Carolina Seafood
Company

Mr. Etlas Henries, Jr., of Carolina Seafood Co., displays crab pot made by his father.

Article by Marie Deans and Barbara McDade
The month was May. After making the forty minute trip from the college to Aurora, Dr. Armstrong and we arrived at the place where we were to meet the man of the day, Etias Henrys, Sr. Unfortunately, Mr. Henrys, Sr., was not available to speak with us. But instead Etias Henrys, Jr., obliged by talking to us. The father and son team are dedicated workers to their operation of Carolina Seafood Co., a crab factory they own, located on South Creek near Aurora.

The crab processing plants or crab houses, like Carolina Seafood, located along the Pamlico River and its creeks and tributaries are a very important and interesting part of the area’s economy. Etias Henrys, Jr., told us of the workings of a crab house and its suppliers, the crabbers, and how both have changed over the years.

Etias Henrys, Jr., is a tall young man with brownish-black hair and mustache. He is a down-to-earth fellow. Having been taught everything by his father in the field of the crabbing operation, he has grown to have the understanding and knowledge of the art of picking and packing crab meat. We greatly appreciated his warm hospitality and precise organization as he talked to us.

Graciously, Etias took us on a guided tour of his packing house, explaining every phase of the operation in detail.

Okay, basically we're a complete picking house. Right now I've got 20 crabbers working at this plant. That is, 20 fellows who run the boats. All of them, with the exception of one, are working crab pots. Every boat is working 300 crab pots; that figures up to 6,000 pots working out of this one house.

The crabbers are all independent workers. They are not employed by the company, but they sell strictly to this one place, like they do at all other seafood places.

Each house has its own set of fishermen?

Yes, and, like I say, we're probably one of the largest ones on pots. We're pretty well strictly crab potters because we work all these local creeks and tributaries up here.

What area do your crab potters cover?

Some of them work from Core Point. I've got three that come from Pamlico View, which is on the other side of the [Pamlico] river next to Belhaven, and these work down as far as Goose Creek Island to Lowland.

Do any work around Bath?

No, but one comes from halfway between Belhaven and Bath, which is pretty well straight across the river. You know, as you look across [from Aurora], you're only about six miles from the other side [of the Pamlico], and it's easier for them to run straight across than to run to Swan Quarter or Belhaven.

Well, once the crabbers come in here, we just buy their catch from them. If you like, I'll show you what we do with them.

Sure.

After we buy them at dock side, we put them in stainless steel carts, like so. Each cart will hold 1800 pounds of crabs. The stainless steel carts will not rust. The only thing that's not steel is the wheels.
and they're neoprene to keep from tearing the floor up.

So when you get the crabs from the boats, the first thing you do is to put them in these carts?

Yes. We weigh them and then dump them directly into the big cooking vats. In the summer when the crabs are real active, we can only get about 1500 pounds in them because they'll start trying to get over the edge.

Now this house is unique in that we have what is basically a flow through. We'll buy them; they'll be delivered right here. We'll weigh them and dump them into the stainless steel carts or cooking vats. The carts roll right into the pressure cooker to keep from having any manual labor with it. Everything is automatic. We just close the door, lock it, and cook the crabs at 240 degrees and 12 pounds of pressure. Just like a pressure cooker at the house.

Is that steam?

That's steam.

Are the male and female crabs separated?

Yes. We have a table here where we pick the big males out and send them to Baltimore alive. But what we're handling this time of year is female crabs. They're lovely for picking. Right now we're picking up 7,000 pounds a day of hard crabs; that'll produce about 600 pounds of crab meat. But it will vary, depending on where you get the crabs. The North Carolina crab will have more meat in it than the Virginia crab, and right now we're buying some from Virginia.

So we buy them, separate the big males, put the females into the vats, roll them into our steam room and cook them. Once we bring the cooked crabs out of the cooker, we don't want to touch them. They are all nice and clean, and we try to keep everything sanitary. We just put them in a cooling-down room. This room has a vent in the ceiling; air is drawn through the vent and just blows out by fan. When they come into the cooling-down room, they are hot, 240 degrees, so we cool them down to 100 degrees. You can't refrigerate them at 240 degrees; you would burn up your refrigerator.

