

Jones, Alice Eley: Herring Fish ^[1]

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Alice Eley Jones: Herring Fish

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 3/12/2006. Copyrighted.
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Historian Alice Eley Jones and I recently got into her Jeep and went in search of herring -- or at least the history of herring fishing. We were in Murfreesboro, her hometown. Herring have been an important part of life in that northeast corner of the state for centuries. As early as the 1740s, large commercial herring fisheries flourished there. They often employed mile-long nets, sometimes caught half a million fish in a single haul, and exported tons of salted herring up the Eastern Seaboard and to the West Indies.

While those large commercial fisheries are legendary, Eley Jones wanted to show me another side of herring fishing's past. As we drove to old fishing beaches in Murfreesboro, Eleytown, Parker's Ferry, Potecasi Creek and Winton, she talked about herring and community life -- the joys of church fish fries, the companionship of mothers and daughters salting herring in their back yards, and the importance of a barrel of herring in a hard winter.



Alice Eley Jones. Photo by Chris Seward, 2006. To request permission ~~to use this photo~~ to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

We're going to go to Vaughan Creek first. This is where my father to this day comes to go fishing. His nickname is Duck, and when I was growing up, all six of us were called Little Ducks. I hear it to this day. I'm 57 years old, I've got gray hair. Vaughan Creek is like a community fishing hole. Usually between March and June, the fish come upriver from the ocean to spawn. You waded into the waters of Vaughan Creek and just dipped your net or pulled your net and it came out full of fish. When fishing season is here, for like a mile in either direction, you have to park and walk to this spot because there are just so many cars. It's like a circus has come to town! You see all these men with trucks and their boats and their nets. Fish literally clogged these streams. You could wade into Vaughan Creek and pick them up with your hand or a bucket. It's not like it was one or two fish. It was millions of fish! Everybody went herring fishing. Some would have dip nets. Some would have bow nets. People would go down here, catch the fish, clean the fish and fry the fish right on the shore. Churches would go. It was a community event, a time of fellowship. They'd cook the fish in a heavy cast iron pan with corn meal and lard, and bring out the moonshine liquor. People complained that it was difficult to hold church and even difficult to hold court or get any business done because everyone was catching fish. Any herring you didn't eat at a fish fry, you'd take home and corn. Salt herring got a lot of farmers through winter. Families were large when I was growing up. So to have three to four barrels of fish, that was wonderful. If you could raise enough fish to fill a barrel, that was a good thing. Of course, when I was a kid, I didn't say "herring." Typical Southerner, it had to be "herring fish."

This is the street I grew up on, good old Diamond Street, and there is my father's bow net. It is rounded on one end, and then the two bows cross and extend out. It looks literally like a bow tie on the end of the net.

Herring fishing was a man thing. Girls and women were not welcomed! The only time that women and girls were welcomed was when it was time to clean the fish.

I've cleaned my fair share of herring, David Cecelski. You have to scale them first. You cut the head off, take the knife and run it into the section where the belly is and get the entrails out, wash that out.

Then you get a barrel or tub and you put a layer of fish, a layer of salt, until you get it to the top. The last thing you put on the top is a layer of salt.

I don't remember them being called "barrels" or "tins" of herring. I remember them being called "stands" of herring. I remember women discussing that at church. They'd say, well, how many stands did you put up? Well, I put up four. I put up five. You could buy your salt in 25 or 50 pound bags. You usually had salt left over from hog killing the previous winter anyway.

To this day, it is traditional that you eat salt herring for breakfast. To cook them, you have to split them down the middle in the stomach cavity from top to bottom. You put them in soak overnight, get up in the morning, wash them out and pat them dry. You fry some cornbread, and usually fix either stewed white potatoes and onions or stewed sweet potatoes. That's your breakfast, and you're ready to start your day.

This is Parker's Ferry. It has been here since Colonial times. This is the original site of the Meherrin Indians -- Meherrin Town -- before they were forced on a reservation. I don't remember it being quite so far down this dirt road.

This is also the road where the black beach was located--Chowan Beach. The beach was down there, but it was also a fishery. I always call it the Disneyland of Hertford County for black people because, in segregation, there were not a lot of white people there.

I simply do not remember not eating herring fish for breakfast, not eating fish roe, and not having men go herring fish. It's just part of my world. There's roe in the freezer in my house now. My sister Jackie, she and her girlfriend will sit under the tree, I, myself, David, on the other hand, was gone from Murfreesboro long enough that I don't want to sit under anybody's tree coming herring anymore! My father says I've been censored! So if I want a salted herring, I either go to my sister's or I go to the store.

Alice Eley Jones Collection, 1940s, 1970s-2004. Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/j/Jones,Alice_Eley.html ^[3]

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