

A WINTER'S DAY AT SHACKLEFORD BANKS

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As soon as I left the boat to fetch the morning paper I knew it was a day that should not be squandered. It was Sunday, the twenty-ninth day of December, just two days before the beginning of a new year, but the air had a smell and a warmth and a softness as in spring. When I stepped off the finger pier onto the dock I looked across Taylor Creek, as I usually do, to see if any of the wild horses that inhabit the Rachel Carson Reserve were grazing on the shore of Town Marsh. They were not there this morning, but I could see some strands of thin mist layered in the air, motionless, just above the island like the smoke from someone's fire. The air was perfectly calm and the water, almost like a mirror, flawlessly reflected the masts of the sailboats at anchor. As I returned to the boat with the paper I knew we were to be favored with a rare winter's day when even a light jacket probably would not be necessary.

Nancy and I had been looking forward to our usual relaxed Sunday morning ritual: toast and coffee followed by a leisurely perusal of the Sunday morning paper (the only time we read a newspaper), succeeded by Bloody Marys, very spicy but with little vodka. Typically, after we had lingered over our drinks, I would cook a large brunch consisting of eggs, perhaps an omelet, with bacon, fried potatoes and onions, and it would usually be past noon when we finished. When I returned to the boat on this day, however, I told Nancy that if we wanted to visit Shackleford Banks as we had previously planned,

this was the day to do it. We agreed to leave for Shackleford later in the morning if it was still sunny, warm and calm when we finished reading the paper.

We live and cruise on our boat, a thirty-four foot, double cabin trawler named Summer School (a reference to our former lives as college professors), and we had decided to spend the winter months in Beaufort, North Carolina. We had become captivated by this picturesque little seaside town in our earlier travels along the coast, and during the past year, through our readings, we had become fascinated with the nearby island of Shackleford Banks, which is the barrier island running northwesterly from Barden Inlet in the bight of Cape Lookout to Beaufort Inlet over eight miles away. The island is uninhabited and accessible only by boat although it once supported a population of about six hundred people before a severe hurricane struck in 1899. Now it is probably best known for the herd of wild horses which roams there. These horses are separate and distinct from those on Town Marsh that we often see from our boat at Beaufort Docks. The Shackleford herd is much larger, of different origins and, in fact, it is managed by a different government agency, which has recently received national attention for its policy of culling the herd to remove diseased animals and reduce the population. Lying between the ocean and the waters of Back Sound, Shackleford Banks has a local reputation for providing a fine beach on the sound side for family picnics and outings, while the ocean beach is well known for the quantity and variety of shells which can be found there, particularly after a storm. I think our fascination with this island was caused in large part by the notion of being able to explore a substantial island that was actually uninhabited and still in an almost wild state with a resident herd of wild horses. We also were enticed by the prospect of being able to comb uncrowded and uncluttered ocean beaches.

Although we live on the water we are mostly confined to the sheltered bays and rivers to provide safe moorage for our boat. There remains something elemental and exciting about an ocean beach with its foam and spray and breaking waves.

Now that we were settled in our slip at Beaufort Docks, Shackleford Banks was within reach. The northwestern tip of the island is due south from the Docks at a distance of one and a half miles. However, it is impossible to get there directly. Rather, it is necessary to navigate around a group of low islands, shoals and marsh which together form the Rachel Carson area of the North Carolina National Estuarine Research Reserve. Taylor Creek runs approximately east-west, separating the north side of this area, comprised of Town Marsh and Carrot Island, from the Beaufort waterfront. The south side of the Reserve includes the narrow strip of Bird Shoal at the western end, and Horse Island near the eastern end, all surrounded by an extensive area of tidal flats, shoals and very shallow water. The portion of Back Sound between the Reserve and the north shore of Shackleford Banks contains a deep water channel called Shackleford Slough.

According to the charts it was possible to reach Shackleford by skirting the Reserve either to the east or the west. The shortest route, from our location, is to proceed west on Taylor Creek past Radio Island and into Beaufort Inlet, turning abruptly east just before entering the ocean and following the north shore of Shackleford Banks along Shackleford Slough. This route is about three and a half miles long. Alternatively, it is possible to travel Taylor Creek in the opposite direction, to the east from Beaufort Docks, until it opens into the mouth of the North River in Back Sound. At this point there is a channel running generally southwest, past some unmarked shoals, until it encounters the north shore of Shackleford Banks at a point where there is a jetty and small dock to

facilitate going ashore. Because of the more sheltered waters here, this is the route favored by local boaters who know the channel. It is somewhat longer, however, with a length of about five miles from the Docks.

