



tar heel towns

by Susan L. Comer

Oriental

In this Pamlico County town, born of a storm and named for a sunken ship, only the forces of nature rule. The wind determines where a sailor cruises, the season dictates which fishery arrives on the dock, and a rest stop at this tranquil natural harbor can result in a permanent change of course.

In Oriental, sailboats outnumber people by about three to one. "Every little creek and little inlet here has a sailboat in it," says town manager Wyatt Cutler. Backyard piers are as common as concrete driveways, and residents don't have to wait long between regattas.

But Oriental is much more than the "Sailing Capital of North Carolina." It's a place where, one night, you can burrow into a porch rocker at The Ol' Store as banjo and guitar pickers jam the sun on down — then attend the world premiere of a one-act opera at the civic and cultural center the next. It's a place where retired folk organize scholarship fund-raisers for students, and they, in turn, deliver Meals on Wheels. A place where a New England accent is just as familiar and every bit as endearing as a Down East drawl — where a voyager far from home is greeted as warmly as your next-door neighbor.

As locals will tell you, Oriental has everything it needs and nothing it doesn't. Churches of almost every denomination, but no purveyor of fancy clothes to wear to them. Art galleries galore, but just one bank. Marinas, yes — malls, no. More boating supplies than beauty salons. Motels, restaurants, groceries, and

gasoline, but the only "chains" you'll find are attached to boat anchors. A top-notch volunteer fire department, medical facilities — even two vets — but no dry cleaner. A few stop signs — for the sake of practicality — but if you want to see a traffic light, you'll have to drive 20 minutes away from Oriental.

Tales of the Far East

One might wonder what a town called "Oriental" is doing in the Tar Heel State. The small fishing village, 25 miles east of New Bern where the Neuse River empties into Pamlico Sound, was originally known simply as Smith's Creek for one of five creeks that surround it. But when the time came to establish a post office in 1896, it needed a real name. According to legend, Rebecca Midyette, wife of town founder Louis Midyette, was strolling along the Outer Banks one day when she found the name board of the USS Oriental, a Yankee cargo ship that had sunk off Bodie Island in 1862. Another scenario places "Aunt Becky" in a Manteo home where she spots the name board hanging on a wall. Either way, the outcome is the same. So smitten was Mrs. Midyette by the name that she suggested the town be christened Oriental. Other villagers agreed, and Oriental was incorporated in 1899, with Louis Midyette as post-

master.

Midyette himself had landed here — literally — in 1870 when he was blown off course during a fierce gale on his way up the Neuse to New Bern. Finding shelter in the natural harbor, Midyette liked what he saw and decided to stay, setting a precedent.

"All you really need to do is just drive into the town, and I don't know what it is about the town, but you immediately fall in love with it," says Pamlico News owner Nancy Winfrey who did just that in the 1960s when the sailing community first began to take note of Oriental's protected harbors, steady winds, huge water mass, absence of lunar tides, and zigzag of tributaries, rivers, and creeks. During the 1960s, you might say the tide began to turn for Oriental, whose sunshine promise had all but washed away some 30 years before like a child's forgotten sandcastle at dusk.

The port after the storm

In the early 1900s, Oriental was a thriving port city served by two steamships and a rail line from New Bern. Drummers from New York's Fulton Fish Market and the Baltimore and Philadelphia markets crowded the docks to buy fresh catches of shrimp, crab, and fish to be barged north. A local plant manufactured boxes for shipping

seafood and produce. Particularly lucrative was the lumber industry. "We're sitting on kind of an L-shape," explains Sandy Semans, Pamlico News managing editor, "and the Neuse River is on one side and then the entrance to Smith and Green Creek kind of wraps off the river on the other side. So it was a real easy place to take logs out. A tremendous number of logs were taken out of here at the turn of the century."

Bill Mason, 98, lived those heady times. When he moved from across the river at Brown's Creek to Oriental in 1919, he found "the biggest sawmills in North Carolina then. We farmed, we fished, we hunted, we lumbered, we timbered," says Mason, who even knew "Uncle Lou" Midyette, a "tall, scrawny Outer Bankser," as he recalls.

