

You might remember us as the cheeseburger guys, Wofford College's finest appetites—Mike Curtis, John Lane, Mark Olencki and Deno Trakas—but for our latest culinary caper, we took on the fish camps of the upstate. We can't remember why, exactly. Mike wondered what a fish camp was, so maybe that was it—to share our proud southern culture with an apprehensive northerner. But the real reason is probably that none of us can pass up an excuse to eat fried food.

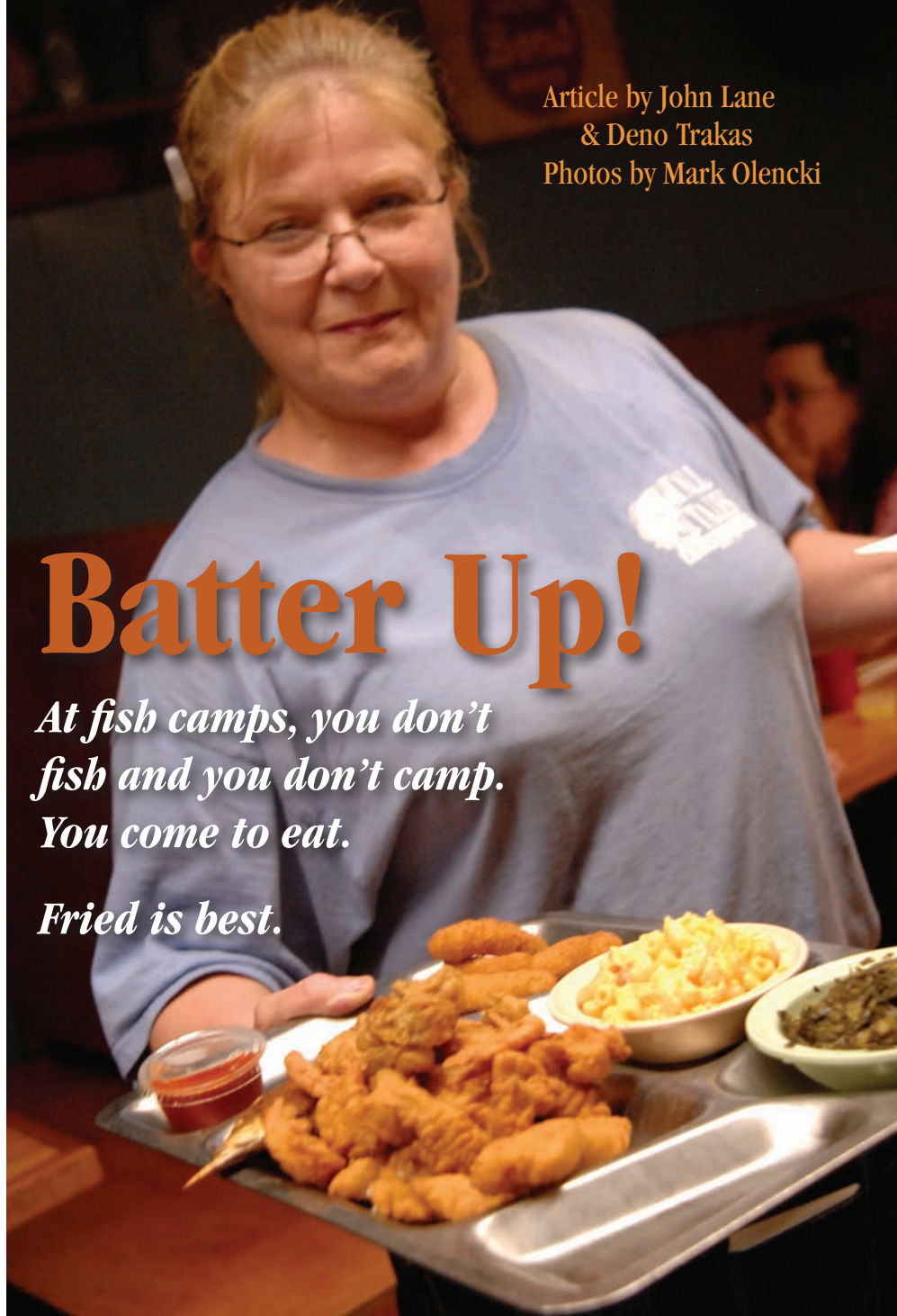
To strengthen our team, in the off-season we drafted Dean Thompson, a Wofford alum, a professor at Presbyterian College and a self-proclaimed lifelong fish camper. We also invited USC-Lancaster professor Stephen Criswell, Mr. Fish Camp, the author of the "Fish Camp" entry in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, but he had some fishy excuse and had to decline.

