



PIER PRESSURE

WRITTEN BY BILL MORRIS ■ PHOTOGRAPHED BY SCOTT TAYLOR

In the dog days of August 1990, as a stunt for Raleigh's long-gone *Spectator* weekly, I fished on every available pier between Atlantic Beach and the South Carolina state line in a single weekend. I bought a pier pass, walked to the end and cast my lure into the ocean from 23 piers in 48 hours. (Sunset Beach Pier was still closed after Hurricane Hugo damage.)

As of May 1, 2006, 10 of those piers had closed forever and one more in Atlantic Beach may be gone by the time you read this. On the Outer Banks (territory I didn't cover back in '90), the Kitty Hawk Pier has been turned into a Hilton, and Jennette's Pier has been closed since Hurricane Isabel in 2003. Jennette's Pier is owned and operated by the N.C. Aquarium Society in partnership with the N.C. Aquariums. The pier is being rebuilt completely of concrete, much like Johnny Mercer's Pier in Wrightsville Beach, and should reopen by the spring of 2008.

As the price of beachfront property continues to skyrocket, fishing piers, and the culture they engendered, are becoming endangered monuments to a simpler era.

When the first edition of Robert J. Goldstein's "Coastal Fishing in the Carolinas from Surf, Pier, and Jetty" was published in 1986, the author listed 35 ocean piers in North Carolina—more than 25 percent of all the piers on the entire Eastern and Gulf coasts of the United States. We had one more than Florida, but that state has

1,350 miles of coastline compared to our 301.

North Carolinians and out-of-state tourists alike took it for granted that we were the center of pier culture. How fortunate we were to have so many of these sturdy, creosoted Shangri-Las where anyone, regardless of income, hometown or skill level, could spend around \$5 for a day's pass and go fishing in the Atlantic Ocean. Most piers don't even require that you own a rod and reel; they will rent you one for less than \$10. Parking is generally free, the food is cheap, bait is reasonable and the drinks are cold.



The Sportsman's Pier in Atlantic Beach has joined the list of the dearly departed.

If this makes fishing piers sound like some kind of paradise, well, they always have been, ever since the Kure Beach Pier opened in 1923. It was a tenuous, 300-foot addition to the Kure family's then-remote entertainment enclave—a pavilion-bathhouse-restaurant complex that catered to Roaring '20s Wilmington. And it immediately caught on.

Since then generations of North Carolinians have thronged to piers. Often we've had something other than fishing on our minds. As teenagers, how many of us found vacation salvation at the pier house arcade? How many summer romances—or even lifelong marriages—began with something as mundane and magical as a nighttime stroll to the end of a fishing pier?

Despite their diminishing numbers, piers still cast their spell. So, almost 16 years after my 48-hour marathon, I wanted to find out why so many have disappeared and what the future may hold for the rest.

Access denied

"It's a shame," says Mike Robertson, owner of the Kure Beach Pier and grandson of the man who started it all, L.C. Kure. "Kure Beach has always been very open-armed to people from all walks of life, not just the elites and the affluent. It seems like [the new] people have got a problem with lower- and middle-income folks. The lower guys get priced out."

The Kure Beach Pier is truly a landmark, having survived more than a dozen hurricanes. It may well have been the first fishing pier on the East Coast and has been under the same family's ownership for 83 years. Robertson says he intends to keep it that way. Still, he says that he doesn't blame anyone for selling a pier. "When you are in business," he says, "it can't just stay the way it is."

According to Frank Tursi, Cape Lookout coastkeeper for the North Carolina Coastal Federation, "Piers are becoming like quaint historical oddities. The gentrification of the coast continues at a rapid pace, and with the piers we're losing cultural icons and access to the beach."

In short, accelerated development on our barrier islands is doing what 80 years of hurricanes and nor'easters could not: closing down most of our fishing piers for good. But Tursi doesn't condemn the pier owners who don't rebuild after a storm, or who sell a perfectly good pier because it doesn't make financial sense to keep operating it. "The land," he says, "is too valuable."

Nowhere is the number of piers dropping more rapidly than along Bogue Banks. The Emerald Isle, Iron Steamer and Indian Beach piers are gone. The Morehead Ocean Pier was torn down and then rebuilt behind the massive Sheraton Hotel as more of a guest amenity than a public fishing pier. It was heavily damaged in last September's Hurricane Ophelia. The site of Sportsman's Pier in Atlantic Beach has already been rezoned for residential use and approved for a 10-unit condo complex, according to the *Carteret County News-Times*. The Triple S has also been rezoned, sold and demolished.



The Bogue Inlet Pier is the latest plank palace to be sold, but owner Mike Stanley told *The News & Observer* of Raleigh in April that he was about 85 percent certain the new owners would keep the pier open. "That's my wish, and that's the town's wish. If the right planning is done, this should be pretty positive," Stanley says.

