

BILL DUCKER, interviewed by Glenn Blackburn on June 28, 2012. Bill was a contractor in Florence, S. C. for many years and has owned a home on Sunset Beach since 1980. He has been President of the Bird Island Preservation Society since 1992 and was one of the leading spokesmen for the Society during the long struggle to preserve Bird Island. He served on the Coastal Federation's Board for a number of years in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Bill's home on Sunset Beach today looks out on an expanse of beautiful marshlands with Bird Island on the far horizon. He remembers when the marshland was a lake at high tide and seeing Frank Nesmith and his dog Spartina going to Bird Island on Frank's skiff. Bill's home is very close to where the Price family wanted to build a long bridge/causeway to the island. Bill said that for him one of the big issues in the Bird Island fight was that the bridge/causeway would have turned public waters/marshes into private use. The marsh in front of his house is a "commons."

When asked why so many people were so passionate about protecting Bird Island from development, he mentioned the beauty of the island, the desire to protect the habitat of the birds, and people's love of a natural area. But, underlying everything, he said, was the fact that people had been visiting the island for years, and development of the island would have infringed on a "pristine" place that people loved. Bird Island was a favorite place for many people, and the fear of losing it made many people passionate about saving the island.

Bill said that his first involvement with the Bird Island issue was sometime late in 1991, when the Price family from Greensboro came to a Sunset Beach town council meeting in order to get Bird Island zoned. Zoning would have been a prelude to development. (The Price family had owned the island for some time and had plenty of money to develop it. The proposed bridge/causeway would have cost around two million dollars.) Bill said the meeting hall was packed with people worried about what was going to happen. He added that he had never been an activist of any sort, but near the end of the meeting he spoke up and started questioning people about the scope of the proposed development of Bird Island. Mrs. Price said at first that she only wanted to build a few structures for her family, but under Bill's prodding it gradually became evident that once development started it would be hard to prevent the construction of many structures, including clustered housing and marinas.

After that meeting, some people on Sunset Beach began talking about possibly doing something on the Bird Island issue, but they didn't know how to proceed. Bill said that soon after he was talking with Cary Paynter from Wilmington, and she put him in touch with Todd Miller. Bill met Todd in Wilmington in March, 1992. Todd, Bill said, was really good at seeing the big picture of what needed to be done and what could be done. Todd recommended that the Sunset Beach people get in touch with David Redwine, their state representative; Redwine then told the Sunset Beach people that he would help them if they would put together a viable organization. Thus, the Bird Island Preservation Society (BIPS) was born, with Bill as President. A Steering Committee included Bill, Minnie Hunt, Sue Weddle, Frank Nesmith, Todd, Lauren Kolidij, Camilla Herlevich of the N. C. Coastal Land Trust, Walker Golder of

Audubon North Carolina, and a couple of others. The Committee often met at Bill's house, looking out on Bird Island. (They even had an official cookie – oreos.)

Bill said that at that point in 1992 BIPS was focused on finding a way to block the permits needed to build the bridge/causeway to Bird Island, but in the back of everybody's mind was the hope that they could eventually purchase the island. So, BIPS began to solicit donations and recruit members to support the cause. Their first mailing requesting donations was very successful, he said, and BIPS eventually had maybe as many as 2600 members. (That number includes many family memberships and an educated guess about the number of people in a family.)

Bill noted that Lauren was really good at coordinating all of this. He said that she was really aggressive at pushing ahead and getting things done, but gentle in dealing with people.

The great value of the Coastal Federation in the Bird Island fight, according to Bill, was that it gave BIPS some direction. It explained what BIPS needed to do. Also, the Federation was the fiscal agent, handling all the donations to BIPS. Todd and Lauren, he said, were "vital" to the Bird Island fight, and the Federation is a "wonderful gift" to the people of North Carolina. The Federation serves as a good example for other states. When asked what did Todd and Lauren do, he said "everything." They helped BIPS get organized, helped them prepare for speaking at CRC hearings, helped them focus on the most important issues. Without the help of the Federation, Bill said that BIPS could not have done much. He added that Todd was "wise," but also "realistic." He understood all the rules and regulations thoroughly. And, above all he understood the full scope of what it would take to save Bird Island.

Asked about the significance of the Kindred Spirit mail box in the Bird Island fight, Bill said that it was the source of much of the passion of BIPS members. He suspects that anyone who ever wrote in the notebooks was passionate about saving the island. A lot of people consciously wanted to save something pristine for future generations. Frank's beach walks to the island and the mail box were in Bill's opinion crucial to sustaining the enthusiasm of BIPS members. He noted that it is now easier to walk to Bird Island. Mad Inlet began to close around 1997 and closed permanently around 2000.

As for what BIPS still does today, Bill said that the main activity is sponsoring the Bird Island Stewards who help look after the island. The Stewards often speak to island visitors about the history and nature of the island.

On the question of what have been the greatest achievements of the Coastal Federation, Bill said that for him the saving of Bird Island was a great success. He added that for the people in the Albemarle-Pamlico peninsula the fight to prevent peat mining there was a great success, and for the people around Stump Sound the saving of Permuda Island was a great success. Each of these places would be very different today, if the Coastal Federation had never existed. The fight against Titan has already been successful as an educational process, regardless of what happens in the future. He went further to say that whatever weaknesses there are in the Federation's work are not the responsibility of the Federation, but of the people they have to deal with. The problem is the lack of environmental understanding among people. The strength of the Federation depends, not so much on the Federation

itself, but on the gradual growth of environmental education throughout the general public. We all need to become good stewards, and it takes organizations like the Federation to make that happen.

As for the future, Bill said that we need another Coastal Futures Commission to get input on coastal issues from local people and governments, to get ideas about what should be done in the future. That could give us some perspective on what needs to be done. A big issue for the future is global warming; everybody on the coast needs to think about how to respond to it. Another issue is how we think about future generations. Bill pointed out that when we destroy wetlands, we are borrowing from the future of our children – their water, their food, etc. Environmental education needs to be more widely spread than it is today, and the Federation does as much as anybody on educating people about the environment.

Finally, on the question of the connection between religious beliefs and environmental concerns, Bill said that he is a Christian and that for him and many other Christians the idea of kindred spirit is illustrative. Humans are the only creatures who don't do what we should do; we often work against nature. But, in his view we are all kindred spirits even with those not born yet. We are here only for a short time, and we have a responsibility to be good stewards. We have done that, he said, with Bird Island; we have been good stewards.

Bill stressed that the world is God's creation. Humans are the only creatures that will confront nature with situations that can destroy or upset the natural balance of our environments. Certainly, we must work and hope that with each new generation the human population will develop greater understanding of the consequences of our actions and the will to be better stewards of our environment. To this end, the Coastal Federation works! I feel sure that this is a part of the vision that Todd has to protect the coast.