

the Oyster Way

Written by Michael Graff

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TRAVIS DOVE

It's sometimes raw and sometimes steamed
and sometimes fried. It never moves. But it
always works. And we should be kinder to it.
The oyster is good to us.

Opposite page: An oyster reef sits just below the waterline near Jones Island in the White Oak River. Aside from relentlessly filtering the water, oyster reefs are a natural habitat for other sea creatures, and they also provide a profitable fishery and food source for humans, making them one of the most important species in the North Carolina sounds.





Down in the mud in the North Carolina sounds,

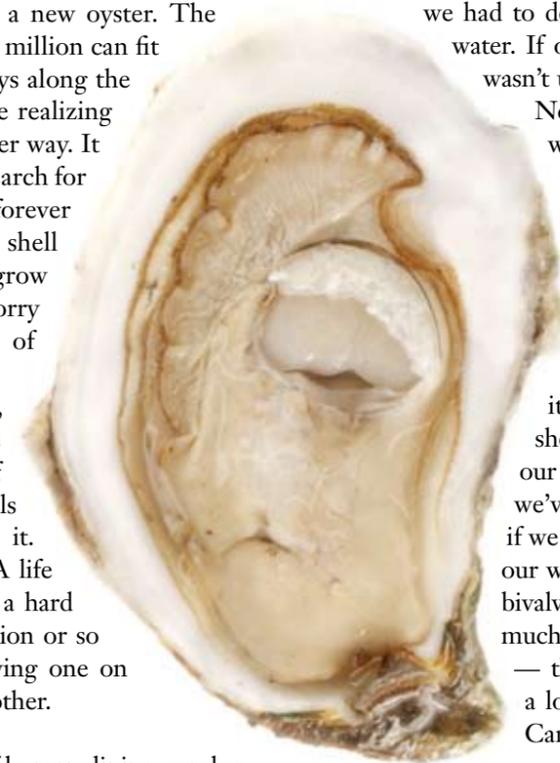
the oyster finds a home and sticks with it. It will never move, not even to do the one thing that makes just about any creature move — not even to mate. Each spring, when the water hits 68 degrees, and not a degree sooner, without even the slightest courtship effort, the male releases his sperm into the water, and the female releases her eggs, putting it all to chance that somewhere in the sea they will meet and make a new oyster. The offspring, larva so small that a million can fit in a cupped human hand, sways along the surface for a few weeks before realizing that floating just isn't the oyster way. It dives down to the bottom to search for something solid to stick to forever — preferably another oyster shell — where it will stay and grow and never again have to worry about the wild uncertainties of locomotion.

From that fixed spot, anything that happens in the oyster's life is the result of outside influence. Food falls to it. Predators nose around it. Storms wash its world away. A life of such permanence demands a hard shell. The oyster, for 520 million or so years, survived this way, growing one on top of the other on top of the other.

And then we came along.

Somewhere in the course of human dining, we dug our hands into the shallow water and grabbed the thing that couldn't swim away from us, and somehow we figured out a way to open it, and somehow we figured out this was good eating. Today, the oyster can shape a person's identity: Slurp one down on the docks, raw and dripping with saltwater, and some old man might tell you it'll put hair on your chest; eat one in the city, Rockefeller-style, and some old dame might rub her pearls in approval. More than any other seafood, the oyster shifts social status based on who's eating it and how, which is funny because the oyster is as it ever was.

When Europeans first reached North Carolina's shores, they reported seeing mountainous oyster reefs. They are no more. We overharvested. We polluted. It wasn't until the last couple of centuries that we learned the oyster's breeding process, wasn't until recently that we realized that all we had to do to keep the oyster population going was to give the young ones a hard spot to land. All we had to do was kick our shells back in the water. If only all recycling were so easy. It wasn't until recently that we realized our North Carolina sounds can't survive without the oyster.



An oyster has the ability to filter 50 gallons of water a day. It provides a habitat to serve and feed dozens of other sea creatures at the bottom of the food chain. When it joins together with other oysters, it makes a natural seawall for shorelines. It is the source of life in our water. It has given us far more than we've ever realized. And it will go away if we keep taking. Some people around our waters are now standing up for the bivalve mollusk that has given them so much. If we save the *Crassostrea virginica* — the Eastern oyster — we've gone a long way toward saving the North Carolina sounds.

WATER PEOPLE BECOME WATER PEOPLE because of the water people who came before them. Even now, when people transplant themselves anywhere, it's rare for an inland soul to uproot and take a career at sea. It seems almost anyone who's ever set a pound net in Core Sound, checked an oyster reef in Bogue Sound, or pulled a crab pot from Pamlico Sound, had it born in them.

