Mr. "Tee Wee" Blount Describes the Jamesville Easter Monday Herring Festival

Mr. Blount demonstrates his cheese cutter for Michael and Janice.

Article by Janet Simpson and Michael Williams
Introduction by Michael Williams

If you head west from the college down Highway 264, turn right on Lizard Slip, left on the Old Bath Highway, right on the Lodge Road, go straight down the Cherry Road, turn right on North Market Street Extension, and take Highway 171, you will end up in the town of Jamesville. That is what I call taking the backroads, and on this particular Friday I directed Dr. Armstrong through these narrow, winding, scenic roads, where some farmers could be seen already transplanting the tobacco plants to Jamesville. There we turned left at the stoplight and met Janet at the Friendly Grocery Store to talk with store owner Mr. "Tee Wee" Blount, a self-confident man with an old-fashioned GI haircut, who calls you by name and looks you in the eye when he talks to you.

Janet lives in Jamesville and she knows "Tee Wee," but it was the first time Dr. Armstrong and I had been to the store, and we were truly amazed at this country store, which looked like it contained everything from A to Z and back again. There were machetes (large knives used for chopping through underbrush), a block of cheese, hats of all kinds, tools, jeans, hip boots, and many nuts, bolts, and screws.

When Mr. Blount returned from lunch, the four of us adjourned to the storeroom where "Tee Wee" proceeded to tell us interesting stories about his life, the store, and the annual Easter Monday herring festival.
Mr. Tee Wee's store.

Leaning back in an old wooden-framed chair, Mr. Blount laughingly told us that he began working at the store in 1935 for a weekly salary of $7.
I had worked here maybe 12 months, and the owner decided that I ought to have a little raise. So he agreed to let me have two cokes a day, which was ten cents—they were five cents each—and three packages of cigarettes a week; they were 25¢ each. I worked this way until 1941. I got a job at Williamston in the Central Service Station, making $20.00 a week.

When the man tried to hire me for working at the service station, I asked him how much he could pay me. He said $20.00 a week, and I said you can't pay that much money [laughing]! I didn't think there was that much money in the world! Yes, sir!

So I've been happy, Roy, and I think this is the thing in life—that if you can get over to anybody if he's doing what he's happy with regardless whether he's a ditch-digger or what, don't bother him. I hadn't made nearly the money that a lot of people have, but I guarantee you one thing: I have been happier than anybody. I've raised three children and two of them went to Greenville [East Carolina University], and one of them went to [N. C.] State. At times it was hard, but the Lord will provide. He sure will, and I'm mighty happy. I've got five grandchildren, and my son the 15th of last month [March] got married in Hawaii. That just goes to show a little bull can go a long ways [laughing]!

We want to talk some more to you about the store, but how about telling us about the herring festival that's held here in Jamesville in the spring.

Of course. The herring have been here, and at one point of the game it was a sur-
vivor, and I think this is about as far back as you want to go. It was a must in the early days. We had no transportation really and just about didn't have any money. We were using due bills mostly, and every farmer and nearly every person in eastern North Carolina put up a barrel of herrings. Depending on how big the family was was how many herrings he'd put up.

Easter Monday as a rule is always the height of the herring season. It's along in the middle, and, of course, Easter is a holiday and everybody would come to Jamesville. Actually, if he didn't want to buy any herrings, he'd watch the fishery that we had across the river. They would buy the herring and go home and corn them and wait until next year to come to Jamesville, a whole lot of them.

But as time went on, the highways began to come in, and in, I think, 1927 [was] when this one came through here. And people began to have more money, and we didn't have to have herrings anymore to survive. They would just come down to look at the scene.

The Rutland Club here, which is the only civic organization that small communities have, we organized somewhere around in '57 or something like that, we would go down to the river and have a hotdog stand and try to boost up this herring gathering. At one year we even had a little Ferris wheel at the top of the hill for the children. Then we began to give away a prize pig and try to create some excitement here since they were not buying herring. They would come look at the fishery for a while.

But this past Easter is no exception of the crowd gathering here. It's grown each year, but they've done a lot of advertising. I think that we had more people here at one time Easter Monday than we've had any two years put to-gether. Now, of course, this is just a guess, but every available spot in the side streets and in the town parking lots and all was filled up with cars. A boy down at the river has got a long trailer that he just disconnects, and he got a country grass band and the one on the Cypress Grill side had the same thing except he didn't have the truck. They play music, drink a little liquor, and catch little fish and have a big time. I really think it's a good thing, and where it's going to wind up we don't know.

How about telling us about the herring as compared to other fish, like the size of it and how it tastes and the way you cook them.

Roy, that's a good question. Everything that you get, animals and everything, is different; hogs and beef are different. So are fish. This herring is a delicate fish. He doesn't eat many solid foods, and at one time, we didn't think he ate anything, but sporters [fishermen] are beginning to find baits that they actually will bite.

He's around a pound at full grown, and I told you he was real delicate. His scales will come off really easy. He's got a real tremendous amount of bone in him, which prepared right it doesn't bother you to eat.

