

Sneads Ferry

Residents hold on to the things that matter most: shrimping, family, and the pleasures of life in flip-flops.

By Chris Gigley • Illustration by Steven Noble

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ALTHOUSE

On humid afternoons in Sneads Ferry, a small village just south of Jacksonville, shrimpers gather on the docks behind the seafood houses. Discussions vary from the day's haul to joking about wives, from the price of gas to wondering whether there's any finer life, any finer place, than this. Jimmy "Gig" Everett once went searching. He and his brother, Tommy, run the same seafood house their father owned, L.T. Everett and Sons Seafood. They were raised in a little white house 30 yards behind the docks.

After he graduated from high school, Gig trained to be an X-ray technician, a career that surely would've made him more money than shrimping. But three days of working in a hospital convinced Everett that type of life wasn't for him. Like many people who part from these ports only to realize there's no place better, Gig came home.

"I've heard people say they're moving to the mountains, sell everything they have, and go," he says. "Six months later, I see them back here clamming."

One of the premier shrimping ports on the East Coast, Sneads Ferry is set on a notch of land in the mouth of the brackish New River, where a handful of seafood houses sell thousands of pounds of fish and shellfish every year to restaurants, grocers, and anyone else who walks up to their docks.

Billy Thompson has been fishing from Sneads Ferry since he was a small boy.

"You have gas prices going up and the price of seafood coming down, so it's tough," he says. "But I still love doing it because I love being my own boss." Several other shrimpers within earshot snicker. "All right, my wife lets me be the boss when I'm out here," he jokes.

Two docks over, C.D. Merritt heaves several potato sacks full of clams off his small skiff, the last of his three boats. He sold the other two.

"I practically gave them away," he says, adding that he stopped going on two- and three-day shrimping jobs this year because it simply doesn't pay the bills. He estimates he'll earn about \$270 from this latest



The Shop Across the Street (above left) sparkles on the outside with lights and on the inside with a collection of handmade gifts. Ronald West of Greenville gingerly picks up a blue crab at Larry's Crab Shack (above right).

haul of clams. Not bad, but the day before he had been out clamming for eight hours and earned just \$7 for his trouble.

But like Thompson, Merritt says he relishes the freedom he has as a Sneads Ferry fisherman.

Life in flip-flops

Gaylene Branton and Marcia Hamilton love their freedom here, too. They both arrived in the early 2000s and are now active in the Sneads Ferry Community Theatre, which puts on full-scale plays, reader plays, and dinner theater shows at the local community center.

"It's very small-town America and very relaxed," says Branton of her new home. "You tend to get into Sneads Ferry time when you're here, which is a good thing. It's easy."

"We go around in flip-flops and shorts," adds Hamilton, a Greensboro native who actually lives just

over the bridge in North Topsail Beach but spends much of her time in Sneads Ferry. "You wear them in church, everywhere. It's wonderful. It's a whole different frame of mind."

Hamilton and Branton have been instrumental in making the community theater a big attraction in Onslow County and beyond. It offers top-notch productions — it was named community theater of the year at the 2006 North Carolina Theatre Conference — for only \$10 a ticket.

"Our crowds have grown in the last couple of years," says Branton. "We seat 150 people, but the last production we did we had to add extra seats."

The free-spirited nature of the town and its people attracted painter and Rocky Mount native Sherry Thurston to Sneads Ferry in 1978. She bought an old church on Peru Road, refashioned it into an art studio, and bought the house next door four years later. Now her studio is Thurston Art Gallery, where she

displays works of other area artists and sells souvenirs, many with her rendition of “Sneads Ferry Sneakers,” the white rubber boots shrimpers wear. It’s become the unofficial symbol of the village.

An art teacher at Dixon High School in Holly Ridge, Thurston says Sneads Ferry never ceases to inspire her. After more than 30 years in town, she now feels like one of the locals.

“These are really sweet people,” she says of her neighbors. “They’re curious people, and they’re very specific about what they like.”

Saving the Shrimp Festival

Locals in Sneads Ferry worry about the preservation of their town, especially as recent events threaten their quiet and independent lifestyle.

The first sign came in 1996, when the town nearly cancelled the Sneads Ferry Shrimp Festival for good. The festival draws thousands of tourists to the tiny hamlet every August and is its top revenue source. The community center and the adjacent grounds where the festival is now held were bought and built with Shrimp Festival money. In 1996, however, the committee was still looking for



Sherry Thurston bought an old church on Peru Road and turned it into an art gallery full of local artwork.



