

# STOP & SMELL THE ROSES



*The Robinson House, built in the Neoclassical Revival style circa 1913, is just one of the historic homes you'll see on a walking tour of Elizabeth City. Free tour brochures are available from the Chamber of Commerce and Museum of the Albemarle.*

by Carolyn Corbett

The rain, which had been falling most of the afternoon, had finally quit by the time *Windom* tied up at the city dock in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, but the clouds were still low and threatening when 88-year-old Fred Fearing showed up. With the slow and courtly speech of a lifetime Southerner, Mr. Fearing invited Britt and Ilana Stern and the other transients tied at the dock back to his house on East Fearing Street.

"We sat in hundred-year-old chairs in front of the fireplace," Ilana said, "drinking box-vintage white Zinfandel

and eating Cheez Doodles. He showed us paintings on the wall. Florence Fearing at 20, and again at 40. She was a beautiful woman."

Fred is still in love with her 20 years after her death. "Yesterday was our anniversary," the octogenarian told the gathered boaters. "I went to talk to my wife. Brought her flowers, as I do every

Sunday. You know, she is the reason I started doing this." He gestured toward the wine and snacks.

Fred, an avid history buff and unofficial historian of Elizabeth City, was born and raised there. He grew up playing baseball in the

tree-shaded yards of the neighborhood and met Florence when he went to Louisburg College on a baseball scholarship. They signed up for the same classes, the only two students at Louisburg to have every class together that year. Seeing the gleam in Fred's eye, the Dean of Women assigned them to the same table



*Forget anchoring out! Elizabeth City provides well-maintained docks free of charge for 48 hours.*

for meals. They ate three meals a day together for the next two years.

Fred, who once earned \$5.85 a week playing semi-pro ball, where he showed real promise in centerfield, chose a 35-year career as a postal carrier to support Florence and their two children.

He lost her after a debilitating struggle with rheumatoid arthritis, but the love lives on. "I visit my wife every Sunday. My children know not to call at 9:30 on Sunday mornings. I haven't missed more than 10 Sundays in all these years."

"We were married for 46 ½ years," he said, "and I loved every day of it. I looked for something to do to honor my wife, to honor the state of North Carolina, and to honor the city of Elizabeth City." In the South, he says, they'd call him a con artist. He distributes hospitality, smiles and chips, and the boaters put Elizabeth City on the map. As Fred fertilizes friendliness, he propagates publicity.

It all started back in 1983. When Fred came out of church one September Sunday, there were 17 boats tied to the newly completed docks at Mariners' Wharf, just across from the Episcopal Cemetery where Florence had been laid to rest the year before. Fred said to his friend, Joe Kramer, "I've got a gallon of wine. Let's go down there and have a Thanksgiving party." Joe thought he was crazy. Thanksgiving was over two months away. But Fred was determined to thank those sailors for stopping by his town.

Fred rounded up the wine, cheese and some paper cups. Joe, an avid rose gardener, clipped 17 blossoms from his garden to give to the ladies. Bearing roses and refreshments, Fred and Joe headed for the docks. The Rose Buddies and their "Harbor of Hospitality" were on their way into waterway history.



*Still a favorite destination for boats traveling the ICW, Elizabeth City's freshwater, landlocked harbor on the Pasquotank River once rivaled Baltimore as one of the busiest East Coast ports.*

Carefully cultivated roses for the ladies. Complimentary deep water dockage for 48 hours. An invitation to come ashore for wine, beer, cheese, munchies and camaraderie. For 19 years now, the picnic tables at Mariners' Wharf have hosted gracious gatherings for visiting vessels, where boaters and Rose Buddies mix and mingle amidst occasional appearances by the mayor, Chamber of Commerce members and anyone else in town who feels like stopping by.

Fred and friends fill folks in on the historic district one block away from the waterfront that boasts 32 sites on the National Register of Historic Places, the local library where cruisers can swap paperbacks, the Farmers' Market, featuring locally grown fruits and vegetables, and the commuter bus loop through the city for a dollar per ride.

The Rose Buddies, identified by their shirts and Mariners' Wharf caps, are private citizens. Their buddy system includes a welcoming smile, a firm handshake, maps and city brochures, directions to just about anything a cruiser could want — restaurants, groceries, ice, laundry, post office, marine supplies — and encouragement to partake in the small-town spirit of this cruiser-friendly community.

Nestled against the Pasquotank River, in the northeastern corner of North Carolina, Elizabeth City is located approximately 45 miles south of Norfolk, Virginia, and about the same distance from North Carolina's famous Outer Banks. The Dismal Swamp Canal, the oldest continually operating canal in the United States, connects the Elizabeth River in Virginia with the Pasquotank River in North Carolina. The town itself is approximately five square miles in size, with a population around 17,225.

Hoard of history encircle this cultural center of the Albemarle area. Blackbeard the pirate used one of the town's homes as a hiding place and reputedly had several lady friends in the county. Edgar Allen Poe wrote *The Raven* at nearby Lake Drummond Hotel. George Washington was the primary surveyor of the Dismal Swamp Canal and purchased 40,000 acres of land in the area. Nearby Dare County, home of the Outer Banks, was the location of the first English settlement in the New World and site of the Wright brothers' first flight.

This year marks the third time Elizabeth City has been featured in "The 100 Best Small Towns in America,"

ranking highest in growth, per-capita income and bank deposits, public school expenditure per pupil, and proportion of young adults, physicians and college-educated residents, and ranking lowest in crime.