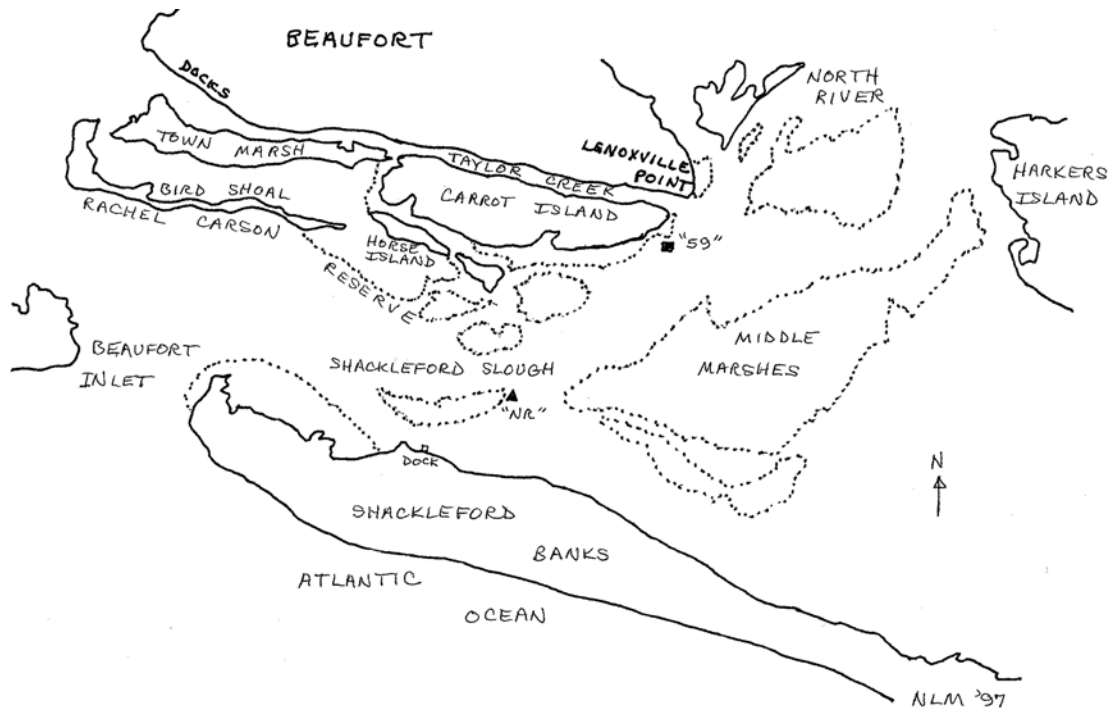


Figure 1 - The Beaufort Area

It was not very practical for us to use Summer School for this kind of day trip. Our slip was narrow and, because of its location in the Docks and the strong currents that usually flow there, it is no trivial matter to get the boat into or out of the slip without mishap. There is also the fact that in order to accommodate the tides of nearly five feet at the non-floating docks, the boat had to be carefully secured; we used a total of seven dock lines. We would have to disconnect all of these lines, as well as the two power cords, the phone cable and the television cable, in order to leave the slip. We also had the very real concern that, if we took our boat into waters that were unfamiliar to us with many shoals that were not particularly well marked by navigational aids, we might well

run aground. However, we keep our inflatable dinghy, which we have named Recess, floating behind the boat where it is easy to use. Because it is a small dinghy we could not risk taking it out into Beaufort Inlet with the potentially rough water to be found there, but since it draws less than a foot of water it is much more suitable for shallow depths. The longer and more sheltered route around the east end of Carrot Island was possibly just within range of our small, three and a half horsepower outboard motor without having to refuel, although the trip probably would require about an hour, we thought, depending on the currents.

We were not really sure that a dinghy trip all the way to Shackleford was practical for us until about a week previously. We had a sunny, mild and calm day then, and we took Recess out for a ride mainly to exercise the outboard. We had no particular destination in mind but we went east on Taylor Creek until we reached the wider waters of the North River at its mouth. We found that the end of Taylor Creek was well marked with a number of navigational aids, the most prominent of which were a danger sign marking a shoal off the tip of Carrot Island and a fixed green marker, designated "59" and fifteen feet tall, just south of the creek entrance. We left Taylor Creek and headed toward marker "59." The water was very calm, the air was clear and we could easily see the shore of Shackleford Banks. We could just distinguish against the shore another navigational marker towards the southwest which we had noted in our previous study of the charts; it was designated "NR" (for North River) and it was a little over a mile distant from marker "59." The air was so clear and calm, and it felt so good to be on the water again that we continued to steer for marker "NR." I had brought a spare one gallon container of gasoline so that I knew we could refuel if necessary.

