

## [Fisherman's Paradise]

FISHERMAN'S PARADISE

Original Names Changed Names

Ed Smith Ben Cathern

Robert Samuel

Mollie Nancy

Bill Tim

Eddie Nathan

Father Irvin Father Judson

Tom Lonnie C9-[?] Box 1

Date of first writing: July 18, 1939

Name of person interviewed: Ed Smith (white)

Address: S. Front St, Extension, New [Bern?], N.C.

Occupation: Retired seaman

Name of writer: James S. Beaman

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### FISHERMAN'S PARADISE

At a point where the elsewhere busy, well-kept thoroughfare gives up all pretense of being a city street and straggles on to an abrupt, unpaved end, amidst rain-washed gullies, honeysuckle vines, wild plum trees and trash dumps, stands a little two-room shack, the home of Ben Cathern, retired seaman, policeman, painter, and fisherman. A narrow footpath winds through weeds and wire grass from the street to the front of the shack — a distance of about sixty feet.

The gray frame structure is twelve by sixteen feet in size. There are shallow-roofed porches across its entire width at both front and back. It is covered with tar paper of three contrasting shades. There are two rooms running the full length from front to back, and each has a door opening upon the front porch and/ another upon the back porch. A connecting door in a weather-board partition is just inside the two front doors. Narrow unscreened windows run almost the full height from floor to ceiling at both ends of each small room.

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The room on the right of the shack is Ben's "bed and living room." The floor was bare. A steel cot with bedding stood just clear of the back door, and a notched wooden rack hung on the wall above the cot. It was filled with shotguns, rifles, bayonets, and hunting knives. A goods box served as a stand for a stoppered water jug and two small, thick glasses. Just above this hung an illustrated calendar, bearing a printed legend which showed it to be presented with the compliments of an orphans' home maintained by the Catholic Church. On either side of the small wood heater were empty/ gun shell boxes which are used as seats for "comp'ny." A topless wooden box nailed against the wall held tobacco, matches, and toilet soap.

The kitchen was equipped with a midget size cook stove. Just above the stove was a small square window with no sash but covered with heavy canvas to keep out the rain and cold

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air. A large shallow box with two shelves was nailed against the wall. This served as a depository for dishes, glasses, and knives and forks. Pots and pans were hung on nails just behind the stove. There was a crosscut saw on pegs just above the front door, and a straight chair was at the table. Both rooms were clean. There are no toilet facilities, inside nor outside. The nearby plum bushes and honeysuckle tangle answer the purpose for the lone occupant.

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A footpath led from the back porch through tall weeds and driftwood to the water's edge, a distance of forty feet. Six rowboats were tied around the two wharves constructed of heavy planks. The rentals from these boats help in making up Ben's livelihood. A crudely scrawled sign across a rough board read: "Boats for hire heare—25 cent."

Ben is deaf, the result of one of his experiences at sea. He does a great deal of the talking.

"Sure," he began, "I live right down here right by my goddam self and have been for 'leven year. My boy, Samuel, lives right up there in that house on the hill. That street don't belong through there and we can close it any time we're a mind to. He and his wife, Nancy, want me to live up there with 'em, but nothing doing. When I get to where I have to live with one of my children I want to peg out. I do go up there and eat my dinners just to please 'em, but I get my breakfast and supper myself, right down here on my own stove. Damn good cook, too. Shucks, what would I want to stay up there for? Why, suppose I wanted a girl to come stay with me awhile, how in hell could I do it if I stayed up there with them? Damn right, I have girls come to see me down here.

"Like I said, me and Samuel have bought this whole place now. We lived here and rented a long time, but back in 1936 4 we had a chance to buy it and pay for it by 1940. Well, yesterday we just tore up the last note—paid for it five months ahead of time. God A'mighty only knows how we done it, but we done it. We ain't neither of us ever had a car and we don't have no fine clothes but, goddam it, we have got a place apiece to come in

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out of the weather. And that's a helluva sight more than most of these folks down this way have got."

Ben shifted his position on the bench, drew long and thoughtfully on his two-for-five stogie and was silent, as if letting his last pronouncement sink home with his hearers.

Presently he said, "Well, to tell you some more about me: My father was born in Germany—God knows where—and he married my mother in this country. She was Irish, so I guess I'm what you'd call German-Irish, a pretty damn mean combination, if you'll believe me. My father died when I was so small I hardly remember him. My mother lived to be a right old lady.

