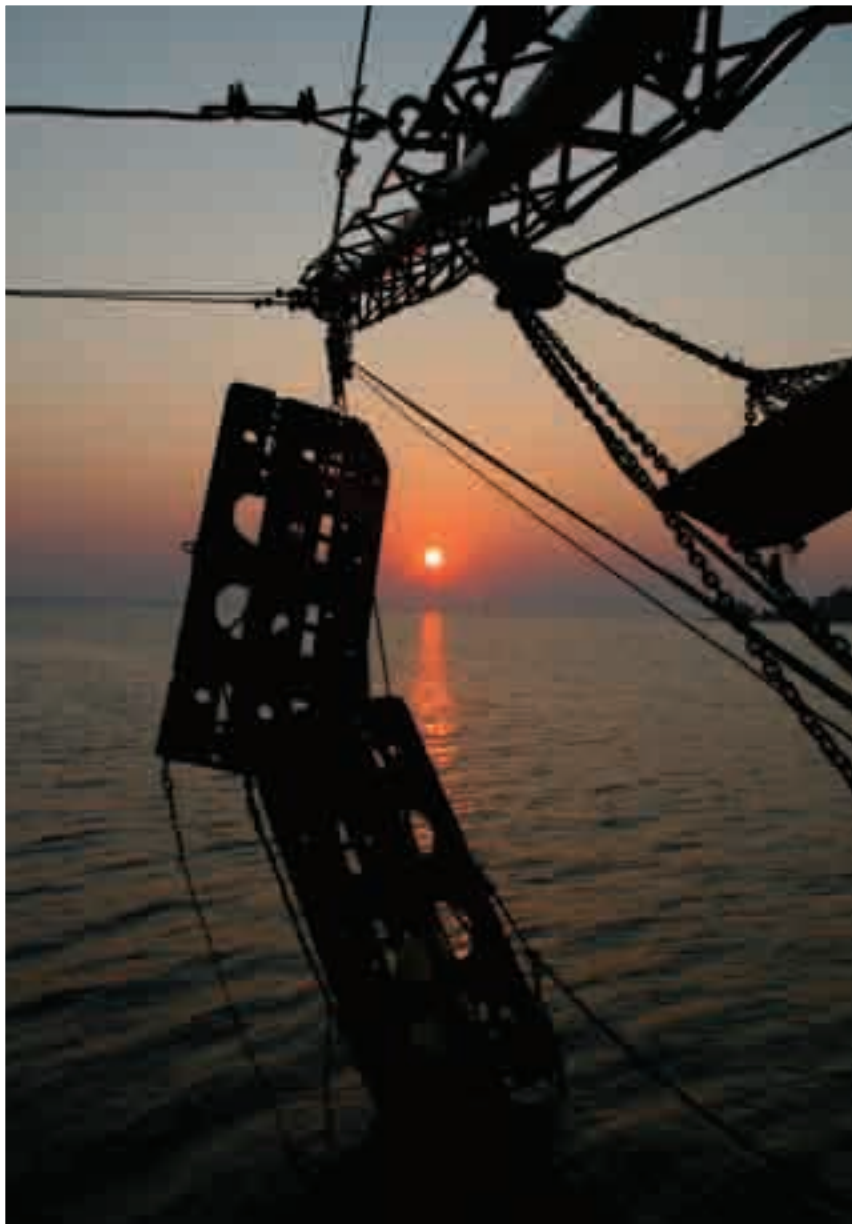




PHOTO BY ED FUNK



PHOTOS BY ED FLINK

Harvesting the WAVES

“Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises? But who takes off his eye from a comet when that breaks out? Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? But who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world?”

—John Donne

It's late Saturday afternoon and the 62-year-old ardent and sturdy Captain James Murray is in the process of painting his “Pretty Woman.” From a glance at her stained salt and sun weathered deck, stern and rigging, the skipper is in much better physical shape and less in need of any makeover.

“I’ve been a shrimper for over 43 years,” shouted Murray,

quickly adding, “you can’t be in this business for the money today, this is what I know and it’s my only life.”

