

Carrabelle~Discover Old Florida

Where Time Stands Still

By Leigh Cort



Vintage paper placemat with Carrabelle on the Gulf of Mexico

I imagined that one day I would find a secret place in Florida that would capture my imagination with intoxicating stories and images of the people who were courageous enough to pioneer its mystical treasures. Driving four hours from northeast Florida to Carrabelle, an easy journey toward Tallahassee then southward through the Osceola National Forest to the Gulf of Mexico, I expected a serious dose of solitude. What I discovered was a porthole into the rare beauty of the 'Forgotten Coast'. I couldn't recall why I chose to visit this tiny rural community of long-gone conquistadors, gamblers and tycoons. But by the time I returned home, I couldn't imagine why I would ever want to leave again.

For centuries, man has tried to tame the wild splendor of America. In many places they have. Yet in Carrabelle, midway between Apalachicola (locals call it Apalach) and Alligator Point (a sparsely populated estuary known for its clam harvesting), this authentically rustic village has survived nearly intact. The **Old Carrabelle Hotel** is a welcoming reminder that one can relax and step into a glorious past that hasn't disappeared quite yet. One of the last remaining treasures in Carrabelle, built somewhere in the late 1800's, the front door opened onto a story worth telling.



Old Carrabelle Hotel

To **Skip** and **Kathy Frink**, along with partners and good friends **Will** and **Debbie Brown**, their spirit of adventure and fascination with Carrabelle filled them with a joy of transforming the old house into a bed and breakfast. For a year, they labored and did almost the unthinkable construction projects that began by tearing out more than a century of *'old'* and infusing the house with love, hard work and charm. For ten years their five bedroom 'hotel' has entertained guests from across the continents as they have shared the story of Carrabelle and saga of the transformation of the old house.

When you arrive and walk into the front room 'Monkey Bar', it's obvious they all have a great sense of pride, passion, humor and place. Uncovering a faded image over the front door that announced 'Old Carrabelle Hotel', their instincts were correct. Honor the past and create a comfortably nautical-themed sanctuary for their guests that reflect Carrabelle's colorful and picturesque unpretentiousness. The Hotel is perfectly in balance with the destination; it's the place to experience small town nostalgia while being a naturalist's paradise.



Left to right: Will, Kathy and Skip

One of the oldest homes in Franklin County, it may have survived a massive 1899 hurricane. Its story transcends lore and legend. It might have been an old railroad hotel for people who worked on the rail or schooners transporting cypress and other woods from the riverfront. It might have been home to the sawmill manager. During World War II when Carrabelle became the amphibious training base for the Normandy invasion, rumor mentions a 'brothel'. As they all worked together to move walls and doorways, rewired and re-floored ~ plumbing, painting, air-conditioning and contemporary comforts took form.

Open-air porches and a secluded garden couldn't be more appreciated by Hotel guests when they want to unwind and watch the sleepy village as would have been fitting a century ago. The true beauty of the Old Carrabelle Hotel is its proximity to the waterfront marinas, restaurants and tiny shops. One could never get lost in Carrabelle. There aren't any stoplights anywhere but there is the **World's Smallest Police Station** that is inside a telephone booth on highway #98, steps from the Hotel. Circa early 1960's, it's been featured on many national TV shows and has nearly been loaded into a visitor's van as a keepsake. (The original booth is on display in the Chamber of Commerce office across the street).



World's Smallest Police Station

Breakfast each morning is a wonderful and unique treat. The Frink's present guests with signed cards to breakfast out ~ either at '**2 Al's Cafe**' or **Carrabelle Junction**. I offered my card the first morning at **2 Al's** and indulged in a near 'belly busting' homemade omelet with ham, peppers, onions and lots of cheese over browned potatoes and warm biscuit. Alternatives were Exploded Biscuit platters, Smoked Pork Chop Breakfast, Big Country (fried steak), eggs, pancakes and the works. Their \$7 card is a passport to all of Al's signature breakfast dishes that couldn't be served in a more quaint little beach bungalow. I felt at home immediately, hoping that I would return one night for an equally well-prepared seafood dinner (most priced \$12.95-\$18.50). Al

Perry and his father Al shared a dream that Al, Jr. has continued for more than eight years. The only Carrabelle eatery open 365 days a year, it's worth the short drive.