We successfully reached the beach near the dock and jetty without having to refill the outboard, though I knew that I would have to do so before beginning our return trip back to the boat. It had taken us an hour and fifteen minutes (our stubby inflatable does not make much speed with the small outboard motor, especially against the strong currents that we encountered in Taylor Creek). Since it was already well after 3pm we did not have much time if we were to get back to the boat before dark, so we decided not to go ashore. Also, we became somewhat uneasy as we realized we were really not very well prepared. Although we had spare gasoline (we always take that), we had no food or water, no compass or light, and no VHF radio to get help if we encountered trouble such as a puncture of the inflatable or a motor failure, and it was doubtful that we could row the dinghy back to the boat against the strong currents in these waters. Somewhat reluctantly we decided it would be best to head back to our boat, but we were not disappointed with our trip. The island appeared to be deserted, the beach near the dock seemed to be firm clean sand with a gentle slope, and we could easily imagine that the ocean beach on the other side of the dunes would be even more attractive. We resolved to return on another day when the weather was good and we could leave earlier and be better prepared.

Now that day was here and I felt as excited as a little boy about to go on a picnic. I could not really concentrate on the paper and I was finished with it almost as soon as I was finished with my coffee. Outside it was even warmer now, still with no wind and a clear sky, though a slight haze had developed in the air over the water, it seemed. I went up on the bridge to get the various items we would need for our dinghy trip: the paddles, a floatation cushion, the spare gasoline, the canvass bag containing our folding anchor

and line, our floating water-proof bag that we use to carry essential items such as a small tool kit, a spare sparkplug for the motor, and a patch kit for the inflatable. All these items were stacked next to the gate for the swim platform where Recess was tied. I then retrieved the small cooler to be used for our lunch and drinks and returned inside where Nancy was making her preparations. After our previous trip we had made a check list for all the items we should bring, which we now reviewed. We included our portable VHF radio, a camera, some sweaters, and a small hand-held compass which I hung around my neck. I also reviewed the chart one last time. I knew that if the air was a little hazy we probably would not be able to distinguish the "NR" marker against the shore of Shackleford when we left the mouth of Taylor Creek, and I wanted to determine a compass bearing to this point from marker "59" just south of the creek mouth. The bearing was 210 degrees. Finally all was ready. With a growing sense of excitement we loaded Recess and mounted the outboard. It started with a single pull and we were on our way by 10:15.

What a sense of exhilaration we felt to be out on the water, making this excursion about which we had thought for so long! The air was warm, even close to the cold water, and there was no need to wear our sweaters. Taylor Creek was at high tide but there was still a strong flood current which we rode eastward on the Creek towards its juncture with the North River. I kept the outboard just above idle speed but we moved rapidly with the current past the houses and private docks of Front Street on the north shore, and the uninhabited shores of Town Marsh and Carrot Island toward the south. There was now a noticeable haze in the air.

We passed Deep Creek, which separates Town Marsh from Carrot Island. According to the chart it was possible to take Deep Creek all the way through to Shackleford Slough on the southern side and then cross to Shackleford Banks. This channel was unmarked, however, and it wound in serpentine fashion through marshes and sandbars before reaching deeper water. Although it would reduce the length of our trip by almost a mile, I decided not to attempt it. Even though our dinghy and motor had a slight draft, it was still possible to run it aground, perhaps on an oyster bed, and do considerable damage. I did not want to risk spending the day repairing a puncture or the propeller or perhaps wading in the forty-five degree water to get Recess off a bar.

We thoroughly enjoyed our passage down the creek. At its widest point near the Town Docks, Taylor Creek is less than a tenth of a mile wide, and proceeding easterly the channel narrows to a width of about a hundred feet though the water remains deep. We could watch the homes and boats on the Beaufort side or look for wildlife on the island side. There was always the possibility of seeing dolphins in the creek or wild horses on the shore. Towards the easterly end of Taylor Creek there is a menhaden processing plant which uses two large commercial fishing vessels. These were at their docks this morning and a surprising number of birds was collected around them. There were many gulls, cormorants and brown pelicans, which we always delight in watching, in addition to quite a few white egrets and great blue herons perched precariously and improbably on the rigging of the ships. There were ibis and night herons in the nearby trees. We have always enjoyed watching the wild bird life on our travels and the concentration of these large water birds near the docks of the processing plant afforded us particular pleasure. Once we passed the menhaden ships we were overtaken by a large motor yacht which

showed an unusual degree of consideration by passing us very slowly so that it left very little wake. Nothing, it seemed, was to detract from the pleasure of our day.

