Interview with William on May 13th,2009. William is a real estate agent from Durham, North Carolina, who is single, 45 years old, and owns a home in Otway Community (Straits Township), Carteret County, North Carolina.

Q.1.: Connection to Down East

Henry: Tell me a little about your connection to Down East.

William: I've owned my house in Straits Township, in Otway, for three years. My folks live in Smyrna which is east of where my house is and they have been in that location now for nine years, but they've been in Carteret County for eighteen. They vacationed at Atlantic Beach when my brother and I were in college; when my dad retired, they sold their house in New Jersey and moved to Carteret County. My brother was living in Carteret County and my folks were there, and it was the natural place for me to vacation – the close place; and because so much family was there, it really became home. I certainly wasn't going back and forth to New Jersey anymore and didn't want to, so that's how I kind of ended up there. And about three years ago, I really – I enjoyed staying with my folks and in their home, but I really felt like I needed my own space down there; and I felt that I needed a place of my own that I would go to and take vacation time because I typically don't do that. So that's why I bought the house and it was purchased as an investment too for retirement.

Henry: Your family’s really bought into Down East in a big way. What is it about that area or that part of Carteret County that attracted you to move there?

William: I think primarily the fact that I’ve spent so much time in eastern North Carolina during my college years, and really have real deep connections to the people. A lot of kids that I went to school with grew up in those areas, so I didn’t feel like a stranger in a strange land. And typically in North Carolina, once you get east of Interstate 95, if you run into someone, they know someone who knows you or who you know. I felt very comfortable and very at home because I had spent so much time there.

Otway is just a great location, you know, it’s very quiet, but it’s in close enough to the waterfront in Beaufort to walk or to go out to Harkers Island and catch the ferry to Cape Lookout. During the summer season, I am typically on my boat or my dad’s boat, or in my parent’s bay which is Middens Creek; and we float on tubes, we float on rafts, we shell, we shrimp, we explore the marshes, and just enjoy being on the water and out in the water. And then just exploring all of the estuaries and little guts.

I make no mistake that I am not an insider in Carteret County and never will be. I do recognize that. But I value the local culture that’s been there for hundreds of years – the high-tide culture. The regional accent, which is so distinct. And the customs of the area; and I think at all costs, we should work to preserve those. And sometimes it requires an outside hand to help; and if I can be a part of that, then I will.

Q.2.: Connection to Down East natural environment

Henry: In terms of the environment or the natural environment or the landscape of Down East, are there things you particularly like or value?

William: I enjoy the fact that it is not overbuilt, that it has a rural feel, and it is rural. I like the fact that there are endless stretches of water and waterfront property without houses built up on them where you can pull your boat up on to a sandbar and spend a day out on the water and not really see many other people. I enjoy the fact that for the most part, the water, the bay is very clean. I enjoy the fact that out on the banks the beaches are clean; that years ago when they moved folks off, they just kind of let nature take back over.

Q.3.: Professional perspective on Down East

Henry: Tell me a little bit about the perspective that, you might have on Down East professionally since you’re in the real estate industry.

William: When the market was a boom market and was rapidly appreciating, there was speculation occurring in the real estate market which lead us to this mess we’re in now. Down East prices were appreciating very quickly; and that run up in price affected rents, was driving a lot of the longtime residents out because they couldn’t afford to stay there.

When Carteret County went through its revaluation process last year and there was this radical adjustment in housing values, there was a lot of anxiety among the longtime residents. They were worried that they wouldn’t be able to pay property taxes or wouldn’t be able to stay in a place that they had grown up in or always lived in. But then as the market kind of imploded, that anxiety disappeared, but it brings a whole new set of anxieties with like, what are we gonna do to make a living?

When gas and diesel fuel was up around $4.00 and $4.50 a gallon, the fisherman were despondent over paying their bills and keeping their boats out on the water; so that was interesting to watch. And as the prices have leveled off, of course they’re able to hopefully make ends meet. And as housing prices have deflated, then the Down Easterners are comfortable; like you know, they can afford to stay in their home.

Q.4.: Community and environmental change

Henry: During the time that you've been connected to Down East have you seen the area change, and if so, what are the main changes that you have seen?

