Hallet Buck, Fisherman

Article by Misty Boyd and Wendy Braddy

Misty enjoyed interviewing fisherman Hallet Buck.

Introduction

By Misty Boyd

Have you ever tried to look for the old man of the sea? Probably not, but that is how Dr. Armstrong and I, Misty Boyd, felt when we began our adventure in a hard, long rain to find Mr. Hallet
Buck, legendary fisherman from Blounts Creek. The rain was pouring down that day, and visibility was pretty low. We felt that we were lost at sea because we were indeed lost, and we were indeed wet.

We stopped and asked for directions three different times as we rode along the back roads of Blounts Creek, and each time the person we asked was very hospitable and even knew Mr. Buck. But the directions were such that we were looking for things, such as refrigerators, sets of trailers, and particular landmarks, like the third unpaved road after the second bridge. We finally found his house just before we were about to give up. Just as we turned down the narrow dirt road that led to Mr. Buck’s house, we realized that there was a chance of either getting stuck in the mud or just being stranded because the water was flowing down like a raging river. We took the chance, and our journey to find Mr. Buck turned out to be very rewarding.

On meeting Mr. Buck for the first time, we could tell that he was a man of the water. His skin looked very weathered, but in his crystal-blue eyes I could see his love of the sea. The interview went smoothly, and Mr. Buck was pleased to give us interesting, accurate, and important information about his life as a commercial fisherman on our local rivers and creeks. Mr. Buck told us about how he fishes for mullet in the winter and shad in the spring. He uses gill nets and drop nets to catch these fish. Mr. Buck also talked about his concerns with the environment and the pollution that harms our waterways. In fact, he started talking about the environment right off the bat.

Mr. Buck: Some things [about the environment] I don’t go along with at all. There’s a lot of it that I don’t know, and I’m not saying a word against education. Education is fine, but without a little common sense to go along with it, it ain’t worth a darn. You can educate a fool, but you got to have a little common sense to go along with it. Sometimes they use it; sometimes they don’t.

Life: You’ve been fishing for 42 years?

Mr. Buck: Yes.

Life: How did you get into it?

Mr. Buck: Well, I started off my first three years after I got married as a farmer, and for three years in a row acts of nature took the profit away from it. I said, well, farming isn’t for me, and along towards the last [of my farming] I moved to Core Point 42 years ago in ’54 or ’55, I can’t remember. Since then I’ve seen fish come and fish go, and the river change from plenty of grass to none at all. Everybody, I suppose, has their own theories on why the grass disappeared and why it came back. My theory was [that] about the time the grass started disappearing, the Agriculture Department advocated no-till farming and spraying weed kill by the loads of it. The chemicals back then were not as biodegradable as they are now. There’d come a heavy rain, and it’d wash right off in the ditches and into our streams; [the stream] didn’t stand a chance. I’ve seen even the marsh where the rain ran out into the river during its worst period and killed the marsh. But over the years it gradually got better with more biodegradable chemicals. And it’s nothing anybody did so far as planting grasses because they tried that, and it would all die. When nature’s time come and the water got able to support it, grasses come back. And so there’s a lot of species of fish that’s beginning to
really increase with the increase of the grass over the last three or four years.

Life: So it’s gotten better recently?

Mr. Buck: It’s got better. It’s got cleaner, not that I think some of the places have cleaned up their act some. But your biggest water polluters now are your municipalities, towns that pour so much nitrogen into the water. Just a few years ago it was estimated that Rocky Mount alone dumped enough raw sewage into the river to fill a six foot pipe a thousand miles long once a year! That’s a pile of sewage! And that’s only one town. You multiply that by all the towns along the river, and you got a pile of nitrogen going into the water. And it’s not being over fished, but the fish can’t hatch. If your water’s not clean enough for them to hatch in. When the last one comes up and her eggs don’t hatch, then you ain’t got no more.

Life: You mentioned that you got into fishing because farming wasn’t working out.