When we left the narrow confines of Taylor Creek and entered the much broader waters at the mouth of the North River it was evident that the haze had matured into a fog. We could just barely see the end of Harkers Island to the east of us about a mile and a half away, but we could not see Shackleford Banks about the same distance away to the southwest. Neither, of course, could we see our target, the "NR" marker near its shore, even with the binoculars which we had brought. But we could easily see the "59" marker just to our south and we had our compass bearing of 210 degrees to follow from there. I also knew that if I followed a more southerly heading, say 190 or 200 degrees, I would eventually run into the beach of Shackleford, though there was the danger of getting too far off course to the east and encountering a large area of marsh and shallows known as the Middle Marshes. But the tide was still high and there seemed to be little danger that we could get so far off course that we would have to worry about going aground. The motor yacht that had passed us also seemed to be going in the same direction and only slightly faster. I could probably follow it, I thought, through most of the channel. We steered toward marker "59" and as we passed it I removed the compass from around my neck, placed it on the seat in front of me, and set our course on a bearing of 210 degrees.

As we headed to Shackleford we found that the fog was rapidly becoming more dense. In very little time we could no longer see any land at all or even marker "59" which we had just left behind. The motor yacht we were following was now at a considerable distance and soon it too vanished in the mist. Nancy sat near the bow with the binoculars, trying to locate the "NR" marker, while I held our course to 210 degrees.

Overhead we could see clear blue sky which meant that the fog was a thin layer over the water. I hoped it would soon lift. It was surprisingly disorienting to be on flat calm water with dense white fog in every direction. I found that I tended to drift off course to our right and there is no doubt that without the compass we would have been lost. Even with the compass there was cause for growing concern. Although we could hold the desired course according to the compass, I knew that we could miss our target by a wide margin if we had a sideways current due to the ebbing tide, a condition which I began to suspect was occurring. Our little boat was slow and the fast currents that ran through Shackleford Slough could have a pronounced effect on our resultant direction of motion. If we were swept past the “NR” marker on its northern side, we would be in danger of finding ourselves in the exposed waters of Beaufort Inlet which would be bad enough even if we had good visibility. Accordingly, I adjusted our course to a more southerly and easterly direction hoping to compensate for any tidal drift. Nancy continued to search for the “NR” marker or any sign of land with the binoculars, while I watched the compass and the water. After a short while I could see the sandy bottom about three to four feet below us; I hoped that this was one of the shoals extending out from the Middle Marshes, which it apparently was, for shortly we were back in deep water again and Nancy was finally able to see the faint silhouette of a shoreline through the fog. We went in close and then turned to follow the beach to the west where soon we saw the dock and the jetty which marked our destination. We had missed it by about half a mile. This experience had been more than a little worrisome and I hoped that the fog would disappear as the day progressed. We beached Recess and tied it securely well up on the shore. It had taken us slightly more than one hour to make the trip.

Now that we were finally on the island we were anxious to begin our explorations, but first, we decided, we would have lunch. What is it about going to the beach that increases the appetite? It was not yet noon but we were very hungry. Slightly uphill from the head of the dock a small deck had been built with a single picnic table. It was a fine place to have our lunch with a good view of the beach and the waters of Shackleford Slough.

Perhaps it was due to my relief at being safely on shore, or the warmth of the sun or the sea smell of the air with the faint sound of the breakers from the ocean beach, or the goodness of the food, but as we sat on the deck my first impressions of the island were even better than I had expected. There was only one other family there this morning though it was an unusually nice weekend day. They had their boat tied to the dock where the father was fishing while the mother and her two children walked and played on the beach. Even though we were near high tide the beach had ample width. It was firm and clean, gently sloping into the water, and I could easily understand why this area was popular for family outings. My most unexpected impression was of the cleanliness of the area and the obvious care with which this comparatively remote facility was managed and used. I have been to many beaches and various other publicly used areas, not only the more heavily used beaches along the east coast but also some remote beaches in the Bahamas as well as wilderness campsites and portage trails far from any road in northern Canada. All of these areas usually show the debris which seems to accompany human use, but here there was a notable lack of trash even around the picnic deck. The deck and the dock were also well constructed and maintained, as was the separate building which provided sanitary facilities, which were themselves remarkably clean. We had a most

enjoyable lunch at our picnic table and as we ate, as if by script, the fog became less dense and lifted off the water and there, a half mile to the northeast, we finally saw the “NR” marker for which we had previously searched in vain. By the time we finished our lunch and prepared for our trek across the island, the air was quite clear and it was easy to see Carrot Island and Town Marsh to the north and, beyond these, the water tower and some other buildings of the town of Beaufort. It appeared that we would be able to enjoy the remainder of our day at Shackleford Banks without worrying about our trip back to our boat. Before we left the beach, however, I took a compass bearing for the “NR” marker from our location on the beach just in case the visibility deteriorated later. It was about a half mile away at a bearing of approximately seventy degrees.

