

The Dawn of Sportfishing Boats

In 1968, the Oregon Inlet charter fleet was going strong, attracting fishermen from around the country for a chance to catch dolphin, tuna, wahoo and maybe even a billfish. One North Carolina group may not have come as far as others, but their trip was still a memorable one.

These anglers drove from deep in the mountains all the way to the Outer Banks to catch some fish. The mountain men had been to Oregon Inlet the year before and they had their adventure all planned out. They would leave home early in the morning, drive 500 miles across North Carolina and arrive at the Fishing Center just after dark. They planned to fish all the next day and then start back home the same night. Frugal by nature, they would bring enough food and drinks for the entire trip and sleep in the car.

After a long day's drive, the fishermen arrived at Oregon Inlet right on schedule. They parked their old station wagon directly behind the *Erma Queen*, the same boat they chartered the previous year. Six big men crawled out of the car and immediately broke out sandwiches and soft drinks in the parking lot. After a stroll around the dock, the men drew straws to see where they would sleep. Before long, the mountaineers had rolled out their blankets and prepared for the evening that lay ahead. Two were on the front seat, two on the back seat and the two lucky winners had the bed of the station wagon.

During the night, a low-pressure system formed off the coast and a strong northeast wind kicked up. By the time the first captain arrived at the Fishing Center, the station wagon was rocking from wind gusts that measured over 20 knots. Undaunted, the relentless fishermen piled out of their quarters and prepared for an eventful fishing trip. When the last man finally stood upright, a blast of wind whisked the cap off his head, hurling it into the dark waters of the turning basin. The baldheaded mountain man ran over to a mate standing nearby as if he had lost a child, and the two fished his cap out with a long-handled gaff. A small disaster had been averted, but a bigger one awaited.

H.T. Gaskins, veteran captain of the *Erma Queen*, arrived to dispatch the bad news to his fishing party. The wind was predicted to increase throughout the day and the charter fleet was not going out. Either wait until tomorrow or try again next year, he told them. For this group, however, neither option was acceptable. These were hearty souls who were here to go fishing and, by gosh, they were going fishing.



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Left • 289: *The Erma Queen, pictured here with Captain Billy Brown, backs into her berth at the Oregon Inlet Fishing Center. 1973.*



Right • 290: *Captain Bob Scarborough, rear, watches as mate Allen Burrus prepares to hoist a marlin to the scales. Hatteras. 1967.*

The men tried to talk Captain Gaskins into making the trip but he would have none of it. Feeling sorry for their plight, H.T. offered a suggestion. They could drive to Oden’s Dock at Hatteras and ask Bobby Scarborough if he would take them fishing on the *Red Fin*. Gaskins knew that Bobby was famous for going when no one else would and he also wanted to pay him back for several practical jokes that Scarborough had pulled. This could be the perfect solution.

Without hesitation, the fishing party concurred with the plan and they piled into the station wagon for their trip to Hatteras. They arrived at Oden’s Dock in about an hour and located the *Red Fin* in a line of charter boats still tied to the dock. Captain Scarborough, grandson of Wanchese boatbuilder Bob Scarborough, had already sent his mate home for the day and was preparing to leave himself when the six big men, each dressed in a red flannel shirt, bib overalls and brogans, showed up behind his boat. Surely they didn’t want to go fishing.

In a dialect he had never heard, one man asked Bobby if he would take them out. Captain Scarborough replied in his best “hoi toide” accent, “I think so. I just had a quitter for tomorrow and you can fill in.”

“No, not tomorrow. *Today!*” came the response in unison. There was a long, long pause and before Bobby decided, one of the men said, “We figured you’d be too scared to take us.”

That did it. Without hesitation Bobby responded, “Okay, but we’re coming in when you get sick.” Everyone agreed and Scarborough called his mate, Allen Burrus, to return to the dock. This would be an easy \$150 because the winds were increasing, now clocked at over 25 knots, and waves would be breaking over the bar. Bobby figured they wouldn’t even get offshore before this mountain party gave up.

As the group made preparations for the big day, Bobby and Allen exchanged snide glances. The men loaded a bag of sandwiches, some apples and an old rusty washtub filled with soft drinks and ice. These guys didn’t even have a cooler. This was too easy.

The *Red Fin* headed around the breakwater and up the channel to Hatteras Inlet. White water broke all the way across the inlet and the waves were at least 8 feet tall. Rain squalls added to the misery as Captain Scarborough carefully navigated past the sea buoy.

Once in the ocean they headed toward the light tower at the tip of Diamond Shoals. Bobby was expecting someone to call it quits at any moment. When the *Red Fin* took a couple of waves over her bow, Bobby glanced back to make sure that the cabin was draining. To his astonishment, all six big men in their wet, red flannel shirts, bib overalls and brogans, were laughing and drinking sodas. Good grief, how could that be?