Todd Miller is the founder of the North Carolina Coastal Federation, which makes him the man behind the organization that's saving our sounds one oyster at a time, and he's here because of his dad. In the 1940s,

When Todd Miller founded the North Carolina Coastal Federation 28 years ago, he took a stand for our fragile estuaries. As a result, the water is healthier and spots like Bear Island (opposite) remain places with a view.



Coastal Education Coordinator Sarah Phillips (left) places bags of oyster shells along the edge of Jones Island in the White Oak River, a tidal estuary that feeds Bogue Sound. Since the Coastal Federation started its oyster initiative in 1998, workers have dropped more than 70,000 bushels of shells in North Carolina's seven inland sounds.

Miller's father moved from Baltimore, Maryland, to the town of Ocean in Carteret County, and he took a job at Wallace Menhaden Products in Morehead City. He came down by boat on the Intracoastal Waterway.

"People here are very connected to the water," Miller says. "It's not just a backdrop."

Menhaden fish were the tobacco of the sea. They fueled an economy for decades. Watermen caught them in boatloads to take them to the factory, where workers turned the fish into products. Like tobacco, menhaden was never eaten, it had a smell that traveled miles, and the industry eventually crumbled.

For years, though, it supported families like Miller's. His dad was a chemist who worked on ways to use the fish for poultry feed. Out in back of their house along Bogue Sound, Miller's dad had a laboratory where he raised chickens to see which blend of fish food helped them grow the fastest.

Miller grew up with three older sisters and no brothers, and he loved the water so much he had a boat built for himself when he was 14. He remembers his oldest sister telling him about a time when she could sit in the family backyard, look across Bogue Sound, and count 13 lights from houses along Emerald Isle.

In 1971, when Miller was in high school, the state built a bridge connecting Cedar Point and Emerald Isle. And more lights went up. Now, Emerald Isle is one of the busiest vacation spots in the state.

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Miller earned his undergraduate degree in environmental studies, then went back for a master's in city and regional planning. He always knew he wanted to come home to the water to work. Around Thanksgiving in 1982, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation gave him a grant to start the North Carolina Coastal Federation, hoping to preserve the state's wetlands and sounds.

Soon, he floated back to Ocean, and he bought the family home from his dad. He got married and had two sons, and he planted his family in the same place where his father started it.

ALONG THE WESTERN BANKS OF BOGUE Sound, just south of where he grew up, Miller pulls his boat up to a fishing pier at Swansboro. On the back of his shirt is a slogan: "No Wetlands, No Seafood." It's the motto of the North Carolina Coastal Federation, and it proves a point: People want their seafood, but what are they willing to do for it?



Ted Wilgis, the North Carolina Coastal Federation's education coordinator, spends many of his days walking through water, monitoring the health of oyster beds and the North Carolina sounds.

Aboard hops Ted Wilgis, the Coastal Federation's coastal education coordinator and the man Miller hired to know oysters better than anyone. Their plan for the day is simple: They want to check on their oysters.

Since the Coastal Federation developed its oyster initiative in 1998, Miller and his crew have planted 70,000 bushels of oyster shells in dozens of locations throughout North Carolina's sounds. They know that every oyster shell they put back into the water gives the larvae another place to live. Their efforts have created statewide awareness.

The North Carolina Oyster Shell Recycling Program, established by the Legislature in 2003, resulted in oyster-shell drop-offs at 126 public recycling sites, spread out across 23 counties. The locations have pulled in more than 110,000 bushels of shells. Each shell is the potential start of something.

"It's amazing to me that you can put oysters out in the water and more oysters will colonize on them and make a reef," Wilgis says. "Every time I'm on a reef, I feel that."

Miller and Wilgis are looking at reefs in the southern sounds today, from Swansboro through Camp Lejeune to Sneads Ferry to Morris Landing, about 40 miles

away. They'd considered driving a car to some of the reefs. But when Wilgis climbs on the boat, Miller presents a new plan.

"I had an idea," Miller says.

"You want to go down by water, don't you?" Wilgis says.

"Yep."

Miller and Wilgis always choose the water.

AN OYSTER REEF ISN'T MUCH TO LOOK AT.

One shell on top of another on top of another. A rock pile that never moves.

Wilgis sees more. He earned a degree in zoology from Connecticut College and worked for several years at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. He came here because he realized he had more to work with, realized that the sounds were in better shape than the bay.

He spends enough time in the water to prove it.

