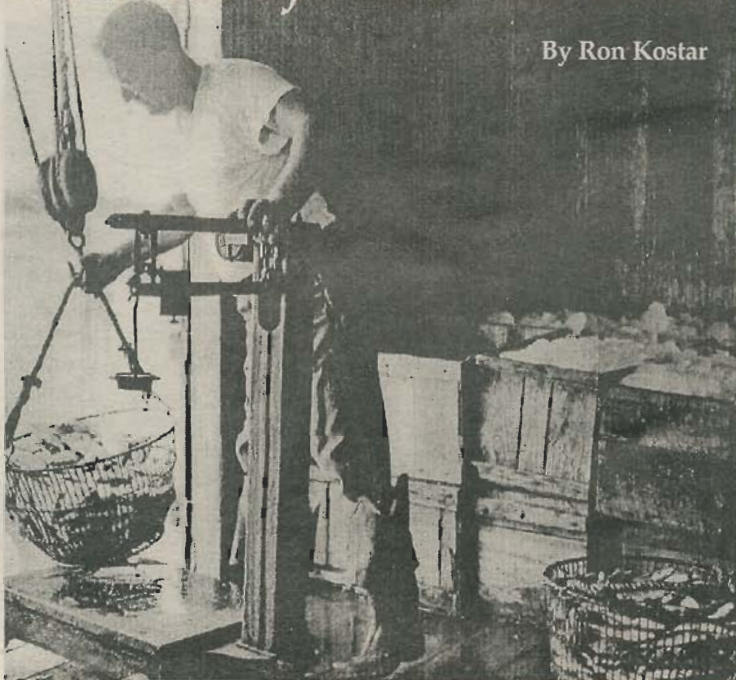


## Ocracoke from a Distance

By Ron Kostar



The fishhouse in the 50's. Photo courtesy of Standard Oil (New Jersey) Collection, University of Louisville.

### Save the Fishhouse!

Whenever my family went to Ocracoke in August, we would sit in our aunt's living room or out on the porch and Grandpop Howard would entertain us with stories, most of them about hunting and fishing. And every year I would ponder and ask him the same question, "Instead of commuting north for all those years Grandpop and then finally moving up north permanently so you could work on the dredge, why didn't you just stay in your beloved Ocracoke and hunt and fish for a living?"

And every time, my grandfather would answer the same way, "Because there was no steady market back then and a fisherman's life is uncertain."

My Grandfather, Lawrence Howard, was born in 1891. Between his weekly shifts on the dredge, he and his brother Stacy fished and hunted hard in the 1920's and 30's, and sometimes they ran their fowl and fish to Hatteras or to Roanoke Island by boat. However, delivering a catch daily back then was unheard of. Highway 12 as we know it today and refrigerated trucks didn't exist until later and it wasn't until the National Park Service bought up the north stretch of the island in 1953 that the Hatteras Ferry existed and even then it could transport just a few cars. It would have been impossible during his day to run fish to Hatteras, much less to the bigger markets in Manteo, Norfolk,

Philadelphia or New York, and impossible to have supported a family by fishing.

Even in the early '70's when I lived briefly in Ocracoke, most of the handful of full-time fishermen sold their fish to the limited number of local restaurants and ran the rest up to restaurants in Hatteras or Buxton (which made for some very long days). There were many, many days, however, when they caught more fish than they could sell, and the market, or more accurately the lack of a market, constantly limited how many nets they could set.

It wasn't until 1975 that Johnny Griffin replaced the old metal Fishhouse and that he and other fishermen like Rex and Ronnie O'Neal, Hardy Plyler, James Barrie and Mac Tolson (these are the just ones I remember now) started fishing regularly. And thanks to the business acumen and persistence of Griffin and later of Murray Fulcher, they founded and supported what came to be known as the South Point Seafood Company. By the mid-80's, it became a bustling business that in its heyday bought and transported millions of tons of crabs and fish and, more importantly, enabled local commercial fishermen to fish full-time.

So we were saddened to learn on our recent vacation to the Magic Island that the current Fishhouse had to close its door this past spring and that its future is now shaky due to the pressures of the modern economy and a combination of perhaps a little bit of mismanagement and a shortage of young fishermen.

The good news, though, is that a group of 25-plus full-time fishermen and an enthusiastic local couple, Tom and Robin Payne, have stepped up in an effort to save the Fishhouse. That the fishermen have formed a Watermen's Association and, with the financial and moral support of a NC Sea Grant, co-opted the operation, renamed it the Ocracoke Seafood Company, and resumed both its wholesale and retail operations.