The city is home to one of the largest, most diverse United States Coast Guard commands in the world. John Lloyd and Dave Thomas, two of Fred's fellow Rose Buddies, are active members of the Coast Guard Auxiliary. Both men and their wives originally arrived in town by boat, were greeted by Fred and, when they retired, put down roots in Elizabeth City.

Ten acres of public park space are set aside along the city's waterfront, including Mariners' Wharf, Waterfront Park, Charles Creek Park, and the smaller Moth Boat Park. As far as locals know, their welcome center, only one block from the wharf, is the only state-sponsored facility in the United States to welcome visitors who arrive by both car and boat.

Donations from various businesses and individuals paid for the construction of the complimentary city docks. Fixed wooden finger piers lead out from the concrete seawall, where 17 boats can be accommodated and stones imbedded in the walk along the bulkhead show cruisers who sponsored their slip. Anchorage is permitted on the river beside the piers, with a dinghy dock available for those swinging on the hook.

National prominence was accorded the Rose Buddies when NBC *Today Show* weatherman Willard Scott broadcast a story from the wharf. "I don't know how he heard about us," says Fred, "but he was putting together a package about people doing something for other people. Anyway, he came down and visited us. Put his arm around Joe and me and told us that for doing such good things for people, we deserved some-



*Fred Fearing, one of the original Elizabeth City Rose Buddies, charms cruisers with roses and Southern hospitality.*

thing too." Scott gave the philanthropists a beautiful golf cart emblazoned "The Rose Buddies."

The golf cart, loaded with goodies, is often seen escorting a visitor on a tour around town or whizzing between Fred's house and the docks five blocks away. Local businessmen and organizations donate many of the goodies consumed at the nightly wine-and-cheese parties. "We do enjoy the boaters," explained Phyllis Robertson of the Colonial Restaurant.

Joe Kramer's rosebushes flourish at the waterfront these days. After his death in 1987, his family had the bushes transplanted there, where they con-



*Main Street is one of five National Register Historic Districts in Elizabeth City. Early 19th- and 20th-century storefronts house specialty shops, restaurants, art galleries and antique shops.*

tinue provide the blooms for the ladies. If there are less than five boats in the harbor, Fred invites the folks home to sit under the old pecan tree in his yard, where cruisers often take off their shoes to feel the grass under their feet.

"Dear Elizabeth City, We were cold and tired and wet when we sailed into Elizabeth City. I'm not sure I can express in words just how good it felt to have a kind gentleman welcome us with a smile and a beautiful rose," wrote a grateful sailor in Fred's guest register, where dock guests from round the world have

recorded their names.

Many cruisers new to the ICW consider their stopover at Elizabeth City a rite of passage. Some discover the town while "doing the Dismal." Others arrive because of the Bamboo Telegraph, having heard tales of wine and roses while in the Bahamas or Bermuda or Barbados. Not only is Elizabeth City renowned along the Intracoastal Waterway, it has also acquired an international reputation for waterfront hospitality. The Rose Buddies have welcomed cruisers from Canada, England, Germany, France, Australia, New Zealand and Russia.

"They put out a welcome mat to everyone," Diana Prentice of s/v *Strider* says, "no matter what size your vessel or your bank account. It's like being welcomed by distant relatives whom you've never had a chance to meet."

"When Joe and I first started this," Fred says, "about 200 boats a year came through here. Now we have almost 2000. Back in 1996 we logged in boats from 43 states and 14 foreign countries."

The Dismal Swamp Canal was inaccessible for nearly four months in 2001 because of repairs and early closing due to the late-summer drought. Had it been open the entire season, the number of boats visiting Elizabeth City likely would have surpassed the previous

year's record of 1,882. As it was, more than 1,300 sailors spent time docked at the city's waterfront last year.

Jim Hurdle, owner of Hurdle's Hardware considers those cruisers an asset to the community. "Boaters are like cousins you see twice a year — fall and spring," he says. "All they want is the same things we'd want if we went to their community: to know where a good restaurant is, interesting stuff to see, where to spend the evening."

Jim is one of Elizabeth City's unofficial Rose Buddies. They're everywhere. Hospitality is a natural part of life here, not an advertising gimmick. "What the heck," he says of the folks who tie up at Mariners' Wharf. "They're neighbors. If we don't know 'em yet, we will soon."

Visiting boaters have been known to go to weddings and funerals of people

they don't even know. "Wherever we're goin', Hon, we carry 'em along," says Jim.

"If they have a health problem, we run 'em to the doctor. If they're walking from the grocery store with their hands full of bags, someone will offer them a ride back to the docks. Sometimes I round people up off the dock and we all go to dinner in town."

Jim Hurdle stored a mountain bike and kayak for the Prentices' son when the young man drove in to join his folks aboard *Strider* for several weeks. He holds packages for boats in transit. He's fed cruising cats and canines whose owners are away from the boat for a few days. He orders parts when a crew calls from 50 miles off needing a particular widget, offers the use of the vise in his back room, and gets Christmas cards from boaters all over the place. Shucks,

he's even a Magistrate Judge. So if you're in town and looking to tie the knot. . . . Heck, Fred would probably provide the posies!

What happens if there are no roses in bloom when boats pull into the dock? "We're in cotton country here," says Fred. I have friends bring me cotton stalks, and I pick off the boll. I give the ladies cotton bolls and tell them they are Cotton Pickin' Carolinians!"

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Carolyn Corbett was a liveaboard cruiser for more than a decade, during which time she conducted surveys and interviews with fellow cruisers. She now lives in Minnesota and writes articles about the cruising lifestyle.