Chapter Update: June’s Audubon NC annual meeting was a wonderful success. Special thanks to Charley Winterbauer, Diane Butzin, Kathy Hannah, David Paynter, Larry & Diane Wyte, the Bald Head Island Conservancy, and all the trip leaders, volunteers and participants. Thanks too to the Audubon NC staff and to Francis Grant-Suttie from National Audubon, VP for the Atlantic Flyway.

This is a special edition of the Skimmer. By great good luck, Mike Vaughan was willing to share memories of growing up on Hewletts Creek in the 50s. Our hope is that this article will inspire each of us to restore our local habitats as Mike is doing in his current home. You can contact Mike at mhvaughan@bellsouth.net.

Paradise in the 50’s by Mike Vaughan

This is a story about a boy’s life in a natural paradise in the 1950’s, New Hanover County, written by that same boy, sixty years later. Prepare to enter a very different world.

I grew up “on the sound”, Masonboro Sound, one foot on land and one in a boat –

Looking up Hewlett’s Creek (at low tide) was taken from the point we lived on, looking up-creek. The white house in the background belonged to Addison Hewlett Jr., a descendant of the family for which the creek was named.
literally. My parents built a home near the entrance to Hewlett’s Creek about 1950, and gave me freedom to roam land and water, provided I ate some meals with them, slept at home (mostly), and attended school. I was blessed with friends who had the same privileges and shared my interests in the outdoor world. Before I tell you about our idyllic life, let me introduce you to New Hanover County as I knew it in 1950, now utterly transformed.

The population of the county (63,272) was largely within Wilmington (45,043), mostly living in the space presently bounded by the Cape Fear River, Shipyard Boulevard, Kerr Avenue, and Smith Creek. Wrightsville Beach, which was all on the beach island per se, was much as it looks today, with almost no winter residents, while Carolina Beach was considerably smaller than today.

That was it! The rest of the county was largely pine savanna, with only scattered homes along the sounds and the creeks entering them. There were few No Trespassing signs anywhere – none on the beaches, other than Wrightsville and Carolina, all the way up to Topsail Island, because there was literally nothing man-made on them. There was a lighthouse on Bald Head but no development or access except by boat.

In fact, my friends and I felt all the other beaches were ours and always would be. In particular, we used to enjoy camping out on Figure Eight Island and Little Topsail Island and fishing in Mason’s Inlet, Rich’s Inlet, and Elmore’s Inlet (aka Old Topsail Inlet). For boys, we had good taste. Summer and winter, all months, I lived a vital part of each day on Hewlett’s Creek and the surrounding marshes, waters and islands, especially Masonboro Island, almost visible from our home.

Two friends, Sandy and Rob McEachern, who lived on the opposite side of Hewlett’s Creek, hunted, fished, and shrimped with me. Their father made us a 100 foot long seine we used for shrimping on out-going tides in the creek on summer mornings. We would lazily swim and drift down creek with the net, stopping occasionally to pull it to shore and empty it of assorted fish, crabs, and shrimp. The net contents sometimes included bizarre and beautiful creatures, too, such as Aplysia (giant sea slugs), colorful starfish, and a variety of edible and non-edible crabs. Black Skimmers were always with us, as well as lots of Oyster Catchers, Willets, Herons of all types, Egrets, and shore birds.

By noon we headed home with several bushels of shrimp, and then, to avoid the work of heading the shrimp, called ladies in Wilmington whom we knew were happy to get very fresh shrimp at a good price and had maids to handle the heading job. Budding entrepreneurs.

The birds on and around Hewlett’s Creek were varied and endlessly fascinating, and I constantly expanded my life list. At higher tides we frequently had Ospreys and Bald Eagles fishing for mullet in the creek, and it was quite usual to watch Eagles stealing the
Ready for action is of my friend, now brother-in-law, Harry Latimer standing on the cabin roof of his family’s boat, the Mary A., in which we spent many happy hours. I think we are behind Figure Eight island, but it may have been Little Topsail. Jim Evans, sprawled out on the cabin roof, still lives in New Hanover County. I recall a day when we were anchored in an inlet fishing, with Jim up there on the cabin roof, when he suddenly hooked a large channel bass. He couldn’t fight the fish and hold onto the roof, too, so we had to take turns up there, holding onto him by his belt!

Ospreys’ fish right in front of our house. Ducks were common on the creek, too, and in winter we boys hunted for them. The first I proudly brought home were two Red-breasted Mergansers. I explained to my mother how to prepare them, using only the skinned breast meat, but the results still tasted more like fish than fowl! No more ducks were cooked in our home, though I tried valiantly for the Teal, Black ducks, Ruddy ducks, Bufflehead, Scaup, Pintails, and occasional Brant that flew past our blind.

One special place where we hunted ducks was Big Bay inside the marshes behind Masonboro Island, reached by going up Houseboat Creek, which entered Masonboro Channel right behind Masonboro Inlet. The Bay was (is?) quite large, many acres in area at high tide, and the McEachern boys’ father told us that until the Great 1933 hurricane it was full of Eel Grass which attracted flocks of Canvasback and other ducks in winter. In summer we would often spend the day on the island, collecting buckets of clams at low tide in the creek’s clean, sandy pools.