But in order to ensure that a truck filled with iced-down doormat flounder pulls away from Silver Lake and rumbles up Highway 12 every early afternoon this fall, people need to be aware of the current tenuous state of the Fishhouse and, individually and collectively, do what they can to ensure that its doors remain open.

Money always helps, of course, and supporters can find out how to contribute by stopping by the Fishhouse or by contacting the OSC at 252-928-5601. And yet this is also a situation in which some creative thinking may be needed.

My family and friends thought that a few new signs leading tourists to the Fishhouse's door might stimulate its counter business, and that perhaps the retail folks could enlist the talents of some local artists to make the store more conspicuous and more attractive. Local restaurants might do their part by overloading their menus with seafood, which is what people come to Ocracoke for anyway, and at least for a while everyone could eat more healthy by buying and eating local clams, crabs, fish and shrimp. And the fishermen themselves might do their part by taking young local kids out to their nets more often and letting them see why they might later want to become fishermen.

And though I'm no Isiah or Ezekiel (and in fact I'm even a Yankee!), I will take the liberty to say this:

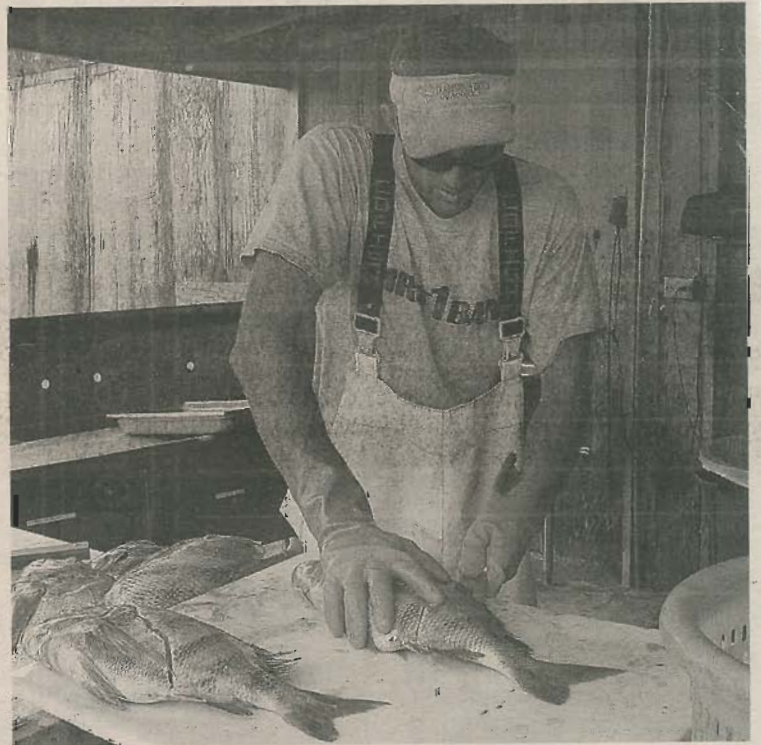
Tourism is a double-edged sword. Sure it may, and has, increased the standard of living of most Ocracokers (and unlike my Grandfather, fewer people now have to leave the island in order to make a living), but at what cost? Fishing, like the Ocracoke School and other cherished institutions, is part of Ocracoke's heritage. Is it sentimental and wrong to say that fishing has always been the "heart and soul" of this island town? And isn't it necessary, in order to retain the fabric of a town besieged by tourism, to hold onto some trades and vocations that don't directly cater to tourists? As someone who spends a good number of his days laboring over a computer, it seems to me that there is something authentic and worth saving - exciting, though often back-breaking and frustrating, but usually fulfilling, sometimes beautiful and always necessary - about a life that is supported by pulling fish out of the sea. Everyone has to eat,

## FISHHOUSE

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and eating fish is eating well.

The fishermen of Ocracoke currently are facing the same situation that farmers are facing up here in rural New Jersey. Up here, in Random Development Land, once a farmer's large family farm is sold and divided up into countless identical sublots by a developer, there is no turning back. Ocracoke, it seems to me, is at a point in its history where it may be turning its back on its "sea farmers" and on the water. O-cockers may all want to pile into a large imaginary sailboat or skiff and take a long ride out into the Sound and look around, and reconsider, because Ocracoke without the Fishhouse, and its full-time fishermen, wouldn't be Ocracoke.



*The fishhouse today. Bill Evans cleaning a catch of Sheepshead. Photo by Linda Rippe.*