

*Friday Nights, Fried Fish
and Friendship On*

Lake Waccamaw

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Every Thursday Frank Gault prepares 10 pounds of catfish. He used to soak it in buttermilk, now he sprinkles it with some Old Bay seasoning and tops it off with Cajun Creole seasoning. He lets it marinate in the spices, and then on Friday nights he and the catfish head six houses down to Johnny McNeill's place on Lake Waccamaw where a treasure trove of flowers adorns the property – including the dock.

The men, both in their 80's, have been friends since they were boys in scouting. A few years back Johnny had an idea to raise money for the local library's summer reading program and the museum. They could hold a fish fry every Friday night on Johnny's dock. They would donate the fish, paper goods and such; and everybody else could bring the fixings. Stranger or neighbor, everyone is welcome to just show up.

A wooden chest with a slot large enough for "a dollar bill or a \$50" holds the donations. In the first five years, the men had taken in \$30,000.

What started in 1999 has become a pass-the-word, pass-the-plate Friday night tradition, a happening as dependable as Sunday morning church. The fish fry tradition begins in May and lasts until Halloween, when a giant costume party makes for a merry way to end the year's season.

"If I can recognize them, they don't eat," says Frank. "You wouldn't believe some of the things people come up with."

The batter starts popping in the fryer on Johnny McNeill's Lake Waccamaw dock, and the bell rings promptly at 7:00p.m.. Time for the blessing and then it's down to business.

Catfish and hush puppies for 60-plus every week keeps Frank behind his special counter on the dock until he has all 10 pounds cooked, most in pieces that measure two fingers' width. On the Fourth of July, they up the catfish to 20 pounds. Some Friday nights they run out, and some nights there is enough for people to take home leftovers. They



have had as few as eight attend the night after a hurricane and as many as 120 gather.

With pot luck Friday nights, they never know what side dishes will be accompanying the catfish. One night they ended up with 17 desserts, which is fine by Frank since he heads to the dessert table first anyway “to avoid the lines.” Food is set up on the rustic, almost primitive tables the men built themselves.

The men, their fish fry and their 70-plus year friendship have become a local legend on one of North Carolina’s only natural lakes. The secluded setting of Lake Waccamaw keeps the masses away and that’s just fine for the locals.

“Hey, when you write about us, say that this is White Lake. We don’t really want people to know we’re here,” whispered one fellow at the fish fry.

Many scientists surmise that the egg-shaped, fresh water lake was most likely formed by meteorites 250,000 years ago. Other theories exist as to their development, including guesses about wind and wave action. Lake Waccamaw is the largest of our state’s natural Carolina Bay Lakes. At five miles wide by seven miles long, it is one of the largest naturally formed freshwater lakes on the Eastern seaboard.

“The afternoon breeze – we call it the ‘5 o’clock breeze’—is the most wonderful thing in the world. It gets to be a nice 10 m.p.h. on most afternoons. You see white caps that last until about midnight,” says Johnny.

Spanish moss hangs from the cypress trees that line the shores, making Lake Waccamaw drip with lowcountry charm. The water has a golden-hue and an odd neutral pH balance, making for a unique ecosystem. It stretches knee-deep for a quarter of a mile past Johnny McNeill’s dockhouse, another wonder at Lake Waccamaw.

With 8,000 plants, the McNeill’s dock is an arboretum on water. Johnny McNeill wanted to be a botanist when he went to the



University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 1936. However, there weren’t any jobs for botanists during the Depression. Instead, he became a pharmacist and entered the family business.

McNeill Pharmacy in Whiteville opened in 1872 and is the oldest pharmacy in North Carolina and one of the oldest in the United States. The fifth generation of McNeills choosing to become a pharmacist enters pharmacy school this fall.

Johnny McNeill worked in the drugstore until he was 75. Now 87, he has spent the last 12 years pursuing his botanical hobby, something he does after visiting his wife in the nursing home every day. He estimates that he plants 1,500 begonias and over 1,000 impatiens every summer to prepare his dock for the setting that is every bit as important as the catfish on Friday nights.

Ropes stretch across from one dock to

another. Children tempt gravity as they hold the rope at the top and tightrope walk across to the other side, mothers onshore daring them with a look to fall off and get wet. Small red reflectors twinkle in the dusk across the swamp. Frank and Johnny tell the kids that those are the alligators’ eyes as the scary creatures troll through the swamp.

Throughout the summer and into the fall, Johnny fastidiously replaces

spent blooms, aging and wilting plants. The docktop garden is a continuous work in progress, with coleus and sweet potato vines providing the base for all of the blooming flowers. Marigolds add yellow and orange accents while the World War II Navy veteran uses red and white flowers to spell “Liberty” in celebration of the Fourth.

“Johnny will wear you out telling you every damn name of every flower. He’ll tell you more than you want to know about those plants,” says Frank, good-naturedly ribbing his friend.

Frank, retired from the insurance business, also spends his days in the dirt.

“I retired in 1985 and really went to work. I work for a landscaper as a go-fer and digging holes and such. It keeps me in shape and out of the honey-do business at home,” says Frank.

Frank’s homeplace is the gracious gray historic structure that houses the administration building for the Boys and Girls Home of North Carolina at Lake Waccamaw. His father had the home built the year Frank was born in 1923 and then sold it in 1954. It sits just 400 yards from where the Gaults live now.

Lake Waccamaw is 98 percent residential, luckily lacking “honky tonks, beer joints or ferris wheels,” according to Frank. Instead, the lake is surrounded by large trees and comfortable homesteads, an ideal place for a close-knit community with the lake in the middle to host a friendly Friday night fish fry. 🐟