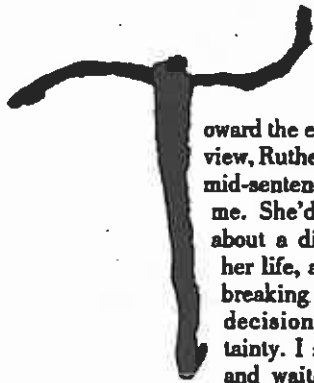


# On Blackwater

BY MELINDA RULEY



oward the end of our interview, Ruthellen stopped in mid-sentence and glared at me. She'd been talking about a difficult time in her life, a time of back-breaking work and hard decisions and uncertainty. I sat on the sofa and waited it out. She

leaned forward, tapped a finger on my knee—hard—and said, “Don’t write us as foolish womens when we tell you so much.”

Ruthellen is onto the problem.

Last April I began work on a project on the lives of crab pickers in a small town in Eastern North Carolina. The pickers were black, mostly poor, mostly uneducated. Few had traveled beyond the swampy coastal counties they were born in or held jobs outside the crab houses that line the creeks and rivers of those counties. Though many of the women knew my grandmother, who lived in their town and delivered some of their children, I was a stranger—white, curious, standing at the screen door with a Steno pad.

Most times the screen door swung open and I was invited to sit at the kitchen table—or go fishing, or visit a relative in the hospital. As the weeks passed, family albums were opened, letters read, grandchildren introduced. I was asked to supper, invited to church and welcomed to sit at the picking tables at the crab house. Steno pads filled up and the tape recorder ran, recording hours’ worth of stories about a group of women and a way of life that is ending.

Reading through the notebooks and listening to the tapes, I consider Ruthellen’s warning and think how easy it is to exploit memories refracted by years and circumstance. Reporters fortunate enough to stand in the thick woods of another person’s life rarely see the quicksand spread around them, how easy it is to turn people into objects of our wisdom and our pity, and thus coerce them into caricatures.

When this happens the last laugh is on the reporter who, eagerly jotting down what she hears and sees, overlooks the silences, the veiled comments and counter-codes—the woman, in other words, who’s talking so sunny. Downeast, every remark, every anecdote, no matter how personal or intimate, is filtered through the politics of the small-town South. These crab pickers are not just a working-class subculture, they are elderly black women living in small towns and hinterlands claimed by tide

and wind, a piece of the South in which Jim Crow prospers, in spirit if not law. The reporter who fancies herself a confidante to her sources, the beneficiary of unqualified truths, is kidding herself. When the project is over, you will leave and they will stay and nobody forgets it.

And yet the truth is told, a truth of hard work and poverty pieced together from the stories and the faces and the hands, deciphered from the shifting complexities of affection and exploitation. Only occasionally is there a frank appraisal—plumb on the mark and no apologies. “What you going to do if they don’t treat you fair?” said Velma Murray, a crab picker for 52 years. “They got you between a tree and a stump.”

The truth is also surprising. These women are not without power and accomplishments, though it is not power and accomplishment as the world generally reckons them and has little

to do with “empowerment,” the buzz-word cry of the ‘90s. Despite working a job that is tedious and smelly, that offers low wages and no benefits and currently is threatened by the influx of Mexican immigrants, the women I met were proud of their work.

“First-things-first is just different for some people,” Ruthellen said, standing beside a clothesline festooned with wisteria. “I see womens on Oprah talking about how they president of their companies and they ain’t happy. Got a swimming pool and children in the college and they so unhappy they got to go on a TV talk show. I worked a honest living at the crab house and it was bad bad bad sometimes. Work was nasty, smelled bad. But they was always food for my babies and a little something for them to get started on when they got big. Do you see me on a TV talk show? I ain’t ashamed: You can write that down: Ruthellen ain’t ashamed.”

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NEWS & COMMENT

T H E E N T R Y N O T B O O K W E E K L Y

## Downeast

**T**wenty miles north of Durham, the Tar River flows knee-high and warm as bath water. Teenage girls stand on the banks with bamboo poles and cast into the current; elbows cocked, hipbones aslant, they issue idle threats to the tea-colored water. "Mista Fish I ain't here to feed you dinner come on now." It is hot and when a truck rumbles over the bridge above, headed for a nearby tobacco field, the girls hush and wait for the breeze before recommencing. "Mista Fish what did I tell you?"

Born in the clay flats of Person County, the Tar River winds southeast through the Piedmont and Coastal Plain, clearing by a good 15 miles the Triangle's metropolitan centers, its asphalt apron of Jiffy Lubes and octiplex cinemas. Instead the river flows through tobacco fields and sidles up to towns like Pilot, Heartsease and Stanhope, places you can get to from Raleigh in a matter of hours and step out of your car onto ground that *smells* different. (Downeast is for a fact different, and here's how: In Raleigh you get in your car and drive to the bank; if someone gets in your way you change lanes. The bank is the target. In Heartsease you get in your car and drive up behind a piece of heavy equipment sidwinding down a two-way road. In Heartsease you wait for the all-clear signal before you pass; while you wait you watch a hawk hang in the sky and remember a name you thought you had forgotten. The trip is the target. That's Zen. It's also downeast.)

In little Washington, just east of the Beaufort County line, the Tar River passes under a bridge, spreads out, slows down and becomes the Pamlico River. The river flows 33 sleepy miles before emptying into the Pamlico Sound, which in turn fans out to meet the Outer Banks and, beyond, the open Atlantic.

Near the mouth of the sound, the Pungo

River angles down out of the pocosins of Hyde County to join the Pamlico. The rivers are fed by salt tides and blackwater creeks that snake through inland swamps and savannas. Though threatened by corporate farms and river-bottom mining, that estuarine combination of salt and freshwater continues to nurture a good deal of what we call seafood, including the Atlantic blue crab which, for much of this century, has been fished, cooked, picked and packed along the Pamlico and Pungo rivers.

At 73, Mable Everett has seen a good deal of the century, much of it from her vantage point at the picking table. Mable met me in the middle of a rainstorm at her house in Belhaven, a town of 2,300 on Pantego Creek. Because the banks of Pantego Creek, an offshoot of the Pungo River, rise only four feet above sea level, rain is an uneasy blessing. Years ago, when my grandmother lived in Belhaven, we held our breath during hurricanes that would drown the chickens and carry porch furniture out to the sound.

This, however, was a routine crisis, a steady spring rain that filled ditches, swamped front yards and floated small toys. A gray cat sat beneath the fig tree, looking damp and cross, but the rain was of little consequence to Mable, who sees most events, meteorological or otherwise, as blessings by virtue of the fact that she is alive to witness them. Like a lot of women I talked to, crab pickers in their 70s and 80s, Mable spoke as if she lived beneath a reprieve that might be lifted any moment. Lord spare her, she would buy food tomorrow, clean the

house Wednesday, see her grandson off to his prom Friday night.

Mable Everett is a kind of self-proclaimed icon of Belhaven's crab pickers and an "outlaw" picker. "That means fast," she says, "fast fast." Mable lives in a pink house with sky-blue walls and a glamour-photograph of herself as a young woman, hair arranged in a glossy hive. "Hair and beauty is my *second* love," she says. "Crabs is No. 1 with me and that's the way it is. I am the only one so far that has picked 101 pounds of crab meat in one day," she says. "I came out and took the record for that."

