

Columbia has no shortage of eye-catching scenery, from the ❶ cypress trees poking out of the Scuppernon River, to the ❷ crabs hiding in the sounds, a ❸ neon-lit cultural museum, and ❹ storytellers so entertaining they've won statewide awards for their gift of gab.

TAR HEEL TOWN

Columbia

It's easy to miss this quiet town on the way to the beach. But when you stop, the colorful characters who bend your ear make you quite thankful you did.

BY MICHAEL GRAFF | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TRAVIS DOVE

DRIVING TO THE BEACH, Columbia is the geographic equivalent of the 4 a.m. hour, idly positioned in the space just before most of us wake up. The town is on the eastern wrist of U.S. Highway 64, two hours east of Raleigh and an hour east of Interstate 95, yet 40 miles short of the beach. It is in the blank. For most of the more than 1 million cars that pass through here every year on their way to the Outer Banks, Columbia is the snooze button: Wake us up when we get there.

It is the last town before you reach the Alligator River, although alligator sightings are rare. The area surrounding it is the only place in the country where you can find red wolves still roaming in the wild, although the man who runs the wildlife center has only seen three there. For years, the most celebrated time of the year was spring, when the red herring charged down the Scuppernon River in millions, pushing a wave in front of them, meeting their end in local fishermen's nets and selling for a penny a pound. Today the herring is an endangered species.

Columbia is the only town in Tyrrell County, the least populated of all of North Carolina's 100 counties. Nearly 9 out of every 10 acres is protected for wildlife. A full 40 percent of all traffic accidents in this county are caused by animals in the roadway. The area sits low, at sea level, and weather affects more change than people. A wildfire in 2008 singed the tops of the loblolly pines. Last August,

Hurricane Irene lifted the Scuppernon River five feet, flooding everything downtown, including the increasingly recognizable arts school. The townspeople shrugged and wrung themselves out, tipping their hats to nature.

Today the water has receded, businesses are reopened, and you would never notice that a flood occurred here, especially if there's a good song on the radio when you drive on through.

If only you'd stop.

If only you'd take a moment to consider the things you pass on the way to someplace else. To know the people you brush past. To learn about the things in your periphery. To consider people like the man you might meet one night in Columbia, a man talking to a catfish.

He is fishing on the Scuppernon. It is 7:30 p.m., and as the sun sets, violet stretches out above him and the frogs begin to sing behind him. His name is Wendell Fenner, you learn, and despite the fact that he is talking to a fish, he is far from crazy.

Fenner grew up in Columbia. His mom taught school, and his dad worked in the timber business. Fenner attended high school during segregation, and he graduated from the black high school in town in 1966. He went on to North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro and then moved north to become an environmental engineer. He's retired now and living in New Jersey, but he's in town for

Wendell Fenner's love for Columbia matches his ardor for the catfish he hooks in the Scuppernong River. "What are you doing here?" he asks one before throwing it back. "It's past your bedtime."





Columbia remains the lone town in Tyrrell County, sitting calmly off U.S. Highway 64, one of two routes to the Outer Banks.

a family reunion when you meet him. About 150 people from the Fenner bloodline attend the reunion every year on the old homestead, 150 people who love coming back here. When you meet him, Fenner has his right hand down a catfish's throat. The fish swallowed the hook into its belly. Fenner can't retrieve the hook, and it breaks. Fenner gently drops the fish back in the river and hopes it lives.

"It's a shame to like to fish and to hate to hurt the fish," Fenner says.

For 30 minutes, Fenner stands and fishes while you sit on the bench behind him, the U.S. Highway 64 bridge in the distance. He's a conservative fisherman, using only half a worm each time he baits the hook. He is one of several people still fishing in the dark, trying to pull something from the oil-colored Scuppernong.

He tells you that his senior class had 26 students. No football team. He had to beg people to play basketball. He remembers when the first stoplight was installed. But he has no ax for his small-town upbringing.

"Oh," he says, "this is a great place."

Columbia was a singular town for many years — one doctor, one lawyer, one pharmacy, one main road.

Just then his bobber vanishes under the water. Another bite. Another catfish. This time a baby.

"What are you doing here?" Fenner asks the little catfish dangling from the end of his line. "It's past your bedtime."

Then without much warning Fenner simply says he is done. He packs his gear and walks a path in the woods to his car, a gentle and quiet man leaving the river as he'd found it.