Mr. Buck: Yes, I gradually slipped into it when I moved to Core Point. There was a lot of full-time commercial fishermen living down there at that time, and I went to work part time for one of the commercial fishermen living down there, Clinton Martin. I fell in love with the water. Of course, I always did love the water. From the time I was 12 years old, I would hook and line feed. Oh, I still do a lot of that. I’m one of the very few commercial fishermen you ever see that pick up a reel and rod or fishing pole, but I just solid love it. Even when I haven’t got anything to do on the water for recreation, I get out there in my boat and ride along right slow up small creeks here and there, just looking.
waterways got in a lot worse shape than ours, quicker than ours, because the temperature's hotter year around, and he was talking about shad, seeing shad in the spring of the year floating. I said, "Your water's not pure enough to support him after he spawns because he's in such a weakened condition." He said he thought shad was supposed to die after he spawns; he didn't know. That's how much they really know about it, but you can peel off a scale off a shad and tell how many times he's returned to fresh water to spawn. You can tell how old he is. He returns the first time to spawn at approximately three years old, and then every time he rereturns, there'll be a circle on that scale there where he entered fresh water. To the educated eye you can wipe a little bit of slime of protective coating that a fish carries off, and there's the individual circle for every time he's come up the river.

Mr. Buck's wife seems pleased to hear her husband's stories.
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Life: Have we had a decrease in shad?

Mr. Buck: Oh, yes! It’s down to where there’s no money to be made off shadding. I don’t know nobody that even has shad nets anymore. Fish for flounder with a sink net, which is not an appropriate net to fish for shad, and you incidentally catch shad occasionally in it; no one don’t even hang nets for shad no more.

Life: So you primarily fish for mullet?

Mr. Buck: Oh, yes. Mullet and flounder, flounder before it turns real cold. When the temperature drops below 50 degrees, flounder begins to go into its dormancy stage. If the water temperature ever drops to 40 degrees, it goes completely dormant and stays that way until [the temperature] gets above [40 degrees]. I’ve seen flounder in the spring of the year that when you had a real hard winter and went dormant early and had been dormant for a couple of months when they first come out of dormancy happen to catch him before he’d camouflage, got that camouflage coloring to it and you can take him alive, and, buddy, he didn’t like that! Shake him and the meat would slide right down the skin! Been dormant so long he just gone all to pieces.

Life: Shad is very good for the roe?

Mr. Buck: Yes. There used to be a tremendous market for the meat up North, but the shad disappeared for so long until the market almost disappeared up North for shad. It was primarily the Jewish people during [one of their religious periods]. They went to fish instead of red meat, you know. They weren’t supposed to eat red meat. Shad was a big seller back then.
Life: How big a boat do you have?

Mr. Buck: Just over an 18-foot skiff. I've always worked with small boats.

Life: In exactly what areas do you fish primarily, in the Pamlico River?

Mr. Buck: In the Pamlico primarily. I used to fish its tributaries, Durham's Creek before it closed, South Creek and all the creeks.

Life: Did you get up to Bath Creek?

Mr. Buck: Yes! Yes! Ain't many places on this river I hain't had a piece of equipment some time or the other.

Life: Do you go out in the Pamlico Sound any?

Mr. Buck: I have over the last 20 years. But the first 20 years of my fishing was entirely in the river, but it got to the place you had to go where the fish was at, instead of the fish coming to you. Then I began to trailer and to go to Neuse River or the [Pamlico] Sound or wherever I heard they were doing anything, where they were catching them.

Life: When you fish, do you have other people with you?

Mr. Buck: Primarily by myself. Always have been a one-man operation.

Life: Who do you sell fish to?

Mr. Buck: It varies. I used to have a steady market one place, but now I get on the tely [phone] and find out who's paying best, and that's where I go.

Life: Locally though do you sell, like, to Fish 'N' Stuff?

Mr. Buck: I do sometimes. But if I can pick up a load of fish or something like that and Edenton's got a 15-20 cent better price per pound, all of it goes to Edenton.

Life: When you sell them, you don't clean them first?

Mr. Buck: No, no! You sell them whole. I got a little ol' retail license here, for what few fish we sell here. The only reason I got it: after I'd been in here a few years, neighbors around all wanted to come by and get a mess of fish once in a while. Then laws changed to where you couldn't even sell your neighbor a mess of fish unless you had a license to do it with. When I first started, whatever you caught or raised, you could sell without a license, but they changed all that.

Life: Have you ever had any dangerous experiences out fishing, like storms?

Mr. Buck: Oh, yes! I've been into them when I wished I was on the hill.

Life: Do some of the storms come up suddenly?

Mr. Buck: Yes, just blow up without warning. I've been caught when I didn't know whether I was going to make it back or not.
Life: You've never gone down, have you?

Mr. Buck: No, I've never gone down.

Life: Have you come close?

Mr. Buck: I thought so [laughter]! Quite a few times!

Life: Is that mainly from the wind?