For most of her life, Mable has picked crabs for the George Baker family of Belhaven. In the '30s she picked for "George Baker One," rumored to be the first person in Belhaven to pick a crab. She saw her current employer, George "Georgie" Baker III, through diapers while she worked for his daddy, "Big George Two." When

Big George Two died, Mable was a flower girl at his funeral, a tribute to her friendship with him and her loyalty to the family, a loyalty that has survived nearly seven decades.

*I started picking when I was 7 years of age. My sister and I lived with my old Aunt Sally and she was rearing us by herself and we did what we could to help. I would wake up at 2 and go in and work to the crab house until it got light. Then they would walk us up to some of the people's house to wash up and get us some breakfast and walk on up to school. It took some willpower to stay awake in school, but we did it.*

*I was always good at it, always fast with my hands—picking cotton, picking up potatoes, I'm just fast. I learned first to crack claws, that's easier and that's what they teach you when you're little. Then I learned to pick. They put what I earned on my aunt's time card.*

*I finished school and got married but that didn't stop me. It was instilled in me to go to the crab house. I went to the Madame K. Mitchell Beauty School in Portsmouth. My sister and I always had a lot of thick hair and we had the lamps and the straightening combs and we would press our own hair. I have taught beauty culture and I love missionary work, but I have never stopped picking crabs. Every chance I got I was down to the crab house.*

*People say to me, "Mable, why do you work so hard, why do you keep so much food in your kitchen?" It's a part of me because I remember the summers when we'd come home from the crab factory and we would be in the field cropping corn and cotton and I was so hungry I didn't know what on earth to do. And I just looked right up and I said, "Lord, if I ever live to see to get going on my own I'm gonna eat anything in the world that I want." And I do.*

*I'll be 74 in October if God's willing. I have positive thinking. People say, "Don't go to the crab house, that's some nasty work." That crab house has caused many people to pay off their mortgages, it has sent children to school. It's been the only thing around here for women to do and it's an honest living.*

**B**aker's crab house sits in the northwest corner of town, where Battalina Creek cuts in from the Pungo. The building spans a stretch of dirt and creek bank at the edge of residential Belhaven. At 4:30 a.m., when the pickers begin to arrive, silvery eyes watch their headlights from the creek

bank and shapes pare away from the black background: deer, fox, raccoon.

The crab house itself hums with the machinery of its innards: steamers and cooling units, industrial-sized fans and power generators. The company truck sits in the gravel parking lot, under a streetlight. There is an airbrushed seascape mural on the side of the truck: A tiny trawler cutting the water above an Atlantic blue crab and a colossal mermaid. The mermaid, an aquatic Farrah Fawcett-Majors, is the focus; she looks as if she could knock the vessel off the horizon with a flip of her hair.

By 5 o'clock on opening day hoppers filled with steamed crabs are rolled into the picking room and work begins. (Crab picking is seasonal work, given a calendar by sun, rain and tide. The pickers usually work from April to December, and from 5 a.m. until 2 p.m. No one is sure why they start so early, though there is speculation that it is a holdover from pre-air-conditioned days.) There is only a handful of men in the crab house and they surge to and fro in a small gang, tending to fuse boxes and conveyor belts, hoses and scales. The crab house is largely what Mable calls "a female place." Approximately 30 women, most of them following in the footsteps of their mothers or grandmothers, sit and stand at stainless-steel tables that run the length of the room.

*My mama used to pick crabs, says Lena Smith. I remember her coming home from the crab house and fixing supper. Just a routine thing, a job. My aunt picked crabs, my sister picked crabs. Just about all of my family have*

*picked crabs. There's nothing here but crabs, shrimp and crabs and working in the fields. That's about the only thing there is.*

*I tried picking crabs when I was 16 but it didn't work. Some way or another I could never get the hang of it at that time. So I did housework and fieldwork. I cleaned a little house for*

*Speed is where you make your money. I slow down with the lump because the prettier you can get that lump out the more money Georgie can get for it. He wants you to take your time on that lump cause that's where he gets his money.*

There is a row of small windows and a wet concrete floor and a conveyor belt that carries

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**AT 4:30 A.M.; WHEN THE PICKERS BEGIN TO ARRIVE, SILVERY EYES  
WATCH THEIR HEADLIGHTS FROM THE CREEK BANK AND SHAPES PARE  
AWAY FROM THE BLACK BACKGROUND: DEER, FOX, RACCOON:**

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*Georgie's mama. I worked in corn, cabbages, things like that. As I got older I started to gain in bills. I had a baby and that was a big bill. I knew I had to get a job.*

*At first I was a claw cracker but it came to a point that it started to work on my nerves. Cracking claws made me real nervous on the inside, that constant hammer motion. That's when I started learning to pick. I caught onto that. The main thing was keeping the bones out of the meat. I always have had to work on my bones; cause if the meat is bony the boss gets a lot of bad reports.*

*So I learned how and I been going on about my business ever since. I do all right. I have made up to \$60 a day. Every now and then I'll have a touch of arthritis, or my fingers may be stiff, but you go to work and forget all about it.*

crab carcasses to a dump truck outside. Each woman holds a single small knife and sits before a pile of crabs scarlet red from the pressure cooker. The women wear plastic aprons over knit slacks or house dresses. They are expected to wear hair nets and leave fashion accessories at home, but there are always a few conspiracies. Women tuck their curlers into flowery shower caps or lacy hair nets. A few wear lipstick and earrings. The building smells like high school biology class the day the cat bags are opened.

Because it is opening day the women are minding the crabs, hunting a rhythm that will carry them through the next eight hours, the

## Downeast

continued from previous page

next eight months. To make minimum wage, each picker must pick three pounds an hour. Beyond that, they earn \$1.50 a pound. Although a fast picker can make \$300 a week, or about \$10,000 a year, many can pick only enough to make minimum wage. There are no health-insurance benefits, no paid sick leave or pension benefits.

During much of the off-season, and in the spring when there are not enough crabs for a full week's work, pickers pick up extra work cleaning houses or receive unemployment checks. Occasionally, if the season starts late or the crabs are scarce, crab house owners will falsify work-schedule records in order to qualify their pickers for unemployment benefits. It is a charitable gesture with a hidden agenda: "Bossmen don't want you finding no other work," says one picker. "They're afraid you won't come back to the crab house."

Early in the season the crabs make minimum wage a challenge even for the fastest pickers. They are "mud crabs," small and hard, trawled at the mouth of the Pamlico River, or off the cold floor of the sound. Later in the summer, local crabbers will supply more of the catch, and the crabs, the pickers say, will be "prettier"—bigger, softer.

For now, though, the crabs are hard and "bony," and to make matters worse, most are "sooks," or female crabs—and most have eggs. "Sooks is the hardest to pick," says Mable, who nevertheless flies through the crabs, "backing," or pulling off the backfin and legs, plucking out the "jumbo lump"—the most expensive meat—then scraping out the gills and eggs and picking the fine meat of the "ends" and "shoulders." "Sooks is built to protect the eggs. They're the most flavorful crabs but they're hard on your poor hands." (See "Picking pretty.")

Two hours pass and the sky comes through the windows, pink over the creek. The weighers begin to process the plastic containers the women have filled. Maggie and Joyce sit at the "boning table," picking bits of shell and egg out of meat. The women begin to talk and laugh, catching up on news. Some nurse wads of tobacco or snack on crackers tucked into the tops of their aprons. When they spot Jody, a young man who walks around gathering tubs of claws, a discussion ensues on the consequences of his marital problems.

life." Velma sits on top of a stack of plastic chairs and trades insults with a picker across a mound of crabs.

"Velma, you all in my face."

"Hush up and act right. Can't you see I'm trying to get you straight?"

