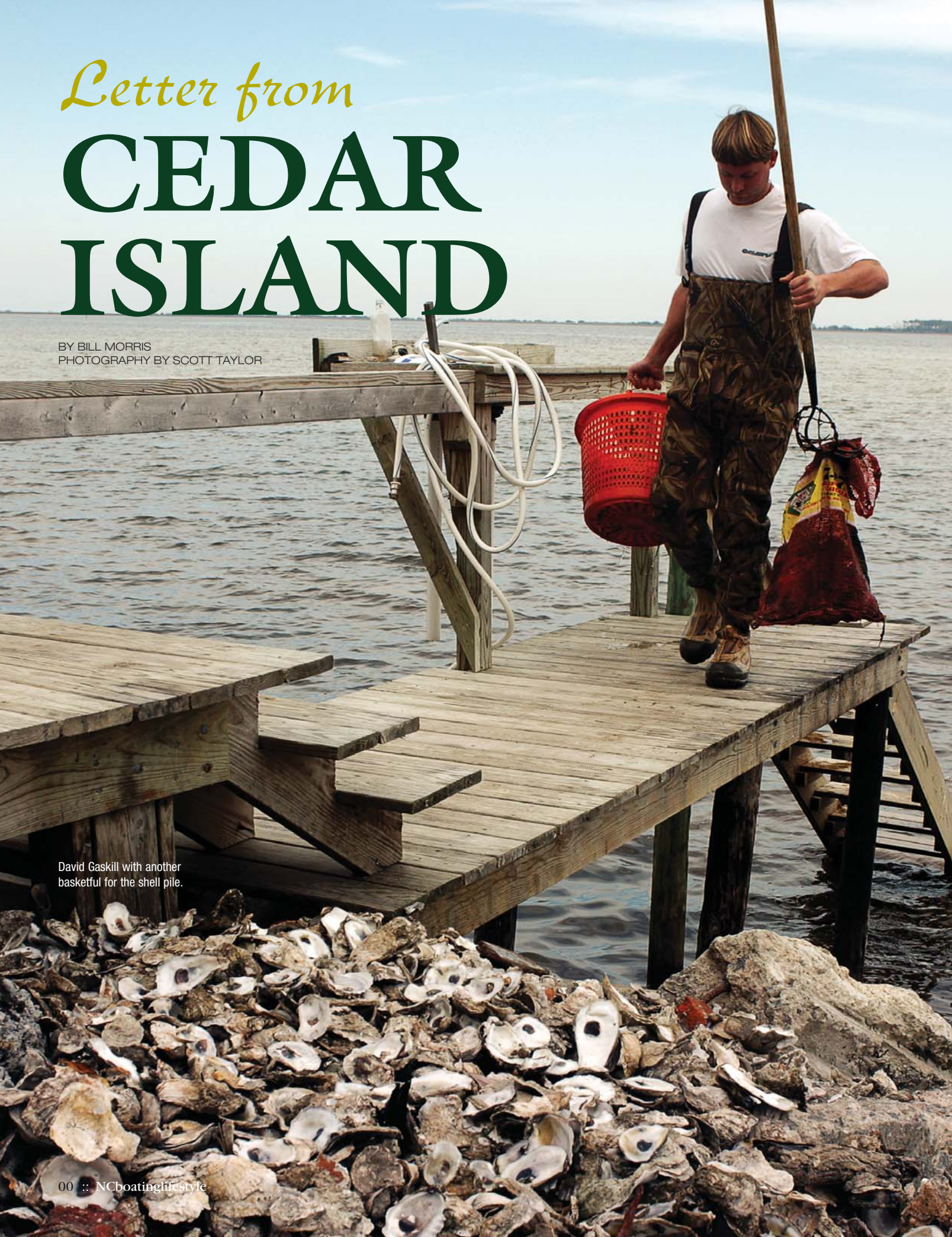


Letter from CEDAR ISLAND

BY BILL MORRIS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT TAYLOR



David Gaskill with another basketful for the shell pile.



Writer Bill Morris (in hat) on Cedar Island native Clay Gaskill's jet skiff.



Every year more than 100,000 drivers hurry through Cedar Island with one goal in mind: catching the ferry to Ocracoke. If you've been one of them, or plan to join their number soon, this is your wake-up call.

The town (population 328) has one motel – the Driftwood. It has one restaurant – the Driftwood. It has one place to buy fresh oysters, clams and shrimp – Quality Seafood.

And so on.

By the numbers, Cedar Island doesn't add up to a lot. But if you can measure a place by its natural beauty and appreciate people for their heart and genuine hospitality, then Cedar Island is a much bigger destination than it appears.

It's a place where people are proud of their heritage. That hometown pride inspired Geraldine Gaskill to write a note to the editor of this magazine, inviting *NCBoatinglifestyle* to "come to Cedar Island and write about the way of life in a small community."

And that's how photographer Scott Taylor

A January work day on Cedar Island Bay.



and I ended up scooting across Cedar Island Bay in a jet boat on a bluebird-clear January day best described as "seasonably cool."

With Geraldine's husband Clay Gaskill at the helm, we crossed Cedar Island Bay headed toward an archipelago of smaller islands: Hog, Chain Shot, Shell, Wainwright and our destination, Harbor Island.

Clay, who works as the service manager at Radio Island Marina in Morehead City, took us to Harbor Island to inspect the ruin of an old hunting club. Storms have washed the island down to where it is nothing but a strip of shell beach with part of the foundation still

standing. It is like something you would expect to see in Greece.

Clay assured me that Harbor Island is haunted – something I know must be true because I read it in a book by Bland Simpson, called *Inner Islands*. The restless spirit is supposed to belong to an unfortunate cook buried underneath a fig tree that is now long gone with the tide.

