

Burris, Dwight & Foster, Ernie: Old Drum ^[1]

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Dwight Burris And Ernie Foster: Old Drum

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 6/10/2007. Copyrighted.
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On the Outer Banks the other day, I was listening to small-plane pilot Dwight Burris and charter boat captain Ernie Foster telling stories about Hatteras Island. The two old friends were talking about 'old drum.' The big drum, also known as channel bass or red drum, are the fish about which Hatteras old-timers dream.

Historically, island cooks prepared old drum for their finest feasts. Wives stewed them for their husbands' birthdays, and mamas cooked the dish for children when they came home from college or wars or whatever else pulled them off the island.

Dwight and Ernie started talking about old drum by recalling how much Ernal Foster, Ernie's father, loved them. He was the legendary captain and owner of Hatteras' Albatross fleet, the charter boats that first made the village 'the billfish capital of the world' in the 1930s.

In Dwight Burris And Ernie Foster's words:



Dwight Burris And Ernie Foster. Photo by Chris Seward, 2007. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

Dwight Burris

Ernie's father and uncle pioneered sports fishing on the Outer Banks here. As far as deep-sea fishing, sport fishing, the Albatross fleet really led the way. But Ernie's daddy, Mr. Ernal, he didn't like to eat offshore fish. Right up until he died, th
He said to me one time, 'If you see any of those drum up on the shoals when you're flying that airplane, let me know.'

So one day in my airplane, I got all excited because I lost count after I saw about a dozen schools coming in there from the east. It was kind of a -- pardon the expression -- but a little bit of a snotty day in the water, especially up around the st
So I landed the airplane and told Mr. Ernal. He was ready to go lickety-split. By the time we got to those shoals, Mr. Ernal looked to me like it had taken 10 or 15 years off his life.

He was 85 years old, and he was standing up there with his legs spread there on the Albatross I, the original Albatross, with myself, Mr. Raymond Basnight, the local doctor at the time and another guy.

I decided I'd just keep my mouth shut, because I had already seen these fish and knew what color they were and all. It was going to be his day.

Mr. Ernal was up on the bridge. We were on the east side of the shoals and he brought her around a little bit like that, and he looked out on the stern and he said, 'There they are boys! Cast over that way!' And then he threw his head around there and he looked over here and he said, 'You can cast up that way too!'

And then he turned around and the whole ocean was golden, as far as you could see. We were right in the middle. And he said, 'They're everywhere!!! Cast anywhere!'

I tell you what, it was important to him that we didn't lose a one of them. We did bring them in, one old drum for every angler. And it wasn't but a few weeks later that Mr. Ernal passed on out of this life. But he got to see five old drum in the ste

Ernie Foster

When I was a boy, the only fish that was a big deal on Hatteras Island was old drum. Yellowfin tuna, dolphin and wahoo are three really exceptional fish caught out of the Gulf Stream. They bring a big price.

But I'll tell you the truth: When I was a boy, there was no one on Hatteras Island that would walk across this room to get their hands on one of those fish. But they would drive 35 miles from Rodanthe to Hatteras to get a half a side of old drum

That's how important that fish was to the locals. From Hatteras up at least through Waves, and maybe to Wanchese somewhat, old drum, a big one, was the only fish that people would go out of their way to get their hands on.

The little ones were there, but the big ones were the ones people wanted. The big ones have kind of a strong flavor. You boil it with potatoes and onions, and there would be grease in it. It sounds terrible, but tastes great.

Then, a few years ago, they decided that you couldn't keep any drum bigger than 28 inches. That was a hard pill to get down. That meant you couldn't keep eating old drum.

When they banned it, a lot of older people, in particular, were no longer able to eat what was really the special meal in their lives. And just like that, it was gone.

Dwight Burris

You can't compare it to old drum, but Mr. Ernal also loved bluefish. Now, you got to understand this, he had three boats, the Albatross fleet. He owned more boats than anybody else in the harbor. But Mr. Ernal didn't like offshore fish and the

I had a little skiff and I would go to the inlet and catch bluefish after my flying day was over. After all his boats were in and all the fish were cleaned and he was going home, I'd say, 'Mr. Ernal, what you got for supper tonight?' He'd say, 'Oh, H

I'd say, 'Well, I got some bluefish.' He'd say, 'You got some bluefish?' 'Yes sir.' 'You catch these bluefish in the inlet?' 'Yes sir.' 'Incoming tide?' 'Yes sir.'

He'd hold out that hand. He'd say, 'Put four of them right in that hand. Put them right in that hand there.' He was in his 70s then, a man that owned three boats, and he'd go home happy like a little boy."

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