"I don't want to hurt you, Velma, Lord knows I don't."

"Ain't you a mess? You a bad girl."

"Go on, now, with your chubby self."

The other picker is Weasel, a distant cousin of Velma's, who claims kin, by blood or mar-

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### SHOPS STAND EMPTY AND WAITRESSES, HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS

WITH LIMP PERMS AND TANGERINE PERFUME, DO THEIR

HOMEWORK IN THE BACKS OF RESTAURANTS.

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"I remember what he looked like when he first came here."

"He used to be beautiful. Used to could smell him' come in the room."

"Had biceps all over him, looked like he just come out of college."

"That's what problems at home will do to you is make you dwindle away."

"Got to have things right at home; I tell him there's more than one fish in the pond."

"Mm-mm-mm."

Although most of them live within walking distance of each other, opening day at the crab house is a kind of reunion, an opportunity for the exchange of information and gossip: Velma Murray's mother has not spoken from her hospital bed; Hilda Warren's daughter found a night-shift job in little Washington; Maggie Moore was so excited about opening day she could not sleep all night. There are updates on grandchildren, their appetites and illnesses, milestones and setbacks. Mable talks about her boyfriend, "Pink," who has checked into the hospital "probably for all his

riage, to most of the women she works with. "That's the way it runs," she says. "Crabs is a family tradition."

"We been knowing each other all our lives," says Mable, who cuts her eyes at Weasel whenever there are threats of bodily harm and advises me to ignore the battles, which usually end with giggles and kisses. "We are very close and special to each other," she says. "It is a togetherness place."

Everyone is excited. Georgie Baker walks around the picking room, teasing and laughing, taking an informal inventory of his workers: Who can he count on to work a full season? Who will quit before Labor Day? "Don't throw my claws out!" he hollers amiably. Mary Frances pops Maggie on the bottom with a wet towel and somebody makes a funny comment about the cluster of men working on the plumbing. Everyone is laughing. It is therefore surprising when one of the pickers looks up from her work at the boning table and says, quietly, "You put down in that notebook we are the lowest paid women in the world."

**B**usiness is poor in Belhaven. Tobacco does not grow in the humus and textile mills have not made it east of little Washington. If you are lucky you work for the seed-supply company or across the river at Texasgulf. Borden has left; Norfolk & Southern has left. Shops stand empty and waitresses, high-school girls with limp perms and tangerine perfume, do their homework in the backs of restaurants. On the outskirts of town men spend their days leaning over engines; children read below grade level and get hookworm; dogs live in a dirt circle beneath a mulberry tree.

In town, between Business 264 and Pantego Creek, the ruins of the old Cooperage Mill sprawl across acres of marshy bank, all of it For Sale. Cooperage was big business 60 years ago, when the timber boom supported lumberyards and mills, loggers cut old-growth cypress and the railroad brought workers in from the county. Well-to-do lumbermen and farmers moved to town and built houses with wraparound porches and gingerbread eaves. Edna Farber was said to have visited, as were Orville and Wilbur Wright. Main Street prospered and crab houses lined the creek banks and paid workers to do piece work: cut fish, shuck oysters, head shrimp and pick crabs. Each crab house had a distinct whistle to call employees to work.

Today bees live in the Cooperage Mill smoke-stack, and the crumbled bricks look snaky.

*Belhaven used to be a fine place, a success. There was work for the menfolks back then and it was a grand town. Crabs was plentiful and big and there were lots of crab houses. It was a proud place to be living and raising a family. When Cooperage closed down it was a loss for the men that worked there.*

Mattie Ebron lives in a mill house purchased by her husband, John Booker T. Ebron, after Cooperage Mill closed down. The house is fastened to a wheat field on the northern edge of town, and standing in Mattie's front yard, your back to the town, there's nothing but lonely space, the flat earth and bands of shimmering color: emerald wheat, a smudge of scrub

pinetrees, then the sky, itself another substratum, heavy and fragrant. It is not the bowl sky of the Midwest; downeast the sky *descends*, in a kind of perfumed siege. Mountain people are uneasy in Beaufort County, where even the creeks are vast and unwrinkled.

*Mattie farmed with my great-grandparents and kept house for my grandmother when she*

*left on the kitchen table—the same quick brush of her hand—and, changing the subject, chastises me for driving around town by myself. Mattie is suspicious and fretful and keeps a two-by-four nailed to her front door. "Ain't you scared?" she says. "I see on the TV how they choke womens and leave 'em on the road. I don't go out by myself."*

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**IT'S POSSIBLE TO IMAGINE MATTIE YEARS EARLIER, FEARLESS AND STRONG, WORKING THE CRAB HOUSE IN THE MORNING, SPENDING HER AFTERNOONS RAISING A WHITE FAMILY, ONE EYE ON THE IRONING, ANOTHER ON THE STOVE.**

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moved to town; the link between us affords certain privileges: For instance, each day I visit Mattie she asks me to feel the bones in her body knotted and pushed out of joint by arthritis and "general elderliness." She also snaps at me when I ask stupid questions.

*Where else you think we womens worked except the crab house? They ain't nothing else. I worked in the field with a grub hoe, I cooked for the Navy shipyard and hung tobacco in Rocky Mount. But my family was here, and I always came back here to the crab house. It was my life. Me and my sister Georgia both. Georgia was a outlaw picker. Lord, that woman could pick some crabs! I was fast but I wasn't like her. Womens worked so hard back then. To the crab house all day then come home and your feet all swolled up from standing. Got to jump on the yard work and tend the garden and get the children fed. We was hard-workin', Lord knows we was.*

Mattie is so small and frail her stockings sag around her ankles and the bones of her skull show. Her dress is held together by safety pins. She refuses to be photographed, claiming she's gotten too "poorly." In fact she is beautiful, but she discards the compliment like a bit of trash

When Mattie's face is held to the light it's possible to imagine her years earlier, fearless and strong, working the crab house in the morning, spending her afternoons raising a white family, one eye on the ironing, another on the stove, listening for distress signals from children playing beneath the crepe myrtle trees. It's also possible to understand how Mattie and other black women, watching jobs disappear and their community run to seed, felt the only thing of strength and certainty was, as Mattie puts it, the "courage and nerve power of womenfolks."

*Men most generally don't help womens. The crab house was all womens. We ran the place and without us the place was nothing. The bossmen knew it. They would come along every day and tell us how good they liked us. They know a man won't do a job like that. A man'll get to thinking about the smell or he'll say I'm too good for this. A man'll walk off a job like that. Womens have more strength than men. Men don't want to do nothing but sit around or walk the road. ■*

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*Part 2 of "Downeast" will appear in next week's issue.*

# Picking pretty

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, crab picking is unskilled labor.

The department stands alone in that opinion. The pickers say it is an art and even crab-house owners admit picking is tedious and difficult. "It's hard work, it's just flat-out hard work," says Georgie Baker. "It's a real skill to picking crabs. You don't believe it, you go try it."

I tried. For about 10 minutes—long enough for one of the pickers to remark that I would probably never qualify for minimum wage. "We could put you to the boning table," she said charitably.

Because it takes about 15 pounds of whole crabs to make a pound of processed meat, and since each worker must pick three pounds an hour to make minimum wage, a picker must go through at least 45 pounds of steamed whole crabs an hour. One crab at a time. Although each picker has different style, the basic routine is the same: From a stack of scarlet crabs alofted onto the table in front of her, a picker pulls one out and "backs" it, using a small knife to pull off the shell and, with it, the eyes, stomach and mouth. Guts and shells fall into a chute and onto a conveyor belt. The picker then snaps off the fins and claws, saving the bigger claws for the claw cracker. She scrapes out the eggs and gills, then carves out parts of the crab called, variously, the "ends," the "shoulders" or the "fan," and slivers meat off the layers of cartilage. This is the "special meat." Finally, the picker extracts the lump meat, two rounded chunks that go into a special container. "You learn to get that out real pretty," says Mable. "That's where Georgie gets his money."