The frogs sing louder. The only other noises are made by the cars passing on by, crossing the Scuppernong on the bridge, a continuous flow of people on their way to the beach, plunking on the expansion joints — *da-dum, da-dum, da-dum* — never knowing that on the shoreline below them an engineer has been talking to the catfish.

Bears, wolves, and people

When you pass through Columbia, downtown is on the north side of the road, and on the south side is woodland, miles and miles and miles of woodland. Everything else is water.

The Scuppernong River — an offshoot of the Albemarle Sound, located just five miles north — is dark and acidic because of the tannins released from the surrounding soils. Despite its appearance it is far cleaner than most clear rivers. The Scuppernong is the only reason the town is here. It is a deep river, 25 feet in spots, and it allowed for massive freight vessels to come through during the 19th and 20th centuries. One of those, a 112-foot steamer named the *Estelle Randall*, caught fire and sank just off the dock downtown in 1910. It still sits there in the black water.



1 The Scuppernon River Interpretive Boardwalk is a favorite among locals, as is the **2** Vineyards on the Scuppernon, housed in a restored fire station. They're also proud of the **3** Pocosin Lakes Wildlife Refuge, **4** where the world's only wild red wolves roam.

The county was founded in the 1700s and named for Sir John Tyrrell, one of the Lords Proprietors. At the time, the county included land from Roanoke Island to Tarboro. As Tyrrell County was downsized, Columbia (founded in 1793) became the lone remaining town and, thus, the county seat. Today almost anybody from Tyrrell County also considers himself to be from Columbia.

Columbia was a singular town for

many years — one doctor, one lawyer, one pharmacy, one main road. But in the late 1990s, the state built a new, four-lane section of U.S. Highway 64. For a few years two bridges led into town — the old bridge that came into Main Street and the current bridge that still serves as the main passageway. The old bridge was torn down about a decade ago, and the new road is all that remains.

That road is as important to

Columbia as the river now; Highway 64 is one of only two roads to the Outer Banks, serving most of the traffic that comes from the west and south. Columbia has made various attempts to steer some of the traffic into town. The Pocosin Arts Folk School is a well-respected school, centering on projects that incorporate local culture and nature. And a few restaurants, including Flemz and Columbia Crossing, are

5 THINGS NOT TO MISS IN COLUMBIA

1. Scuppernong Millhouse Bakery and Café

With a few chairs outside on Main Street just down from the water and tables situated among local artwork on the inside, every seat is pleasant at this well-known local spot. The menu has daily specials, and each meal comes with a cookie. **201-B Main Street. (252) 796-9600**



2. The Brickhouse Inn

If you go to a town and it has only one place to stay, you want it to be like this. The Brickhouse is a refinished 1890s-era home with a porch that wraps around and cookies that stay out all day. A country-style breakfast every morning helps the Brickhouse achieve something all bed and breakfasts try to

do: make you feel at home. **415 Main Street. (252) 766-3333. thebrickhouseinn.com.**

3. Vineyards on the Scuppernong

Jack and Grace Bishop bought a 300-acre farm on the west side of the Scuppernong River in 2002 with plans to build a housing development on it. They loved the view so much they stayed and put a winery here instead. Winemaker Tom Payette makes an assortment of award-winning wines using muscadine grapes. **117 Elm Street. (252) 796-4727. vineyardsonthescuppernong.com.**



4. Pocosin Arts Folk School

Although the building flooded during Hurricane Irene, the school remains open with much of the work moved upstairs. The school focuses on artwork that connects local culture and customs with the natural environment that surrounds and shapes Columbia.

Classes are offered throughout the year. **201 Main Street. (252) 796-2787. pocosinarts.org.**

5. Columbia Theater Cultural Resources Center

Housed in an old movie theater and operated by the Partnership for the Sounds, this center is a walking museum that tells the story of the area with artifacts such as old oyster openers and popcorn machines. A moving, talking mannequin named Hunter Jim tells the story of the wildlife here, and the voice behind the man is local folklorist Walter Davenport. **304 Main Street. (252) 796-1000. partnershipforthesounds.org.**



good for eating quick bites among locals. The biggest draw is a winery, Vineyards on the Scuppernong, which sprang up in 2008 on the north side of 64. The owners of the vineyards put a sign on the side of the building this year, “Winery,” and business has doubled. Across the highway, the Pocosin Wildlife Refuge and Columbia Visitors Center provide maps of some of the more than 70 miles of unmarked gravel roads in the wilderness that are open to the public. The Partnership for the Sounds, an organization that helps promote this rural area, runs the visitors center.