Mr. Buck: Yes. Most people are lost in a wind out there in a panic and use too much power. If you cut a motor off and just let the boat do its own thing, a mighty little boat will stand one; it can blow a lot of wind without [the boat] taking any water into it.

Life: So you think the best thing in a big, sudden wind is just cut the motor off?

Mr. Buck: Or idle her down to where you're just holding headway and go pointing in your general direction where you want to go. I've got caught up by North Creek in a 16-foot boat. I was docking in South Creek, and the seas were so big I couldn't go tail to them, and I couldn't go head to them. If I went ahead to them, she'd rise up so high, I'd take water over the back end. You'd have to catch in between seas [waves] and 45 [degrees] off the wildest wind till you're well coursed [straightened out] then catch between seas and turn 45 back the other way. Weren't no fun, but I made it back in!

Life: Do you carry a radio?

Mr. Buck: I do now since my health is not what it used to be. Had a lot of heart problems, had open heart surgery and back surgery and all that stuff. I didn't put it in there, but some of my friends made me put one on there; said I had to carry one.

Life: What do you see as the future for commercial fishing around here on the Pamlico?

Mr. Buck: That's a hard one. Controls are necessary on the amount of gears put out for each commercial fisherman. Now, I think the laws they've got in place now will gradually do that. They have got now a moratorium on all licenses to where there's no more issued, and I think that'll gradually do its own thing. With the improvement in water quality, we're beginning to get them species of fish back, but it shouldn't stop where it's at. The water quality should keep going because we've got now where we can hold our own, and the grass used as a filter down river has cleaned up maybe 30% over what it was four years ago. But it's the grass that's holding our own with what cleaning up has been done on the amount of pollution going in the water because the population increases all the time. There will have to be for a commercial fisherman to survive and for your water quality to survive, tighter and stricter regulations on sewage dumps and hog farms and all this stuff.

Life: Do you think the major problems are the municipalities?

Mr. Buck: They have over the last 40 years. You can't name one ain't almost grown four times in size in the last 40 years. That's one of the deals, plus every available hill is on a stream, even the creeks that run off the river. Now there's development on them and [you can't] say a whole pollution level's what it was 40 years ago. If you'd really tighten up on your municipalities and every-
thing else, it’s might impossible to say you can have everything the way it was 40 years ago, you just can’t do it; but you can help a lot. And the difference in chemicals they make today and what they made 40 years ago has helped a lot.

Mr. Buck shows one of his fishing nets.

Life: With the farming?

Mr. Buck: Yes. A lot of the chemicals now are biodegradable. They work for their period of time and then degrade. Back when I first started, there was stuff like DDT. DDT, wherever it’s at now, [it] is still DDT. It don’t biodegrade; it’s there forever. If humans were to disappear off of the earth, in 10 year period of time your rivers would be as clean as they ever were. We’re the cause of all the problems; there ain’t no reckon about it. We’re
the cause of all the problems. Now speaking on the regulations and what not on fishing that’s decided, I just know how a fish spawns and how he grows. One thing they don’t look at, and they should, is the balance of nature. If you bring one species too high, it’s going to downslide them other ones. You’ve got to keep that thing in there even keel. Right now they’re over protecting striped bass. They’re getting too abundant; there’s not enough food for them. When there is feed that’s not there, he changes to something else to feed on where he downgrades the population of other types of fish. If they keep that thing one even balanced, everything will fare better. In the *Virginia Pilot* newspaper a year or two ago, a rock [striped bass] was dressed out and it was pictured in the paper. There was 42 small crabs in that one rock!

Life: Is that right?

Mr. Buck: So you see, its feed weren’t there, so he had to go to something else.

Life: So he started on crabs?

Mr. Buck: Right. They done that thing in Louisiana with the drum, and the crabbing industry is falling off rapidly in Louisiana. The whole place has turned to red drum. They overprotected them, so they’re damaging something else. You’ve got to keep things on an even keel.

Life: Is the red drum that popular because of the blackened red fish in restaurants?

Mr. Buck: No. More than anything else was sportsmen’s interest in red drum. Now you can’t tell one that’s come from New
York or somewhere down here with the yacht and he goes out on Northeastern and don’t catch his cooler full of fish. The fish ain’t there, the commercial fisherman caught ‘em up because he didn’t catch his cooler full on the Northeastern or something. A fish bites when he gets ready, because I done some of both of it and I know. Come back in a couple of hours, they’ll eat it up. So don’t necessarily mean they ain’t there because you don’t catch it. He’s just not ready. If they’d look to their barometers and tide changes, they’d catch more fish than they would by just going out blind.