Fast pickers can go through a half-dozen crabs a minute, talking and laughing in part to keep their minds off the tedium, the blisters and cuts, the pain in their fingers and hips. Most days, something will get Helen Windley laughing—Helen's laugh makes everybody happy, and most days Mary Frances O'Neal will cruise the room with her wet towel, delivering threats. Occasionally there's even a little excitement, like the morning Mable's glasses fell into the carcass chute. But always, between the jokes and laughter and gossip, there are the piles of crabs, heaps and mounds and stacks of crabs.

"Jesus keep me," Velma says under her breath when she gets up to take her meat to the weight room. "Jesus keep me now." —Melinda Raley

# Picking the Blues

BY MELINDA RULEY

I sit in Georgie Baker's office and try to focus on the interview. It's a struggle. To my left, a cardboard-cut-out super model, amazonian, jostles me with a corrugated hip. In another corner of the room Miss April, calendarglossy, all skin and spandex, breathes down Georgie's neck. I keep an eye on the super model, take notes and tend to Chief, Georgie's dalmation and the unofficial mascot of the Baker Crab Co. Chief looks at me in a way that suggests years of neglect but blows his cover by climbing, unscolded, onto the couch beside me and expertly presenting his backside to be scratched.

Georgie, a crescent of belly showing beneath a "Van Halen Live" T-shirt, is having his own problems concentrating. The crab-picking season has started and people need his attention: Wholesalers are on the phone, talking quantities and price fluctuations; crabbers wander into the office to jawbone about the weather; a fish and wildlife officer drops by to chat, assuming standard-issue law-enforcement posture, legs spread, arms crossed, eyes scanning. Between visitors and phone calls and questions from the girl reporter, Georgie fidgets and makes notes to himself, shooting glances at the parking lot outside.

By Belhaven standards, Georgie Baker is worldly. He cruises town on a chromed-up Harley Davidson with power accessories and leather fringe, goes to Duke football games and motorcycle shows in New Bern. He has a daughter in college and a snapshot of himself in Florida, posing with Miss Nude Ireland.

Georgie is also a third-generation crab house owner, a native downeaster happy on the high perch of his tractor or in the recesses of the crab house, wrestling with a busted machine. He knows his rainfall levels and fishing seasons, is prepared to talk outboard motors or firearms with the boys down at Hardee's. Miss Nude Ireland notwithstanding, the Baker Crab Co. slogan—"You Just Can't Beat Georgie's Meat"—is innocent as rain.

Georgie Baker caits the women who pick crabs for him his "girls," though not a few of them worked for his father and grandfather and watched him grow up. He knows the details of their lives—the sick children and errant husbands, the histories and sensibilities and overdue bills. He knows who's worried or preoccupied. "I try to be their friend," he says. "Some of 'em I'd give the world and they'd appreciate it. Some of 'em, you can't give 'em enough. I just try to be as fair as I can. I don't never fuss at anybody in front of anybody. I don't try to belittle 'em or back 'em into a corner. You back 'em up in a corner you're going to get into a fight."

When Georgie talks about managing his employees he assumes a tone of weary forbearance, a kind of parental exasperation. "I tell them they have to weigh up and not pile the meat up," he says, "but it's in one ear and out the other." Likewise, he expresses affection for his workers in the dubious terms of a father with a house full of adolescent females. "She's bullheaded but I love her to death," he'll say; or "She's good as gold but sometimes I could wring her neck."

The crab pickers, by contrast, are unequivocally affectionate in their assessment of Georgie, whom they call by his first name or "Bossman." "I been knowin' George ever since he was a little bitty boy," says Goldring Satchell. "He went to school with my children. George is real sweet, he treats me real good and he is family to us and we do right by him."

Georgie and the pickers are both reluctant to show their grievances and, on occasion, utterly transparent, exposing themselves in the oblique language of family—sullen silences, coded complaints and rapid-fire one-liners. When Velma discusses wages at the Baker Crab Co. she says, "They's some people making \$1.75 a pound. We're making \$1.50, that's less than anyone in the county. George can't be made to pay you more money, it would just be nice of him if he wanted to give it to you." And when somebody suggests that arthritis makes it difficult for the older pickers to carry their meat into the weighing room on schedule, Georgie says, "Naw, they're just lazy."

Labor-management relations in crab houses are enigmatic at best, encumbered by elements of loyalty, dependence, resentment—and history. Crab pickers like Mable Everette, Velma Murray and Goldring Satchell remember when blacks downeast lived on the edge of survival and at the mercy of whites who handed out grub hoes and picking knives, but rarely offered opportunity for economic independence. The best many black women could hope for, short of leaving home, was to find a job that got them out of the cotton field, away from picking vegetables in the murderous heat of downeast summers. “It wasn’t beautiful work but it was better than the fields,” says Velma Murray. “You were glad for the work. Younger girls today aren’t glad for it anymore, but I was raised the old way and it’s hard to move away from the way you were raised.”

Even today, Velma says, she doesn’t take breaks, doesn’t stand outside and drink a soda or go to the bathroom. “Sometimes people talk bad about you when you work hard,” she says. “Some of them say you sit there cause you’re greedy. But I’m not greedy. I like to do what is right. If I go on this man’s job and I’m supposed

to give him eight hours, why not work and give him a decent day of work? I’ve never worked a job where I was running back and forth to the bathroom. I like to sit there and be in that motion and do what I got to do and get it over with. My mama taught me to work hard.”

*stopped school when I was 17, says Goldring Satchell, and I went right there to the Blue Channel crab house, working full time. I don’t know how many years I worked there, but I know it was a long time because I started when I was 10 years old, wanting to make a little money. I had a girlfriend that worked to the crab house and she got some sticks in the yard and showed me how to crack claws. My sister cut fish but I was the onliest one in my family to work to the crabs.*

*At Blue Channel everybody was beautiful to work with but one morning I stayed at home until it was time to carry the children to school to register them. And when I went to work they*

*had pulled my card. I knew by my card being out I was fired. So I didn’t ask no questions, just walked right on back out. I was ready to get away for while. Blue Channel never had no benches and I was tired of standing up and I didn’t care if they did fire me. I just went on to work at the Belhaven Fish and Oyster crab house until it closed down. Then George called me and that’s where I worked ever since.*

*They was good jobs to have. Sometimes there would be a walk-out when the crabs were bad, all cold and hard. A lady’d come up and say “Goldring, these crabs are hard to pick, let’s go ask for a raise.” And I’d support her and we’d walk out and go to the boss. He’d say “Ladies, it’s the best I can do right now. The crabs’ll be better next month.” And we’d say, “No, they’re too hard.” And sometimes we’d get a few more pennies.*

Until the late ’80s, when it was bought and then closed down by Borden, the largest crab company in Belhaven was Blue Channel. Mac Pigott was plant manager and vice president of production for the \$10 million company, and when, at the beginning of our interview, I apologize for smelling like crabs (I’d been in the crab house all morning), Mac just grins. “Smells like money to me,” he says.