"Believe it or not, back in the early 1900s, there was a population here about triple what we have now," says Larry Gwaltney, owner of Sail/Loft Realty Inc. "There were more than 2,000 people that lived in Oriental." But the Great Depression lowered the boom; the final blow was delivered by trucking — the replacement for ships and rail. Oriental, the last stop on N.C. Highway 55, now seemed at the end of the road.

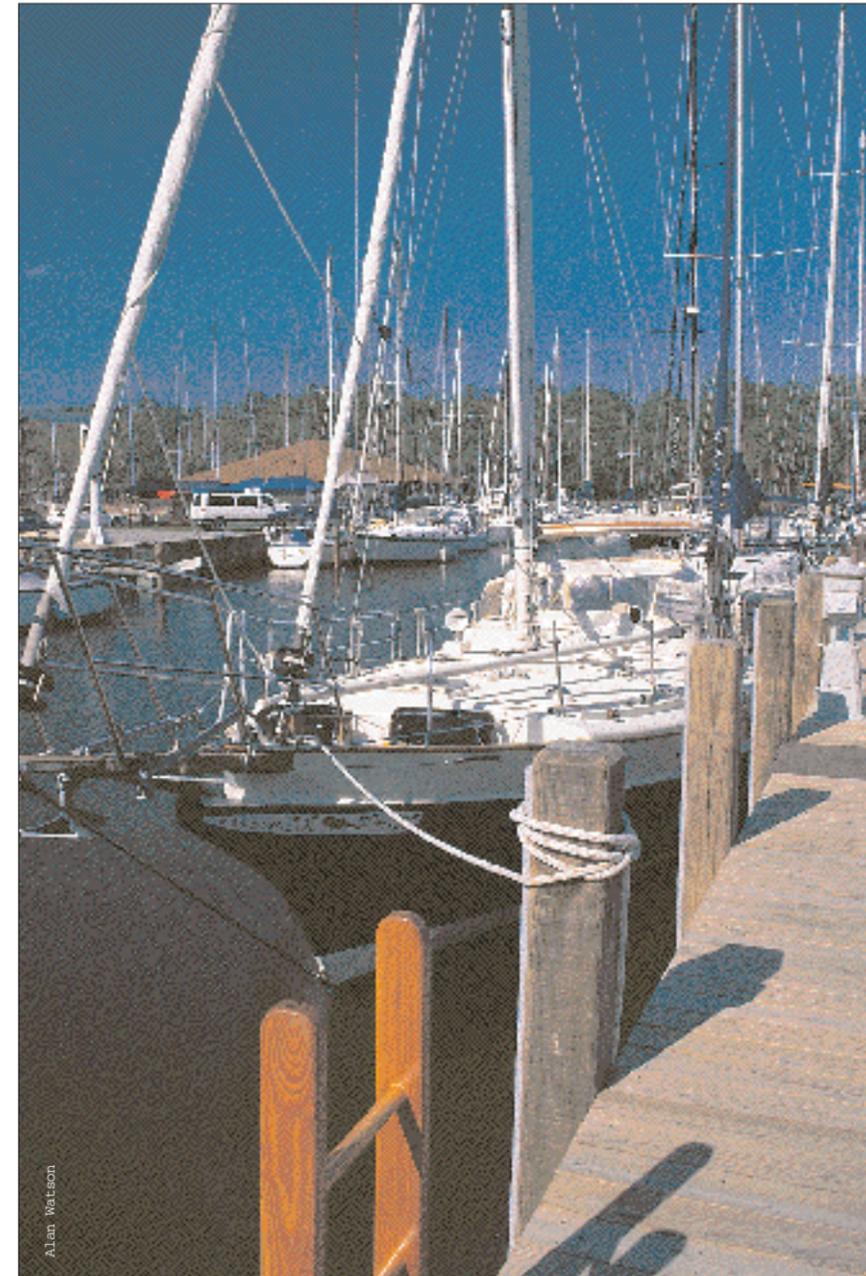
Wind in our sails

Grace Evans remembers the solitary sailboat floating in Oriental's harbor when she first laid eyes on the town in the early 1960s. "It

There was no motel, no restaurant — nothing, says Evans. But the sailing sure was good. So the following year, the group decided to have a sailing social. "Not a regatta, but a social," Evans clarifies.