For two and a half hours the *Red Fin* labored into a massive head sea. As they neared the shoals, the waves grew to over 10 feet and the rain beat down even harder. Captain Scarborough had sized up the mountain men and if they could make it, so could he. Bobby motioned for Burrus, who was hanging on for dear life, to put some lines out. Allen managed to get two spoons overboard and as soon as the lines straightened, two fish were hooked. Giant bluefish, each weighing over 15 pounds, were landed and thrown into the fish box. The spoons went back overboard and quickly returned with the same results: two more huge bluefish and two more happy anglers. One of the smallest men in the group latched on to something big, a 55-pound amberjack. In his typical mountain drawl he hollered out to his friends that this fish was really “a-feudin’” with him and it was going to take some “doin’s” to get him in.



Above • 291: Legendary charter fisherman, Captain Bobby Scarborough, checks his tackle. Sunny Briggs, a famous charter captain and boatbuilder who docked at Oden’s beside Scarborough, said fishing against him is like pitching to Babe Ruth every day. Hatteras, 1968.



Above • 292:
Lucky fisherman poses with a 585-pound marlin caught on the Red Fin with Captain Bobby Scarborough, right, and mate Allen Burrus, kneeling. Hatteras, June 28, 1968.

alongside the fish and backed their car as close as possible. One man opened the hatch and the rest began launching fish right into the back of the station wagon. They packed fish into every square inch leaving only enough room for three men in the front seat and three in the back seat. When they realized that all of the fish wouldn't fit inside, they stacked the remainder on top of the car. Then, they lashed the whole mess down.

The mountain men profusely thanked Captain Scarborough and Allen Burrus for a great trip. They paid the captain and headed for the car when they noticed their old washtub. After a brief huddle, one man eased over to Bobby and whispered that since they didn't have room to take the tub home, they wanted Allen to keep it as a reward for his hard work.

The men thanked Bobby again and crammed into the car. Their wet, slimy clothes hardly dampened their enthusiasm. They were clearly excited about heading back to the mountains and figured if they could get there before daybreak, they'd have enough time to show off their catch before the community fish cleaning. They had enough fish

Soon the box was full but the fishing hadn't slacked off one bit. Burrus was bringing fish in so quickly that all he could do was pull the hook and let them flop on the deck. Over the next three hours, the party caught one after another and by 2 p.m. they were knee-deep in fish. Everyone, including Allen, had fallen into the slimy mess. Bobby couldn't control his laughter. What a sight! Big fish, big waves and big mountain men—how could anything be more fun than this?

At 2:30, Captain Scarborough turned the *Red Fin* for home. He still had to get everyone safely back to shore and the weather had not let up. After a couple of hours through the slop, Bobby eased into Hatteras and backed into his berth. Allen threw the fish onto the dock and counted them: 67 big bluefish, 10 albacore and 6 amberjack.

The mountain men threw their empty washtub up on the dock

to last another year and they were already planning their return. Bobby and Allen silently prayed for good weather.

Bluefish tails were fluttering in the wind as the station wagon headed up Highway 12. In a moment of reflection, Captain Scarborough realized that these mountain men were just like him: determined, enthusiastic and adventurous. The only difference was, “My Lordy, they sure did talk funny.”

Overview

Private sportfishing boats dawned in the late 1940s and 1950s along the North Carolina Outer Banks. The post-World War II economy was growing and people had more money to spend on recreation and leisure-time activities. Gasoline and diesel engines had improved and boats were safer, faster and had more range. The highway system was better and the Outer Banks were more accessible to inland population centers. All these factors contributed to an increasing interest in offshore sportfishing.

The earliest sportfishing boats on the northern Outer Banks evolved from shad boats and on the southern Outer Banks they emerged from sharpies and Core Sounders. Local fishermen took fishing charters when the opportunity arose just to supplement their income. Few saw sportfishing as a way to make a living, and some even viewed it as a waste of time. But as the charter fleets grew and the demand for fishing opportunities increased, boatbuilders responded by constructing more sophisticated sportfishing vessels. They started focusing on the sportsman and their boats were designed exclusively for offshore fishing.

The great boatbuilders who led the transition from charter boats into the dawn of private sportfishing boats on the northern Outer Banks include Wilton Walker, Allen Hayman, Worden Dough, Lee Dough and Bob Scarborough. The transition on the southern Outer Banks included respected boatbuilders Ray Davis, Charlie Alligood, Ray LeMay, Nat Lee Smith and Asa Cannon.

These fine boatbuilders took the shad boat and the Core Sounder and made them sportfishing vessels. Even though many of their boats were built from the late 1940s through the 1960s, some of them are still in use today. The talents and skills of these boatbuilders and fishermen started a legacy along the Outer Banks, and they were instrumental in the early years of the new industry.



Above • 293:

The Connie Dionne with charter fishermen captains Matt Spivey, back left, Moon Tillett, back center, Delton Dowdy, back right, and Jack Hoffer, back kneeling, display a nice catch of dolphin on a “day off.” The Connie Dionne was the first sportfishing boat on the northern Outer Banks to be equipped with a diesel engine. Oregon Inlet Fishing Center, circa 1954.