The pier had been in Stanley's family since his late father, Joe, and uncle, Melvin Stanley, bought it in 1972. "I graduated from high school that year [in Philadelphia], and the next day I came down here," Stanley says. "Running this pier has been a way of life." But it's not necessarily a way of life that makes good business sense. "Putting a million dollars' worth of lumber into the ocean may not be the smartest thing to do. We're the biggest gamblers this side of Las Vegas."

Stanley believes that piers play an important role in preserving not only the culture but also the environment of our barrier islands. "We have a relatively light footprint," he said. "Piers have a minimal impact on

the environment because we funnel large numbers of people onto a single access point. It's a valuable service, and we need to continue it." He even suggests that beach towns ought to consider buying the piers and leasing them to operators.

Saltwater fishing 101

About a hundred miles up the coast, at the Outer Banks Fishing Pier in Nags Head, owner Garry Oliver agrees that all pier owners are struggling. Oliver, who has owned the pier since 1970, says he has seen all sorts of strange behavior, with top honors for weirdness going to a group of shark fishermen he had to dissuade from using live chickens as bait. What he sees for the future of fishing piers is uncertainty. "It's totally changed," he says, referring to Nags Head as well as his business. "We used to be busy 24 hours a day, summer and fall. Our customers were lower- and middle-class people who would get a cheap motel room or sleep in their trucks or stay up all night fishing."

Oliver points out that the piers have long performed an important function that is often overlooked. "We introduce people to saltwater fishing," he says. "That's something we've always done that's benefited the economy of the community and the fishing industry in general."

Kure Beach Pier's Robertson brought up the same point. "It's not just about making money. We [each] affect 20,000 to 25,000 people a year. Pier owners have an obligation and responsibility to educate people about conservation. I tell them, 'If you're not gonna eat it, don't kill it.'"

Are education, enjoyment and access being lost along with the piers? Not too long ago there were eight ocean piers on Topsail Island, plus the popular Topsail Sound Pier. Today there are three. "It used to be packed every weekend, with 200 or 300 people on every pier," says Hampstead native and former fish-house owner L. D. Smith. In the mid-1980s Smith leased North Topsail's Paradise Pier, which was lost to a pierhouse kitchen grease fire in 1985.

Storms are usually the engines of a pier's destruction. At Barnacle Bill's Pier in Surf City, Hurricane Bertha took 75 feet off the end in July 1996. Owner Doug Medlin immediately went to work making repairs. "We finished about five days before Fran," he says. Fran, a September storm, was a full-scale disaster for Topsail, and Medlin never

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re-opened Barnacle Bill's, which had been in business since 1959. The Scotch Bonnet, Ocean City and Topsail Sound piers also were casualties.

Yet despite 3 feet of sand in the streets and even cottages washed into the sound, soon after Fran real estate prices on Topsail began to climb. Lately they have taken off again, and former pier operator and commercial fisherman Smith is now a real estate agent. He says that the 10 oceanfront lots that were carved from the Barnacle Bill's property sold for at least \$800,000 each.

When I fished it during my pier marathon back in 1990, Barnacle Bill's looked as if little had changed since it was first built. My 15-year-old notes tell a typical tale. "7:20 a.m. A kid catches a nice sea mullet. His whole family is out here fishing right in the surf wash, with Thermos bottles of coffee, etc."

At 5:15 that same afternoon, seven piers later, I was on Oak Island at the Long Beach Pier, the self-proclaimed "longest in North Carolina." There I met a man whose pier cart identified him as the "Pier Master." He

For decades, anglers have found not only fish, but solace at North Carolina piers. In addition to providing cheap pleasure, these plank palaces introduced thousands to saltwater fishing. Of the 23 piers author Bill Morris fished in 1990, 11 have closed or soon will be closed, many to make way for beachfront housing.



Piers such as the Sportsman's (left) and Bogue Banks Inlet have provided places to show off a big fish and keep track of who has had the best catches for the year. And a fisherman could buy just about everything he needed for the day right there in the pier house.

was an older gentleman dedicated to king mackerel fishing as far offshore as his modified golf cart could carry him—all 1,047 feet. The cart would hold six rods, coolers, a bait bucket and other paraphernalia.

A special breed

I wonder if the Pier Master was there when the Long Beach Pier closed for good with a big New Year's party on Jan. 1, 2006. According to an Associated Press report published two days later, "Pier owner Tommy Thomes had to divide assets with his former wife for a divorce settlement. The pier property will be divided into 10 lots worth as much as \$1 million each."

No one I interviewed blames pier owners for not rebuilding after a storm. Yet for more than 70 years, piers were routinely restored to operation after hurricanes and no-name storms. According to Robertson, the Kure Beach Pier has had significant storm damage at least 19 times.