"We didn't want to be fancy." Twenty boats signed up that inaugural year of 1963, and the numbers kept doubling each year until, finally, class divisions were established. "People then started coming here, buying boats, building marinas," says Evans, who moved to Oriental permanently in 1975. Old houses began getting new roofs and fresh paint. Shops and restaurants emerged. Gwaltney's father, Joe, anticipating the next wave in Oriental's journey, hung a shingle for Sail/Loft Realty in the mid-1970s and began marketing to the northeastern United States.

"He knew that's where a lot of the money was and a lot of these folks were going to be retiring and moving somewhere south," says Gwaltney. "And he primarily marketed to sailing



In Oriental, boats outnumber people three to one, and the vessels at Whittaker Creek Yacht Harbor fall into formation for another day of smooth sailing.

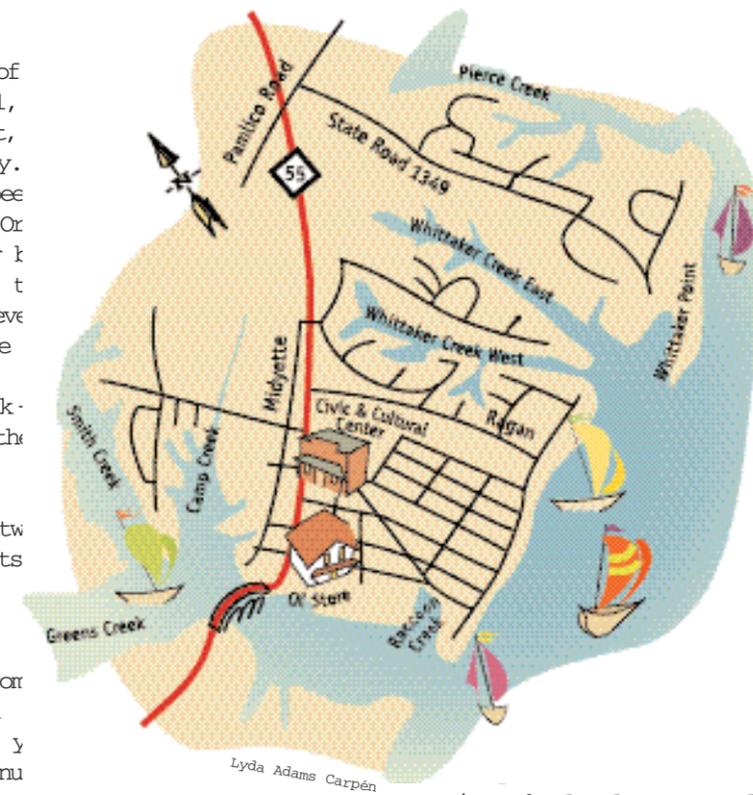
communities, because he knew that the sailing here was great and that the folks would find it to be very similar to what they were used to in the Northeast." The elder Gwaltney also coined the phrase

"The Sailing Capital of Carolina" for Oriental, sort of "if we build it, will come" philosophy.

That potential has been filled and then some. Or 2000 Racing Calendar has more than 75 events, ten sailing schools and several sailing clubs thrive here, the exceptional skill of local sail-makers is known beyond the town limits, and, of course, there's the matter of the mere "two or three thousand boats here in the greater Oriental metropolitan area," laughs Evans — a far cry from that lonely Dickerson 27 she found here 40 years ago. And sailors continue

— for good.

"People will come in to overnight on their boat on their way south or



just absolutely are charmed by the town and the people," says Winfrey. "And a lot of them have gotten off their boat,

and bought property, and got back on their boat, so they can retire here when the time comes."

"As far as what it's done to the property values," says Gwaltney, "they've quadrupled since the early 1970s. For instance, you could buy a riverfront lot for about \$20,000 back in the 1970s and now those lots are \$90,000. Creekfront property, which there's a scarcity of, the values are even higher."

The sport has certainly bolstered the economy. To the traditional bread-and-industries — "farming, fishing, and forestry" — can be added tourism. For instance, the annual Oriental Cup, the proceeds of which provide scholarships for local students, brings sailors in for the weekend from across the

state and beyond. Construction of piers, docks, and marinas has increased tax value and provided jobs.