Walking across the island was delightful even though some of the dunes were high and some of the sand was soft. I had been concerned that this half mile walk would be unduly arduous since I had read that some of the dunes were almost fifty feet high and there remained some large areas of dense maritime forest, but there was a good trail that led between the forested areas and wound around the highest dunes. As soon as we climbed over the first row of dunes behind the picnic area, the sound of the ocean surf was much more prominent. Signs of the Shackleford horses were everywhere and we had to watch our steps. The dunes were covered with sparse short grasses with some low shrubs between them, and I wondered how there was enough vegetation to support the herd of horses. Eventually we passed into a flat area within the dunes, like the bottom of a pond, which it probably was since the soil was very damp and several old cedar stumps could be seen. We were surprised to see, in the first such area we encountered, a small square section that was surrounded with barbed wire. A sign near the enclosure indicated

that it was a research area established by the National Park Service to determine the effects of grazing by the wild horses. The ground cover inside the enclosure was remarkably more dense and taller than that of the surrounding area and I could well understand the concern with a growing horse population. We walked through another set of dunes and came out into another pond-like area with the ocean surf now sounding very close. It was then that we had our first sight of the Shackleford horses. We could see two horses grazing in the dunes on the other side of the flats. As we approached them to try to get a good photograph, a colt appeared from behind a dune. They watched us warily as we got closer, finally trotting off with a snort when we were within about thirty feet. This was the highlight of our walk across the island and we were thrilled to see these wild animals. It was more than remarkable to us that these horses have roamed wild on this island with, apparently, so little molestation.



Figure 2 - A Banker Pony on the Shackleford Dunes

We eventually surmounted the last set of dunes and came upon the ocean beach. What a sight to come upon it so suddenly! It was a broad beach of moderate slope that stretched away on either side of us like a sandy highway disappearing mysteriously into the mist, for we found that the fog was still present on the ocean. There was little wind and the ocean was not rough, but there always seem to be waves on the ocean that break in a white and foamy surf. The appearance and the sound of the surf, the smell of the salt spray in the air, and the seeming limitless extent of the ocean serve to distinguish it in my feelings from the more sheltered bays, sounds and inland waters, no matter how large they might be. There was no one else there as far as we could see, though some old footprints were evident in the sand above the high water mark. As it was with the sound beach, this seemed to be cleaner and more natural than I had hoped. Before beginning to explore the beach, we did take care to mark the beginning of our path back through the dunes with a stick stuck in the sand. This path was by no means obvious and there remained the possibility that the fog could become worse.

We turned to our left and started to walk the beach towards the east. We walked slowly and stopped often to examine the shells which seemed to be collected in two lines, one along what I believed to be the extreme high water mark, and the other line nearer the edge of the water and more recently deposited. Neither of us had ever encountered a beach that had this number and variety of shells. We had brought two large plastic bags and we began filling them with our treasures. Nancy was much better than I at identifying the various types of shells. They not only included a great number and variety of clam, mussel and oyster shells, but also cockles of a variety of sizes and colors, a large variety

as well of scallop shells, the conch-like shells of the whelks, moon snail shells, olive shells, slipper shells, the large and thin fan-like pen shells, and others which we could not name. Many of these were broken or otherwise damaged, but we searched for those that were striking and nearly perfect, becoming more selective as our collections grew. It was like a childhood dream come true, Nancy said, and for me it brought back sharp images and memories of exploring the wild and natural beach in Brigantine, New Jersey, when I was a young boy.