Sitting in his pier house on a blustery day in Nags Head, Oliver tells a story that illustrates how pier ownership is not for the faint of heart. Shipwrecks are a big part of the lore in Dare County, but to pier owners they're more than just colorful relics. Buried wrecks with stout timbers made from oak or cypress are often uncovered in a big storm. Afloat again, these ghost ships can act as battering rams against a fishing pier.

During a major nor'easter in 1978, Oliver got a call that floating wreckage had just gone through Jennette's Pier, tearing out a major section of pilings. And the wreck was headed his way. "I got some guys together and some grappling hooks on heavy lines. We went out on the north side of the pier to watch for the

wreck, thinking we could go down on the beach, and if we could snag it, drag it to shore before it got to us." As strange as it sounds, this technique had worked before.

Oliver and crew stood in the howling storm. It got darker and blew harder. "At 11 o'clock I called it quits and went home. The next morning I got a call. Someone had seen that same wreck, washed ashore at Coquina Beach. Somehow it floated through Jennette's and then around my pier and came back in to the beach south of here." Today that wreck is on display in front of the Nags Head town hall. She has been identified as the *Francis E. Waters*, a schooner lost in 1889.

The people who still choose to own piers are a special breed. Oliver grew up a self-described "pier rat." Just to maintain the Outer Banks Fishing Pier parking lot requires about 50 truckloads of sand every year. His

father, Lewis, in 1954 (just in time for Hazel). The Orrs decided to rebuild after Fran.

Maybe these pier owners should be considered as much preservationists as businessmen. Thanks to their commitment, the fishing piers we have left have remained accessible, inexpensive and still popular. Just as they always have, the same fishermen return year after year to celebrate traditions that started decades ago.

A society of anglers

"It's like a social situation, out on the pier," says Angelo DePaola, who has fished nearly every day of every season on the Jolly Roger since 1957. He may very well be the most accomplished pier fisherman in North Carolina, if not the world. "A while ago my aim was to catch 500 king mackerel off that pier," he says. "Twenty years ago I got to 400."

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most recent in a string of rebuilding efforts came after Isabel took 150 feet of the pier in September 2003. Robertson is following in his grandfather's and father's footsteps in Kure Beach. After Bertha he had to start practically from scratch one more time. Stanley rebuilt the Bogue Inlet Pier after Fran took away more than 400 feet. When Ophelia damaged the Sheraton Pier last September, some of the debris washed into his pilings. In January I visited with Mike while he and his crew were making repairs in a toe-numbing gale. Down at Topsail Beach, Robin Orr still runs the Jolly Roger, originally the New Topsail Ocean Pier, built by his late

He's now at 480. And don't think it's a fish story—he has recorded every catch. In the closet of the spare bedroom of his modest, landlocked Topsail Beach home, DePaola has a thick stack of records kept by the Silver Kings, the Jolly Roger's now-defunct fishing club. Known to his friends as "Depe," he started fishing seriously after retiring from the Marine Corps and becoming civilian fire chief at Camp Lejeune.

"When I got off work, I'd drive down from Jacksonville and fish. Early on I decided I'd get serious and fish only for the game fish: drum, amberjack, tarpon and the king mackerel. In those days we caught more tarpon

than kings, and the main thing we caught was red drum—30-, 40-, 50-pounders. In good times, I once caught five kings in one day." In 1979 DePaola and his wife, Janie, moved practically across the road from the Jolly Roger. "One of my buddies said, 'What are you gonna do? You can't fish all the time.' I told him, 'You watch me.'"

Even winter doesn't stop him. "We've been having a good run of trout lately," he says in a phone interview a week after Thanksgiving, which in 2005 happened to fall on his 85th birthday. DePaola is as rooted to the community of pier fishing as anyone could possibly be. Years ago, at the end of the Jolly Roger, he told me a story that gave a glimpse into why, for nearly 50 years, he has taken fishing to such a single-minded level. The story began with his platoon of Marines being attacked on a hill somewhere

in Italy, and it ended with his being one of the very few brought off that hill alive.

It troubles him to see the piers just up the road in Surf City become cottages. "The piers might be on their way out," he says. "They can get a helluva lot of money for that land." But doesn't the real estate boom benefit him, too? "They say the land value has tripled here since last January. Somebody could offer me a million dollars. But where the hell else would I live?"

Fishing on 23 piers in 48 hours began as a lark, but 16 years later the fate of these rustic, resilient bridges to nowhere has become something of an obsession. I'm fascinated by the trivial, like the way that, laid end to end, the 10 piers that are already gone would stretch for almost 2 miles of warped planks, knotholes, fish scales, chili-dog juice and notches carved into nearly every foot of the rail. And for every set of notches there's a family like the one on Barnacle Bill's, pulling in spots and sea mullet, the children laughing as they fill up coolers and buckets while their mother smiles under her bonnet and Dad baits hooks. "Fishermen," Stanley says, "are from all walks of life."

With fewer piers every year, how long will that remain true? ♦

Bill Morris, author of the novel "Saltwater Cowboys," lives in Beaufort.