In Everett Bay, just off of Stump Sound on the western side of Topsail Beach, Wilgis jumps overboard in his tennis shoes. Everett Bay stretches a mile wide but drops only about three feet. Walking waist-deep in water, Wilgis stuffs his hand below the surface and pulls out whatever he can find. He points to a blotch on a shell



that's part of an oyster comb. "That's a spat," he says. "A baby oyster."

He wears the same shirt: "No Wetlands, No Seafood." A flounder squirts out from beneath his feet. He jumps back a little, and he pulls out another glob of mud and oysters and other things that live at the bottom. A shrimp flaps around. Worm tubes, sea squirts, and barnacles all live in the oyster comb.

"It's kind of like walking across a desert and coming to an oasis," Wilgis says. "The oyster reef is that oasis."

The oyster population in North Carolina is down 50 percent from the late 1800s, but, because of the work of the Coastal Federation and the state, things are improving. In North Carolina, the oyster supports a crab and finfish population that brings in about \$67 million every year.

The oyster is vital to the health of so much of our seafood. To prove his point, Wilgis produced a time-

Top: From the Emerald Isle Bridge, the view of Bogue Sound reveals its most important resource — the wetlands.

Left: With the help of people like Ted Wilgis, the Coastal Federation's oyster expert, more oyster shells are making their way into the water and more baby oysters have a place to grow.

lapse video that shows an oyster dropped into a tank of dirty water and how, within an hour, the water is clear.

"You can talk to people about the water quality all you want, and they'll never listen," Wilgis says. "But you talk about oysters, and they say, 'Oh, I've eaten oysters.'"

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT TO THE REST OF the oysters in North Carolina, the best might come from J&B AquaFood in Holly Ridge. Here, on the banks of Stump Sound, Jim and Bonnie Swartzenberg have been raising oysters in Bonnie's family's water for 17 years.

Here's a testament to the quality: On an afternoon this summer, the health inspector pulls up to the Swartzenbergs' landing. He checks over the operation, and Jim asks, "Did I pass?"

"You always pass," the health inspector says. "I'll be back in a few weeks to buy some for myself."

Even the health inspector eats oysters from here. He's not the only one. Walter Cronkite ate them, too. And

J&B AquaFood is part of the reason Wilgis says Stump Sound "grows the Cadillac of oysters."

Jim Swartzenberg served 22 years in the United States Marine Corps and then worked as an English teacher before retiring to work the water. Bonnie is a retired social worker. And they're about the happiest people you'll ever meet. They wear matching floppy hats, mud down their shirts, and they talk through permanent smiles and squints that have been burned into their faces by life in the sun. Jim drives a truck with a license plate that reads, "OYSTER."

Breeding oysters is like breeding cattle. The Swartzenbergs buy baby oysters from a hatchery, a million larvae fitting in their hands, and they put them into tanks filled with oyster shells. Once the oysters set and become spat — it usually takes a few weeks, with Jim and Bonnie monitoring every day — the Swartzenbergs take the shells into the water and lay them down.

