

# Rising costs, foreign competition and the pressure to sell waterfront land to developers are bringing an end to a way of life along North Carolina's coast.

STORY BY APRIL JOHNSTON ■ PHOTOS BY RAUL R. RUBIERA

Larry Smith goads the grumbling Miss Lily away from her dock and eases her through the unruffled New River in Sneads Ferry.

At 5 a.m., it's still too dark to tell where water ends and sky begins. A radar screen and a single spotlight keep the 46-foot shrimp trawler, green nets reaching wide like wings, centered in the narrow river channel.

Smith is headed for the Atlantic Ocean after what shrimpers call the daylight squirt — that sliver of time when the sun takes its first peek over the horizon and the

shrimp scamper, with any luck, right into Miss Lily's nets.

"Like a thief in the night," Smith says with a grin.

But, lately, it's been difficult to savor the spoils.

Muggy summer mornings cast a dangerous fog over the water, making it nearly impossible to see the next boat over.

Blacktip sharks stalk the nets, occasionally ripping into one and freeing the shrimp.

Even if the boat and the catch make it back to shore, more trials await them there.

Cheap imports have sliced the price of shrimp. And the fish

houses, where shrimpers dock their boats and sell their wares, are slowly disappearing as owners cash in on their coveted waterfront property.

From his place at the wheel of a trawler, Smith has watched the shore slowly disappear.

Where there was once only sand and a stretch of uninterrupted sky, mansions and condominiums now choke the view, silently threatening to steal away the only place Smith, and so many others like him, have ever wanted to make a living.

See **SHRIMPERS**, Page 4A

## FISH HOUSES

Barbara Garrity-Blake of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and Barry Nash of the North Carolina State Seafood Laboratory conducted an inventory of North Carolina fish houses in 2006. They found that about a quarter have closed.

### IN NORTH CAROLINA

- 117 fish houses are listed
- 78 remain open
- 39 have closed

### IN SOUTHEASTERN N.C.

- 20 fish houses are listed
- 15 remain open
- 5 have closed

From **Page 1A**

Sneads Ferry, the old fishing village, sits on a chunk of land that bulges into the New River like a swollen thumb.

This is the place where, for nearly a century, the shrimpers and fishermen of Onslow County have lived, left and returned.

It looks the way you'd expect a fishing town to look — quaint and worn, warped by rain and covered in a layer of sand dust.

Not much has changed about this town in the past 40 years. The big names in fishing are still the big names in fishing: Everett, Bowman, Millis. The annual August shrimp festival is still the hottest ticket in town. High school boys still make their summer spending money digging for clams in the New River.

But the old-timers and the traditionalists notice the subtleties. They see trawlers

tied to their docks more often than they see them dragging at sea. They know the sons of shrimpers are choosing college over catching. They've watched fishing towns to the north and south of Sneads Ferry transform into resorts.

And they spend their time lamenting the impending transition the sickly fishing industry will surely force their town to make.

Gig Everett, co-owner of L.T. Everett and Sons Seafood, chuckles when he hears that kind of talk.

"People say they don't want Sneads Ferry to change," he says. "But it's changed — for the past 20 years it's changed."

Already, a handful of fast-food restaurants and a bank — the town's first — have planted buildings at the intersection where N.C. 210 crosses N.C. 172, moving commerce inland.

River pollution caused by runoff has forced clambers to do their digging elsewhere or not at all. Land development promises to make the pollution worse.

And real estate developers have already begun their descent on this town, a place thus far virtually untouched by outsiders.

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It's nearly 10 a.m. when Larry Smith idles Miss Lily and swings an orange basket of shrimp onto the dock at L.T. Everett and Sons Seafood.

"The sharks got me bad," he tells Gig Everett. "Real bad."

The morning had unfolded just as Smith hoped it would — with clear skies, gentle waters and squawking seagulls

clinging to Miss Lily's ropes for a free ride.

But beneath the surface, blacktip sharks, looking for breakfast and enticed by the glittering scales of trapped ribbon fish, tore basketball-size holes into Miss Lily's \$600 nets, likely releasing 100 pounds of shrimp back into the sea.

"We maybe got 30 pounds of shrimp," says Smith's wife and business partner, Wanda, as the shrimp topple out of the orange basket and into Everett's hanging scale.

Smith watches the shrimp fall. Thirty years of experience tell him Wanda is wrong.

"That's not 30 pounds," he says.

And he is right. The scale halts at 18. To the Smiths, that means just one thing: they lost money that morning.

Shrimping is not a lucrative business, not anymore. The cost of fuel is \$2.50 per gallon. The price of shrimp since the United States signed the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 has held at about \$1.50 per pound. For a shrimper to break even, he must catch at least 60 pounds each time he goes out.

Shrimpers who live on their boats and chase prey from North Carolina to Florida and back usually fare best.

The Smiths did that for five years, motoring a 60-foot trawler from March to January, netting thousands of pounds of shrimp a day. But shrimping is hard on the body, and it doesn't come with benefits. So three years ago, they returned to land, traded in their 60-footer on a smaller trawler and found Wanda what shrimpers call a public



seafood sold their riverfront property to developers who plan to sell. The sales price was undisclosed but is thought to have been in

job, at CVS.