"At fourteen I joined the United States Navy as apprentice seaman and served four years in square-riggers. There ain't any more square-riggers in the Navy now, and there ain't any more sailors neither. I saw lots of the world in my four years in sail in the Navy: England, Ireland, France, Portugal, Spain, and all the seaport South American countries and the West Coast. No, I didn't never go to Chiny or Japan.

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"The Navy's good schooling for a lad. You learn something there besides books. Books is all right in their place, but there ain't no book going to show you how to hold a square-rigger into the wind or how to luff her. A man has to know things like that in sail, or hell's to pay and Davy Jones gets some more goddam company. Books is all right in their place. Take a lad that wants to be a doctor, a preacher, or a lawyer; all right, let him go to college four years, six years, eight years if he wants to. Take a lad that wants to keep a store or run an engine; all right, let him go to school through eight or ten grades: that's more than enough learning for that kind of work. And take a lad that wants to be a painter, or a fisherman, or a policeman, or a fireman, and the fifth grade is plenty high for him. What in the hell, I ask you, does a painter or a policeman need to know about 'algebra' or history? What in the hell does anybody need to know about history, for that matter? History

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ain't nothing but a lot of made-up mess about something that never happened or if it did happen it never happened like the history books say it did.

"I sent all my children through high school. It was a job to do it but I done it. And what the hell! Now Samuel's a painter in a shipyard; Tim's a policeman; Nathan's God knows where, and both my living girls are married and keeping house.

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So, I say, what's the hell's use in taxing people to give children a lot of education they won't ever have a damn bit of use for, huh?

"My folks was poor and schooling was scarce and high when I was a lad and I didn't get no further in school than what would be about the fourth grade now, but I'll swear and be damned by my pains and body if I don't know more than any one of my children, or than all of them slung together, for that matter, right now. What do they know about real geography? Not a damn thing. What do they know about real arithmetic? Not a damn thing. Couldn't any one of them figure the plaster on a room eight by eight by eight, if he was going to be shot.

"There's just one more thing that you can give too much of more than education—religion. I am a Catholic, but I don't claim to be a good Catholic. If believing that hell is paved with baby tombstones and that my wife was a whore because a Catholic priest didn't marry us is what it takes to be a good Catholic, then goddam being a good Catholic. And take the other churches: they are all filled up with a lot of mess that they teach and don't really believe and sure don't practice. The Baptists teach their way of baptizing and there ain't a one of them with a thimble full of sense that believes it's the only way to be saved. And the Methodists hollow against dancing and card playing, and by my pains and body they all dance and 7 play cards and go two-thirds naked at the beaches and on the streets, from the parson's folks on down. And that's the way it is with all of them: Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Christians, Holy Rollers, and all of 'em.

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“The best thing that could happen to this country right now is to have all the churches and their religions cleaned up and all the laws did away with and a whole new set made. And they ought to be made in Washington for the whole country and everybody alike. We don't need any state laws and county laws, and city laws—just one book of laws for everybody, everywhere. That's the way to get back prosperity: do away with so many fool state and county laws and let everybody be on a equal footing.

“Now, you take this Game and Fish Laws business. I made a good living for a big family right out of these rivers and creeks for years when there won't no sign of a fish law. Now, how is it? Why, most of them what did fish has quit and gone on the WPA, and those that are still trying ain't making a decent living for one, much less a family. And they've fixed it so you can't trap any more. Now, I've got a hundred or more steel traps in that red house you see there on stilts, and not a damn one of them can I use in this goddam county—just lying in there going to rust. Me and Samuel used to make around \$300 every year on muskrats that we caught right out there on 8 the marsh. I tell you, God A'mighty put the fish in the water and the birds and animals in the woods for the people, and when you make any fool laws that stops the people from using them then God A'mighty makes them scarce. You just wait until all this WPA and CCC and other stuff is over and all this other government help and you'll see hell to pay sure enough when these folks have to start back to fishing and trapping, or starve, and, goddam it, they will starve. I wouldn't want to be in a game and fish warden's shoes then. And tell you what's more, if I saw some fellow slip up behind one and fill him with buckshot I wouldn't testify against him; I wouldn't tell a damn soul, I wouldn't.

“Well, to get back to where we was. Well, when I finished my time in the Navy I was eighteen years old. I loafed around on odd jobs for about two years and then I signed up with/ the Merchant Marine—in square-riggers this time, too. I sailed around the Horn four times during the 'leven years I was with them and had lots of experiences I haven't got time to tell about now.

