

Fisher, Alfred: Bay River ^[1]

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Alfred Fisher: Bay River

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 8/12/2007. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I visited Alfred Fisher in Pamlico County, three hours east of Raleigh. Now retired from his job as a chemist at a Weyerhaeuser pulp mill, he is active in the county historical society and has been helping a local group, the Neuse-Pamlico Sound Women's Coalition, to record and preserve the county's African-American history. I met him at his home near the Bay River marshes, and we drove from one end of the county to the other. We visited old fishing villages, little farm settlements and once-remote beaches, some of them now in the shadows of posh new riverfront developments. We talked about hot summer days in the '40s and '50s.

In Alfred Fisher's words:

This is the Bay River. And this is Vandemere. This used to be the county seat. This place used to be all fishing, a big fishing fleet. It's just about all gone. That's an old fish house. There's the old ice plant. That's where the old crab canneries were. Right down there, see the hull of that boat? That's the old Hayes. A McCotter man had a big store down here, and he'd go across the river in that boat and pick up passengers from Florence, where my mother's people lived. He'd bring them to every time we'd come to church down here, Mama would point to that hull and say, 'That's the old Hayes.'

This is Stonewall. A sawmill was over across the river there. They'd drive rafts of logs down the river, and they used to make fish boxes and shingles.

I remember barrel houses here too, where they made barrels. There was one here and one up in Alliance, a big barrel house but that was for potatoes.

This time of year, in the '40s, everybody grew potatoes. Up there, where I grew up, was the railroad, and there was a side track and a potato grader. Sometimes two trains would come down there a day, and both of them had over a hundred men. My father used to grow them. See, during the war, soldiers ate potatoes every meal. I remember Daddy used to have 20 or 30 people working for him.

In the '40s, there would also be migrant workers in this area. They were all over the place digging potatoes. I mean thousands! They'd come from Florida, black people.

You know, the things we say are, subtly, picked up by kids. Like, when I was growing up, I remember every time something got stolen or anything, somebody would say, "Wasn't nothing but those old Florida people." But the truth is, sometimes this is Mesic. It's basically a black community. When I was growing up, mostly what people did down here was oystering and shrimping, and they farmed also. They were go-getters too.

These are the fields that my grandfather tilled when he and my grandmother were slaves. My father's mother, Phoebe, was born here in 1858, and her father, Sutton, was born here in 1812. And his father was born here in 1790. His name was sometimes come down here and sit, and I can almost see what it was like for them, particularly when it's hot like today.

This is what you call Maribel. Blacks owned all this land. I'm going to take you down to a house where one of my father's first cousins lived around the turn of the century.

We used to say that everybody in Maribel could dance real well. Everybody! Most of your little speakeasies and joints were down here.

The people in Maribel could shake it! It used to worry me. I wasn't a good dancer, you know. You're talking to a girl and a guy from Maribel comes up, you're like, 'Uh oh, trouble here!'

Everybody used to come down here to Rainbow Beach. You could swim, and they had a big dance hall. They'd have plenty of white lightning too.

In the '40s, there was also a beach called Faison Beach, down near Oriental.

There was a preacher back in that time you ever heard of a man called Daddy Grace? Well, Daddy Grace came to Faison Beach. The story I heard was, he didn't want them to put change in the bushel basket, because change hurt Daddy Grace. This is Oriental. We used to go across the river from here and go to Shady View over in Harlowe. Yeah, Fourth of July, people go down there, dance. And then we'd go to Kinston to one of those big tobacco warehouses, and they'd have a dance. I remember one night James Brown came to Kinston. He was late. He got there about 12 o'clock. But when we left that morning, he was still there; he had quit singing, and he was playing the organ. He played the organ real well. It was 6 o'clock. I remember one night we were in Kinston. This was 1958 or '59. They had a fence down the middle of the warehouse, you know, that was supposed to separate the white dancers and the black dancers.

But that night, about 12 o'clock, that fence went down! I don't know who tore it down, but that fence went down. Everybody was dancing together! The cops just threw their hands up! Everybody was dancing till the morning, and then we all went home.

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