Mac now owns the Great Belhaven Bait and Seafood Co.—“Great Bait”—and he spends the days minding his freezers on Main Street or delivering bait up and down the coast. Fourteen years ago, fresh out of N.C. State University with a degree in Food Science, he signed on with Blue Channel, a company with history, prestige and shelf space in grocery stores across the country. Blue Channel had already made advances in pasteurization and was the first company to succeed, albeit within limits, at mechanizing the crab-picking process.

Blue Channel used an assembly-line process: Pickers would stand at one end of a conveyor belt, backing the crabs and picking the jumbo lump meat. The crab carcass was then ground up in a machine and passed through a saline solution that floated the meat and sank the shell. At the end of the belt, women inspected the meat, weighed it and canned it.

“It was a great company and I thought we were going to do great things,” says Mac. “We had the most efficient operation, the best crab supply and the most talented employees. Occasionally the girls would get into it with knives, fighting over guys, and there was a man lived across the street from the plant and got in the habit of pointing a rifle at me anytime I walked by. Other than that, at least for the first few years, there were no problems.”

Then, says Mac, in the mid-’80s, crab houses, including Blue Channel, began having labor problems. “I don’t want to sound like Rush Limbaugh,” Mac says, “but we were competing with the federal government. The older, reliable workers that had been with us 30 or 40 years were aging out.” And the younger workers, Mac said, were learning to manipulate the system. “They not only didn’t have to work to get money,” Mac said, “but working actually put them at a disadvantage. I had some women come to me and say, ‘Look, pay me under the table and I’ll work, but I’m not going to lose my gravy train.’ It boils down to dollars and cents. These women get a base pay of \$15,000 a year of federal dollars. I couldn’t pay them that.”

Management responded to “labor problems” by offering various incentive plans to boost production and hold onto workers—though, again, without increasing pay or offering benefits. “We were desperate to keep people coming to work,” says Mac. “If they came to work and worked extra hard I’d give ’em a TV or a microwave oven. We gave away dishwashers, had cash raffles. That went over pretty good, but some of the incentive plans were you might say less popular.”

One such plan offered a \$50 bonus to supervisors capable of increasing production rates to a certain level. “I knew we shouldn’t have done that,” says Mac. “The girls saw the [production] chart going up and thought they would get the bonus. When the supervisors got the money

instead it was hell. I remember it was a Friday and the place was deadly quiet. They had all weekend to stew about it. And on Monday, the girls walked out. I mean, the whole damn place went into a shutdown."

Mac reached for damage control. "There's always a crab house hierarchy," he says. "There's always a queen bee." When the workers had congregated in the parking lot after the walk-out, Mac went straight to an older picker named Georgia Clark. "I knew if I could get Miss Georgia to turn back around and herd 'em back in I had it beat. So I asked her to tell me what the problem was and she did. It's a hard thing to take, getting cussed out by a 80-year-old woman. I can't remember exactly what she said to me but it was to the effect of 'suck-egg mule' or something like that." Georgia and Mac negotiated an agreement by which the bonus money would be distributed equally among the workers. "I think I paid 'em all a nickle," Mac said. "But it was the principle that mattered. Everybody had to be treated the same."

According to Mac, he had won the battle but lost the war. Borden bought Blue Channel in 1987 and was unwilling, Mac says, either to cope with local labor problems or hire foreign labor. The Blue Channel crab house closed in January 1990. "I had to lay off the whole plant," Mac says. "It was hell. It was the coldest thing you ever seen."

*The womens the ones that kept the plant together, not us men. They's the ones that ran the plant, but nobody above could see that. And it was hard work, I 'clare it was hard. They stand in one place and it's the same thing all day. Water on the floor, everything damp—it was horrible working conditions. Women had to work from 4 in the morning,*

*till 4 in the afternoon, take breaks standing up outside. There would be girls come in in the morning with their legs all swelled up, feet to where they couldn't get 'em in shoes. I don't think a bunch of men would've did it. I don't think you could've got the work out of men that them women did. Men would walk away.*

*Some social programs did hurt the people that could work. They'd say, "What am I going to work for?" The good people that would give you a day's work, they was getting better jobs,*

*going into Washington to the spinning mill. Back then, as soon as the kids got out of school they wanted to go right to the crab house and make some money. Now they don't want to go to no crab house. Now they look for something else. Anybody in the crab house is looking for something better because the crabs stink and nobody want it.*

Walter Moore was one of the people who lost their jobs when Blue Channel closed in 1990. Today, wearing factory-blue overalls and a baseball cap, he minds a small grocery store on the lot next to his house. Assisting him is a pit bull who pushes a fierce jowl against the screen door, and a Great Dane who spreads his considerable self along a fence beside the store. The street is hot and smells of pitch, but inside Moore's Community Store the air is cool and dark. There are jars of Mary Janes and jawbreakers and cyan blue bubble gum ice cream.

Walter worked at the Blue Channel crab house for more than 40 years, starting in cold storage and moving up to supervisor. For some years, crab houses employed both white and black women, though their jobs were frequently separate: Black women did the backing and picking, white women doing the weighing and packing. Walter supervised the backers and pickers—as many as 60 employees before labor started dropping off.

"My job was to keep the crabs on the table and keep the women straight," Walter says. "If you didn't get so much out of each woman it killed the profits." Walter hired and fired and broke up an occasional fight, but mostly the work was quiet, keeping track of who took long breaks

or spent an hour in the bathroom. "For every 10 that would work," Walter says, "there would be three that would hide behind somebody."

As supervisor, Walter employed various incentive programs of his own. "I had a stopwatch and I would walk around timing people, encourage them to tighten up a little bit. We had a lot of little things like that to kind of boost the workers. Act like we taking the name of somebody who'd stay in the bathroom three or four hours. There were lots of things you could

do to have them thinking you were going to do such and such a thing to cause them hardship on the job."

By the early '80s, with older pickers leaving and no one taking their jobs, workers were no longer motivated by a stopwatch or a lecture. "We worked many a day when we were supposed to have 40 backers and it would be 25 at the table. It used to be like a family, people would pull together. But it got to where it was just dwindling. The spirit wasn't there, people didn't care and the whole thing is just ending, far as I can tell."

Young women who used to follow their mothers and grandmothers to the crab house are making different choices, moving to inland or resort coastal cities for better jobs—or staying put and raising their children on welfare. Those who take picking jobs frequently develop rather different relationships with their employers. "I have met owners who were afraid to go into their own picking rooms," one activist says. "Remember, these were women with knives. The owners were afraid. They'd say, 'It's a goddamn shame when a man can't go in his own picking room without somebody pulling a knife on him.'"

In the five years, as local labor has dwindled, crab houses in North Carolina have relied increasingly on migrant workers. Sea Safari, Belhaven's other crab company, now takes advantage of a U.S. Labor Department program that allows employers to hire foreigners to do jobs domestic laborers are no longer willing to do. Predictably, the influx of Mexicans is controversial: Townspeople and crab house owners

argue that local labor has been hijacked by government assistance programs. Activists say local labor exists—for a price—and that foreign labor allows crab house owners to duck the problems of wages and working conditions that have run domestic workers off. “How do you get workers to do a nasty, smelly job?” says one lawyer who works with crab pickers. “You increase wages and benefits to make the job attractive. Give them a seat with a cushion, give them medical benefits.”

For crab house owners reluctant to hire migrant workers, experienced local labor is a precious commodity—but not, apparently, one they are willing to pay for. If anything, employers owners express an almost bitter amazement that some women choose welfare over picking jobs. “I would hate to have to start hiring Mexicans and I ought not have to,” Georgie Baker says. “There are a lot of people here that are good crab pickers but they’re sitting at home and won’t work. They get food stamps and they get their cheese and their oil. They get on disability if their blood pressure gets a little high. Folks just don’t have to work any more like they used to.”