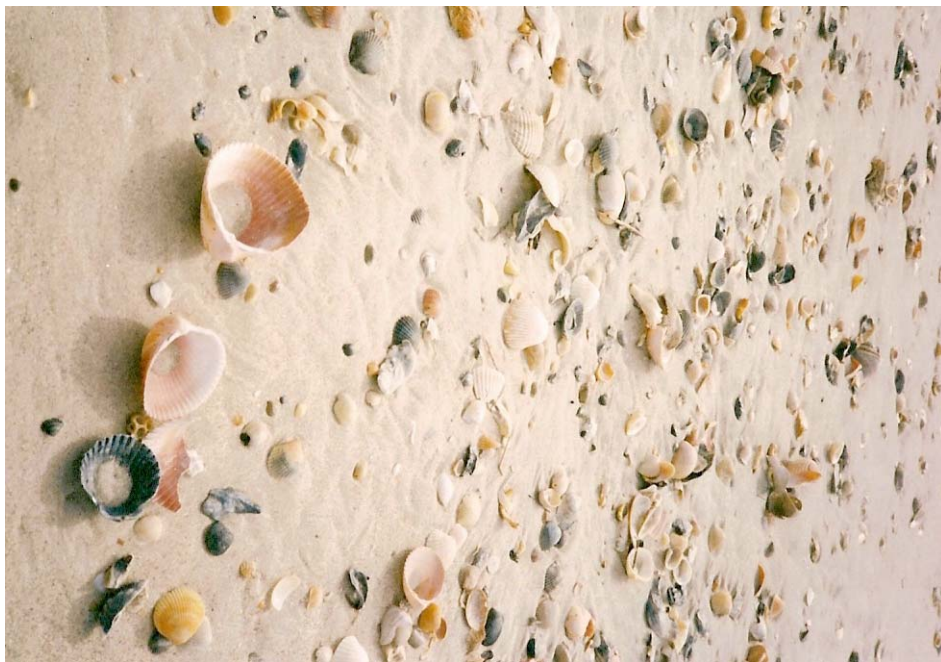


Figure 3 - Shells on Shackleford Beach

We were intent upon our beach combing when I heard the sound of a boat engine. Looking out at the ocean we could see two small open fishing boats heading west parallel to the shore and just beyond the breakers. A dense fog bank was now close to the beach and we could just barely distinguish the outlines of the boats. We could not help but wonder why anyone would consider fishing so important as to risk taking small open boats out on the exposed ocean in the fog. Perhaps they were caught by the fog unawares

and they were trying to follow the shore of Shackleford back to Beaufort Inlet, but this would be a risky undertaking since there is shoal water around the inlet to a considerable distance off shore. It was not until much later that I discovered that they probably were taking this risk for a much more serious reason than fishing.

Shortly after seeing the boats we approached a sand spit where there was a large flock of herring gulls standing on the beach at the water's edge. We walked towards the gulls to see if they were gathered there to feed on some concentration of small crabs or fish, perhaps, and they seemed remarkably unafraid. They did not fly, but rather walked out of our way reluctantly as we got near. There was one, however, which could not walk. It was floating in the shallow water of the surf, apparently unable to walk, swim or fly, and as each small wavelet washed over it and then receded, it would drift back into the surf, flapping a wing tiredly and sporadically, until the next wave washed it back towards the beach. The gull was not crying out or making any sound at all, and in its silence it seemed resigned to its fate. We knew we were watching a small tragedy. There was nothing for us to do and we turned back then, intending to explore the beach on the other side of our marked path. So as not to retrace our steps we walked higher on the beach where the sand was softer, and shortly we came upon the partially decomposed body of a pelican. What disease or accident caused this death, we wondered, and was this death also a slow process like that of the gull seemed destined to be? I realized that, as much as I enjoyed seeing wild animals, I seldom thought about how transitory their lives might be and how they died in their natural environment. While the sea supports such a rich variety of life, it is relentlessly unforgiving of weakness and disease.

A slight cool breeze started to blow off the ocean as we continued, and it brought the fog with it. By the time we had passed the beginning of our path the visibility had been reduced to perhaps two hundred yards. There is something remote and mysterious and wild about a beach in the fog. You are alone within your sphere of visibility, with the sand and the breakers rolling in out of a white nothingness. It is truly mysterious, even thrilling. But we savored these feelings only briefly for as the fog became even thicker we knew we should get back through the dunes to our dinghy and return to the boat in Beaufort. The fog would be confined to the ocean beach, we hoped, and the air would still be clear across the sound.



Figure 4 - Fog Coming In from the Ocean

But the fog remained thick as we walked back through the dunes and I was again struck by the high degree of disorientation that it produced. There were many trails through the dunes, some of which were obviously used by park rangers as they traveled in their all-terrain vehicles to manage the research areas and other resources on the island,

but the one we had followed from the dock, we thought, was very obvious. Nancy, in particular, is a very close observer of everything around her with a remarkable intuition and sense of direction. Yet there was one point where we were both quite confused and we were forced to closely scrutinize the sand to find signs of our previous footprints.

Despite our growing anxiety about our return trip in the fog, we experienced one moment of extraordinary enchantment as we proceeded through the dunes. When we were crossing the first of the flat bottom areas, and nearing the far side, as the dunes materialized out of the fog we saw a group of the wild horses standing quietly in the mist. We could see at least ten of them. They were standing motionless, wary, but seemingly unafraid, and they were watching us intently as if to determine what it was that infringed on their solitude. We stopped to admire them only briefly before hurrying on our way, but the image of these horses standing among the dunes and watching us through the mist is one that I will long remember.

When we finally climbed over the last set of dunes and were once again on the beach near the dock, we were not surprised to see fog over the water, but we were dismayed by how thick it was. We could no longer see the “NR” marker and the fog seemed as thick as when we had arrived. We clearly had a decision to make. We could wait on the beach and hope that the fog would lift once again, or we could strike out for the mouth of Taylor Creek using our compass. We only had about three hours of daylight left and if we waited, we reasoned, the fog could just as easily become worse instead of better. We decided to leave immediately. If the visibility did improve we would be well on our way home. The tide had receded in the past several hours and Recess was about ten feet from the water’s edge. We carried her back into the water, climbed in, refilled the

outboard's gas tank and left without any further delay, steering by the compass to keep on the previously determined bearing of seventy degrees towards the "NR" marker, which we hoped to see very soon.