That partnership is devoted to a section of the state few people know — the Albemarle-Pamlico Peninsula, a swampy expanse caught between two sounds. The Pamlico Sound to the east and south is, by its proximity to the ocean, dense with salt water. The Albemarle is more concentrated with freshwater. Together the two sounds and their tributaries produce 90 percent of the state’s seafood crop and form the second-largest estuary in the country.

The region’s black bear population is one of the densest (nearly three per square mile) in the country and in recorded scientific literature, says Howard Phillips, refuge manager of the Pocosin Lakes Wildlife Refuge.” Two endearing animals — the red wolf and the red-cockaded woodpecker — are protected species. When it rains, frogs cover the roadways. On sunny days, your car is likely to approach a walking quail or dove or wild turkey, only to watch them take flight to avoid being flattened.

This landscape is one of the most diversely populated in the state, human or otherwise.



The food of Mike’s Kitchen brings smiles to residents’ faces. Owner Mike Lam has lived around the world and recommends the salt herring.

A herring story

A man from Hong Kong owns a restaurant in Columbia named Mike’s Kitchen. Mike Lam wanted to name it after his wife — the love of his life, the mother of his four children — but she said no.

Crabs are so plentiful in the local sounds that Columbia even helps supply Maryland, keeping Dennis Foreman plenty busy dropping traps.



“Because if it’s not good,” she told him, “then it’ll be your name on it.”

Lam grew up in Hong Kong. His wife, Jennifer, grew up in a port town in China. They both remember eating fish for breakfast. One of those fish was herring, and it was served with a potato side that looked like grits.

Lam’s dad moved his family to

Kansas when Lam was 10. Lam moved to the Outer Banks after high school and owned a Chinese restaurant there for 25 years. In 1990, Lam visited family in China. He met Jennifer on the trip. He spent three days with her and proposed marriage. He came back to the United States, acquired a visa for her, and they married on the

beach six months later.

They ran the Chinese restaurant together and started a family. Lam then sold real estate for eight years. But in 2008, they grew tired of the ocean and decided to migrate 40 miles inland to this town along the Scuppernon River and the highway that led to the beaches where they’d once made their home.

“The sounds are so much prettier,” Lam says. Point being, they’d lived around the world but decided to stop in Columbia.

When they moved here, Lam felt right at home. A generation ago, most Tyrrell County locals ate herring, back when the fish wasn’t an endangered species here. Lam remembered it from his childhood, too. So he sought herring from other states and now has regular shipments coming in aboard trucks that turn off Highway 64. On a menu of mostly fresh seafood, the salt herring dish with stewed potatoes is the one off-the-menu item that you can’t taste unless you know to ask.

“That’s the tradition here,” Lam says.

Lam speaks fluent English — he even pronounces Tyrrell County correctly (Terrell) — but he talks with a bit of a whistle. He explains: He doesn’t like picking steamed crabs, so he bites into them instead, shell and all, and he’s broken a few teeth that way. He’ll have implants installed soon. For all the traditions he embraces, for all the local boards of directors he serves on, Lam still can’t do the one thing Columbia does better than just about any place in the world: pick crabs.

A nose for crabs

Clear on the opposite end of Main Street from Mike’s Kitchen — less than a half-mile away — sits the largest crab-packing operation on the East Coast.

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Captain Neill's Seafood takes in, on average, 30,000 pounds of crabs every day from local boats during the peak season. That's 15 tons of sea scavengers removed daily from the bottom of the Albemarle and Pamlico sounds and the Alligator River. That many crabs equates to about 3,000 pounds of fresh crab meat, which Captain Neill's packages and sells to many distributors, Costco and Sam's Club among them.

The owner is a man named Phillip Carawan, and he dresses like he doesn't own a thing. He talks in the brogue of eastern North Carolina and trails off on his words with high-pitched exits. He grew up on the water. If you dumped a pound of imported crab meat and a pound of local crab meat onto a table and mixed it together, Carawan could separate every piece just by looking at it. When his industrial steamer is fired up to cook his own crabs from the area sounds and rivers, Carawan can tell you which body of water yielded the batch just by smell.

They love Columbia like it's the last town on Earth.

He started this business in 1982 only because his brothers started similar businesses. Dozens of crab-packing houses were open in the area then. Somewhere in the course of the past 30 years, though, the competition fell, and Carawan took off.

