

Spain, Odell: My Way Of Life ⁽¹⁾

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Odell Spain: My Way Of Life

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ⁽²⁾," *News & Observer*. Published 9/13/1998. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Odell Spain and I talked as we drove around Goose Creek Island, a broad, marshy peninsula surrounded by Pamlico Sound. Born in 1931, he grew up there in Hobucken, once a bustling fishing community, now almost a ghost town. A former oysterman, Spain is the last male descendent of the Spain family that has lived on Goose Creek Island for two centuries.

He has a daughter in Arapahoe, off the island in another part of Pamlico County, but he lost two sons in tragic accidents: one was killed by a convenience store robber in South Carolina, and the other died a couple of years ago when a trawler accidentally capsized his fishing boat.

A renowned musician and storyteller, Spain has somehow kept a warm sweetness about him despite the anguish he feels over the loss of his sons and the disappearance of the community he knew as a youth. Spain told me a story about Brant Island, a small island in Pamlico Sound where fishermen used to camp during the summer to tend pound nets. During World War II, the military turned Brant Island into a bombing range, but the pound netters did not give up their fishing camps so easily.



Odell Spain. Photo by Chris Seward, 1998. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the *News & Observer*.

In Odell Spain's words:

I was about 9 year old, I'd say, when daddy took the job. Twenty bucks a week hauling fish for Mr. Elzie Goodwin at Oriental. He had an old boat with an old Lathrop engine in it. It had an old hand crank on her. You didn't have a starter, you'd We'd ice them down and go to Oriental. Generally, we'd come back and spend a night at Brant Island. So much going on around the docks at Oriental during the nights, you couldn't rest very good. It was too hot to sleep, too. So you'd come t You had to stay close to your nets, fish them every morning. The men built camps on this island and brought their supplies and stayed there all week. Those camps were about 15-foot square, 15 by 20 maybe. They had an old wood cook stove. In the corner, they'd have stack bunks, one over the other. Some days there'd be probably 10 or 12 boats. You'd leave Sunday evening and come back Friday evening. You only had bacon and eggs, no ice, and in tomato season, we had tomatoes. After about two days, the bacon was full of mildew. For about six years it was us and the planes. We would stay on that island and we'd hear them coming, we'd get our nets up and leave. You didn't leave your boat far. Generally, they'd make one pass and the next time, you'd better be out of the way. In about 1948, they went to live amn They sunk a man's boat down there the first day. It was a net skiff. They got to dropping those bombs and they were flying everywhere. They weren't exploding, but they would ricochet. They would hit and go back up. You couldn't tell where t There was one that hit that island and it went right up over the top of those camps and it came down through the bottom of his net skiff. He had left it tied there. I'd expect there was 30 people on that island. Those old planes looked like they was 300 feet in the air, bomb bays open. You could see the bombs a' hanging on in there. We'd all lay right in the bottom of the boat, lean right on down. There was an old black man, one of the men in the ca You just didn't want to give it up. It was convenient. The next day, we'd be right back and we'd be ashore. We saw them coming and we'd take the nets up and put them back on the skiff and push from the island and let them have it. Then the The first bombs was water filled. They looked like a regular bomb, to look at it, with the fins on the back, a good four feet, maybe five foot long. Some of those bombs would hit that soft marsh and they would tear up. Other times, people broug Pound netting was a summer thing. You oystered in the winter time. I didn't like farming. Chopping corn with a hoe a row at a time and picking cotton and picking corn - I despised that. But working on the water - I loved it. It was my way of life By 1950, most of the oysters had been caught. People went to moving out because there was a better way. You could catch a few oysters -15, 18 bushels a day - but it was not big money. You could do better doing other things, other places. I still like the water, but there's nothing out there anymore. If it wasn't for the crab potting, I don't think a man could survive. I understand the whole river is dead. There is nothing in it. But back then, yes, I oystered myself up to '64. I'm so saddened at our community, this island. I guess it's my age maybe. I'm sad when I see these old homes that were once full of people, and all the families is gone. Even the homes is gone. We're going downhill, and I've got a sister at Lowlands says there's five vacant homes right there around her. There's a couple right here close to me that's vacant. They're livable but nobody wants to live here. Our community is changing. It's more for retirement people. We are getting a few people in, and they are people that are good people, but they're not our way of life. They just don't know. I look at the phone book of names and it's got Hobuck

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for A Change](#) ⁽³⁾" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ⁽⁴⁾ at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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