After they are cooled to about 100 degrees, we bring them into a refrigerator cooler where they are stored until they are picked. So far the crabs have not been touched since they were cooked. Only the outside of the cart has been handled. They are never taken back out into an unsterilized area. They come from the cooler into the picking room. We're at only about half production today. The pickers will sit here and manually pick the crab out.

At this point we wanted to get a picture of one of the ladies picking crab meat.

Ethel, you better smile!

But Miss Ethel didn't seem to want her picture taken. She said, "Lord, have mercy!"

After the ladies have picked the meat, they'll bring it to be weighed. We have electronic scales. Then, it is pushed through a hole into another refrigerated room. Everything these ladies touch must be sterilized: their hands, their aprons and their knives.
Miss Ethel and other ladies skillfully pick the crabs.

Everything is clean; so is the crab meat.

Let's go into the next room. Okay, it is pushed into here; see, that's what the crab meat looks like. We grade it at this time.

How do you distinguish the grades?

The size of the meat pieces. See those large lumps? It's all basically the same, but you want the large pieces. They will have no bone and will be graded higher. Some looks like it has been ground up and will have bone in it; that's the lower grade. The claw meat will be brown. After grading it, we
pack it in cartons, put it in ice, load it on trucks that take it to Baltimore.

We'll go out this door. You've come into one end of the building and worked your way through to the truck loading area at this end. There is nothing difficult about it.

We do have a lot of space for storage. We have cardboard boxes and about 20,000 crab cans stored right now. We also have a storage for the crabbers; we keep their crab barrels and their motor oil for them. Everything is separated so that there is no mess. Everything concerning the actual process of picking crabs is totally separated, sterile and low bacteria counts. It's real simple once you get it all set up, if it works right. We also have a freezer for the crabbers' bait. In order for them to fish the crab pots, they have to bait them. This freezer is run at zero degrees and is full of nothing but uneatable bait. We now have 12,000 pounds of roe herring in here. You can't stand in here long; it cools you off.

I'd like to ask you something about the ladies that pick the crab meat. How do they develop that skill? Does it take a long time?

There has not been a way to train them. The government has tried to set up training programs, but there is no way to do it. But the lady you took the picture of, Miss Ethel, has four daughters working here. It seems to be something that mother teaches daughter and just keeps passing on.

Are there some people that can do it, and somethat can't?
Some people can do it, and others would starve to death and can't pick enough to eat. That's the category I fall into; that's what keeps me skinny. I'd say it's just an art that they develop with time.

Do they get paid on the basis of how much they pick?

Yes, we pay them by the pound. Right now they are being paid $1.25 per pound. That doesn't sound like much, but some of these ladies can pick up to 40 pounds a day. That's $50 per day and the only investment they have is a stainless steel crab knife and an apron. Not every picker is that good and some will pick out nice large lumps and some will tear it to pieces. But it is an art.

How do you distinguish between who can have the fewest bones and shell?

You learn your pickers over time. Some will consistently pick big chunks of meat and others will tear it up. It's just something they learn. The crab itself is sectioned off into different compartments. The back leg, where the fin is, is where the big chunk of meat is. If the lady can roll that one piece of meat out, that's half the meat in the whole crab.

Next Etias told us that his company is expanding.

We have just built a new building. Most companies do not have the flow through nor the ice machines that we have. The health inspectors get grouchy if you don't keep everything cold. I have three ice machines, two running all the time and one just in

case I have trouble with the others.

Is crab potting fairly new?

Yes, it is in this area.

Why is that so? Because of the price of gas?

For years everybody said that you could not catch crabs in crab pots in the Pamlico River. When I was 12 or 13 years old, I had a boat with a trotline on it. That was the thing; you either trawled or you trolled. Everybody wanted big expensive boats. Well, now they have found out that they can catch crabs in crab pots, and they are using little speed boats. These speed boats are fishing 300 to 350 crab pots.

You mean one of those little bitty boats?

Yes, in one of those little bitty boats.

How many pounds of crabs do they bring in fishing 350 crab pots in this area?

In July, they will bring in 1500 pounds per boat.