Suggestion: When you finish breakfast, leave your car at the Café and walk a short distance to the Old Beach for a LONG Gulf walk. I'm guessing you won't see anyone for miles. The famous soft white sand slopes to the clear blue Gulf lapping near your feet. Leave your flip flops anywhere and they'll be there when you return.



Old Carrabelle Beach ~ best kept secret

Gazing across the peaceful morning Gulf, it was time to think about boating to Dog Island and seeing Carrabelle from the water. **Captain Chester Reese** was waiting at the Yacht Club to cruise us leisurely through the Carrabelle River and St. George Sound, pointing out landmarks and enchanting me with fishing tales. His company, **Natural World Charters**, offers something for everyone, especially if sighting birdlife and wildlife is your love. I was excited that we would head toward Dog Island for a shelling expedition – along the way drinking in his knowledge and fondness for the barrier islands accessible to historic Carrabelle.



Captain Chester Reese

Once aboard, the ride was highlighted by watching a huge sleek dolphin who decided to swim alongside the 24' Morgan sport fishing boat 'The Eagle' and accompany us for five thrilling minutes. He proudly *danced* close enough to *almost* pet! Cruising for four hours, it was a very stable ride that can accommodate up to 4 anglers for fishing offshore or closer in where we meandered to Dog Island.

Each month of the year is known for something 'biting'. With 25 years of experience working on the water, Capt. Reese is expert at understanding which fish and weather issues affect the fishing scene. Whether it's February and speckled trout, March Spanish mackerel, April flounder or May pompano and bluefish, I found a great source of information at www.SaltyFlorida.com. Capt. Reese started as a mate at the Bahia Mar docks in Ft. Lauderdale until he moved to Franklin County and began his private captain services. He's a warm, charming and masterful guide who knows how to navigate first timers or seasoned fisherman around the Gulf marinas and waterways.



Listening to the story of the sunken shrimp boat

Fishing Tips:

Charter fishing rates with Capt. Reese are:

- Fishing for (4) people half day/ \$400. \$700/day
- Eco environmental tour for (6) people \$350
- Shelling excursions for (6) people \$225 to Dog Island



Oysters from Apalachicola Bay Area

The Glorious Oyster

I can still taste the sweet/salty freshness of true Gulf oysters harvested in the morning by Barber's Seafood in Eastpoint, fifteen miles west of Carrabelle. On Scenic Highway #98, Eastpoint is a commercial fishing town with processing plants, docks, seafood markets and restaurants stretching the length of town along St. George Sound. Large piles of oyster shells attest to the main activity; it doesn't get more authentic than this.

Watching oyster fishermen with their rakes and meeting **Stephanie Barber**, owner of **Barber's Seafood**, was unparalleled in my culinary 'to do' list. Stephanie and husband David are a third generation oyster fishing family, selling wholesale and retail oysters nationally. Eastpoint has been the hub of oyster fishing since the late 1800's. With more than 1,000 people employed by the oyster industry along this part of the Byway, oystermen harvest the oysters today in the same manner they have for a century. From small wooden boats 20-23 feet long, using tongs that look somewhat like two rakes attached scissor-style, they haul the oysters to the surface.

I barged into the production warehouse as afternoon day boats brought in mounds of sacks filled with minutes-old oysters ready for conveyer belt water spray, cleaning the beautiful gray shells. Stephanie led me through the multi-tiered process from the time the boats arrive on the shore, each oyster individually culled by hand and placed on the boat board where they are singly examined for size. The combination of salt (salinity) and fresh water, along with ideal rain and temperature conditions play a mega role in the life of an oyster. The little spats (baby oysters ½" long) take approximately four months to harvest into 3" oysters and larger. The washed oysters are sold in bushels (50 lb. sacks) or ½ box (30 pounds). What about the gorgeous shucked oysters that many of us find in the fish or super market? Barber's employs at least 20 people who open/shuck the oysters that eventually get delivered to restaurants – even oyster co-ops.