*Dear Louise, today the boss looked at me like he know I am angry. Mary say she will walk out too but she got that boy to look after. We all got the bills to pay. I am tired of all of it. My feet are swelled up and seem like I can't get the smell out of my hair. Mary say what for they making so much money off us. It gets me angry and the boss know it.*

This letter sits in a Food Land bag at the foot of Ruthellen's bed, along with papers and photographs of her sister Louise. Louise lived in an apartment in Brooklyn through much of the '50s and '60s, but the sisters wrote—dozens of letters about husbands and children and recipes and work.

Ruthellen, who refuses to divulge more about her age than “in the lower 80s” lives in a small house near the swamp. In the winter tundra swans fly over her yard, but now martins hawk insects and water snakes nod against iridescent logs. It is best at night, black air over blackwater. Unlike the sky at sea, where space swings out to the stars, creek air at night closes around you with the sounds and smells of swamp creatures. Cottonmouths, swamp cats, bears. Lying in a tent near blackwater you do not ponder your insignificance in the cosmos; on blackwater you curl happily under the blanket, considering your imminent dismemberment.

Ruthellen claims to love “swamp living,” and says that “God hisself a little spooked by the swamps and proud of hisself for making them.”

Like a lot of pickers, Ruthellen worked at one crab house or another for most of her life, raised children on the money she made and has nieces and cousins working there still. *Unlike* most pickers, Ruthellen is willing to talk about the hardships of the job—willing, she says, because she's “tired to death of eel talk”—by which she means “hard-working women protecting the mens”—and because she's retired. “I have gone and they can't do nothing to me now,” she said. “I got me a little something coming in and my son helps me out and I don't need 'em.”

“For most of the years I was there it weren't nothing but bossman taking advantage,” she said. “Keep you on your feet all day, sometimes until supper, pay you hardly nothing. Children want to eat, need boots for the winter. Bossman's children had boots for the winter. I ain't saying they was living high, I'm just saying what there was won't spread much.”

Ruthellen says it took her a long time to “see things for the truth of them.” She and her husband, a logger, were happy and lived off their income and the creeks. “We was a sea-food family through and through. My sister cut fish and all us shucked oysters back when

there was oysters. My uncles fished and did a little crabbin'. It made sense with water all around you that's where you get your living. Wasn't much money but you kept a little gar-

want to fight when they turn around and take the schools from black folks.

“Then I go into the crab house and my granbaby don't have boots and the bossman

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**“IF YOU WAS ME YOU DIDN'T THINK ABOUT THE SMELL OR YOUR SWOLLED-UP FEET,” SAYS ONE PICKER. “YOU WAS GLAD TO HAVE A JOB. YOU WAS GLAD THE BOSSMAN CIVIL TO YOU. YOU SAID, ‘THANK YOU, BOSSMAN.’”**

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den and you got by. If you was me you didn't think about the smell or your swolled-up feet. You was glad to have a job. You was glad the bossman civil to you. You said, ‘Thank you, Bossman.’ You said, ‘Thank you, Lord.’”

Then, in the late '60s, one of Ruthellen's cousins became involved in the Hyde County school boycott, protesting a desegregation plan that called for closing two black schools. For an entire year, students refused to go to school and several times were jammed into jail cells. Others held demonstrations, marched on the capitol in Raleigh. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* covered the events and TV networks sent camera crews to interview parents and activists fighting to keep their schools alive.

“Nobody thought things around here could catch fire but it did,” says Ruthellen. “People has got pride, even if it takes something to get you to see it in yourself. Those demonstrations made a little change in me. They had shot and killed the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and much as you respected the man it made you

drives a nice car and it was working on the nerves in my stomach and I quit.” Ruthellen refused to pick crabs for a season; without a car to drive to Washington or Greenville, she kept children in her home and did house cleaning. but there were bills to pay and she returned to work the following spring.

*It was different, though. I had got mad and got away from it. When I went back I still put in a good day's work but I didn't want no pat on the back. Used to be I would be waiting for somebody to say something nice to me but now I was doing it for myself and my children. I seen the bossman's car and I say, he wants more and more, he ain't never happy. I put supper on the table and I'm glad I could do it and proud I could do it. I would say to myself, I ain't doing someplace in this world and taking care of my family because of peoples. I'm doing it in spite of peoples. ■*

# Tides Turning

BY MELINDA RULEY

**O**ver the years, in the dusty attic of the old firehouse, the Belhaven Memorial Museum has been home to myriad treasures: a Cyclops pig, an ingrown toenail, an electric drill that killed a local man standing in a puddle. For my cousins and me, visiting

our grandmother in a town as quiet as Belhaven, it was no small consolation to spend an afternoon squatting on the museum's cool floorboards, inspecting jars filled with pickled fetuses, deformed farm animals, rattlesnakes, tumors.

Belhaven is one of those towns that gets written up in travel books with names like *Quaint and Curious Stopovers*. There is the renovated rail car that houses the chamber of commerce; there is the noon whistle and a local paper that publishes the names of people who went shopping in Greenville, the number of doors found open by police, editorials reminding residents to be nice to strangers.

Belhaven is a popular stopover for yachters en route to Miami or New York via the Intra-

coastal Waterway, and these "boat people" are frequently seen running downtown's one red light in golf carts provided by downtown's one hotel and marina. If you approach Belhaven by water, as the boat people motoring up Pantego Creek do, you see a town of colonial and Victorian houses, alabaster pink and eggshell, turreted, scalloped and fretted, with scrolled dormers and candytuft in the yard. This is the part of town that cleans up well for the Independence Day parade, the part where you can buy a drugstore orangeade and watch boats pull in and out of the creek. This is the part of town Belhaven shows strangers, and if you stop in at the renovated rail car and ask the public-information officer for directions to the streets where the town's crab pickers live, she'll give you a look, shush her voice and point north off Pantego Creek. "That's over in colored town," she'll say.

Several blocks off the water the turrets and scrolled dormers disappear, replaced by mill houses with asphalt siding and mobile homes buried inside add-on porches and bedrooms, ornamented with rusted antenna rigs and Co-Cola machines. In the oyster-shell driveways

outside, teenagers drape across bicycles or slap half-heartedly at each other, coping with the heat. Window fans are propped in sills, and from inside houses that smell of kerosene and a thousand Sunday dinners people watch for the summer storms that detonate the air and make the streets steam.

Every afternoon, after clocking out at the Baker Crab Company, Velma Murray is "at home," a condition she signals by hanging her plastic crab picking apron on the clothesline. In the early evening, Velma goes downtown to visit her mother in the small hospital beside Pantego Creek, but while the apron is out she sits with friends. Depending on the weather, Velma positions herself on the front porch, where she fusses at a rooster across the street, or in an easy chair set up in the corner of her kitchen convenient to the TV, the telephone and a large box of vials and bottles, the medicines she uses for arthritis and a "nervous stomach." A pastel Jesus-with-children hangs over the chair; behind it, in a dark foyer heavily decorated with dolls and family portraits and furniture wrapped in factory plastic, there is a black-velvet tiger painting. With the right angle,

it looks as if the gentle people of Galilee are about to meet a grisly jungle death. Velma calls her house "my little glory."

