

Celebrating the WORKBOATS of Core Sound

Photograph by Lawrence S. Earley.

Whether it's a shrimpboat or a haulboat, a trawler or a skiff, there's something about fishing vessels at work on Core Sound that commands attention. Perhaps it's their white hulls, brilliant in the morning sun, or their practiced movements on the water as they harvest their catch. Perhaps it's the trail of seabirds behind them clamoring for a portion of the haul. Or perhaps it's because many of these workboats are decades old, with long histories on the water, and that they face an uncertain future.

On March 1, Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center in Harkers Island is hosting a day-long symposium and photographic exhibit celebrating the role and importance of the area's historic workboats. Titled "The Workboats of Core Sound," the public event will present talks by Core Sound fishermen, historians and writers on the cultural heritage of the area's fishing vessels. The symposium and exhibit will be free of charge.

There's more to these boats than their native good looks. A workboat is not only an individual signature of the man who made them, but also a distinctive expression of the village in which they were made. A local eye can easily distinguish a Harkers Island workboat from one built in the nearby village of Atlantic. Each workboat in the Core Sound region is a link to families, communities, local landscapes and also to the types of fishing that the region offers.

"Workboats have played a critical role in the Down East communities for more than two centuries," explained Lawrence S. Earley, a writer and photographer from Raleigh who is organizing the event. "The symposium will focus attention on the history and styles of Core Sound's workboats and on some of the area's legendary boat builders. Such an appraisal is long overdue, especially as commercial fishing continues to decline in the area and the boats disappear."

Also speaking at the symposium will be Michael Alford, a maritime historian


The Kimberly M. Smith was built by James Gillikin of Harkers Island in 1977 for Luther Lewis Seafood in Atlantic to be used as a "run boat" for long-haul fishing. The run boat is dispatched by the fish house to a long-hauler working in Core or Pamlico sounds. A bailing net on board transfers the fish from the nets to the run boat's hold, and the boat then returns to the fish house where the fish are packed.

and former curator at the N.C. Maritime Museum in Beaufort; David Cecelski, a historian and author of several books about the coast; Barbara Garrity-Blake, an anthropologist from Gloucester and a member of the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission; and Bland Simpson, writer and member of the singing group The Red Clay Ramblers.

In addition, fishermen Danny Mason of Sea Level, Buster Salter and Jonathan Robinson of Atlantic, and Bradley Styron of Cedar Island will join in a panel discussion about the future of long-haul fishing in Core Sound and other issues regarding commercial fishing.

An exhibit of Earley's black and white photographs will accompany the symposium and stay on view through May 1. Earley has been documenting the workboats of the region for several years, focusing especially on the community of Atlantic. "I fell in love with Atlantic's workboats because so many of them had a lot of age on them and yet were still in use on the water," Earley said.

"The Workboats of Core Sound" symposium and photographic exhibit are funded by grants to the Core Sound Museum from the North Carolina Humanities Council and the North Caroliniana Society.

"We're pleased to receive these generous grants," said Karen Amspacher, director of the Core Sound Museum. "And we are honored to be working with the Humanities Council, the N.C. Arts Council and especially with the fishermen and the scholars who will come together to address the importance of these workboats, both to the community and to our recorded history." 

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