Nearly every eatery in the Gulf region features oysters on their menu. From raw and steamed to gourmet combinations that get broiled or baked, this is truly oyster heaven. **Boss Oyster Restaurant** is a top pick where my first dozen raw oysters with spicy cocktail sauce led to another six jumbos topped with chopped onion, peppers, bacon and cheddar – served bubbly hot. They encourage patrons to submit their recipes which often make the menu list!

If you're a golfer, a major surprise awaits you. **St. James Bay** in Carrabelle is the only Audubon International designed and sanctioned public course within 60+ miles. Robert Walker created a brilliant course in complete harmony with nature. More than 100 of the 375 acres are wetlands and water hazards, with bunkers perfectly fashioned to define the layout. Robert Walker worked closely with Audubon International to create a course in complete harmony with nature. This perfectly manicured 18-hole championship course gives golfers the ability to play a strategic game of golf. General Manager Russ Cooper is available daily to share the story and course – in addition to offering visitors the opportunity to plan a guided kayaking excursion down the Crooked River. (\$75/one week advance reservation recommended). Golf fees begin at \$60/pp including cart.

For the past 100+ years, Carrabelle has seen its share of life and history. It has its feet grounded in world history at the **Camp Gordon Johnston Museum** that is dedicated to the heritage of soldiers of World War II and those who trained for amphibious landings. Artifacts fill six rooms: barracks, equipment, military vehicles, photos and wonderful docents available for interpretation.

The sponge 'era' in the mid 1800s was something I didn't really give thought to, until I stumbled upon the Sponge Shop in nearby Apalachicola. During its heyday, sponges were an economic influence that ranked this region the third largest sponge producing area in Florida. By 1888, it employed about 100 men with two sponge warehouse exchanges. Today, the warehouse is still standing as a testimonial of the grand shipping ports on the Forgotten Florida coast. In the building (circa 1831) the Sponge Shop offers all-natural sponges and a bazaar-like collection of fabulous take-homes. Their most popular product is a sponge dunked into a luxurious and aromatic 6-oz. bar of goats milk and olive oil soap. Even if you're not a shopper, the blend of history and genuineness here is worth the journey from Carrabelle.

As the three night escape was coming to a close, my bucket list was getting longer. Returning to test hiking skills in **Tate's Hell State Forest**, a four-mile trail featuring coastal scrub habitat, old sand dunes and Sand Pines, hikers eventually pass over Yent Bayou, a scenic stream winding through marsh grass into the Gulf. I've heard that you need to keep your eyes open for black bears and cubs. The **Crooked River Lighthouse & Museum** will also be there upon my return where, for 115 years, it guided timber ships and fishermen through the treacherous pass between Dog and St. George Islands (circa 1895).

Saving a slice of nostalgia for my last breakfast at **Carabelle Junction**, owned and created by **Ron Gempel**, his reputation for building great sandwiches wasn't wasted on me. For breakfast, the tall 'everything bagel' was laden with cream cheese, tomato, red onion, fresh avocado and bean sprout threads (\$6.25). What complimented breakfast was memorable; characters out of 'Central Casting' (*written with love and respect*) came and went for coffee, pastries, eggs & bacon, even ice cream cones. Meeting Mayor 'Curly' Messer and his gang, Chamber of Commerce leader Suzanne Zimmerman, local police officers, new property owners and a vibrant cast of characters made departing more difficult.



Nostalgia is reality at Carrabelle Junction with Mayor Curly Messer

The 'Forgotten Coast' had grabbed hold of me. I am beginning to understand when people say 'Come to Carrabelle when you're looking for nothing to do'. Perhaps one Thursday night in the not too distant future I'll join Skip and Kathy at 2 Al's for trivia night. I have a lot to learn about Carrabelle and why the first Europeans and great powers of the 18th and 19th centuries fought for possession of North Florida. Let's meet in the Hotel's Monkey Bar and concoct a new oyster recipe drizzled with love.

HOW TO STAY IN TOUCH:

www.OldCarrabelleHotel.com

www.NaturalWorldCharters.com

www.StJamesBay.com

www.Carrabelle.org

www.CampGordonJohnston.com

www.ApalachSpongeCompany.com

www.SaltyFlorida.com

2 Al's Café at the Beach – 850-697-4576

Carrabelle Junction – 850-697-9550

Barber's Seafood – 850-670-8830

Boss Oyster Restaurant ~ 850-653-9364

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