



Written by Sandy Summers

The secret's out about Carrabelle... It is Friday happy hour at Harry's Bar, a fishermen's hangout in Carrabelle, Florida. You know it is a fishermen's bar because of the hours of operation: 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Opens early so fishermen can gather to talk about the weather, their most serious topic, much more than the small talk it is for the rest of us. Closes early so those early risers can get home to their families or continue the party around the corner at Wicked Willie's. Also, those are the hours that Harry wanted it open before he retired and handed over the bar rag to Jerry and Carole, the new owners. A line of fishermen flank the bar three deep, talking about the price of a 60-lb. bag of oysters, when the Saunders' Seafood trawlers are expected back, and how things look for tomorrow. A group of local women fill a room of tables (no men allowed), having brought their own canned bean dip and salsa (good if you mix them up, they say). A pool table sits as close to the rest rooms as possible, but players still must dodge bar patrons when a shot from the left presents itself. A crock-pot of jambalaya steams in a corner, a reminder that New Orleans is just down the road. Behind the bar, Kim wants everyone to taste her spicy jambalaya. The ceiling over the bar is a patchwork quilt of dollar bills autographed by patrons over the years. Occasionally an outsider wanders in, one of hundreds of sport fishermen who come to Carrabelle. Not hard to tell him apart from the local fishermen who make their living in Carrabelle waters. Local faces are creased from the sun and etched with worry and character from the lean fishing ears they have known. The outsiders are clean-shaven, wearing polo shirts and khaki shorts, talking pompously of their catch-and-release fish.

Forgotten Coast Carrabelle is a peaceful fishing village perched on the Gulf Coast panhandle about an hours drive south of Tallahassee. It is in the Florida panhandle near Apalachicola, where all the fat, juicy oysters come from. But most people have never heard of Carrabelle, and if they have heard of it, they have forgotten it. Hence, its unfortunate moniker: Florida's Forgotten Coast. Carrabelle is laid-back and quiet, rural

Florida. Its rich history is not so serene, though. Its beaches were once a training ground for troops heading to Normandy for the D-Day invasion, and yellow fever ravaged its people at the turn of the 20th Century. Fish famines are rare in this fishermen's paradise. In the bays, inlets and flats around Carrabelle, fish practically jump into the boat, they say. Laurel Newton, reporter for the weekly Carrabelle Times, tells of the time a man walked into the newspaper office carrying a flounder bigger than a turkey platter. The fish was flopping around wildly like a toddler in a temper tantrum. The man swore he was just driving along when the fish landed on the hood of his car. Dented it, too, Laurel says.

Wanted: Tourists Carrabelle boasts a vibrant Chamber of Commerce. Its members talk about how they encourage tourism and hope retirees will move there to help balloon the economy. Those same Chamber members, however, voice concern about protecting their fragile ecosystem and keeping out big developers. They like a place where there are no movie theaters, no parking meters and no shopping malls. They go to Tallahassee and can't wait to get back home, they say. For more information visit www.carrabellechamber.org.

People come to Carrabelle not only for fabulous fishing, but also to sail, snorkel, scuba dive, play on the beaches (there is never an undertow) or just to shut out the real world. The Georgian Motel, a fun place on the riverfront run by Ray and Linda, and the Old Carrabelle Hotel (choose the Hemingway Room in this 1880s B & B) are excellent lodging choices, or Anchor Realty can find you a vacation rental home on the beach. You can reach The Old Carrabelle Hotel at (850) 697-9010 or Georgian Motel at (850) 697-3410.

For more information on Anchor Vacation Properties call (800) 824-0416 or email them at rentals@florida-beach.com. Don't even think of fast food burgers because there are none in Carrabelle, and that is just as well because their fine restaurants serve the best bounty from the Gulf. Ever eaten a bulldozer? It is a rich-tasting Spanish lobster with a head like a bulldozer often found on the menu at the Tiki Hut. They also serve shrimp so big your mother would make you use a knife and fork.

Drive out to the East Point Oyster House and have Scott shuck some briny "sliders" straight from the surrounding sea. And, Finni's on the beachfront at St. George Island is the place for delectable fare, music and a fun beach bar. Try their Portobello mushroom with grilled shrimp, a fragrant mix of soil and sea. Crabby Nick's is the place for big family groups; add an extra order of their crispy slaw. Don't miss a visit to Carrabelle Junction, a local spot littered with artifacts. Ron will fix you some breakfast, some great coffee and you can buy the famous Tupelo honey that doesn't granulate and turn to sugar. Harry's Restaurant (not the bar) serves up some fine lead-belly omelets before a day of sport fishing.

Fertile Fishing Charter fishing is plentiful and Captain Robyn Morgan is one fishing captain who knows where the fish are. She also loves to take families snorkeling for

scallops because kids are so excited by the thousands of neon turquoise eyes in the water, she says. For larger fishing groups, Captain Bob McDaris is a good fish finder and host. Captain Ron Treutel is also an excellent charter choice. Have Captain Ron cruise past where he lives so you can see his pretty home. For more information call Captain Robyn Morgan at (850) 697-9690, Captain Bob McDaris at (850) 697-4101 or Captain Ron Treutel (850) 697-8984. You can also e-mail him at carrabellacove@digitalexp.com. You can also contact the Moorings Marina & Motel at (850) 697-2800 or visit www.mooringscarrabelle.com

With Carrabelle, it is only a matter of time and the cat will be out of the bag. Soon there will be two traffic lights, and just outside the city limits 525 new homes are on the drawing board and a Robert Walker-designed golf course is being constructed. It just may be that Harry's Bar will stay open later to please the changing population. Or, then again-- maybe not. For more information on Carrabelle contact Sheila Hauser, the Event and Meeting Planner at (850) 697-3915 or e-mail her at seasidefla4@cs.com