His business is so big now that he supplies some of the Maryland crab industry. Carawan sends truckloads



Captain Neill's owner ❶ Phillip Carawan (right) can tell a lot about a crab just by smelling it, and ❷ Ray (left) and Walter Davenport can tell one heck of a story.

of live crabs to Baltimore every week to supplement the Chesapeake Bay crabbers, who can't keep up with their population's demands. Restaurants in Baltimore buy Carawan's crabs by the bushel, and then cook them and sell them to customers at marked-up rates — meaning that when North Carolina crabs become "Maryland" crabs,

they become far more valuable, not because of where they were caught, but because of where they are eaten.

Captain Neill's is an impressive operation. Most crabs weigh about a pound, so on an average day the company picks 30,000 crabs. The shells come off in a concrete-floored room with stainless steel tables.



Calvin Liverman might be 94, but he's still got some crab picking left in him.

In this room are 135 workers, mostly Hispanic women here on nonimmigrant visas, who can pick one hard-shell crab in 15 seconds then move on to the next. Spanish music blasts throughout the picking room, and everybody's smiling. There's one anomaly among the pickers — a 94-year-old black man named Calvin Liverman. He's a local, and he's worked here since 1985. And every Friday he asks Carawan if he can work Saturday.

"If you work for someone who treats you right," Liverman says, "you like working."

Maybe that's how Carawan's business prospered above the rest — he treats people right. Or maybe it's because of another, more deep-rooted drive.

Captain Neill's is named for Neill Carawan, Phillip's first child, who died in 1981 at the age of 7. For the past 30 years, Neill's father has worked 12 hours a day, wearing dirty jeans and a ball cap, to build a business in his son's name. Now that business is so big it supplies not only Costco and Sam's Club, but also the state of Maryland with crabs — all from a spot three blocks north of U.S. Highway 64 as you head to the beach.

Stories and stuff

In 2007 the North Carolina Arts Council honored two Columbia men, Walter and Ray Davenport,

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with the North Carolina Heritage Award, given each year to the state's most eminent folk artists, for storytelling. Walter and Ray are brothers who are talkers in the best possible way, and they are as wild as the area they live in. They love Columbia like it's the last town on Earth, and when they went to Raleigh to receive

their award, it was a big trip.

They're in their 70s, and they've lived here forever. It's a safe assumption that they've only ever eaten a handful of suppers that didn't include something they grew or killed or raised or caught. Their lives move depending on what's in season. They hunt bear and deer. When they were boys they went out

into the sound and set nine pound nets in one day. When they were in their 20s, they caught and delivered 30,000 pounds of herring from one net on opening day of the season, just the two of them. "And then we went and chased girls," Walter says.

They know everything about the root systems of the lowland trees that hold still in the dirt here and everything about the moving patterns of the animals that roam. Walter knows the depth of the water without even sticking a stick below the surface. One spot where the sound and river meet is particularly deep because "as the sound gets narrower, the water runs harder, and that means it gets deeper," Walter says.

They also like things from the human world. They wake up every morning and drive around. When they see something they like in a yard — a hunk of scrap metal, an old John Deere lawn tractor — they pull over and knock on the door and make an offer. Near a cornfield in the yard between their homes stand a half-dozen sheds covering the most incredible hoard of things they've bought on their early morning drives. Rusted iron. Car batteries. Tires. Washing machines. Tractors. A boat hull. A full boat. To them, it's not junk.

They turned the iron and wood into a trailer that holds crab pots, for instance. You quickly get the feeling they've never seen anything broken that they didn't think they could fix.

Walter takes you through this heap of stuff one afternoon. Within a few minutes, you hear three gunshots from a .22-caliber rifle from across the cornfield back in the direction of Ray's house. "Don't pay no attention to it," Walter tells you unalarmed. "He's all the time shooting something down there."

Minutes later, you hear a truck start up near where the gunshots sounded. A gray Ford F-150 pulls around the bend and parks in the yard. Ray hops out. "I kept hearing someone over this way talking, and I had to come see what was going on," Ray says.

You ask Ray what he was shooting. "Terrapins."

Terrapins?

"Yeah, they were eating my tomatoes and cantaloupes." Ray is sweating, and his button-down shirt is wide open. Walter has dirt all over him from working in the field and on the water. They laugh. They laugh at everything. They are in love with this life this town gave them. When Walter tells you goodbye, he says, "If y'all come back this way, look me up. I ain't goin' nowhere, unless they pin my toes together."

That seems about right. For so many other people and creatures here, like the man talking to a catfish against a soundtrack of frogs and everyone else's *da-dums* as they pass by, there is no separating from

this place even if they move to Jersey.