That is a vat full, isn't it?

Yes, that's a lot of hard crabs per boat.

Crabs aren't caught here all year, are they? Does your company operate all year? What is the season?

No, crabs are not caught here all year. They start about the first of April and go through November. We do operate all year. We ship crabs in from Virginia, the Outer
Banks, Louisiana, wherever we can get them.

So the same fishermen cannot supply you all year, and you must buy from other areas?

We have crabbers that are fishing now because the crabbing is bad. Some will dredge for oysters. We have had a cold spring, and the crabs are scarce. But during the middle of the summer the average crabber will make $1,000 a week. Some of them will make a lot more. When they are doing their best, they can bring us more crabs than we can handle; and that's a lot of hard crabs. We'll empty all eight of those carts a day, and they can fill them up faster than we can empty them.

How many ladies do you usually have picking?

During the summer, we try to handle about 40. Right now we have 20 to 25 working. Most of the crabs we now came from Ocracoke and Davis.

How long does it usually take the average picker to pick one pound of crab meat?

The average picker will go through about five to six pounds an hour, or on down to three or four pounds an hour. We have ladies that come down during the summer and work 40 to 45 hours a week and make anywhere from $150 to $200 a week. Like I say, the investment is almost nothing. They are working in well-lighted, air-conditioned rooms; and I doubt that they do as much hard work as a secretary would do. The biggest problem they have is with their hands; they constantly have the tendency to get cut, pulling on the sharp edges of the crabs.

Do they wear gloves?

The Health Department will not allow them to wear gloves. If they cut their hand, they have to quit. They are not even allowed to wear band-aids or any kind of antiseptic. If they have a cold, they have to quit. They are under pretty strict regulations from the state and the federal [agencies].

How long has it been this strict?

Ever since I can remember. It's probably a little stricter now or a little better enforced—let's put it that way. When the federal man comes down, he will actually go around and see if he can find dead flies in the window, not live ones. Heaven forbid finding a live one! They want to find a dead one. They will take the ladies' hands and see if they can find a nick or a band-aid. They get real picky, which is good.

Do the regulations hurt your operation or cost you money?

Overall, I don't suppose so. Some things are just petty stuff, like move this from here to there, and I don't understand that as long as it's in the room. They come down to check the chlorine in the water, the stuff to kill germs, fine; that's what they are paid to do. If they find a mistake, well, the only thing you can do is say they're right and I'm wrong. But the red tape, the paper work! If they find something wrong, you've got to send everything in triplicate and to four different places. But I really have no big complaints.

Do you work with your father?
I'm buying the place from him. He has gone strictly into building the crab pots.

Does he make them?

Yes. All these [stacked outside the plant] were made over at his plant at Blounts Creek. He just started out this year. He had made 12,000, and now he has run out of them and this has been a bad year for crab potters. When a crab potter can invest $11 in a pot and turn over $1,000 a week with a $5,000 investment, that's not bad.

I guess they last indefinitely?

Oh, no, sir! About two years. They will rust out in that time. Notice the gold or silver looking bar in the bottom? That's a zinc bar; that's to keep it from rusting so fast. My dad has come up with his own dip to keep them from rusting. Barnacles will also start growing on the pots. Here are some that have been in the water for a year and may not make it through August.

Let me get a picture of you holding that pot up.

You want the nice pretty used one; if he sees me advertising one of his old tore up ones, he won't like that.

Do you want to get one of the good ones?

No, but this is what they'll look like in one year. Now there are all kinds of regulations on crab pots. For instance, the buoys have to be a certain length and width, and they have to have your name inscribed on them. Our plant here has 1,000 pots in the water and has two crabbers working for us to fish them. All other crabbers are self-employed.

There are shrimp boats here, aren't they?

No, that's a crabber that is coming in early. He uses a different technique than the crab potters. In using the crab pots, you bait them, the crab swims in, and you capture him. This crabber goes along and scoops them off the bottom by pulling two nets. He went out this morning, didn't do a whole lot, and decided to come in.

You mean that he will not catch as many crabs with a net as he would with crab pots?