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"I was pretty rough in those days and raised right much hell ashore. Women was my worst troubles and liquor next. Man, I've chased women from hell to Hatteras. Once when I was home here on leave I got drunk and they got me for trying to assault a woman right on the corner downtown. Of course, they didn't try me for rape because the woman was known to be a loose character and she had promised me a date, and I, like a drunken fool, didn't know/ what I was doing. But they said I threw her down right on the street corner. Now, ain't that something? Well, they turned me loose with a fine. What they ought to have done was beat hell out of me with a whiplash. Maybe whiskey does make a man do things he wouldn't do, but what in/ the hell makes him drink whiskey?

"I was talking back yonder about being a Catholic. Well, that sounds pretty bad for a good Catholic, don't it? But, goddam it, I didn't say I was a good Catholic, did I?

"Once when I hadn't been to mass in a long time Father Judson came to see me about it and asked me what the trouble was, and I told him that I hadn't been to church, goddam it, because I just didn't want to go; and I didn't have any other excuse. That's just what I think about going to church: if you want to go, why, goddam it, go, and if you don't want to go, why just don't go. Now, Father Judson is a good man if there ever was one, and I didn't mean no disrespect to him; I was just honest enough to tell him the truth.

"Once, since times have been so light with me and the city dredge that I used to watch had been moved from that dock right over there, Father Judson told me he would like to help me, but I told him that with what I made on renting my boats and what 10 Samuel and Tim gave me from time to time I guessed I could get on. I've lived this long without ever getting private or public charity, and I hope to die before I ever have to.

"Well, after 'leven years in Merchant Marine square-riggers, I decided I'd had enough sailing for awhile, so I quit. I was only thirty-one then, and hale and hearty. I come back here and rented a house. All of my six children was born in that house. Oh yes, I was married then. Got married three years before I left the Merchant Marine. She stayed with

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her folks till I quit the sea. She was sick a long, long time and I spent lots of money on her for doctors and medicine, but it didn't do no good. I didn't mind the money, for she made me a good wife and my children a good mother. God bless her and rest her soul. I reckon I was pretty rough during that time but I worked hard and provided well for my family.

“It was when Samuel was about six years old that I quit liquor. I looked at him toddling up the street to meet me coming in one day from work, and I says right then and there, 'I've either got to give up liquor or my boy.' I meant if I kept on drinking like I was and he grew up seeing it I couldn't do nothing if he took up liquor, too. So I quit right then and there, and from that day to this I haven't taken a drop. And Samuel, he don't know the taste of liquor and he don't smoke or chew.

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“Yes, I reckon you'd say he was my favorite; he's lived right close around me all of his life and he was my youngest. He and his wife have been married three years and they haven't had no children yet. I tell 'em that's right. They are both young and healthy and there's plenty of time for a family after they get their place fixed up and something laid away. I tell 'em that nobody ought to have children they can't provide a good decent home for and as such schooling as they need.

“There's Lonnie coming down the path now. Wants me to talk with him a minute, I guess. Lonnie ain't my boy, but he's just like my boy, though. He comes to me for advice about everything, and I keep his money for him. His real daddy is as sorry a scamp as ever lived. Works on the street cleaning force when he ain't too drunk, or on the roads for being drunk and fighting. Lonnie is a good boy, though. He don't even smoke cigarettes and works hard at anything he can get to do. He hasn't got a steady job now, but he fishes and crabs and belongs to the National Guard and gets \$13 every three months for drilling. He's just come back from encampment now and he got \$17 extra for that. He'll give me all of it to save for him. I tell him it ain't what he makes but what he saves that counts, and he

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believes it. My Tim has promised to get him a place on the police force when Lonnie's a little older. He ain't but nineteen now.

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"I don't believe I've told you I was on the police force here once. Well, I was after I'd quit the sea, for about four years. It didn't pay but \$50 a month then, but that was about as good in them times as Tim's \$120 now.

"Well, I've been lots of places and done lots of things in my day and had lots of close calls, but there ain't never been but one thing I was afraid of and that's getting old. And I am getting old now. I ain't afraid I'll starve because my boats bring me in something all along, and Tim and Samuel hand me a dollar or two now and then and I own this here place. No, I ain't afraid of that part of it, but I hate to get to where I just have to set around and do nothing but think. But what's the use to worry; it don't help keep you any younger. And this damn hot weather will be gone by-and-by. If I can just live through the goddam stuff I can stir around more, do a little net fishing, and gather me some driftwood, and while I'm busy I'll forget I'm growing old."

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