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“I’ve seen sunsets in Hawaii, California, and New England, but there’s something about the colors here that really makes them magical.”

a director as late as March. Rather than continue the search, a quick vote among a handful of them eliminated the festival from the calendar.

A grassroots effort revived the event, and many of the people involved were relative newcomers. Natives groused that the festival had been saved by “Yankees,” but it remains a top event in the state and a gathering place for everyone in the village, young and old.

Bernice Guthrie saw the first traffic jam of her life at the Shrimp Festival. A recipient of the Order of the Long Leaf Pine in 2000, she has seen all 39 Shrimp Festivals, and has been an active participant for the last 35. She’s such a festival icon that the official festival wine in 2005, created by Duplin Winery, was named “Miss Bernice’s Bubbly.” She’s also a fixture at the Riverview Cafe, a favorite dining spot among the locals, tourists, and Marines from nearby Camp Lejeune. Everyone comes for the fried shrimp, clams, and scallops.

“I started at the cafe in 1949 and met my husband on Christmas Eve of ’49,” recalls Guthrie. “I worked a year through August of 1950, we got married that September, then I lived in Norfolk off and on when he was in the Navy.”

Her husband, who died in 2001, retired in 1960, and the couple returned home to Sneads Ferry for good. “When we came back to town, they got after me to go back to the cafe, so I started back,” she says. “I was going to work part time or fill in, but that lasted one week. One of the girls

got sick and left, I took her place, and I was there as a waitress for 38 years.”

During that span, she’s seen her three sisters meet



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Haley Roberts presents one of the Riverview Cafe's famous daily homebaked pies — a chocolate pie with a beautifully browned meringue.

their future husbands while waiting tables there. She's seen her children, nieces, and nephews work there through high school. She's also gained friends from near and far, including a family from Canton, Ohio, who vacationed regularly on Topsail Island and always ate at the Riverview. They were so charmed by Guthrie that they invited her and her sisters to visit them in northern Ohio. They went and had a great time.

Root beer floats and beautiful sunsets

At age 81, Guthrie still works weekends at the Riverview, seeing mothers and fathers who were once her pint-sized customers. She is one member of the old guard in Sneads Ferry who is happy to see the energy newcomers are bringing to the community. Newcomers like Ohio native Jerome Gundrum.

"Sneads Ferry feels like home," Gundrum says. "I grew up in a coal-mining community. You either worked in the coal mines or steel mills there. What I saw here was the same hard-working, dedicated people who are very religious-based."

In 2004, Gundrum opened Dr. Rootbeer's Hall of Foam, an old-fashioned ice cream, sandwich, and soda shop with the largest collection of vintage root beer advertising pieces in the world in an old gas station right around the corner from

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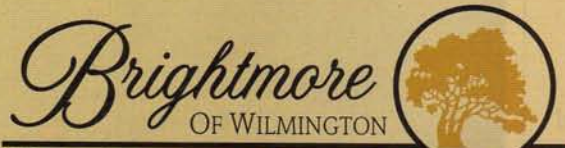
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the Riverview Cafe. The place was so successful that developers invited him to open a store in North Myrtle Beach. He spent most of 2007 getting his second store off the ground but missed Sneads Ferry.

"I need to be here," he says. "Sneads Ferry is a unique place. What I've learned after being in North Myrtle Beach and here is Sneads Ferry is so much more family-oriented. The visitors here come in as a family. And I've never seen a community like this that embodies the saying, 'A high tide floats all boats.' A lot of local people support the businesses. You don't know how much you appreciate Sneads Ferry until you move away."

Now he'll never leave. Visitors can usually find Gundrum behind the counter at his place serving up his own root beer and creamy root beer floats. Don't count on him being there when the sun sets, though. If it's a clear day, he'll be at the crest of the N.C. Highway 210 bridge to watch the skies blush.

"I have never seen sunsets as colorful as they are down here," he says. "It's hard to describe them. I've seen sunsets in Hawaii, California, and New England, but there's something about the colors here that really makes them magical."

That's something everyone can agree on, whether a shrimper pulling up a catch at dusk or a painter trying to capture those vivid colors on paper. Sneads Ferry is their paradise. 🐟

Chris Gigley is a Greensboro-based freelance writer.

if you're going

Riverview Cafe

119 Hall Point Road
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Thurston Art Gallery

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