The Smiths are fair-weather fishermen now, venturing out only when the conditions seem right. Some days they judge it correctly. Some days, like this one, they don't.

"I can't make me a trip like that again," Smith says.

But he also can't quit. Shrimping is all he knows. He started working on his uncle's boat when he was just 17. And, unlike the fish house owners, he has no leverage, no coveted property to cash in on, only an old trawler nobody wants.

Shrimping boats aren't worth much anymore. In Sneads Ferry, the old ones rot and rust at warped docks.

Maybe, Smith says, when his shrimping days are done he'll turn Miss Lily into a yacht and take tourists out on the water he knows so well, show them the sights once reserved only for those who travel the sea.

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Gig Everett snatches a broken body from a pile of fresh shrimp and whips it in the direction of Conner, a chunky Irish setter who catches it in midair.

The day's orders have been delivered, Larry Smith — about the only shrimper left in town — has already come in and only a handful of retail customers have stopped by.

Entertaining Conner is all that's really left to do.

These early days of August are the slowest for fish houses that specialize in shrimp. Summer's brown shrimp have just about disappeared for the season, and fall's white shrimp

are still two weeks away.

Most of the shrimpers who dock here have stayed home to avoid the sharks or motored north to the Pamlico Sound, enticed by rumors of big catches.

Gig doesn't mind the quiet, though. Lately, he's reveled in it.

Gig is the fishing industry's middle man. It's his job to buy seafood from fishermen and peddle it to customers. It's an exasperating task in an industry that's choked with cheap imports.

Shrimpers, hurt by rising fuel costs and expensive boat repairs, want more money for their product. Commercial customers, able to buy a pound of imported shrimp for the price of a candy bar, want to pay less for what's caught in domestic waters.

"It's such an aggravating business," Gig says. "It's the same battle every day."

The idea of ending the aggravation and cashing in on their property continuously tempts Gig and his brother Tommy, though they know the consequences.

"A way of life is passing us by," said their cousin Kern Everett, a Sneads Ferry real estate agent.

When the fish houses are gone — and in North Carolina, 39 have disappeared in six years — they will take history with them. Shrimpers will grudgingly rent their own docks in other towns and peddle their product directly to customers — a task that amounts to having a second job.

Tourists and out-of-towners will move in, demanding more

than an old fishing town has to offer, and Sneads Ferry will eventually look like any other resort town on the Atlantic.

Just down the river from Everett's at Bowman's Seafood, where clammers do their business, John Bowman and his daughter, Donna, have vowed they will not sell, that Sneads Ferry will not change.

It's an honorable stance but, to hear Kern Everett tell it, a nearly impossible promise to keep.

Riverfront land, once available to anyone who wanted to live or work on it, is becoming too expensive to keep.

County taxes on such property jumped 400 percent in just a few years. New waterfront building regulations make it nearly impossible for business owners to repair existing structures and for anyone but developers to afford new construction.

The pollution caused by runoff is poisoning river water — where clams and oysters live — and will only get worse as construction erodes the shore.

In the midst of all this doom, real estate developers offer fish house owners what the fishing industry no longer can: financial security.

Sneads Ferry Seafood already bowed out of the business, taking an undisclosed amount of money — though most agree it was millions — for its riverfront property. It will soon be home to a luxury condominium complex. Next door at Millis Seafood, the asking price is \$6.2 million, and the rumor is it will fetch it.

At L.T. Everett and Sons, Gig and Tommy are painfully honest with their seafaring clients:

They will stay in the business as long as they can. But if the right offer comes along, they'll take it.

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In the silent still of an

August afternoon, long after the shrimpers have docked, Marion Norris begins his work, mending the damage the sharks have done.

He splays green nets across a swath of grass until they lie like the trains of wedding gowns and takes a seat under the shade of an ancient oak tree.

From here he can see the water he and his five brothers worked for 40 years.

Arthritis brought him to shore in 2003. It was both a blessing and a burden.

Gone are days of worrying about weather and haggling over the price of shrimp. But gone, too, are sunrises at sea and dolphins slipping through whitecaps.

Now, he spends his days repairing nets at Everett's for the young shrimpers who never learned how and wondering if the death of shrimping will steal that job away, too.

"Big wheels is what it is," Norris says, carefully threading a plastic needle and squinting against the sun. "Big industry is pushing little industry out."

He saw this coming. First, the government restricted shark fishing until the monsters multiplied and ripped into nets with infuriating frequency.

Then it signed NAFTA, opening the door for cheap imports. The price of shrimp dropped \$2 overnight.

Now, people who use the water for pleasure are pushing out the people who use it for business.

"I told my son if he got into (shrimping), I'd kill him," Norris says. "He turned out to be a carpenter, and I'm glad about that."

But the hollow in his voice says something more. It says there's pride in making a living from the water, satisfaction in being your own boss.

And there's sadness in believing that shrimp boats are just floating dinosaurs, sailing steadily toward extinction.

"Take a good look," Norris says, pointing his lit cigarette toward Everett's docks, where docked trawlers sway in the water.

"Give it another 10 years — shoot, another five years. You won't see any shrimp boats here."

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