

by Lou Ann Homan

The sky is brilliant blue with not even a trace of a cloud as I set out on my bike. The ride is easy and within minutes I am pulling into Morty's driveway. I am sure I have the right house as the yard is littered with fishing line, buoys, old nets, and a truck that has FAT BOYS written all over it. Morty and his Dad, James Barrie, are part of the oldest tradition of the island. They are fisherman. Maybe it would be better to say they are caretakers of the sea. On this day I am going with Morty as he gathers clams from the clam beds. He is only thirteen years old and his parents do not want him out on the beds alone. I am not sure how I got the job as 'clam bed supervisor.' I think, possibly, by default. I am definitely more excited than Morty about this morning adventure on Ocracoke Island in North Carolina.

I am barefoot and carry my large bag with camera and note pad so I can take photos and notes as I sit in the boat and wait for Morty to gather his clams. The boat is old and wooden with a bare coating of white paint and I climb down into the boat and wait for Morty to untie the lines and set us off sailing. There are no seats so I ask him where I should sit? He clears off an old cooler and I sit there taking notice of the life jackets...just in case. Morty stands and steers the boat with a wooden tiller. I watch the Ocracoke light house and shoreline shrink to doll house proportion and turn my attention to the marked clam beds ahead of us in the Pamlico Sound. The boat begins to slow and then stops fifty yards or so away. Morty anchors the boat and says, "Let's go." At first I raise my eyebrows as I look at him and then realize that I have become one of the crew. I tell him I didn't know that I would be clamming and that I am probably not very good at it...but he says it is easy and that we will be done in no time. I notice we have not carried any clam rakes and ask him about that. "We crawl on our hands and knees." I knew that.

As we walk through the warm water he tells me to be careful of broken shells and stingrays although he says he has never been stung. I ask questions as we walk. I want to know about clamming and fishing and his family. Morty wants to be a fisherman when he grows up to carry on the tradition of the sea. He is good in math and wants a college education so that he can protect the environment for fishermen. He is a thirteen year old kid with a grown up brain, I think. We reach the clam beds and he shows me how to gather the clams with my feet and hands. I am clumsy at first. "We only need 500," he says.

I sink my hands into the warm sand and come up with fistfuls of clams. He tells me that it takes three years to grow these in the beds his father has taken care of. We are mostly quiet as we work. I am doing my part and the container is almost half full. He thinks we have 450 clams, but I don't want to leave until we have the 500. Finally it is time to leave. I am

satisfied with the job well done as we wade back to the boat. He sprints into the boat as I watch looking for a ladder. There is no ladder. I tell him I'm not thirteen and not great at sprinting into boats. He hands me a bucket and tells me to turn it upside down getting all of the air out. I easily climb in with that help. We rinse off the clams. He tells me they are going directly to the market, fresh clams for the tourists. As he starts the motor I know that on this morning I have been a welcomed guest into another world. As we pull into the dock I tell Morty that he can call me anytime. He gives me a smile and a small bucket of clams to take back to this, my spit of land, Ocracoke Island.

Boxes of Clams:



Morty Cleaning Fish:



(Photo Needed)