



Farris O'Neal drags the morning's catch to a cooler at the Ocracoke fish house. He had a good haul of flounder and red drum.

STAFF PHOTOS BY CHUCK LIDDY

OCRACOKE GROUP RESCUES LAST FISH HOUSE

Dogged fishermen preserve their traditional livelihood with help from \$325,000 grant

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STAFF WRITER

OCRACOKE — For the hard-pressed fishermen of Ocracoke, landing a grant to keep the village's only fish house operating might prove to be their biggest catch yet.

The commercial fishermen, who banded together to form Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association last year, recently netted a \$325,000 grant to save the treasured fish house.

The grant, from the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center, is enough to buy a former seafood market on the island and secure a lease.

tional waterfront activities.

"We're up and running and doing good," said Hardy Plyler, a fish house representative who was packing shrimp Tuesday.

The scrappy group of about 32 fishermen, crabbers and charter boat operators came together to preserve their livelihood at a time when fish houses — part of what has been called working waterfronts — are becoming scarce along the North Carolina coast.

But they didn't do it alone.

The effort to save the fish house stirred a community spirit that had long been a tradition on the relatively isolated island.

People donated money and held



FISH HOUSE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1B

fish fries. Donated labor ranged from bookkeeping and computer chores to fish-cleaning, painting and dock-building.

The people of Ocracoke didn't want the fish house to close like so many others.

An N.C. Sea Grant study last year found that 39 fish houses, or 33 percent, closed in the previous six years. Seventy-eight were still operating.

The number of fishermen dropped, too, as many sold their boats and took jobs on dredge boats, tugs and in construction. Residents say there are only five or six Ocracoke fishermen who work crab pots now compared with 50 or so in the early 1970s.

The village of about 800 permanent residents is in a private enclave in Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

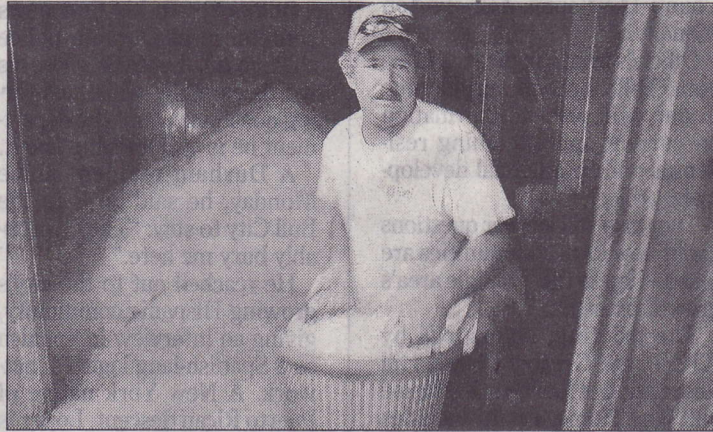
When the owner of Ocracoke's last commercial fish house quit the business last year, he gave the fishermen a year to pay for a long-term lease on the facility so they could keep it alive.

Fishermen needed to come up with money by June to acquire lease interests on property on Silver Lake, the village's harbor.

They got a low-interest economic loan through a Hyde County revolving fund before the deadline.

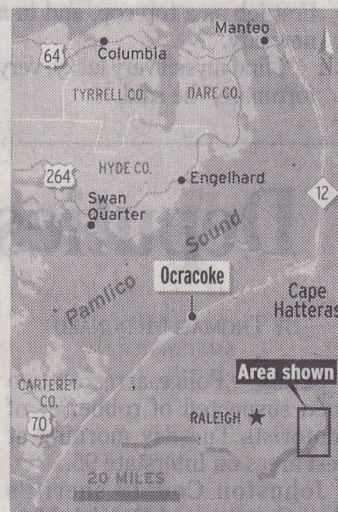
The rural center's grant will pay off the loan and give fishermen possession of the fish house until 2074, association officials said.

Plyler said the deal not only se-



Jerry Lukefahr, a clammer, grabs a basket of ice at the Ocracoke fish house as he heads out for a day on the water.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHUCK LIDDY



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restaurants and residents can buy fish from nearby waters.

Philip Howard, an Ocracoke native whose family has lived on the island for generations, said the fish house benefits the entire village, not just those who work the boats.

"I'm not a commercial fisherman, but I'm glad to see it," he said.

Rudy Austin, a member of the Watermen's association, said the fishermen could not have been successful without support inside and outside the village.

"Part of why we're drawn to fishing is the relative isolation we find at sea," he said. "It's a mighty powerful thing to find people across the state pulling for us and our way of life."

cures jobs for fishermen but also helps retain part of the island's heritage.

The fish house includes a small retail market where tourists,

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