Picking Swans and Ducks in Hyde County

Article by Crystal Spencer and Carlton Carver

Left to Right: Crystal Spencer, Lena Whitaker, Carlton Carver, Lillian Spencer, and Dorothy Collins

Introduction

*Life on the Pamlico*, on December 12, 1989, ventured down to Middletown, N. C., where we interviewed Dorothy Collins, 71, her sister Lillian Spencer, and her niece Lena Whitaker, the daughter of Lillian, about a fascinating activity they were performing.
On that beautiful wintry day with a powder-blue sky, we found them in the back of the house in which Dorothy and Lillian were brought up as children. They were busy practicing a chore that they were taught to do in their youth: picking ducks, geese, and other fowl.

Dorothy and her niece showed us how they clean the fowl for the hunters that bring them in. We learned more than that as we listened to a lady ripe in age and big in heart.

_Life_: How about telling us how you go about every step of cleaning the swans and ducks. What's the first thing you do with them when you get them in? Do the hunters bring them to you?

_Lena_: Yes, the hunters bring them to us.

_Life_: What do you do first?

_Lena_: Well, most of the time, if they're not ready to pick them up right then, we dry-pick them. But they want these earlier, so I dip the whole thing [in boiling water]. That makes the feathers just slide right off and softens them up, but most of the time we dry-pick them like this [meaning what Lena and Dorothy were presently doing].

_Lena_: Now, this neck is not wet. We dry-pick them like this [demonstrates]. And we save this [feathers], and there's a man comes by every year and buys it to make downy pillows and different things. [She held up a box of down.]

_Life_: Where do they hunt for these?

_Lena_: Different people own farms and land. Like when you come up from Engelhard, you probably see a whole slew of
If Lena must pick birds quickly, she first dips them in boiling water.

them [game] there; there's different parties come in there and takes them out.

Life: Are these [cleaned birds] some that were brought in earlier today?

Lena: Yes.

Dorothy: And they [hunters] have got duck ponds.

Lena: And about six or seven hunters at a time can hunt at these ponds.
Lena dry-picks swan.

Life: You not only pick them, you clean them?

Lena: Yes.

Life: Do the hunters eat them?

Lena: Yes. They have a big organization of [hunters]. They show how to cook them. Some barbecue them, some bake them, some stew them, and they have one big get-together every year in different areas. I think they had one last year at Mattamuskeet. Different hunters cooked up different dishes.

Life: I guess it's a great sport for them to be doing that?

Lena: Yes.

Life: Aren't these ducks over here in the pan?

Lena: Yes.

The ladies save the down to sell for use in down pillows.

Dorothy: Not doing much this morning.

Lena: Yes, 'cause we usually have them piled up by the hundreds.

Lena: I wish you could have seen them on Thanksgiving laying in the floor, ducks and swans. [Dorothy laughed.]

Lena: We had them piled up near 'bout that high [holding hand shoulder high over the table] Thanksgiving. I guess we made pretty close to six hundred dollars Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.
Life: How much do you charge?

Lena: For a swan, we get six dollars; for a duck this size, we get a dollar. For those large ones there, we get two dollars a duck.

Life: And that would mean picking it and cleaning it?

Lena: Right, all the way.

Life: So it’s ready to eat?

Lena: Ready to eat when they come and get it. All they have to do is cook it.

Life: Do you have to store them on ice?

Lena: No, most of the time, by the time we get through picking them, they [the hunters] are here to pick them up.

Life: So these hunters will come later today to get them?

Lena: They’ll start coming in about four or five.

Life: That’s a pretty large one there [a large white swan almost picked]. Is that going to be about as big a bird as you’re going to get in?

Lena: Yes, this is going to be as big as we’re going to handle. The geese run smaller.

Life: This [referring to the big bird] is what they call a swan; he’s the largest.

Life: And he’s a wild bird?

Lena: Yes.

Life: When you get them, the first thing you do is put them in the water out here [the large pot of boiling water]?

Lena: No. If they [the hunters] give us time and they tell us they’re not going to pick them up until tomorrow, we dry-pick them.

Life: I see.

Lena: But, if they’re going to pick it up at a certain time, we dip them in that water, and the birds are not as hard to clean.

Life: Just like this one here, see how that feather slides right off? You can move along faster.

Life: And you keep the down?

Lena: Yes, we keep the down.

Life: How many years have you ladies been doing this?

Lena: Well, I’m 42, and my aunt was doing it [since childhood].

Dorothy: And I’m 71 years old, and I was doing it [since childhood].

Lena: She [speaking of Dorothy] was doing it when she was a young girl, her and her momma.

Life: How did you learn to do it?

Lena: Well, I learned by my grandma that raised chickens. And every Sunday morning—you know chickens were scarce—you just got a chicken dish every Sunday morning. So Saturdays, she’d go out in the old hen house and kill five or six chickens, and we’d take them out there and dip them
in the water. And she told us children how to pick 'em, gut 'em; and Sunday mornings when we got up, that's what we had to eat.

*Life*: You pick them first, and then you gut them?

*Lena*: Right.

*Life*: Are the swans good to eat?

*Lena*: Yes, they’re real good.

*Life*: What does it taste like, chicken?

*Lena*: All of their meat is dark meat.

*Dorothy*: It tastes like steak, I think. Sometimes I cut just the breast out and throw the rest of it away. Then I slice the lean meat and fry it like a steak.

*Life*: I'll bet that’s good!

*Dorothy and Lena*: It is!

*Lena*: Especially if you smother it in onions!

*Life*: How much does the down sell for? Do you sell it by the pound?