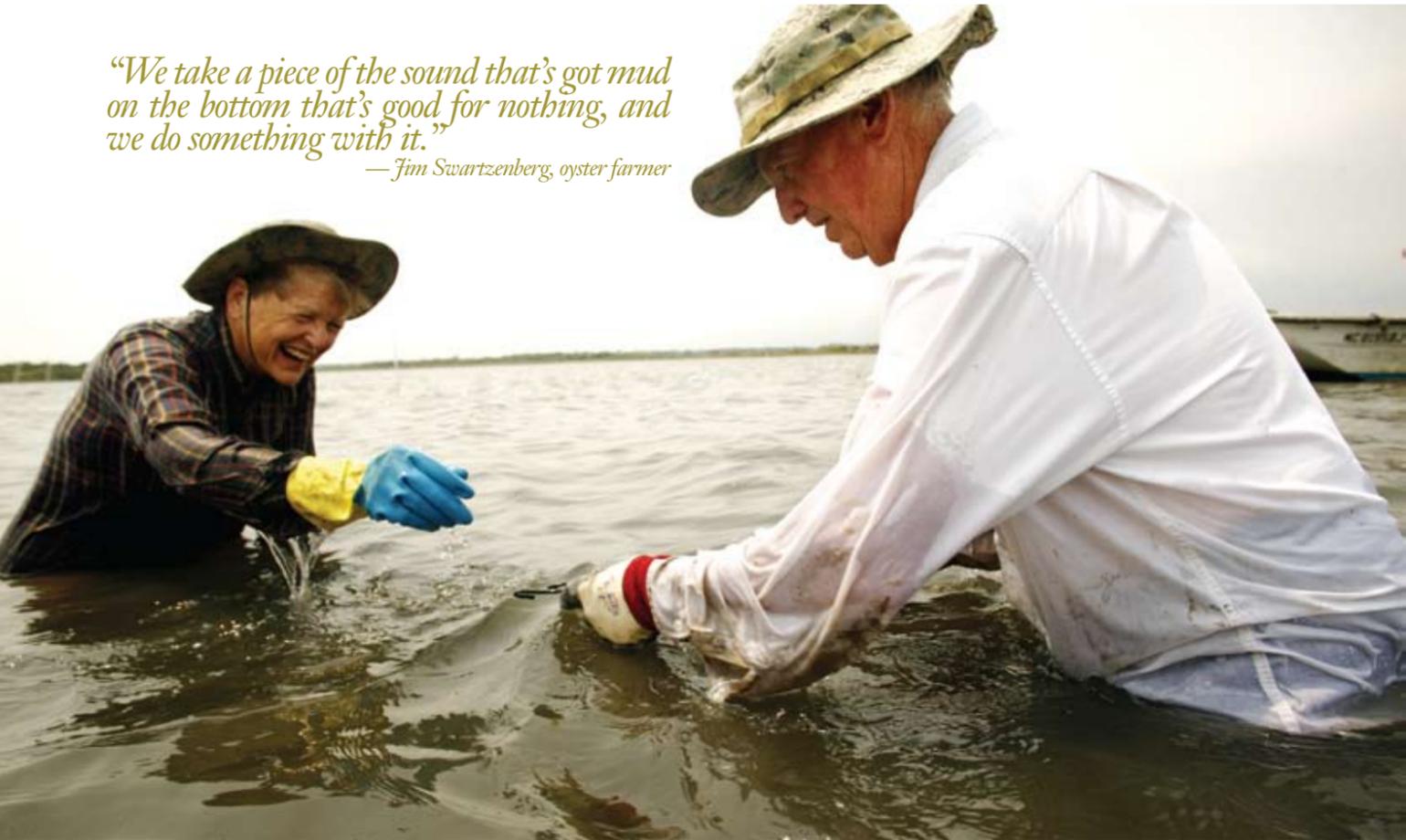
The Swartzenbergs work about 100 acres of water

"It's kind of like walking across a desert and coming to an oasis. The oyster reef is that oasis."

— Ted Wilgis, the Coastal Federation's coastal education coordinator

“We take a piece of the sound that’s got mud on the bottom that’s good for nothing, and we do something with it.”

— Jim Swartzenberg, oyster farmer



Jim and Bonnie Swartzenberg cultivate and harvest oysters in Stump Sound, farming the same waters where Bonnie’s parents and grandparents began harvesting oysters more than a half-century ago.

in Stump Sound. They time their crops so that there’s always something to harvest. They’re oyster farmers. “We take a piece of the sound that’s got mud on the bottom that’s good for nothing,” Jim says, “and we do something with it.”

Bonnie’s family has been here for generations. Her grandparents owned farmland along the sound, and her parents purchased the farmland in the 1940s. They harvested tobacco and raised pigs, and they also harvested oysters and clams. Land or water, they always worked, and always worked together.

One May morning 15 years ago, Bonnie and Jim took their small skiff out with Bonnie’s father to pull some oysters from the water. They had the boat loaded down with bushel basket upon bushel basket, ready to sell, when a 50-foot yacht came cruising past, causing a rush of waves. Their skiff took on water, then sank. Bonnie and Jim survived the accident. But Bonnie’s father, 87 years old, a World War II veteran and a lifelong waterman, died.

The Swartzenbergs never thought about stopping, though. In fact, Bonnie’s mother, now 87, still goes out to help.

“We just keep doing it,” Jim says.

This year, they have their best crop ever, working

the same water where Bonnie’s dad died, harvesting the coveted oyster, which grows best on top of the ones that came before it.

THE NORTH CAROLINA SOUNDS RANGE from extremely salty to mostly fresh, depending on how close you are to the Outer Banks inlets. In those places, like Bogue Inlet or Ocracoke Inlet, North Carolina welcomes the world’s water. The Atlantic Ocean blitzes through the openings, seawater marching under the orders of the moon, only to encounter an equally seasoned onrusher, freshwater, born as a trickle and transported by way of rivers that unreel for hundreds of miles, gaining reinforcements at each turn. Their clash ends civilly, though, in a place called an estuary, where they come together politely, saltwater on the bottom, freshwater on top, density working as their double-yellow line.