Without examining the chart it is difficult to understand the complexity of the waterways in this area. Directly north of our departure point on Shackleford, across Shackleford Slough at a distance of a half mile, is the lower edge of the Rachel Carson Reserve. But there are two distinct channels in the Slough separated by a shoal where the water depth may be only about six inches at low tide. In fact, the "NR" marker is positioned at the eastern edge of this shoal where the two channels come together to form a single deep water channel leading to the mouth of the North River towards the northeast. It was this channel that we needed to follow for about two miles until we encountered the mouth of Taylor Creek where it enters at Lenoxville Point. If we went past this point we would enter the main body of the North River, which is two to three miles wide in some places and generally very shallow with a maze of shoals, marshes and narrow channels. Aside from the tip of Beaufort at Lenoxville Point, the nearest inhabited area is Harkers Island, which lies about two miles across the North River to the east.

Our strategy in returning through the fog was to maintain a bearing of seventy degrees until we encountered the "NR" marker about a half mile away. At that point we would retrace our previous course by steering in a direction of thirty degrees towards marker "59" just south of the mouth of Taylor Creek. If the fog was not too dense we should then be able to see the other navigational buoys leading into the creek. We could feel the effects of current even as we left the Shackleford beach and I knew we would have to contend with strong ebb tide currents as we traveled towards Taylor Creek, but I

hoped that the current would be primarily opposing us and not sweeping across our path and setting us sideways.

When we left the beach, the island very quickly receded from view so that in a few moments we could see nothing but the surrounding fog and water. I kept Recess on a bearing of seventy degrees which, I hoped, would bring us close enough to see the "NR" marker. I estimated that we had about two hundred yards of visibility. We stared intently into the fog but, when we did not see the marker after fifteen minutes, we decided that we had better change our bearing to thirty degrees on the assumption that we must have passed near to the "NR" marker and we were now in the main deep water channel heading to marker "59".

We held our course for what seemed to be an inordinately long time. Now, the fog layer was evidently much thicker than before because we could see no sunlight overhead. We were in our own grey world at the center of a bubble of visibility surrounded by flat dark water. There were no points for visual reference and I had no way even to estimate how far we could see through the fog. I had to watch the compass closely to stay on course and overcome my tendency to steer progressively more to my right. It was difficult to believe that I had to correct my course so often and to such a large degree. Even when I could maintain my concentration, which was difficult with the unchanging view and the drone of the outboard, I could not watch the compass constantly because I knew that I also needed to watch the water in case we entered a shallow area. Yet every time I took my eyes off the compass even briefly, I found that our heading had changed to fifty or sixty or even seventy degrees instead of the thirty degrees that I was trying to maintain. I was reminded of the stories I had read of people who were lost and

disoriented to the degree that they became convinced that their compass was in error. Always believe your compass, I had read, and I could now understand how difficult this could be. I became increasingly concerned. If I steered too far to the east we could miss the mouth of Taylor Creek and enter the waters of the North River where we would never be able to find our way out in the fog. We talked about this problem and decided to steer a more northerly course which, we hoped, would bring us into the shallow water on the south side of the Rachel Carson Reserve.

It happened suddenly. "There's the bottom," Nancy cried out, and I felt the outboard strike bottom and almost stall. Quickly I shut down the motor and tilted it on the transom to bring it clear of the bottom. We were in very shallow water, only a few inches deep, and the current was racing by us at an alarming speed. I no longer had any doubts that it would be impossible to paddle our stubby dinghy against such a strong current, but we had to do something quickly or we would be swept away. Using our paddles as poles we pushed Recess against the current and to the south until we had sufficient depth to restart the motor which, very thankfully, quickly came to life again. We held to a southeasterly direction until we were in deeper water and I could no longer see the bottom. After a short while I then changed our course more to the east and then to the north. We were traveling much more cautiously now but I had to maintain speed on the motor to overcome the effects of the very strong current. We watched for the bottom intently but the strange grey light in the fog made it difficult to see below the surface of the water. Again we suddenly found ourselves in the shallows and the outboard struck bottom, and again we pushed the dinghy into deeper water, but this time we had to push the boat farther before we reached a depth sufficient to restart the motor.

We continued our tactic of steering to the north until we encountered shallow water, and then heading east or southeast until we were once again in a deeper channel. We hoped that the shallow water we were finding was the southern boundary of the Reserve on Carrot Island, and that if we kept following the shallows to the east we would eventually round Carrot Island and find the mouth of Taylor Creek. We knew that this tactic was not without risk, however. We could have already passed Taylor Creek in which case we were in the shallows of the North River with no hope of extricating ourselves before dark if the fog did not dissipate. A more probable danger was damaging and disabling the motor, or finding that we had unwittingly entered a tongue of deeper water between shallows and sand bars and that we were unable to find our way back to the main channel. We could get out and wade, possibly, but we could be far from any firm land and the water was dangerously cold. There was no possibility of heading back to Shackleford because we had no idea of which direction to go. We gave some thought to anchoring but we were afraid we would have to spend a long and cold night on the water or, worse, we were fearful of being struck by another boat in the fog and the dark. We did have our VHF radio and we considered calling the Coast Guard for help, but our lives were in no immediate danger so that it would be unlikely for them to send a boat in search of us especially since we could not tell them exactly where we were and the fog would severely limit visibility.