This affection makes you want to stay a while longer. So you do. And that's why on a quiet evening around supper time, as the sun begins to set over the cornfield, after the terrapins are killed and the tomatoes are saved, you find yourself stopped in a yard

of junk in Columbia while two wild brothers in their 70s tell stories about all the things they found on the side of the road. 🐢

Michael Graff is the writer-at-large for Our State magazine. His most recent story was "What's It Worth?" (October 2012).



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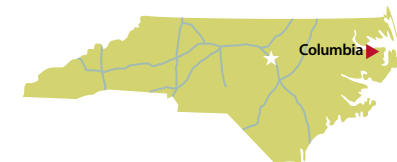
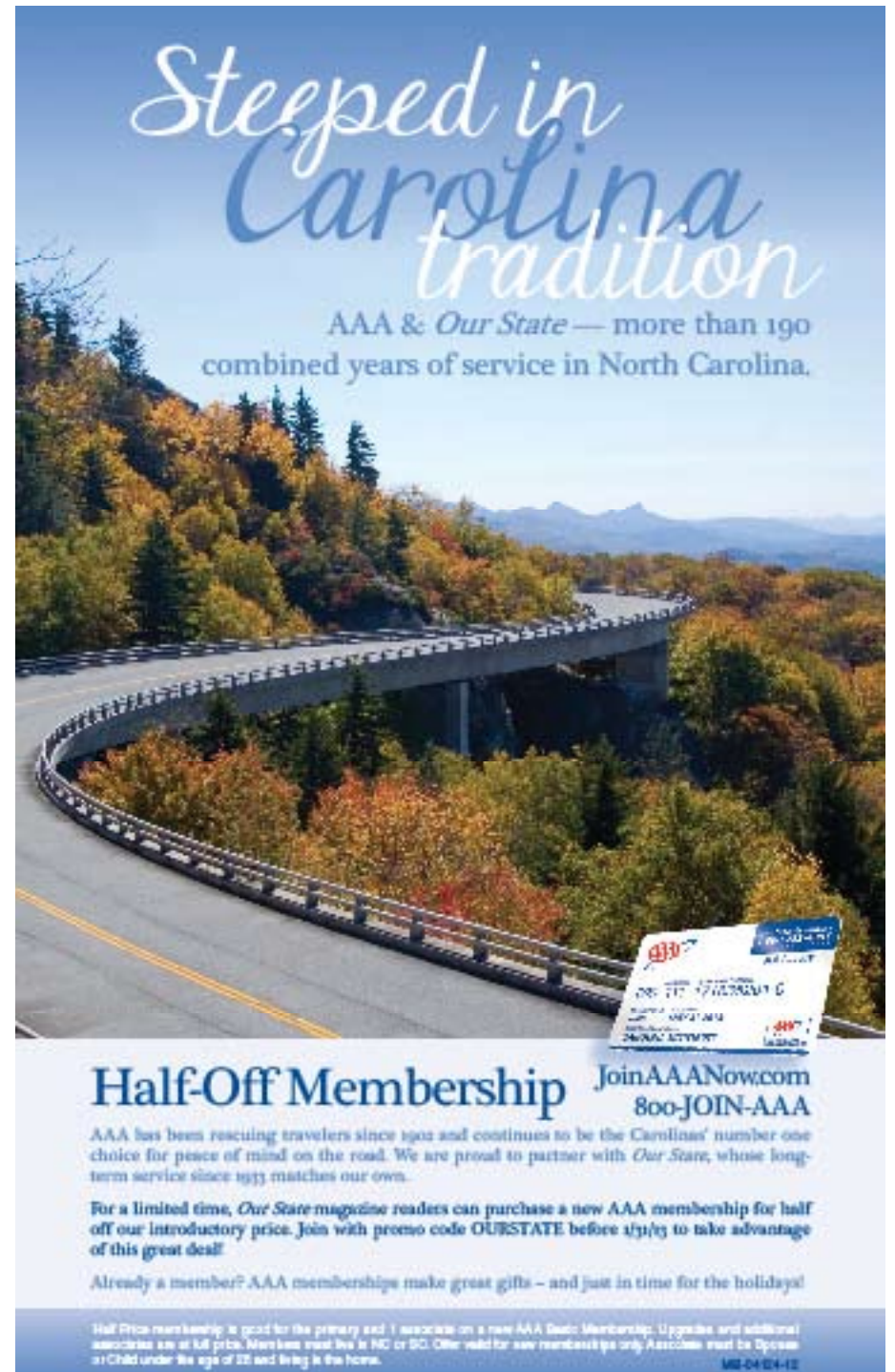
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