I also hunted and fished with two other friends, Harry Latimer and Jim Evans. The Latimers had a 23-foot cabin cruiser in which we spent many, many hours fishing for Channel Bass and Bluefish in the inlets north of Wrightsville Beach. The procedure was to anchor in the inlet as high tide began to recede and to trail our lines out in the current, with chunks of mullet on stout
Ready for ducks shows me prepared to go duck hunting, standing in my dinghy with a basket of duck decoys. Beside the dinghy is my much loved cypress skiff, so light it could operate in an inch or two of water. I miss it greatly. Behind me, across the creek from our house, are the homes of the Hugh McEachern and William Head families.

hooks. Hours of sitting and talking about the things that eternally interest teenage boys, while waiting for fish, were punctuated by minutes of frantic action when they arrived, sometimes on a grand scale. I vividly recall an afternoon when Masons Inlet literally turned red with a big school of large Channel Bass. The whole inlet, as far as we could see. We took turns standing on the top of the cruiser cabin to watch in awe.

In retrospect, I realize now that it was highly significant that, by and large, we were often the sole people on the beach or creek or ocean in these adventures. Thus our sense of unique ownership of what lay around us. Likewise, for better or for worse, our enjoyment of all these seaside activities was increased by the fact that, apart from encountering few, if any, No Trespassing signs, there were also virtually no regulations affecting us, apart from the need to obtain hunting licenses. Saltwater fishing of all types was completely unregulated, with a few exceptions pertaining to commercial fishermen. For practical purposes we lived in a state of nature, enjoying nature, by the sea.

I also enjoyed some inland hunting back then with George McEachern, related to Sandy and Rob. He and his father owned excellent English pointers and took me on quail hunts in the pine savannas around Wilmington. One of these was on the
My big red drum was caught in 1950 at night when I was fishing with Harry Latimer and his father "Big Harry" in an open boat anchored in Elmore’s Inlet. It weighed 33 lbs and was the biggest fish I have caught in my entire life. Red drum are channel bass, though we never called them by that name.

present location of UNC-W. There must have been hundreds, if not thousands, of coveys of quail in New Hanover County then. How many exist today?

Which brings me back to birds. In my experience, most hunters worth knowing take a genuine interest in nature, beyond just the particular game they hunt. There were quite a few such people around Wilmington back in the 50’s, and one result was that Wilmington regularly put on one of the largest and most productive annual Audubon Christmas Bird Counts on the east coast. Edna Appleberry was the chief organizer, I think, with her husband Cecil being field manager. Knowing my interest in science and wildlife, my father saw to it that I got introduced to the group when I was in high school, and I got to participate in several Christmas counts. It was very exciting to be out in the field with dedicated adults working for a scientifically based purpose. I recall being a bit bewildered by the ability of some in the group to confidently identify birds by their songs alone. And I was impressed by going to the south end of Wrightsville Beach on a cold, windy afternoon to use a high-powered telescope to identify and estimate counts of
gannets and other sea birds diving far out at sea.

However, as impressive as the dedication and skill of the observers were, the most important thing associated with the count came at the end of the day: the dinner served by Mrs. A, as she was known. To come to their house for the dinner, after a long day out birding in the cold, was wonderful. All of her food was good, but, in particular, Mrs. A could produce a rare and superb southern dish known as eggbread, matched, in my experience, only by the quality of that made by my maternal grandmother. If you have not encountered it, eggbread is a rich cornmeal soufflé, consisting of butter, beaten eggs, and a little cornmeal. Eaten hot out of the oven, it was incredibly delicious. I have no idea what the cholesterol content is. My wife has my grandmother’s recipe, but we have considered it presumptuous to make it ourselves.

I could go on and on about the good old days in New Hanover County. They were good. But, while writing, I’ve had a revelation regarding the source of a major interest in my life today. I am building a 20 acre piedmont prairie. It has turned out to be a big job, truly a labor of love. What would lead a person to put years of personal effort into converting forest, which has its own obvious natural benefits, to grassland? Some explicit motivations can be seen at a blog I’ve started on the project, at www.ncprairie.wordpress.com. Behind that, though, is an esthetic drive, and I see now that it comes from my wonderful years out on the marshes and beaches and sea and pine savannas of New Hanover. They and prairie have in common a beauty compounded of elegant repetition of simple visual elements on a regular background.

In building this prairie, to satisfy my desire to see what a significant portion of the piedmont looked like before 1500, I guess I’m also re-creating a bit of my own old home.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to my parents, at rest in a cemetery by Bradley Creek, for giving me the freedom to grow and explore. My father, Mike Vaughan Sr., also loved to visit Masonboro Island, and I believe he initiated the first official effort to bring it under the public protection it enjoys today. He was one of Jesse Helms’ boys, and we differed in our politics, but Dad was a true conservative, whose motivation came from his heart rather than his pocketbook. When he heard, I believe in the 60’s, that there was a move afoot to develop Bald Head Island privately, he went at his own expense to the Nature Conservancy’s headquarters in New York, to try to persuade them to buy out the developers. I don’t know why the Conservancy refused to become involved, but what a treasure was lost.

Looking back, it’s not just the beauty of the Carolina coast and the life of adventure with my friends that I miss; it’s even more the loss of freedom, of lack of constraint in interacting with the natural world. New Hanover County is so changed today that I have no idea how children growing up in it can be given that sense of freedom, but I challenge those of you who are raising boys and girls to try to bring a measure of it into their lives.

Thanks to Nancy Buckingham whose idea it was for Mike to write this article.
Parting Shot...

Suggestions and submissions welcome. Please send them to dmpaynter@earthlink.net