We had been traveling for about an hour and I knew that under normal conditions we would have made Taylor Creek easily in that time. I was also becoming worried about our fuel usage, especially in view of the fact that most of the time we had been bucking a very strong current. Soon, I knew, I would have to refill the outboard, which would use

most of the reserve gasoline that we had brought. It was while thinking that we probably should continue our strategy of trying to skirt the shoals until the outboard ran out of gas, and then at that time reassess our predicament, that we both saw the faint outline of a pole in the water straight ahead. It was not more than about fifty yards away. As we got closer we could see that it was a navigational marker, and when we finally reached it we found it was marker "59", the target of our search. It seemed miraculous that we almost ran into it, and we were overjoyed at our good fortune. My relief was short-lived, however, and my uneasiness returned as we passed the marker and it vanished back into the mist. But shortly the piling with the danger sign came into view, and after that we passed next to a small green buoy, designated "1B", which was the marker closest to the mouth of the creek. Then we could dimly see Lenoxville Point with Taylor Creek making off to our left. I brought Recess close to the shore so that we could see it clearly before turning into the creek.

We were not merely relieved, we were exultant as we laughed and talked and congratulated ourselves. We now were moving with the rapidly ebbing tide and we would be able to get back to our boat even if the outboard stopped. I steered close to the north shore and found it reassuring to be so close to land, especially since the fog was much more dense than when we left Shackleford. Although the creek was no more than about fifty yards wide near this, its eastern end, we could see the south shore only dimly or not at all. With the mist now palpable and our hair and eyebrows damp and even dripping, we donned the sweaters which we had brought and found their warmth increased our feelings of security. As we were passing the menhaden factory, a small boat carrying two men materialized out of the mist behind us, apparently returning from a day's fishing, and I

could imagine that they, too, were very relieved to be back. They seemed content to idle slowly behind us until they turned off to use the boat launching ramp to the west of the menhaden factory. We passed only two other boats as we proceeded along the creek; they were both moving slowly using all their navigational lights. We had no lights so we kept very close to the north shore, well out of possible traffic. Finally we reached the Docks, tied up the dinghy and got back onboard Summer School.

What a feeling of contentment and well-being we had as we sipped some hot tea and watched the fog from the warmth and safety of our cabin! Soon it would be dark and the fog was still so thick that we could not see the boats at anchor just across the channel. Our whole experience had been memorable and exciting, but we knew that we were very fortunate to have escaped, if not actual disaster, at least a very cold and miserable night on the water. Our basic error, we agreed, was in continuing to Shackleford Banks when we saw the fog after leaving Taylor Creek. We should simply have turned back. It was an error in judgment we made, most probably, because of our high spirits and excitement in finally undertaking this anticipated trip. Despite all of our previous experience and our respect for the water, we knew we had been careless this day.

We were even more chastened as we listened to the VHF radio on channel 16, the universally used hailing and distress channel. As expected, we heard broadcasts from other boaters who were in difficulty. There was one lost in the fog near Harkers Island. He was trying to find one of the marinas there and he had called the Coast Guard for help. And then there was the captain of a forty foot sport fishing boat out on the ocean trying to find the way into Beaufort Inlet. This was another example, perhaps, of overconfidence and poor judgment, for he had no radar nor even any charts of the area.

As he was calling the Coast Guard seeking their advice, his message was intercepted by the captain of a commercial fishing vessel. There were apparently two commercial boats in the area, one of which had radar, and it was arranged for the sport fisher to follow them through the inlet. As we listened to this conversation, one of the commercial boat captains related to his counterpart that the bodies of two Harkers Island fishermen had been found in the ocean below the inlet. We had just read a notice about these men in the morning's paper. They were experienced watermen who failed to return from a day's fishing on Friday. Apparently, an intensive search by Coast Guard as well as local boaters had been underway since that time, and this, we now realized, explained the open boats we had seen on the ocean in the fog off the Shackleford beach. The two men were found wearing their life jackets, but there was no sign of their boat and no cause had yet been determined for the accident. Unavoidably, I thought of the dead pelican we had seen, and the gull flopping in the surf on Shackleford Banks, slowly dying, no doubt, as these two men must have died in the cold waters of the winter ocean. We sipped our tea and felt very grateful for each other and our boat and all that we had.