Life: The tides and weather have a lot to do with it?

Mr. Buck: Tide changes and your reads. A falling barometer, you might as well pull up your line, go on to the house, and stay there.

Life: He’s not going to bite?

Mr. Buck: He is not going to bite. You know, you probably heard people say I went out after a thunder squall the other day and the fish bit like the dickens. Well, a perch in a thunder squall will drop the barometer right on down. As it passes over, the barometer’s going to be rising in clear but fast behind it. That’s the reason for fish biting so frightening behind the thunder squall; it’s on a rising barometer.

Life: You sound a little more optimistic about the future of commercial fishing.

Mr. Buck: I am much more optimistic now than I was four years ago before the grass started coming back. Our streams during the hot weather will not let the fish come back. We’d have tremen-

dous fish kills. Before the grass started coming back, there was nothing to replenish the oxygen in the water. The heat would take the oxygen out. Fish got to breathe too, and the grass has put back a tremendous amount of oxygen. We’ve got a lot of problems. I expect as long as we’re around, we’ll still have problems; but it’s getting better. But the last four years it’s gotten a lot better. Four years ago it was kind of a rare thing to see what they call a raccoon perch or red fin. Its primarily diet is grass shrimp, which is found in water grass. And the reason he had disappeared was not that he’d been caught up, but nature had slowed down his reproduction process because there weren’t nothing to eat for them. Nature has a big deal in all this stuff. Biologists don’t take a look at that too often. You can take ol’ squirrels you see running through the trees out here. You take a year there’s not going to be many acorns or food like pecan trees. You know, some years they bear heavy and some years there’s hardly any. Ol’ acorn trees and other stuff are the same way. Take a year there’s not going to be many acorns, an ol’ female squirrel won’t have but a pile a squirrels that year, and that’s before the food has time to mature. Nature’s building in too. If gum trees are full of gum berries and oak trees full, nature has four or five fires that summer. It’s in the plan of nature.

Life: Sounds like mother nature know what’s best, huh?

Mr. Buck: Oh, you don’t mess with mother nature, and that’s what we’ve done too much! That’s the whole size of it. We’ve messed with mother nature. We allow our streams to get filthy; that’s not good.

Life: Mr. Buck, this [release] form allows us to print what you say.
Mr. Buck: I don’t mind. After I got a little age on me, I got old enough and ugly enough I don’t give a dang blame what anybody thinks about me. If I got an opinion, somebody’s got to hear it. I used to wouldn’t do that!

Life: Let me get a couple of pictures.

Mr. Buck: Don’t break the camera!

Life: The camera is unbreakable, believe me!

Mr. Buck: I’ve never made a lot of money in what I’ve done. I made a good living, and I can say for the last 40 some years now I’ve done what I like to do.

Life: Very few people can say that!

**Conclusion**

By Wendy Braddy

“You got another pretty girl with you” was the beginning of an afternoon spent talking with Mr. Hallet Buck that was truly enlightening and informative. We met him at the pier where his boat was tied up. Mr. Armstrong was taking pictures, and Misty and I were in the boat with Mr. Buck. In maneuvering to get the right angle for the shot, Mr. Armstrong sank ankle deep in the mud. “I believe you’re new to the area!” shouted Mr. Buck.

We laughed at stories he told of his being caught in a storm and the lack of education about the water some people have. When
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Mr. Armstrong asked if he had ever gone down in a storm, or come close, Mr. Buck replied with laughter, “I thought so! Quite a few times!” Then responding to the question “Do you carry a radio?” Mr. Buck said, “I didn’t put it in there, but some of my friends made me put one on there; said I had to carry one.”

We gave our special attention as he spoke of damage to the environment created by our municipalities, problems of spawning fish, and the future of commercial fishing on the Pamlico River. Commenting on laws and the future of commercial fishing, he said, “I think the laws they’ve got in place now will gradually repair the damage to the river and creeks.” Mr. Buck was a very kind, humorous, and outspoken person, who spoke with knowledge gained from experience. Mr. Buck brought several points to our attention as when he said, “We’re the cause of all the problems; there ain’t no reckon about it.” The commercial fishing industry would be much better off if we all shared the views and concerns of Mr. Buck.

Misty Boyd (center) and Wendy Braddy are ready to go fishing!