When you get him fresh, you take a knife and cut behind his front fin and cut it all the way down and take some of his stomach off and rake the entrails out. Then you notch him. What I mean by notching, you take the knife and lay the fish down flat and cut to the backbone about a half an inch apart all the way down and turn him over and do the same thing. You put
Mr. Tee Wee in quest of the herring.
him in deep fat and fry him good and crisp. Not like a cracker, but good and done. This will eliminate any bone you may get besides the backbone. You can eat all of the bone.

Now, I told you a while ago about surviving; you corn him. What I mean about corn is that you put salt on him, and this salt protects him from spoiling and when you get ready to, you keep him that way for about two weeks. A lot of blood or some blood will come out, and you pour this water off and repack him. They call it repacking. You put a layer of salt, then a layer of fish. Then after you get him to the top, you make a pickle. You fill a bucket full of salt and then fill it up with water, which fixes this brine. It's called a salt brine. You put this so it will float an egg. I don't know if you're familiar with this or not.

No.

When you're in salt water, you float much easier than you can in fresh water. Have you ever tried that, Roy?

Yes, right.

Well, the same thing is true in this. You take the salt and make a brine strong enough so it will float the egg high. Then you know you've got it. You pour this brine right over the salt and the herring, and if you'll keep him in a cool place, this is enough to last you six to twelve months or until you've eat the entire body of herring. Some people put molasses in them, in the brine. Some people put pepper on top. I always get a screen wire and put it to keep off the flies because when they get to it, they'll mess it up. They can lay eggs on it and cause them to have bugs,
and, of course, you've got to throw the whole thing out.

Do you think they're about as good as any fish to eat?

Yes. He's an oily fish. He doesn't taste like a brim or a bass. He's got an individual taste that no other fish has, and that's true with fresh or corned. Now, some fish are not as good corned. We've tried white perch corned here, and they've tried some rock but in salt water. They corn a spot and a mullet and this herring is also used.

They call it a "blind robin" in beer gardens. They take it after they corn it and smoke it. They serve it with beer or eat it just like it is, not cooking it at all.

Now, we've talked about cooking the herring fresh, but I haven't told you anything about cooking him corned. After he's corned for a week, well, it does take but a few days for him to really stripe. After this if you're going to fry him, I like to soak him overnight, and the more times you change the water, the fresher he gets. You soak him overnight and change the water at least two times.

Now, I've got six herrings, and I want to soak them out. I'll take a dishpan and fill it up with regular water and put these in, and maybe I'll change the water two or three times during the night. And the next day anytime he's ready to take out and drain him and meal him and put him in deep fat. No bone bothers you at all in this. You don't have to notch him. A lot of people filet him while he's green, and this is really the best method. And when you get ready to cook him, you haven't got to scale him or anything. All you have to
do is soak him and put him in meal and, of course, then a hot frying pan. He is delicious!

I've never had herring, but I'm going to try that. I've heard that it's really good. The season of the year that they run is not that long, is it?

No. We've got one cafe here. I mentioned to you about the Cypress Grill. He opened up this year along the last week in February, and today is, what, the 22nd [of April]. Saturday night is his last night. After he closes, it's pretty well dead on the Roanoke River. They'll be a few folks that'll continue to catch fish.

Fresh caught herring for sale.
As the herring dwindle out and go back to sea, the rock fishermen are anxious to get them for bait. You cut them up, and they make wonderful rock bait or catfish, and they use them for trout lines.

We just don't have any bulk market. That's what went away with our fishery. We had a man from Cape Charles that came down and leased this fishery from the original owners, and he ran it for a couple or three years and he sold them, and he got a market for the herring. They would put them in big baskets and freeze them and sell them next spring for crab bait. But this wasn't profitable, and since that dam has been upon us, it just raises the water height to the height that we couldn't run a fishery anyway.

When was the fishery here?

This stayed here for years and more years, and at one time we had two fisheries in Plymouth and one in Cam Point, which is halfway between here and Plymouth. And, of course, the one right across the river and around the bend was another one. We had five fisheries on the Roanoke River, and I've seen them over at our fishery here catch an estimated 75,000 herrings at one time. That's a whole lot of fish!

Yes! Let us ask you a little bit about your store. How's it changed over the years?

Well, do you mean how did I fit it into the program?

Yes.

Well, it was owned and operated by a fellow named Clarence Sexton. For years he and myself ran it, and when we were taken away in World War II, his wife and Skillet Long's wife ran it. Of course, three years or so later, why, the war was all over and we came back. I went to Williamston with the Williamston Peanut Company weighing peanuts.

Sexton and myself always got along fine together, and he came up and offered me a proposition that if I'd come back to him he'd give me part of the business. Since I like this very much, of course, I jumped at the idea, and we came back again and started as partners. We got along fine, of course. I believe I mentioned a while ago that we didn't make a lot of money, but we were able to keep the wolf off the door. Finally he decided he wanted to put all his time in farming, so Frost Martin and myself bought him out. We stayed in business 17 years.