Stephen, who notes in one of his articles that the Greenville-Spartanburg area is fish-camp-fer-tile with at least a half dozen such establishments, told us we should check out the fish camp near Gaffney that has a fishing-Jesus mural (we didn't find it), and we should venture into North Carolina, too, because that's probably where fish camps originated. But we have a strict rule—no North Carolina—so we limited our research to these fish camps: The Flounder (Spartanburg), The Lighthouse (Spartanburg/Pacolet), Lake Bowen (Lake Bowen), Colonial (Gaffney), Wagon Wheel (Cowpens), Tall Tales (Mayo) and Roebuck (Roebuck). Dean encouraged us to try Blue Ocean Seafood in Clinton, but we knew as soon

Thirty-year waitress Suzie Bass serves it hot at Tall Tales Fish Camp in Mayo. Coupons make already-affordable meals even easier on the wallet.

Summer 2009

Article by John Lane
& Deno Trakas
Photos by Mark Olencki



Batter Up!

*At fish camps, you don't
fish and you don't camp.
You come to eat.*

Fried is best.





Wagon Wheel staff include owner Christian Perry, Levi Ervin (background) and Lois McMakin (below). Lois has worked at the Wagon Wheel for 30 years.

as we walked in the door that we weren't in a real fish camp because the mural on the wall was of the Acropolis in Greece. I think it also had tablecloths.

In his research, Stephen discovered that fish camps "began as simple campsites along local rivers where textile mill workers could fry up the catfish that they caught in their rare moments of free time." One day one of those guys must've realized that he could charge a little money for his fresh fried fish, so he set up a picnic table by his pot of lard and built a rough shed over the works. Stephen says that one of the first to build a one-room fish camp was Luther Lineberger, who set up on the Catawba River in Gaston County in 1948—eventually his shed grew to be a popular restaurant with seating for 500, and



the fish-camp-turned-restaurant model was born and then copied throughout the Carolinas. Since then, this kind of fish camp has

appeared throughout the South (including Florida), and even in New York City. But in some parts of the country (for example, California and Alaska), people have the cockeyed notion that fish camps are places where people fish and camp.

So, is a Carolina fish camp just a restaurant that serves fish? Not exactly. Some fish camps clearly have "Fish Camp" in their name, but The Lighthouse has "Restaurant" on its receipts, and the Wagon Wheel is just the Wagon Wheel, so identification is a little tricky. Probably the most distinguishing characteristic is that fish camps are usually open only on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings (The Flounder also is open on Wednesday). Leland McKelvey, who owns the pop-

ular Lighthouse in Pacolet, just outside of Spartanburg, as well as the equally popular Lake Bowen fish camp, and a third smaller one in Walnut Grove, said The Lighthouse is open just 15 hours a week but does plenty of business and has a steady clientele despite the poor economy. “My business is regulars,” he said.

We asked one of the customers sitting in a booth beside us how often he came. “Oh, every Thursday night.”

“Tonight’s Friday,” Mark said.

“Oh, and Fridays some, too.”

Another regular cruised past in a wheelchair and said hello. Leland shook his hand and hugged the man’s wife—he said he hugs about 30 women every night.

Ken Toney, owner of The Flounder, which is celebrating its 40th year, says he serves 6,000 people in a good week, and most are regulars. The Flounder was voted Best Seafood Restaurant in the Upstate by *Spartanburg Magazine* in 2008.

We were not regulars, and almost everywhere we went, someone would say, “You’re not from around here, are you?” At the Colonial Fish Camp, they spotted us when we dipped our hush puppies in the 52-percent whipped spread and then sprinkled them with the cinnamon that was intended for the sweet potatoes. Another time it was Dean’s bowtie. But in most places Mark, taking pictures of slaw and perch and waitresses, was the giveaway.

We hit The Lighthouse on a Friday night at 6, rush hour—rush hour is always at sunset, Leland said, meaning 6 in February but 8 in May—and we had to stand in line about 15 minutes. He opened The Lighthouse 28 years ago because he went to the Pioneer Fish Camp (now closed, but Roebuck Fish Camp is in the same vicinity) and had to wait an hour and 10 minutes. A shrewd businessman,

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No need for fancy dinnerware; eating from trays, our lads feast on everything from scallops to deviled crab at the Lake Bowen Fish Camp. From left: Deno Trakas, Mike Curtis, John Lane and Dean Thompson.





Allison Ramsey (left) and Tracey Huntly display the goods en route to a table at The Flounder. Owner Ken Toney (below) says The Flounder serves as many as 6,000 customers in a four-day week.

he knew a market when he saw one. In fact, his fish camps, Lake Bowen and The Lighthouse, were both crowded when we visited. The Flounder was, too—it had a line out the door when we arrived at 6:15 and still had a line when we left a little before 8.

Another characteristic of fish camps is that they tend to have fish-related murals, nets and sea things on the walls. The Wagon Wheel's cowboy theme is odd but somehow within the cultural parameters of fish camps; on the other hand, the Acropolis mural is not. The Lighthouse and Lake Bowen fish camps have been painted impressively with scenes of local color, wall to wall and floor to ceiling, by muralist Clive Haynes from Forest City, North Carolina. Also, fish camps tend



to be rustic, with wooden tables and booths and aluminum trays instead of plates. Most fish camps don't serve alcohol. Some don't take credit cards.