Murray seems to be racing against time in his devotion to “Pretty Woman” and another aging vessel, “Little Lynette,” securely tied up at Hudson’s Seafood dock off Squire Pope Road. Although the native islander does not appear the least bit weary, a glance at the aging and derelict trawlers, once proud and colorful with their stretched outriggers, reveals the current decline of the industry.

These facts speak volumes about South Carolina’s shrimpers: In 2000, they hauled in more than six million pounds and at the end of 2005, the catch was just over two million pounds. Already, the prospects for this season appear even bleaker.

South Carolina’s shrimp industry has hit hard times. Can it be saved?

By James Borton

These photos, taken aboard Captain Richard Inglis’ ship, the “Josie N,” show the exquisite views and tasty catch shrimpers enjoy on the Lowcountry’s waters.



Ben Stewart (left) has worked these waters for decades, catching shrimp to sell to local retailers such as Barbara Hudson (right).



PHOTOS BY GERALD WEAVER

The local fishermen know all too well the swift currents of tide and time flowing from the labyrinth of South Carolina's chronicled black water rivers sunk deep and, in many places, shallow with ancient cypress-and-oak; gracefully flowing into the still redolent salt marsh creeks and sounds and then spilling into the dark blue Atlantic waters.

These shrimpers, their fathers, and even grandfathers, have long recognized both the hardscrabble life and romance of casting off their lines before sunrise; the throttle of the familiar single Cat diesel engine; their faithful vessels nosing ever so effortlessly through the Calibogue and Port Royal Sounds

as these seasoned boat captains navigate their way near shore in sight of Hilton Head Island's beautiful beaches.

With a shout, the hopeful captain summons his crew, "strikers," to drop the nets, suspended from two twin outriggers; balanced by heavy iron and wood laden doors, which pull the 40-foot-long net deep down into shimmering diamond-like morning waters for the long day's trawling ahead.

This shrimping business was never easy work, but in past years, these South Carolina mariners, some still relying on their innate common sense and others with the help of the latest technology, bolstered with lots of lady luck, hit upon

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their shrimp haven, where thousands of schools of shrimp faithfully jump and spring away as the trawler's huge swooping net gathers them up like some mythical crane.

"These days, most of the good captains are either dead or retired, but I am still here," reaffirmed Murray from his well-worn wheelhouse.

The fate of this once-thriving industry has been cast in a spiral downturn for years. Now these shrimpers, in the sunset of their own lives, hidden from the surface of the island's exquisite golf courses and numerous gated resort plantations, face even more acute challenges: rising fuel costs, tougher en-

vironmental regulations, closures of many sensitive harvesting grounds and, of course, the steady increase of shrimp imports. It's no wonder why many of the remaining Lowcountry shrimpers are calling it quits.

From New England to the Chesapeake Bay and the Gulf's Bayou, the commercial watermen are under attack from not only environmental regulatory issues but also from globalization. Certainly, the available aquaculture (farm raised) technology, frozen packaging, and air transport have brought the world's fisheries to our doorstep. The oceanic fish catch yields almost \$7.5 billion to the U.S. economy and \$82 billion

Above, at left, Capt. James Murray brings in a haul while the Little Lynette and Pretty Woman (center) await the next trip out.

Above, Captain Arthur Orage awaits his next trip out.

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NEWS

worldwide. But, one must ask, where is the sustainability?

For the past decade, the alarm bells have been tolling the decline of the world's ocean fisheries and its enormous worldwide significance.

Captain Arthur Orage, now 84, a native islander, still enjoys his life as a shrimper. At 17, he began his life as a waterman. And, standing on the dock at Hudson's, he recalls using just a led line to check the water's depth and a compass for navigation. "Oh sure, we had many good days and years, it was not unusual back in the '70s to have a \$1,000 payday for our shrimp, but that's the past," said Orage in his tired and raspy voice.

Eddy Singleton, born in 1944 on the island, was forced to abandon his fishing life a few years ago, when he had to have his deteriorating knees replaced. "It's a tough, back-breaking job and it requires that you be limber or sometimes accidents happen," remarked Singleton outside Hudson's seafood operations.