*Dorothy*: Yes, sir, by the pound.

*Life*: Do you get a pretty good price for it?

*Lena*: If you’ve got a lot of it.

*Life*: And the people that buy it do what with it?

*Lena*: Make pillows and different things, downy pillows. [Lena used the term “downy” rather than the more common term “down.” Both terms are correct.]

*Life*: I think I’ve asked you this before, but do they do most of this hunting in the lake?

*Lena*: They do a lot of it in the lake, and a lot of them have these man-made ponds. They fix these ponds on their farms, and they take different groups of hunters out every year. That is for these ducks. Now, these swans, they must have killed them when they were combining [harvesting] corn, or where they got wheat fields and [other crops].

*Dorothy*: Or where they raise peas.

*Life*: We did see some out in the fields when we were traveling down here; there were flocks of them out there.

*Dorothy*: My son has got three duck ponds out back.

*Lena*: All she’s got to do is get a bucket and go out there, and they’ll be there. He [nodding to Mr. Armstrong] wants to see me gut the geese.

*Life*: Let me know when you’re going to do it.

*Lena*: You go ahead; I’ll do it when you come back.

*Life*: [We went out back to inspect the birds and the ponds. With noises from the geese all around, Dorothy made a special call to the geese, and they came running. She then threw corn on the ground to feed them. We then noticed the dogs in the pen.]

*Life*: Those your dogs?
After calling geese, Dorothy feeds them.

*Lena:* Yes.

*Lena:* One is a rabbit dog. The other is a retriever.

*Lena:* [We then walked back to the old house to resume the interview and the process.]

*Lena:* You’re going to gut them now?

*Lena:* Yes. I’m going to start here first. [She chopped off the neck and slit the bird to take out its guts. She then reached in and pulled, removing as much as possible at one time. The bird made an exasperated sound.]

*Lena:* I think that I heard a sound!

*Lena:* You did. They do it all the time.
Life: What would you do if somebody was pulling on your insides like that! You’d make a sound, too! It’s kind of like the dead man’s last breath. That’s all she wrote!

Life: Have you lived here all your life?

Lena: Yes, sir.

Lillian: We used to live on the other side of the ditch.

Lena: That’s where I was raised at.

Dorothy: We used to live up in the front part of this house until we got the trailer out there. A lot of the old stuff is still in the attic up there. It’s mostly furniture now. [Lillian found a cornpeg that they used when she was a child and showed it to us.]

Lillian: This is what we used to gather corn with. You hook it on your fingers like that [she demonstrated how it works] and go in the field with a wagon and mules and take this and run it in the shucks and tear the [corn] ears off. [She held it so that we could take a picture.]

Crystal: They made us do it by hand!

Dorothy: Now we don’t have to do that. We have pickers to pick the corn.

Lillian: You don’t see any cotton down this way anymore. [Remembering picking cotton as a child,] we used to have to hook a bag on our side to pick cotton.

Life: To pick cotton?

Lillian: We’d tie the string in the bag, put it on our shoulder, and go up and down the rows all day long picking cotton.
was a tiresome job. I have been beat a many a day. It wasn’t because I couldn’t pick; it was because I would say that I wasn’t going to do it. I would go out and play, and my momma would beat me with cotton strags.

_Dorothy_: We used to cut peas with a pea hook. It’s here somewhere. [She looked for it but couldn’t find it. Lena then resumed the gutting. She showed us an organ from the bird.]

_Lena_: This is called the “lights”; that’s what causes them to float and not sink.

_Life_: Is that right!

_Lena_: Now he’s dead. But with that in him we can put him in water, and he won’t go to the bottom. But I can take them out, and he’ll sink.

_Life_: What do you call that?

_Lena_: Well, ours is “lungs”; they call a duck’s, swan’s and geese’s “lights.” Everything is out of him; he’s ready to eat.

_Life_: They don’t have a machine that can do this, do they?

_Lillian_: Yes, they have.

_Life_: Oh, really!

_Lena_: They pick the feathers off them, but they don’t gut them.

_Life_: What’s that, the liver?
Lena: The liver, the heart, and the gizzard. That’s all you get if you’d go to the store and buy a chicken. They would have all of this in a separate bag inside the chicken. Sometimes we skin this neck back. Most of the hunters don’t want it, the neck; so we keep them and cook them.

Life: The neck, huh?

Lena: We stew it and cook piebread in it.

Life: Is that good?

Lena: Yes.

Life: I’m just going to rush to Kentucky Fried Chicken tonight. [We all went outside to take a group picture.]

Lena: Sorry you couldn’t have seen it Saturday and Thanksgiving; we had them piled up. We worked until three in the morning one time.

Life: Do any other people around here do this?

Lena: There’s a crowd in Fairfield that does.

Life: I guess not many hunters clean their own game?

Lena: Some. This year there’s right many that take their game back with them. We had some today that usually bring their game to us, but because of the bad weather they took them back with them. We’ll be getting swans and other birds until about the fourth of January. We even do quails, doves, regular geese, Canadian geese, and snow geese. We do anything that they bring to us. The hunters know that we like to do it, and we don’t charge a big fee.

Life: That’s the key, no big fee!

Lillian: Yes, the key is no big fee!

Conclusion

On this sparkling Hyde County afternoon, we saw a lot of interesting things. We learned the steps in picking the birds and cleaning them for the hunters. We saw ladies working with skill, expertise, and dedication born of generations.

Now in her early 70’s, Dorothy Collins carries out this avocation and family tradition with pride and joy—and hard work. She said, “The key is no big fee, but we do it because we love to!”