William: I have seen the area change, you know. The fact that there is now city water and sewer run all the way out to East Carteret High School is a huge change. The development at the North River Club, which just floors me. It was a cabbage field when I first started going down there and now it's a golf course community with lots of houses.

The fishing industry has changed. When I first started going down, there was a menhaden plant in Beaufort that was open and it's gone and it's gonna be condominiums or town houses or something. I notice less folks out in the evenings shrimping; or maybe some of the men in church complaining about how hard it is to make a living fishing or the fact that they're not fishing anymore and they're working at Wal-Mart in Morehead City, or at Lowe's.

I have noticed that those who are outsiders and don't try to integrate are kept at bay. I also notice that if perhaps an individual works for the National Park Service or was involved in moving the families off the banks when the Park Service took over, then they're also kept pretty much at bay. There's still some pretty hard feelings over that, over taking the seashore and making it a National Park. I personally think it was a great idea, but I didn't have a home out there and didn't have it taken away, so it's easy for me to say that.

Henry: What do you think has caused the decline in local fisheries there?

William: Well they'll say that – well for a while the bays were overfished; and the game fish are starting to come back in the bays. I noticed that last summer. Foreign competition is cheaper. They've got gnashing of teeth over shrimp imported from Asia. A lot of these fellas were shrimpers; however, the benefit is if shrimp can be farm raised in Asia and imported into the United States more inexpensively, then maybe that's not such a bad thing. It helps keep the wildlife in the estuaries in balance. But the families still have to make a living somehow.

Q.5.: Vision for the future of Down East

Henry: So what is your vision for the future of Down East if you could envision it the way you would like it to be down the road for future generations to experience?

William: I think I'd to see the area, the culture of the communities, and the individual identity of the communities, and the kind of simple way of life maintained as best as possible with as little intrusion from outside; however, I recognize that there's something about the area that I love and there's a natural progression that others are gonna love it also.

I think personally the development of the Outer Banks and the Cape Lookout National Seashore is a good way to help preserve some of the natural character and splendor of the area so that future generations can come and see that. I think the Maritime Museums and Aquariums that we have in North Carolina are a great way to preserve culture and community. And I think that if any development is contemplated in the area, that the developers do so with an eye to being respectful of the native cultures that are there.

I think we should work towards lower density development. I certainly don't see anything wrong with a carless model like Bald Head. I recognize that those kinds of developments, that resort feel, that's very expensive to do that. It might be a good idea to ponder or anticipate transit into the area so that there's less impact by the automobile. And more of a integrated approach to development, that the new development take on the characteristics – the architectural characteristics of the area, of the Down East cottage and not go with the suburban McMansion that's, you know, 3,000 square feet; but something much more modest and fitting with the local environment, you know, that looks like Carteret County.

I envision use that is primarily residential, I think – or agricultural, or agri-residential; and agriculture taking into account harvesting in the bays, and fishing, and net making, and some of the traditional industries of Down East. But then, you know, with a healthy reliance on regional tourism which is developed; and regional being Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina – kind of people coming within two to three hours of home. Those kinds of tourists in my opinion are the best kind of tourists because they already have a vested interest. This is home and they take ownership and pride in maintaining the coastal areas in Down East North Carolina.

Q.6.: Barriers to and opportunities for achieving your vision

Henry: What are the opportunities for achieving the kind of vision that you're describing and what are the obstacles associated? I mean, what kinds of things give you hope that that could happen and what kinds of things make you feel like it's gonna be hard for it to happen?

William: I'm hopeful that it'll happen because planning and zoning is still in the hands of local people in Carteret County. There are battles royal and that's good. Anytime anything is changed, there should be a healthy argument and discussion about how it's gonna be changed.

But, anytime you have a whole lot new people moving into an area, they kind of wanna change and redevelop and rethink the area in ways that suit them, you know, that's a struggle that we've had here in Raleigh-Durham, in Cary, in Chapel Hill, so I see that as an obstacle.

Another obstacle I think is the obvious need for well paying jobs; and how do you balance the customary character of an area and the need for gainful employment so that local folks can live the dream, and send their children to good schools, and have opportunities, you know, for their kids. You know, they want the opportunities for their kids on one hand, but they don't want them to leave the area on the other hand. And it's very painful when they do.