The main reason for the popularity of fish camps is consistent, good, plentiful food at a reasonable price. In most fish camps the mainstays are cat-



Juicy scallops are on the menu with other seafood items at The Colonial in Gaffney.

fish, perch, flounder, oysters and shrimp—usually fried although almost all fish camps now offer grilled options (we discovered, however, that the less batter, the less quality control)—complemented by hush puppies, potatoes (French fried, baked or sweet) and Cole slaw. “We make everything fresh—hush puppies, tartar sauce, Thousand Island dressing, slaw—we make it all every day,” Leland said. Ken Toney boasts the same at The Flounder—he even makes his own barbecue hash.

The menus aren’t all the same, of course. For example, Leland sells ribs, steaks and burgers at The Lighthouse, and he brought us some darn good ribs to prove it. He also brought over some very good grilled, garlic shrimp and an equally good Chinese-Pacolet dish that he calls seafood stir-fry, with shrimp, broccoli and snow peas on a bed of noodles.

Other interesting variations include a small bowl of white beans that came with the hush puppies at Tall Tales Fish Camp in Mayo. All of us liked them except Mike, who said, “Reminds me of school lunches in high school in Arkansas—beans, warm milk and



wormy apples.” But Tall Tales also had a salad bar, which Mike felt “friendly toward,” as well as a “blossoming onion,” fried pickles and a “Texas toothpick”—a fried jalapeno. Few of us had ever had fried pickles before. Mike said they were dreadful, but not as bad as he thought they’d be. Dean loved them and said, “If I were Pentecostal, I’d be speaking in tongues.” They also had mac and cheese and collard greens worthy of rhapsody.

The Wagon Wheel fish camp in Cowpens, which has been around since the 1950s, is a lot like Tall Tales (the owner’s wife’s parents own Tall Tales) except for the odd cowboy motif. It also has fried pickles—Dean’s favorite part of the meal again—pickled onions, homemade Krabby cake (not unlike deviled crab), corn on the cob

and excellent stewed apples. Mike scowled at the pickled onions, so Deno told him to eat them with hush puppies and he’d have onion rings; he showed him how but Mike said he couldn’t get his head around it.

And then there’s the fish. It isn’t fresh the way it was in the old days. Today, in the upstate, with a couple of exceptions, fish camps aren’t even near water. We know because every time we went to one, Deno walked around it—Lake Bowen was the only place where he could get his feet wet. So fish camps don’t sell fresh fish. We asked John Thompson, owner of the Colonial Fish Camp in Gaffney (on Cherokee Avenue, just past John Lane’s great aunt’s boarding house, on the right side of the railroad tracks, although, according to John, there is no



right side of the tracks in Gaffney), if he ever sold fresh fish. The question put him in a Bill Clinton frame of mind and he said, “Well, it depends on what you mean by ‘fresh?’” And Ken Toney said that if anyone around here tells you he’s selling fresh fish, he’s either lying or ignorant.

The point is, in a fish camp you’re not going to find fish that was pulled out of the water that morning. But it will still be good. The catfish served at The Lighthouse and Lake Bowen comes from the Santee Cooper lakes, and the filets are thick and moist, delicately battered, not observably greasy; and John proclaimed that the catfish stew at Lake Bowen was the best he’d ever had. Mike liked the shrimp at The Colonial, the fried flounder at the Wagon Wheel and the stuffed flounder at Tall Tales. Deno liked the Alaskan White



The looks on the faces of Leland McKelvey and company at The Lighthouse convey a common fish camp theme: “This is gonna be GOOD!”

Fish (and plump hush puppies) at The Flounder.

We never had bad food, although the deviled crab was uniformly so-so. Mike and Deno were disappointed that most of the fish camps don't have desserts. We asked John Thompson why that is (although The Colonial offers a decent Key lime pie and vanilla pudding). He said, "Because you're full." Ken Toney said the same but added that if he serves dessert, people will linger and he can't turn the tables over as fast. Maybe for that reason, one of the biggest surprises of our endeavor was the delicious homemade red velvet cake at the Roebuck fish camp.

We tended to spend about \$10 per person, including tea and tip. Take off a couple of dollars for a half plate, or add a couple of dollars for specials or all-you-can-eat, but as John Thompson said, we were usually full after a regular meal. But if you see homemade red velvet cake, get it anyway.

Despite what we consider our fitness for fried fish, after five or six weeks we found ourselves hankering for salads and veggies. As we've said, we found collards here, white beans there, and salads in several venues, but for example, when Deno asked the waitress at Lake Bowen if they had any vegetables, she said, "No, we don't do healthy here." But the fish camps of the upstate, and probably of all the Carolinas, offer good fried fish, potatoes, slaw and other sides, along with fresh-brewed sweet tea and friendly southern service. If you've never been to a fish camp, ask the locals and go where they say. Take cash. Wear loose clothes. Clean your metal tray. Leave a good tip. Go twice and you'll be a regular. ❖

The authors' quest for Spartanburg's ultimate cheeseburger appeared in Sandlapper's Winter 2007-08 issue.



If you see red velvet cake at a fish camp, don't pass it up. The cake and catfish stew pictured here were at the Roebuck Fish Camp.



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This article is sponsored in part by:

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