The lure of Oriental's sailing waters has also changed the town's demographics. When Gwaltney moved to Oriental in 1985 to take over his father's business, he was struck by the number of young families, a noticeable contrast from his childhood days visiting grandparents here and finding few other kids around.

And diversity abounds. Art Tiemey, a retired high school coach from Long Island — and a sailor, of course — fell in love with Oriental because "it reminded me of South Shore, Long Island, and Long Beach when I was a kid." He and his wife Elise built a home here eight years ago and have since befriended other newcomers from California, the Great Lakes, even England and Australia.

"One thing I'll have to say about the local people in Pamlico

County," says Gwaltney, "they have welcomed these outsiders with open arms. I know you've probably heard about animosity in some areas between Yankees and Southern folk, and that's not the case here."

"If you ever need help, there isn't a group that's not willing to step in and help," Tiemey corroborates. "I mean, there are about five different churches here and everybody helps everybody else. It doesn't make a difference what nationality or what denomination you are."

"People come here because they are unique in their tastes and their likes and their dislikes," offers Semans. "We have a very active population. Even our seniors are out sailing all the time or fishing or jogging, and I think that when you attract those kinds of people, they're much more accepting of other people because they want to be accepted. They know that they're not run-of-the-

mill and so I think that they appreciate the differences rather than resent them or become a little suspicious of them."

The feel of Oriental

Despite the influx, most agree that the "feel" of Oriental remains intact. Even those who would argue "increased traffic" sheepishly admit, when pressed, that that means there's a car in front of you. On occasion, Tiemey has heard visitors remark, "Oh, my goodness, there's not a thing here." His response — "Well, that's what I like about it."

Gwaltney, who moved to town a bachelor, approached Oriental life with some trepidation, recalling those uneventful boyhood visits. "I found out shortly after I got here that, not only was it pretty much the same as it was when I grew up," he says, "but that kind of appealed to me now."

Pleasures come simple in Oriental. On a summer evening, says Semans,



On summer evenings, locals gather at The Ol' Store — part curiosity shop, part secondhand market — for an impromptu storytelling session or all-night music jam with owners Lucille and Billy Truitt.

it's not unusual to pick up the phone and hear, "Music in 30 minutes." That would be Lucille Truitt who, along with husband Billy, runs The Ol' Store, a lovably peculiar conglomeration of secondhand squirrelings from vinyl dinettes to vinyl Del Reeves. "You can't tell what's for sale and what's not," says Tiemey. "You can put your jacket down and someone will come along and say, 'Oh, I like this,' and pick it up and try to buy it." Amid sporadic commerce, musicians often gather informally on Lucille and Billy's big old front porch to pick out a few tunes. Everybody's welcome — just pull up a rocking chair or find a good edge to dangle your legs from and, as Semans says, it's "a Sunday evening at Grandma's house." Well, yes and no. Because, instead of the cousin who grabs the last chicken leg or the aunt who squeezes your cheeks numb, you'll find yourself sitting next to an intriguing stranger from

Maine or British Columbia or South America or India. And music being the great equalizer, says Semans, "You'll have a roofer sitting next to a Ph.D. in anthropology and both of them just thoroughly enjoying the evening and learning from each other."

"We have several enabling things here," laughs Evans. "The Ol' Store is probably one of the greatest of the enablers. You go there and Billy and Lucille will tell you stories and make you feel very comfortable and you get a feeling of belonging before you leave."

Oriental offers a surprising

if you're going

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amount of cultural activity, with both the visual and performing arts represented. The Pelican Players, a popular community theater group, maintain a vibrant presence, as do the Pamlico Chorale, the Pamlico Musical Society, and a number of art galleries. One recent source of pride is the purchase of a former theater building to house the Pamlico County Cultural and Civic Center. "I think that has not only helped attract a lot of people to the area, both visiting and retirees," says Semans, "but it also has helped keep people in the community and spending their dollars here in Oriental rather than feeling as though they had to go to New Bern or Greenville or Raleigh to enjoy theater or music." Children's theater and art classes are available in summer as well.