



ORAL HISTORY

# SCENES FROM SPRING CREEK

A glimpse of hope on Florida's Forgotten Coast

BY ANNEMARIE ANDERSON



Cainnon Gregg stands  
on a fallen cypress  
tree in Spring Creek.

IN EARLY MAY 2021, I PULLED UP TO THE SPRING CREEK RESTAURANT in Wakulla County, Florida. If I had driven another hundred yards, I would have rolled my car straight into Apalachee Bay. The small fishing village of Spring Creek nestles against the bay, protecting the mainland from the expansive Gulf of Mexico. Spring Creek Restaurant closed after Hurricane Michael flooded it in 2018. The cement block building was squat and sturdy, built for surviving hurricanes. The low-slung heft of the restaurant blended into its surroundings. It belonged there just like the palmettos and the swags of Spanish moss hanging from live-oak branches. The oak leaves carpeted the ground around the building.

In the decade and a half since SFA's first oral historian, Amy C. Evans, documented Florida's Forgotten Coast, much has changed. For a variety of reasons, oyster populations have plummeted. In response to this steep decline, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission closed wild oyster harvests in Apalachicola Bay in 2020 through 2025. Sitting to its west, Apalachee Bay was deeply connected to Apalachicola's oyster economy. Most coverage of the oyster industry in this part of Florida tells a story of loss. But what if, rather than an ending, I had the opportunity to document a new beginning?

In 2014, Florida legalized oyster farming. Cultivation techniques vary, but here in Apalachee Bay, oyster farmers typically use bags or cages suspended a foot or so beneath the surface. They lease state-owned sections of the bay, known as sovereign submerged land.

Much of the activity in Spring Creek centers around the restaurant. Previously a beloved destination, it drew tourists from all over North Florida, Georgia, and Alabama to eat and fish. An adjacent building on the property contained a handful of rooms for overnight guests. People from South Georgia and North Florida came to sportfish and stock their freezers full of their catch for the coming year. It wasn't fancy. It was a place where visitors spent a few pleasant days out of the year and, for a few commercial fishermen in the

community, it was the point of departure to provide a living for their families.

On this May day, I met oyster farmers Cainnon Gregg of Pelican Oyster Company and Jody Houck of Cypress Point Oyster Company. They process their oysters in the kitchen of the old Spring Creek Restaurant, which Jody and her husband, Dewey Houck, recently purchased.

It was chilly. I had on a pair of tennis shoes, shorts, and a long-sleeved shirt. Jody grabbed a rain slicker out of her room and handed it to me. We loaded into the Carolina skiff docked in the restaurant's boat slip and headed to Jody's lease. Rows of mesh bags suspended by pontoons marked the spot. As Cainnon held the line, Jody selected a few dozen market-sized oysters for a customer. Though they operate separate businesses, Cainnon and Jody consider themselves colleagues, not rivals. The order filled, we cruised back to shore.

The orange rain slickers my hosts wore stood out in the green grass of the saltmarsh. Cainnon compared the landscape to Jurassic Park. Cabbage palms soared up thickly from the tall grass. The boat loitered, and I looked out around us. Scraps of rope dug into the trunks of cabbage palms where fishermen had tethered their boats in advance of Hurricane Michael. A few clumps of wild oysters grew on a fiberglass hull submerged under a thick layer of marsh mud. Cormorants and brown pelicans

perched on palms and poles.

The Apalachicola National Forest takes up more than one-third of Wakulla county. St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge hugs the coastline and stretches into two adjacent counties, further protecting the ecosystem. Fourteen fresh-water springs bubble from the Florida aquifer into the saltmarshes, giving Spring Creek its name. In times of drought, my hosts told me, the aquifer sucks salty water out of the bay, frantically attempting to replenish its underground storehouse.

Towering longleaf pines shield the saltmarshes. When fire crews perform routine controlled burns at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, charred vegetation washes into the bay. The oysters filter the ash-steeped water and take on a pleasantly smoky, pickled flavor,

Cainnon told me. When the manatee grass floats up from the seabed in great clumps, the lease turns into a bouillon bath. He swears that the seagrass imparts a dashi flavor to the oysters in his pillow bags.

Puttering out to his lease later that day, Cainnon stopped the boat. A spring burbles at the bay floor, welling gently at the surface. This spring is called Cold Hole, Cainnon told me. "It's not on any map," he said. "Technically, it doesn't exist, but it's here." I was taken with this thin line between existence and nonexistence; reality and imagination; familiar and strange.

BACK HOME IN Mississippi, summer 2021 was a sticky disappointment. My dog died, my husband had an emergency

Cainnon Gregg holds the line as intern Maegan Polk unclasps a mesh oyster bag.





ABOVE: Spring Creek Restaurant; RIGHT: Waders and rain jackets hang in the Spring Creek boat slip.

appendectomy, and the Delta variant drove a surge in COVID cases. Between trips to Florida, I worked on a project with restaurant owners who struggled to run their businesses in a time of hiring shortages and great demand. The summer months left me with a deep ambivalence about my role. What are the best safety precautions? Am I being as responsible as possible? Should these stories be told now, or should I wait?

Thoughts of Cold Hole and Spring Creek kept me going. Our past stretches clearly backwards, and the future is a gaping unknown. The present was a small bridge between the two. Cainnon, Jody, and the rest of the Spring Creek crew stood firmly on that bridge. Their

presence was a question: *What if?*

What if we thought of a new way to make a living in the Bay? What if we thought of another use for this place that once was full of so much life? What if we did what we could to meet change in the place we claim?

When I returned to Spring Creek at the beginning of August, the restaurant echoed with the thumps of hammers and pops of staple guns. Jody and Dewey Houck had plans to use part of the building as a community center. They imagined renting the hotel rooms once again. Cainnon was helping a new oyster farmer set up his lease. The buzz of activity sounded like an answer to the questions I had. ♡

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*Annemarie Anderson is SFA's oral historian. She is pursuing an MFA in documentary expression at the University of Mississippi. You can follow Cainnon Gregg's and Jody Houck's work on Instagram at @pelicanoysterco and @cypresspointoysterco.*



# Grading (@the creek) Size

## Grade

	Cocktail	Petta	Market	XL	J
	8 to 8 1/2 inches W: 2 3/4 grams	7 1/2 to 8 inches W: 3 grams	8 to 4 inches W: 3.5 grams	4 to 5 inches	

<b>Select</b>	Use - Half Shell Characteristics - Great Cook 100% Meat to Shell Weight Protein - Excellent	<b>Little Honeyys</b>	<b>Otter's Choice</b>	<b>Old Salts</b>	
<b>Standard</b>	Use - Brothers Cove Bar Half Shell Characteristics - Boring/average Great Flavor Protein - Moderate				<b>Mistakes</b>
<b>Commercial</b>	Use - Whipped Shell Characteristics - Hard to crush/ Some Industry Protein - Budget				