How have the merchandise and the wants of the customers changed?

You know, that's a good question. At one time we had a family out here that was a tenant farmer, and they had somewhere around seven or eight children, I'm not sure. We ran them one year: household, kitchen, furniture needs. Now, they had their own meat and their own garden, but we furnished kerosene, smoking tobacco, chewing tobacco, if there's any, cigarettes and shoes once in a while for the children, overalls and what have you and piece goods for the entire family for less than $300.00.

Is that right?

But you asked about what kind of groceries. Standing order just about when you see a customer coming, surely you wanted to go get 10 pounds of flour, and if it was a big family,
you'd get him 25 pounds of flour, a four-pound bucket of lard and a five-pound bag of meal and some side meat. Now this was just about what every customer brought and then you'd ask him what else. Of course, at that time we sold molasses. I buy it now in a five gallon container, but then I bought it in a 50 gallon drum. It's made over in Wilmington, North Carolina, called Coverton's Extra Fancy. I'd sell two of them a year; now I sell maybe three to five five gallons. So that's how much that's fallen down.

Now, this is what I was telling you about a while ago when we just about didn't have any money. We used due bills. When the pulp mill came here, they were a different company from the one now, but it was still the same thing. They started paying about $2.00 an hour, and this same man I was telling you about decided he ought to quit farming and go on day labor. So we figured it out if he worked 365 days, that's everyday around the clock at $2.00 an hour, he made more money in share-farming that year than he would make working at the pulp mill. That's not saying anything about his rent, wasn't saying anything about his garden that I mentioned to you and his hog pen and things like that.

Another thing that would be of interest to you would be that you didn't get fried chicken [except] only in the spring of the year. I can well remember when I'd set a crate out in the front, and we'd put anywhere from three to ten frying size chickens and he wouldn't weigh but two pounds, feathers and all. You'd sell him for a dollar a piece, and then you'd have to go home and clean him and pick him. You'd lose about a third. But, anyhow, comparing it with today's earnings, I sold ten chickens a week then, and now I'm one of three more merchants in town, and I've ordered two cases, which are 40 pounds a piece. Yes, 40 pounds to the case. Now, you can sell them for 49¢ a pound, which you get a chicken dressed and drawn ready for the frying pan for a dollar, but you had to pay a dollar for him on the hoof.

Yes.

A drastic change. Another change is that time has gone on, Roy. The man no longer buys things for the house. In the time I'm telling you, 95% or more of anything that was carried to the home was carried by the man.

Is that right?

Yes, sir, it is. He'd come to town on Saturday for two things. The last one was to buy groceries. And you can imagine what the first one would be [laughing]! And we were talking about the hours now. We opened up along about 6 o'clock; that was everyday including Sunday. Sunday we may wait 'til seven to open up, but we didn't have an ice box, no refrigeration, and people that buy meats on the weekends, Saturday night as I was telling you, we would pack them in this ice box and he'd come back and get them Sunday morning. That was one of the first highlights that I could remember was when a man got enough money to buy a nickel's worth of ice for dinner.

Really?

Oh, indeed, that's the truth! "Bout the only way you could keep your milk was to put it in the well bucket and lower it in the well. I know you've heard of that.
No. I hadn't heard of that. That's the way they kept it cool?

That's the only way you kept it, and when you built an ice box, you'd fill it up with sawdust. Just when you got enough money to buy 50¢ worth of ice, you put it in there and you'd put it five or six inches deep in sawdust and wrap it up just like it was going out of style. Another drastic change has been, I was telling you about the man bought the groceries then. Now the women does 99% of the buying, including buying for her husband. We sold men's shirts, overalls and dungarees and work shoes and dress shoes and even carried ladies' shoes and some underwear and things like that. But the children no longer buy from a place like this.

The style changes every few months. Dungarees, for instance. We'll go back to that. At that time there was just one dungaree, overall. It was the same thing five years from now as it was today. But today they have little legs one 30 days and tight pants and the next day it's big legs and tight pants. The stitches are different on the pocket, and you've got to have the right stitch at the right time. Television sells a lot of it.

We never wear out clothes anymore. The time that I was telling you about, you just about wore out patches before it was all over [laughing]! You wore patch on top of patch.

It really has changed, hasn't it?

Well, some of it is much better. You had time to go visit then. I think this is the thing we miss a whole lot. Jamesville, Martin County, or Eastern North Carolina is changed
the least of anywhere else.

Conclusion by Janet Simpson

Even though I've known Mr. Tee Wee all my life, I'm still amazed by him. He seems to be knowledgeable about practically everything. He can always tell you something about a subject that you weren't aware of. He gave us a very interesting talk about herring, the festival here in Jamestown, and the way life was a while back, especially in his store. No matter what your age or interests, Mr. Tee Wee seems to know something you'd be interested in. I consider myself lucky to have known this remarkable man.

Mr. Tee Wee displays pipe joint he had to cut from child's neck.