Well, no, he won't. In a day's time a fellow fishing 300 crab pots will beat him. Because the pot is there all night with the fish bait in it, the crab is going to swim in to get it and he is captured. The crabber dumps him out, baits the pot again, and it's there 24 more hours catching. But once you tow by a place with a net, that's it.

The crab will either see the bait or smell it; once he goes into the pot after it, he can't get out. However, you don't want to catch a little crab and I will not buy from anybody who does not have cull rings on their pots. The cull rings allow the crabs under five inches to escape. They are illegal to catch.

Five inches is the smallest crab you are allowed to catch?

That is the law.

Isn't it much more difficult for the ladies to pick the smaller ones than the bigger ones?
No, because the little ones are fatter; they have more meat in them. If it were legal, the best crab I could buy would be a four and a half to five inch hard crab. I'd get more pounds of meat per hundred pounds of raw product than I will out of the bigger ones. The big ones have more weight in the shell and less weight in the meat. But every crab pot working out of this plant must have a cull ring in it. A cull ring is nothing but a ring larger than the pot's mesh to allow the small crabs to escape. The crab pots also have buoys to mark the pot in the water.

What types of weights do the crab pots have on them?

Everybody has their own opinion. Here is one with a quarter inch steel bar around it; some have a three-eights inch steel bar. There's not much of a reason to weight the pots here. The Pamlico River doesn't have much current; there's no tide movement. On a typical day here at the docks, the water will rise about four or five inches, so the pots do not have the tendency to shift. If you take this same pot down to Ocracoke, they'll put a half inch steel bar around it.

A certain number of pots are lost each year; somebody will run over one, cut the rope [attached to the buoy] and you can't find it. Or the rope will be caught in a propeller and drug for 100 yards. We could have a hurricane force wind that will scatter the pots everywhere, no matter how much weight you put in them.

So it isn't just corrosion. There are many things that can happen to crab pots?

Here is one that will not corrode; it is plastic. It's got a plastic coating on it, but the algae will grow on it. And it will get so thick that you can't lift it up. If you have one like that, you are constantly taking it out of the water to clean it. It will also cost more for the plastic coating. The rivets are stainless steel and will not rust, but you can lose it just as quick, probably quicker, because the plastic has a tendency to float the pot.

So there's no way to make a perfect crab pot, is there?

They're still working on the perfect mousetrap, I reckon!

This is a fascinating operation. Are you looking forward to taking it over on your own?

Yes. I went to N. C. State for mathematics, and when I got out, I told the old man that one day I'd be back down here. I just decided to take it back over; it was about to work him to death.

I guess you have to keep things clean around here?

You don't just have to keep things clean. The last time the health man came down here, I didn't even know he was here because he doesn't tell you when he's coming. He just walks in and says, "I'm here." Well, he told me that I had a problem, and I thought, "Oh, gosh, what have I done now?"

He told me that I had to put up a new paper towel rack. Everything else was perfect, and he left. They've got to find some-
thing wrong; that's their job. And I did need a new one; the old one was shot. He'll come in, check the chlorine water. He'll check ice room temperatures, freezer, everything. I don't want him to find anything dirty. I wouldn't eat anything out of a place that wasn't clean and wouldn't expect anybody else to.

We have enjoyed talking to you. You have given us a clear picture of the whole operation.

It's basically simple; there's nothing complicated about it. We even have a crab sheder. The long wooden thing down the side. That's where we take the crabs that are about to molt. You put the hard crab in there, he'll climb out of his shell. Then you've got a real live soft, soft crab. He's perfectly clean; you can send him anywhere you want then. You can keep him alive for a week. So we handle the soft crabs, the fish, the whole works. But we mainly work with hard crabs. But the pickers can't pick the meat out of a crab that's getting ready to shed. So with the price of soft crabs, we might as well go ahead and shed them and send those on up to them too.

Visiting Carolina Seafood Co. and meeting with Elias Henries, Jr., was a most interesting and enjoyable venture. One doesn't realize all the important skills that have gone on behind the scenes when he or she buys a package of crab meat. And this is why we wanted to share Mr. Henries' insight and personal knowledge of all the skillful work that goes on in a crab house.

Learning the crab business from his father and applying his own natural ability have