Others, like 80-year-old Captain Ben Stewart reminisced about past glorious shrimping opening days. "Out there in Calibogue Sound it looked like a city and even back around Port Royal, shrimpers came from all over Georgia and South Carolina, man, what a sight, there were hundreds of trawlers on the water," beamed Stewart.

At 66, Captain Gene Orage is a respected and resolute shrimper, but like other native islanders is more than a little dispirited about the future and the prospects for this season.

"It seems like the shrimp catches around the island have continued to go steadily down and maybe it's because of the runoff from the golf courses on Hilton Head Plantation, which go directly into the streams and then into the sound," lamented Orage.

For several decades, Barbara Hudson, the 60-year-old enterprising grandmother, whose family name is synonymous with the island's abundant fresh seafood, has watched the seismic shifts in the industry. Although Barbara and her late husband, Benny, sold Hudson's Restaurant in 1975, the Benny Hudson Seafood operation on the island has been providing fresh locally caught shrimp and fish for decades.

"The foreign imported frozen shrimp sets the market price these days and it does not make any sense," exclaimed Hudson.

She and her energetic daughter, Tonya, persist in carrying on the family's wholesale operation.

"After all, I am one of the few wholesale fish dealers allowed to ship anywhere in the world; our product is chemical free," added the passionate Hudson.

Most consumers are not aware of the economic impact their purchases of frozen shrimp imports from grocery chains place on the local shrimper. Americans consume over 1.4 billion pounds of the shellfish, making it America's best selling seafood, according to the American Seafood Distributors Association.

For the South Carolina shrimper, the bulk of this was imported, with U.S. producers now accounting for barely 15% of the market. A recent price check at the island's local Publix confirmed this discouraging fact: 21/25 count farm raised frozen white shrimp from Ecuador sells for \$7.99 a pound and the 21/25 count fresh American shrimp is \$13.99 a pound.

Just a few years ago, shrimpers banded together and put pressure on the U.S. Department of Commerce to examine the dumping of shrimp imports in the country.

Meanwhile, Hudson often sets her own market price. "These shrimpers are not shown the respect they deserve. They certainly deserve all the trade protections this country offers other industries like the farmers," asserted Hudson. She's the landlord with the big heart for shrimpers who, for more than 30 years, has provided the only available and affordable fishing trawler dock space.

As an astute business owner, she gets a daily fax transmitted print-out of the market prices for foreign exported shrimp. "I still attempt to purchase from these local shrimpers at least between \$.75 and a \$1 more than fair market price," interjected Hudson.

Hudson's large, fresh, American jumbo-size shrimp are sold at \$11 a pound.

Eddy Gordon, executive director of the new branding program "Wild American Shrimp," is also hopeful that it will succeed in driving up the price of locally harvested product through a certification system positioning domestic shrimp's higher quality over imports.

"The Wild American Shrimp effort is helping to make the public aware of the difference in good tasting, safe, ocean caught, domestic shrimp. 'Fresh Ocean Caught' it don't get any better than that," added Clay Cable, vice presi-

dent of the South Carolina Shrimpers Association.

And just as the shrimpers' boats with the stretched outriggers resemble wings of hope, Barbara Hudson's generous and fair subsidies to them seems to reinforce her position as their angel. Her 40 year-old son, James "Butch" Hudson, is also a commercial fisherman. "He often goes out for two or three days on his 89-foot, steel hulled trawler, 'Be Brief'," added the proud mother.

This is not a final requiem for Lowcountry shrimpers. But these not-so-famous men, whose family blood runs with the tides, may require more than an angel to weather any perfect economic storm blowing in during this approaching hurricane season. **M**

Shrimper's ALMANAC

The shrimping industry in South Carolina is broken into three seasons.

- The white roe shrimp season typically runs between mid-May and early June. The season opens when state biologists determine that an adequate supply of eggs has been spawned.
- The second season, for brown shrimp, begins in mid-June and ends in August.
- The fall season for white shrimp is the most lucrative for commercial trawlers. This season peaks in August and September.



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