Each evening at suppertime, Velma's son Vincent comes to fetch her in his car and drive her to the Pungo District Hospital, where Velma's mother, Ellen, lies curled in a fetal position. Since her mother is unable to talk, Velma takes up the slack: she is full of mama-bee intensity, eyeing the nurses, taking phone calls (in a way, Velma is "at home" everywhere she goes) and chatting with the other patients. Not even Geraldo, shouting over a fight that has broken out between his guests on the TV overhead, can compete. When a tray of food Velma holds the tube of liquid mashed potatoes to her mother's mouth and assumes a no-nonsense tone. "Ellen, don't you spit it out now," she says. "Ellen—swallow!"

*My mama worked to the crab house all her lifetime, until she started getting elderly. She raised all us down there. My sisters tried to work down there but it seemed like it didn't agree with them. I started when I was around 13; they let me work on mama's number—that was back when they would let children work so they could*

*help themselves. I was so small they had a little stool for me. In 1945 I started going to New York to work some. I worked on Second Avenue in a garment factory where you nail studs into clothes; then I worked in a saccharine factory. But I always came back here to the crabs. I was working down there all the way through high school. I bought my cap and gown with crab money and they weren't paying more than about 7 cent a pound.*

*I grew up knowing Sam Murray and he asked me to marry him and I said no. But we messed around until finally we did marry. He worked to the crab house too, worked down to the warehouse, did a lot of jobs down there. One day he got messed up real bad down there to the plant. One of those cranes they use to lift the crabs up fell on him and broke both his legs. He didn't work after that.*

*But there were good years when we was both working the crabs in the same place down at Blue Channel. My husband was so deep in love with me that when I went down there he would always have me nice crabs—Honey, I'd have a great big table full of big crabs. That's back when crabs was crabs, big and red. I'm telling you, I have picked way on over five pounds of meat an hour. I'd go to work at 5 o'clock and by 8 in the morning I'd have over 25 pounds of meat picked.*

*I worked to the crab house most of my life and I was deep in it and I loved it. My daughters they would say, "Oh, she down in that nasty place" and turn their nose up. And I say, "Yeah, but didn't I give you that money when you went to school?" I had six head of children and every one of them graduated from high school and three of them went to college. Me and my husband went to three finance companies and borrowed the money for those kids. And we worked and we paid that money back. We paid that back our own selves from the crab house.*

Straight out of the water, the Atlantic blue crab is October blue, with a neatly sutured, pearly underbelly and a bad temper. Abandoned on a pier, a blue crab will make a sidelong break for the water; if cornered it will lunge; if snuck up on from behind it will arch up on its front legs and throw a fighting claw back over its carapace. The blue crab is the guerrilla soldier of the river bottom, full exoskeleton jacket, a canny scavenger cloaked in eel grass, thriving on the misfortunes of other species.

The crab's resilience has stood it well in North Carolina's coastal rivers, long poisoned by agriculture and industry. Chemicals from the silos and sacks of corporate farms flow through a network of ditches, and crop dusters, nose-diving between pine stands, frequently spray creeks as well. According to U.S. Public Information Research Group, Texasgulf, a phosphate mining company situated on the south side of the Pamlico River, led the state in releases of toxic chemicals in 1990. On sticky summer nights Texasgulf sits in a yellow haze, looking as if it alone has survived the end of the world.

North Carolina's coastal rivers have been toxic for so long that a kind of comfortable denial has set in: You can't always catch your supper off the pier anymore, but people still check their crab pots and bait their lines. The only realists are those commercial fishermen and crabbers who have found themselves motoring further and further out to sound, away from the leaks and runoffs, the effluent and busted waste pipes. Their stories are scary and weird: barnacles eaten off the bottoms of boats, crabs with holes clear through their shells, fish flinging themselves onto the banks to escape the poisoned water.

Wayne and Ann Braddy, owners of L.A. Seafood on Pungo Creek, are two of the commercial fishermen concerned about the health

of the river. Ann Braddy, wearing an Achy Breaky Heart T-shirt and mules, loads 50-pound crates of bait fish and talks about the sores and deformities she's seen culling fish and the effect of the sick river on the people who try to make a living off of it. "It's just sad what's happened," she says. "There aren't many jobs to begin with here, and the commercial fisherman is losing his for good."

Wayne comes from a long line of fishermen, and in his lifetime he has tended to his lines and pots and watched the rivers die: Oysters, sensitive filter-feeders, are now long gone; striped bass and Jack Pikes, Wayne says, are rare. He has snapshots of nets so coated with oxygenous algae they float to the surface. The most worried he got, he says, was when the crabs started looking sick, with holes so big you could see their gills working. "Crabs can take a lot," he says. "You can keep crabs alive in the bathtub. But enough pollution will drive them away."

It is difficult, in a part of the state desperate to hold onto what few industries have settled there, to fight the consequences of those industries. In the early '70s a businessman bought, cleared, drained and cultivated 55,000 acres of Hyde County marshland for a corporate farm called First Colony Farms. The 55,000 acres were meant to be the beginning of a 373,000-acre project, but First Colony was discouraged by the costs and difficulty of removing the peat bog that covered the marsh and made cultivation by conventional methods impossible.

After joining forces with a new company called Energy Transition Corporation, First Colony Farms applied to a government agency called U.S. Synthetic Fuels for money to mine the peat and convert it to marketable methanol—hoping to use tax dollars to remove the peat and make a profit to boot. In 1982, U.S. Synthetic Fuels bypassed economic and environmental concerns and promised nearly half a million dollars in price supports and loan guarantees. The decision, many believed, was a transparent concession to several influential founders of Energy Transition Corporation—including William Casey, Ronald Reagan's campaign manager and later CIA director.

Downeast, opposition to First Colony emerged and grew: Environmental groups viewed the mining project as a clear violation of wetlands regulations, and commercial fishermen were already feeling the effects of clearing and draining the initial 55,000 acres. "Removing peat is kind of like removing the filter from a cigarette," says one Hyde County fisherman, "All them chemicals went right down them ditches into the water, plus which all the rain-water. People don't realize what an overabundance of fresh water will do to a river like this. This ain't Kerr Lake, this is a estuary."

Ann Braddy did much of the organizing against First Colony Farms, lassoing local commercial fishermen unaccustomed to public forums or political protest and convincing them to support the newly formed Pungo River Association. Braddy and her fellow demonstrators came to public hearings armed with information and nerve; they also had something not every community protest has: the stink of a political scandal. William Casey's involvement in the taxpayer-funded project caught the attention of news editors at CBS and *MacNeil Lehrer*, who sent TV crews to eastern North Carolina. Between the media and pressure on state regulators, permits were delayed and First Colony's peat-mining ambitions eventually collapsed.

The victory was substantial but not, according to Wayne Braddy, enough. On a warm spring morning he takes me out on his boat to check crab pots along Belhaven's breakwater and talks about the river's fate in a county where money makes most decisions. First Colony Farms may have slunk away but the power structure it represented still exists. "People look at the bigger industries but it's the little ones that'll get us," Wayne says, referring to the large family and corporate farms that spread along the creek banks downeast—farms owned not by outsiders but by neighbors and friends. "Money means a lot to people down here," Wayne says. "They want a certain way of life even if it means destroying another way of life. That's the way it works. The whole place is going down."

Turning the boat in a slow circle around each buoy, Wayne hefts each pot, puts a fresh piece of mud shad in the bait pocket, dumps the crabs into a crate and drops the pot back into the water. The crabs have seemed healthier in the last few years, Wayne says, but the catch is still way down, especially in the creeks. "Sooks used to come up the creeks in the summer," he says. "But when the quality of the water changes they don't come up as far. We don't get near as many as we used to and if it gets bad enough, the jimmies'll leave too."