The oyster requires this environment to survive. “It needs that mix,” Wilgis says.

And that mix is here, in our estuaries. The Albemarle-Pamlico estuary system, which encompasses seven sounds, is the second-largest estuary in the continental United States, behind the Chesapeake, and it has been labeled an estuary of national significance. The rivers

that drain into it cover more than 30,000 square miles.

If you stretched out all of North Carolina’s sound shorelines, they would reach roughly 5,000 miles, farther than the distance from Raleigh to Honolulu, Hawaii.

It’s a big job, and there’s no way one person can cover it all. It takes people on top of people on top of people to save the immovable oyster.

JAMES BARRIE GASKILL IS 68 YEARS OLD with snow-white hair that waves on his head like sea grass and a mustache that reaches his chin on both sides. And he knows the water better than anyone.



PHOTOGRAPHY (THIS PAGE) BY LISSA GOTWALS

Ocracoke’s James Barrie Gaskill knows the waters as well as anyone. He harvests clams (above) and crabs, and he comes from a line of oystermen.

Gaskill is an Ocracoke native, a born waterman, and his accent verifies it.

“We’re heading to ‘Oak-ra-Coke, roight?’” he says, hitting every hard sound like a hammer and pushing an o- in front of every i-. “You moight get a little wet.”

Gaskill pulls his Carolina Skiff off the shores of Cedar Island and starts into Core Sound, heading home to Ocracoke, some 20 miles away.

He skirts past an empty island in the middle of nowhere. Nobody lives there now, nobody will live there in the future, and, just from the looks of it, nobody in their right mind would have ever lived there.

“That’s Hog Island,” he says. “My grandfather was born there.”

Gaskill comes from that kind of blood. In March 1956, that grandfather went to plant oysters out in the Core Sound, and his boat turned over. They never found his body, lost in the water.

Gaskill’s mother moved from Hog Island to Ocracoke when she grew up, and she married a Gaskill, one of those old-time Ocracoke last names of families that have been here forever.

Gaskill went to East Carolina University, graduated, and became a teacher. That job lasted four years. Then he came home to be a waterman. He now harvests clams and works crab pots. But not oysters, not anymore. “It’s harder to raise,” he says. “You might have a nice oyster reef, and a hurricane comes and covers it up with sand, and you’ve lost it.”

But he knows oysters, and he knows this water. He’s a board member with the Coastal Federation, and he works with Miller and Wilgis and knows the Swartzenbergs like family. When called to work, he’ll help set an oyster reef anywhere. He knows how important they are. It’s born in him.

Eight miles out from Cedar Island, Gaskill scans Core Sound in his skiff and stops. For miles, the water stretches in every direction. It looks, well, flat. And it looks like it should be deep. But it’s neither.

“You think it’s all the same, but it’s not,” he says. “It’s low toide now, and roight here, it’s probably 6 to 8 feet deep.”

Gaskill takes an oar and shoves it into what, to any other person, would seem like a random spot in the water. The oar bounces off the bottom. Gaskill pulls it out and holds it up to his side. The watermark is even with the top of his hair.

“Yep,” he says. “Six feet.”

The North Carolina sounds, which are the perfect place for oysters, which are the perfect sea creatures, don't look like much. Just water on top of water on top of water.

But the people who know this water see more. They see what's underneath. They see it for all of its depth.

Gaskill takes the skiff up to Portsmouth Island, another piece of land that once was home to people, but now is uninhabited. He pulls himself up on the wooden dock. He has a piece of property here; he and his wife signed for it thinking they might come and sit to get away from the crowds at Ocracoke, which is just across the water.

When he's driving his boat, Gaskill wears rubber coverall slickers, strapped and hanging from his shoulders, and down over top of his pants. The coveralls are as white as his hair and speckled with mud, some of it years old. After he pulls himself onto the pier at Portsmouth, he slips out of the slickers but leaves his rubber boots on. They click softly on the boards.

Walking on the pier on top of the water, he comes upon an oyster shell. Somehow, it was pulled from the water and left up here. Without a word, Gaskill pulls back his boot and softly kicks the shell over the side. It is the most simple and effortless act, but one that, repeated over and over and over, might be the start of something bigger.

The shell plunks when it hits the water, then drops to the bottom, settling into its place in the mud. 🌊

Michael Graff is the associate editor of Our State magazine. His most recent stories were “Shrimp” and “U.S. Highway 64 East” (July 2011).



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