

EDITOR'S PICK FEATURED

POUNDING STAKES: Exhibit looks at coastal fishing traditions

Cliff Bellamy Updated 15 hrs ago



Submitted/Courtesy of Dan Smith

Eddie Willis and crew members pound stakes and set up nets in Core Sound. The photo is from Dan Smith's exhibit "A Mess of Feesh."

DURHAM -- Dan Smith points to a photo showing the bow of a new wooden boat still under construction. The boat, Smith says, is fourth-generation Harkers Island fisherman Eddie Willis' gift to his daughter Maggie, now 3 years old. Willis says the boat is the last wooden vessel he will buy, and by making it a gift to his daughter, it is also his way of perhaps passing along a family tradition of fishing.

For the past 13 months Smith, an MFA candidate in Duke University's program of Experimental and Documentary Arts, has been photographing and filming Willis, his wife Alison and other members of their crew as they catch shrimp, flounder, red snapper, black sea bass and other fish, many of which are shipped to local stores and restaurants. The photos, along with a video work in progress, are on view through April 4 at The Carrack gallery. Both Eddie and Alison Willis (who is a member of the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission) will be at the opening reception for the exhibit Saturday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Smith grew up outside Durham, and spent 10 years in Washington as a national security policy analyst before returning home in 2006. After returning, he noticed the change in North Carolina's economy -- the loss of tobacco, textiles and furniture. He saw a news report on a program that

put local fishing outfits in contact with local restaurants. He decided to document the fishing industry, which remains "an economic and cultural driver" as tobacco and textiles once were.

Smith asked Tom Rankin, former director of Duke's Center for Documentary Studies, to help put him in touch with a family on North Carolina's coast who made their living by fishing. When he first met Eddie and Alison Willis, "I assumed I would meet them for half an hour and they would show around, and they would be one of the stories I told," Smith said. He ended up spending seven hours talking with Eddie, and the project, titled "A Mess of Feesh," which is part of Smith's MFA thesis, began.

Eddie Willis "has this long family tradition" of fishing, "but he has a 21st century business going," Smith said. Their business, Core Sound Seafood, has a fish processing house and sells to outlets from Carrboro to Japan, he said. Willis "is trying to work with other fishermen to teach them these business practices," Smith said.

Although he uses modern power equipment, Willis uses methods that have been used for about 300 years. Several photos in this exhibit document one of those methods -- that of pounding stakes into the channel and placing nets around the stakes. Because of the way the nets are arranged, fish cannot escape from the trap, but they stay alive (and fresh for buyers), and what cannot be used goes back into the sea, Smith said. One photo shows Willis' pickup truck outfitted with a boom, which creates the holes that are dug into the mud bottom of the sound floor. A photo shows Alberto, one of Willis' employees, with a stake in his hand, preparing to place it in the water.

Smith has several now discarded pieces of stakes -- complete with barnacles -- that were part of this operation. To give a three-dimensional sense of this style of fishing, Smith also has arranged some of the seafood shipping boxes, and included some supplies for making the nets.

To document the process, Smith was with Willis on sometimes 12-hour days, and did chores when he was not taking pictures. "I got my hands dirty quite a bit," he said. "I've headed shrimp with them ... moved nets and pounded stakes," Smith said.

He plans to continue "A Mess of Feesh" beyond the thesis project. He would like to document people in New Bern, Manteo, Wanchese and other Outer Banks communities who make their living fishing. Willis' way of life "is kind of hanging on by its fingernails," Smith said. Willis was very willing to be followed and photographed. "He understands that if this is going to

survive ... that he has to do something to make people aware of it. ... It's not something he does for a living, it's the way he lives, and far fewer people are making the decision to live that way."

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Go & Do

WHAT: Opening reception for Dan Smith's exhibit "A Mess of Feesh"

WHEN: Saturday, March 26, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Exhibit on view through April 4

WHERE: The Carrack, 111 W. Parrish St., Durham

ADMISSION: Free

ALSO: Smith will give an artist talk at 6 p.m. Wednesday at The Carrack.

Cliff Bellamy

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