In the middle of a conversation about the abuses of money and power, Ann Braddy turns her attention to the crab pickers. Ann worked in the office at Blue Channel before it closed, and she argues that it is the workers, not their employers, who manipulate power. "If your company hires all black workers," she says, "and the federal government is on their side, you can't win. Pretty soon the companies will be at the women's beck and call instead of the women being at the company's beck and call."

The idea of crab house owners at the beck and call of their employees is absurd to Janice Ellegor. Janice, a loan officer with the Community Developers of Beaufort-Hyde, works in a tiny brick building on the T.G. "Sonny Boy" Joyner Highway, between Belhaven and Swan Quarter. She is one of a handful of activists who have worked to procure decent housing, transportation and job opportunities for people in Beaufort and Hyde counties. Crab pickers, she says, are women of pride and accomplishment despite the tedium and low pay. "I know the work is hard and I know what they get paid to do it," she says.

Janice and her family moved to Beaufort County from New York in 1976. She and her husband wanted to raise their kids in rural North Carolina, and Janice had family in Pantego, a crossroads just west of Belhaven. "I wanted to try to bring the children to a slower

pace in life," she says. "I wanted to let them smell the roses, not just skip over them."

After years living in New York, Janice found the going tough. She had built a career in business administration in New York but found that jobs, particularly jobs for black women, were scarce. "I was taken aback," she says. "When we moved here I did not realize the underlying racial thing. It's in New York too, but it's so discreet you never really pick it up. Down here I could not get a job in my field for anything in the world."

When, not long after moving to Beaufort County, their house burned to the ground, Janice and her husband considered their options, including returning north, and dug their heels in. "The Devil always has alternate plans for you," she says. "If we were truly committed to change we would have to turn our backs on him and keep our eyes to the sky." The family bought a repossessed doublewide and Janice took a job at Sea Safari, a crab house on the banks of Pantego Creek in downtown Belhaven.

"It was tedious work, hard work," Janice says. "They say it's unskilled labor and people think just sitting there plucking crab chunk meats out is easy. It is not."

Janice found the picking so difficult she

would take crabs home to practice. A neighbor watched the children. There were no health benefits, no sick days, and the work day was tightly controlled. "You had a half-hour for lunch and you could take one 15-minute break," Janice says. "But you couldn't go by yourself, when you wanted to. You had to go outside on a deck with everyone else. Smoke, drink a soda. At that time they weren't even paying a dollar a pound. But who you gonna tell when you need the work?"

Janice picked crabs at Sea Safari for six months, an experience she says helps her understand both the hardships of the job and the reluctance of workers to complain. "One thing I have found with the pickers," she says, "is you *cannot* get people to tell you what the problems are. And though it's frustrating, I understand it. This is their livelihood; they don't want to put themselves in a position where they can't work. They have to look forward to a paycheck every Friday."

Until recently, Janice knows, that paycheck, however small, could be counted on by local women willing to endure the job. That certainty is now compromised by the arrival of Mexican workers in some crab houses. "The scuttlebutt I've heard," Janice says, "is [Mexicans] are being hired because they work for lower wages. That means you have some ladies forced into retirement and it's unfair because that's all they know."

Furthermore, before crab house owners began hiring Mexicans, domestic workers had a crucial bit of leverage: Crab houses may have been the only game in town, but they could not

open their doors without local labor. That leverage has allowed certain privileges—benefits—of no small importance to the women. "I can be home with my children if I have to," says one picker. "When I needed to be taking care of my grandmother I knew I could do that without losing my job. I always know the boss will let me come back."

Crab picking has not been without its rewards, particularly in a county in which black women have long struggled for economic independence while trying to keep families intact. If the pickers, particularly the older women, have suffered injustices of pay and working conditions, if they have worked in situations in which dissent has seemed futile or dangerous, they have also won a kind of reparation, consolations of pride and dignity. "It's true the younger women are making other choices," says Janice Ellegor. "And this job is not for everyone. But these are not women I would look down on or consider less successful. They raised families, kept food on the table, paid off their homes and cars by those crabs. When their husbands died they had funds to bury them. For a lot of women, crab houses were a lifeline."

**O**n a May morning Goldring Satchell baits a hook and casts into a narrow creek behind the crab house. Goldring's daughter, Mary, cradles her own pole a few feet away, but it is Goldring who has all the luck. Her bobber sinks on every cast and each time a fish bites there is a small celebration: laughter, a little hopping dance and a triumphant splash in the bucket.

Goldring has picked crabs for the last 50 years of her life, raising 10 children on crab-house money. She's participated in walkouts, gotten fired, worked weekends to make ends meet. Her accounts of the years—the pay, the hours, the smell—are cheerful, delivered with Goldring's quick laugh and wide smile. "It was beautiful work," she says.

Her daughter Mary just shakes her head. Like a lot of the daughters and granddaughters of pickers, she has chosen not to follow her mother, not to join the dwindling ranks of young women beginning their working lives in a crab house.

*I can't really fault the younger women for not working at the crab house, says 33-year-old Carolyn Jones, one of the youngest pickers at the Baker Crab Company. Myself, I don't mind the job. If you know you got to make a living, it's like any other job, you put yourself into it. The onliest thing about a crab factory is there is no retirement fund. Here I am 33 years old; when I get 60 I don't know what kind of shape I'm going to be in, but there's nothing to offer to me. There's no kind of health benefits, no retirement. You see people that have worked at crab houses for 40-some years and they don't have nothing. I can see now why the older ladies work so late in life; it's because they never can put anything aside. They don't ever get to rest.*

Georgie Baker, owner of the Baker Crab Co. in Belhaven, understands that his business depends on a dependable supply of workers and that young pickers are scarce and getting scarcer. "I'm making out pretty well with the ones I got now," he says. "I've told Carolyn, I

said, 'Carolyn, I promise you, as long as I've got the crew I've got now and ya'll come in here and work and I can keep up this production they ain't going to be no Mexicans down here.' But I said when it gets down to my livelihood, where I can't keep a volume, I'm going to have to do something."

Halfway through the morning, something strange happens out at the creek where Goldring and Mary are fishing. A zeppelin appears on the western horizon and floats slowly overhead, its oblong shadow moving over marsh grass and water. Goldring stands her ground and watches the aircraft, one eye still on her line. But Mary pulls up bait and walks away and watches the zeppelin from a distance, apparently unwilling to stand beneath the flight path. Georgie Baker, who has been tilling ground with his tractor, walks over to tease her: "You ain't gonna let that thing fly over you, are you?" Later he says to me, "See how superstitious? And that's the younger generation."

If Goldring's daughter was wary of a cylindrical airship hovering over Baker's creek, she was also inquisitive, judging from a distance. When I ask her why she chose not to work in the crab house, she laughs and shakes her head again. Like the zeppelin, her mother's work has likewise been the subject of cautious scrutiny. Before she can explain, Goldring jumps in: "As much money as I spent on 'em, paying for their education?" she says. "I sent 'em too far to let 'em come back to the crab house. I always wanted my children to have a better life."

As for Goldring, she will pick crabs one more season, supporting herself and a sick husband, helping children and grandchildren.

Goldring sits off by herself in the picking room, where, she says, she has "conversations with God—just talking to my Lord." One day I ask her what they're talking about, and she gives me her same wide smile, though the answer is surprising. "I'm sitting here hoping the Lord'll bless me away from here," she says. "I don't want to die tired. When death comes I want to be rested. One day I want to walk home and say, 'Lord, thank you I don't have to go down there no more.'" ■