

Ocracoke holds on to fish house

BY SUSAN WEST | SENTINEL STAFF

"It'd sure be a shame if Ocracoke lost this fish house. The village would lose its North Star," said Jerry Gerco, a Winston-Salem resident visiting Ocracoke this summer.

Gerco stood in the retail market at Ocracoke Seafood Company, surrounded by photographs showing island fishermen at work in the 1950s.

"The fish house and the fishermen here give the island an authentic North Carolina flavor," he added, before asking fish house manager Vicki Harrison to repeat her recipe for baked sheephead.

Just a few months ago, Ocracoke's identity as a fishing village seemed destined to slide into the pages of history books.

The last fish house on the island, South Point Market perched on the edge of Silver Lake, had closed its doors.

Fishermen weren't sure when or even if South Point would reopen.

Hauling their catches on the state ferries to fish houses in Hatteras and Cedar Island, fishermen wondered if the time had come to stow their nets.

The grave situation called for communal brainstorming, and the fishermen formed the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association.

In June, the association entered into a lease and an option to purchase agreement with Mike Johnson, owner of the South Point Market property. The association also directs operations at Ocracoke Seafood Company, a new wholesale and retail seafood business housed in the South Point facility.

Robin Payne seems an unlikely candidate for immersion in the effort to save Ocracoke's last fish house. She moved to Ocracoke in 2002, after a 25-year career in architectural planning and construction in the Washington, D.C. area.

"But I've always identified more with rural than with urban," said Payne, who grew up in southern Maryland at a time when tobacco farms held sway over the land.

"My role has been helping the fishermen pull all their ideas and plans together," explained Payne.

Payne said that a working fish house on the island benefits not only fishing families, but could also play a role in education and in tourism.

"People who live here sometimes forget what a unique place the fish house is," she said. "But for people who only see fish wrapped in cellophane packages in the grocery store, what goes on here is fascinating."

Payne envisions a day when Ocracoke Seafood Company can accommodate that curiosity.

"We could create areas where people could watch the fishing boats come and go," she said. "Maybe expand the retail space, and even add a commercial kitchen. But right now, we're still in phase one, raising the funds to purchase the property."

The watermen's association needs \$447,000 to cover the purchase price, operating costs, and other expenses.

"Some of the fish that our fishermen bring in goes to the retail part of the business," said company wholesale and retail manager Vicki Harrison.

"We promote local seafood here," she explained.

Some of the fish is loaded onto a refrigerated truck that runs to Hatteras to meet a large tractor-trailer that hauls the fish to Wanchese.

"It's great to see the Ocracoke fish house buzzing with activity - the fish truck ready to load, workers slinging boxes of flounder and spanish mackerel around, fishermen stomping about in their white rubber boots," said cultural anthropologist Barbara Garrity-Blake, who is working on an inventory of North Carolina fish houses.

"The fish house has a fresh coat of paint, and hope and optimism -- rare in the fishing industry these days -- are in the air," said Garrity-Blake.

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