From Harbor Island, Clay took us to where local fishermen were, as they say here, "catching" oysters. Using those 12-foot-long wooden tongs to pick oysters off the bottom looked like tough work. But the cold air and hard

Cedar Island even has its own beach, on Pamlico Sound.



labor didn't seem to bother Marshall Daniels, a big man who squinted at us through cigarette smoke. I sampled one of Daniels' oysters, which were fat and salty and real good even without crackers and hot sauce.

After an oyster snack we headed back toward town and pulled into the harbor at Quality Seafood to meet Bradley Styron.

Quality Seafood is one of the last fish houses still in business Down East, which means it is one of the last anywhere in the state. The place was a little eerie with its conveyor belts, forklifts and ice machines silent for the winter.

Styron is on the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission, and just talking to him is an education in what is happening to commercial fishing. Government regulation, high fuel prices and foreign competition are the forces most often blamed for the industry's problems. But Styron attributes much of the current difficulties to the hurricanes that have been so frequent since 1996.

"We had this before," he says, "In the late '50s and early '60s. That was the middle of another 20-year cycle of hurricanes."

Commercial fishing came back after that, he says. And it would come back this time, too, except the difference is the dramatic rise in imported seafood. Cheap foreign stuff is



Marshall Daniels culls oysters.

taking the place of the home-caught variety so rapidly that nine out of every 10 shrimp consumed in the U.S. is imported. Fish houses like Quality Seafood have been rapidly going out of business and fishermen have been forced to sell off their boats.

"The resource will come back," Styron says. "But I think this time when it does there won't be the infrastructure in place to bring it to market."

From the fish house Clay took us to a landing on the harbor where we met his cousin Howard Gaskill, who still gets half his livelihood from commercial fishing. (The other half comes from working for the ferry division.)

Cedar Island's harbor is a branching series of canals lined with boats of every description, from small skiffs with gas tanks made from beer kegs to classic wooden boats still working long past retirement age. Clay pointed out the *Miss Rachel*, built right here; the *Mary Elizabeth*, built at Harkers Island; and the trawler-rigged *Captain Joe*. They lay like ghosts from another era, in the peaceful shade of live oak trees dripping winter-gray Spanish moss.

Standing next to the harbor, Howard described how in 2003 Hurricane Isabel had filled the sandy parking area with churning water waist deep.

"When you see everything you own floating away, that's not good," he says.

But he rebuilt after that storm and 2005's Ophelia, too. In fact, there was very little damage still visible anywhere in Cedar Island from the general wreckage of only a few years ago.

The people in Cedar Island are friendly as any I've ever met, but they are tough, too. They have to be to live here, where the hurricanes seem to come from all sides and more frequent nor'easters push the Pamlico water up over the land.

Clay's cousin Howard does his fishing with pound nets, which he describes as being the "most passive gear there is." By that he means a little easier on the resource. Instead of snagging fish and killing them the way a gill net

does, a pound net herds the fish into a circular trap. The fisherman lifts out the flounder and other legal fish with a dip net. Undersized or protected fish can be released unharmed.

People have been using pound nets since the Indians' time, but Howard Gaskill and a few other Cedar Islanders have learned a new way to market the flounder they catch. On family land right near the boat landing he has built a saltwater pound where he holds flounder like cattle in a corral.

It's called "ponding" flounder. The idea was introduced to Cedar Island by a Korean fish dealer, Moon Park.

As Howard explained it to us, in the fall, when the flounder are plentiful, the market price is around \$1.25 a pound – barely enough to break even. But by keeping the flounder in his pond until the wild fish are scarce, and selling them to an Asian buyer for the sushi market, he can get as much as \$6 per pound for the same fish. Of course it costs money for equipment and power to keep the saltwater pumping through the pond, and an even bigger investment of time and effort.

In a good year it pays off. But as Howard Gaskill knows too well, in a bad year, a hurricane can destroy his nets and the pond.

"This right here," he says, "is as close to gambling in Las Vegas as you can come."

But he's proud to still be an active commer-



Farmer Styron (L) and Marshall Daniels in Farmer's garage kitchen.

cial fisherman, even if it doesn't make good economic sense. Recreational fishermen have been fighting a tough battle with commercial interests for the past 20 years. But it's a hard-hearted conservationist indeed who wouldn't respect the genuine feeling in Howard Gaskill's voice when he spoke of fishing the same pound nets as his grandfather.

Our boat ride was over. But before we could leave town, Scott insisted on a visit to Farmer Styron's place. Like everything else in Cedar Island, it was just down the road.

Farmer's little piece of Eden has its own small boat basin, a main house, a net house, a shooting range and a garage complete with a

commercial-grade kitchen and wet bar. Sitting on the steps by the water with his gray-muzzled black Lab, Farmer seemed to know he was in the last, best place. He had seen the larger world during 30 years in the Coast Guard, and then retired to Cedar Island. Home.

Soon Marshall Daniels, who we'd met catching oysters, drove up in his truck. Clay Gaskill did, too. Then we were all in Farmer's garage, having a beverage. We looked at pictures of a real oceangoing voyage Marshall and Farmer had recently made, delivering a 120-foot fishing boat from Louisiana to the tip of Argentina. Twenty-seven days at sea without a stop!

That called for another beer.

By the time we left Farmer's, the fickle winter sun was going down over the 15,000-acre Cedar Island National Wildlife Refuge. After we crossed the little creek called John Day's Ditch, the town and our friends were behind us and a huge expanse of salt marsh lay ahead. The road, now a major highway, was unpaved until 1952.

In the world beyond the marsh, full of high-speed This and celebrity That, 1952 was another age, with quaint values we no longer have time to observe. But in Cedar Island – that Last, Best Place – it didn't seem like so long ago at all. 🍷