoke's fishermen. The Ocracoke Seafood Company, as it is now called, sells to restaurants and operates a public market where people can buy fresh, local seafood. "Ocracoke Fresh" is its marketing campaign, promoting the concept of "caught today the traditional way." OWWA promotes buying and eating local seafood for many reasons: it is fresh, caught and processed by hand, sustainable, maintains old traditions and the heritage of fishing communities, supports the local community and provides jobs for the people living there. Commercial fishermen can be important stewards of the environment, as they are the ones who are out there all the time, observing changes and possible problems.

Vince is uncertain, however, about the future of commercial fishing in North Carolina, and he says that the reasons are many and complex. "The only way we'll survive is to educate the public and get the politicians on our side." He explains that the lobby for imported seafood is powerful, and people don't realize that the imports are raised in crowded, unhealthy conditions with lots of chemicals-bad for the animals themselves and for the people who eat them.

Convinced of the importance of carrying on the family's fishing tradition, Vince and Sue are working on getting a commercial fishing licence for their son Carson, so that he can, if he chooses, fish when he is older. "You could say that the fish house is the center of the island for a lot of the natives and a major draw for the tourist business." Vince said. "I worry about what would happen if our fishing community died, and I hope that our family can carry on in the seafood industry like our ancestors have done generations before. "

Washie Spencer's recipe for Fishcakes: 12 fillets of fish (fresh catch of the day)

3 eggs

½ cup flour

2 cups diced onion

6 cubed potatoes

Salt and pepper to taste

Fill a large pot with enough water to cover fish and potatoes. Bring fish and potatoes to a boil and cook until potatoes are soft. Drain and let cool. Add remaining ingredients to fish and potatoes in a large bowl and mix well. Hand pat into cakes and grill or fry to a golden brown.



Pat Austin serving fish cakes.