



Photos by Stuart Villanueva

A row of colorfully painted fish shacks line a bayou near San Luis Pass. Fish camps and cabins are an old tradition in the region.

From shack to chic

The once humble fish camp has a long history on the Texas Coast

Story by Leslie Watts

Fish camps have long been ubiquitous features on the Texas Gulf Coast. But those camps have come to vary from time-worn, shabby shacks to new cabins built with an eye to sustainability.

Thousands of years ago, Native Americans would make special excursions to the coast for fishing and hunting. Their shelters during such excursions likely weren't much more than a few branches propped up against one another.

And it wasn't so long ago that anglers would gather found materials, pick a "good" spot and build a temporary shelter.

"We were essentially squatters," said Fred Diamond, recalling his early days of fishing with his father in isolated



Fred Diamond and his sons built a 20-by-24-foot raised cabin on land he leases from the state in Christmas Bay

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coastal spots. “These were tidelands and certainly did not belong to us, but we would just put together a temporary shack out of whatever we could find lying around and carry whatever else we needed into the area.”

Today, Diamond, who splits his time between Montgomery County and Galveston Island, proudly displays the official documents that allow him access to and designated use of one of the few highly restricted Texas General Land Office leases on — or rather in — Christmas Bay.

“We still don’t own it, however,” he said, referring to the high, raised cabin he and his three sons have built there. “It is ours exclusively to use, but it doesn’t belong to us — all we have is the lease of the land, and once we build on it, whatever we have built becomes the property of the state.”

Later, as Diamond carefully threads a well-used flat-bottomed boat along the bay’s uneven shoals, a cold wind whips his words away, but the distant destination is clear — a weathered box on stilts on a narrow nub of land marking the confluence of Christmas and Bastrop bays.

‘STILL STANDING’

“This little shell spit is what is left along one of the fingers of the Titlum-Tatum Bayou,” said Diamond, as he arrived at the cabin and tied up his boat alongside the dock. “Long ago, it was part of a major commercial route, but today it may be the most desolate area within 50 miles of Houston.”

The cabin isn’t the first Diamond has owned on this remote spot. One that had weathered hurricanes and floods finally succumbed to a direct lightning strike about 10 years ago, burning to the ground. Today, its charred foundation piers still jut from the water, just inside the foundation of the current cabin, a rough-finished but sturdy 20-by-24-foot rectangle, surrounded by an open deck.

Inside, lanterns hang from open ceiling rafters, above which extra cots and sleeping bags are stored. Two large trundle beds low to the cabin floor provide sleeping for eight, but Diamond often hosts many more. There’s also a kitchen area and an abundance of fishing gear, crab traps and other supplies.

Diamond talks proudly of the good fishing and duck hunting he has enjoyed there.

“We don’t go after tremendously large amounts of fish, but anytime you want to,



Photos by Stuart Villanueva

Fred Diamond’s cabin in Christmas Bay is the property of the state. He leases the land from the Texas General Land Office. The rustic structure, which is only accessible by boat, contains humorous signs on the walls, a small kitchen area with a hot plate and lanterns hanging from the open ceiling rafters.



you can catch yourself a meal," he said.

Diamond also is justifiably proud that his cabin was the only such structure in the area to survive Hurricane Ike, which struck in September 2008.

"Immediately after the storm, one of the Black Hawk helicopter reconnaissance crews spotted this place still standing among the devastation and radioed it in," he said. "The news eventually made its way to me — 'Your cabin is the only one left' — it was hard to believe."

BUILT TO LAST

Residential designer Chula Ross Sanchez and her husband, Ramon Sanchez, didn't receive such good news after the storm. They were completing a renovation of three fishing camps on the family's Offatts Bayou property even as the storm was blowing in.

"All three structures were totally destroyed," she said. But they did find one recognizable piece of a roof in the bayou, she said.

Although the loss from the storm was devastating, the three replacement cabins the couple built marked a bold departure from the way fish camps are usually constructed. Incorporating a high level of cutting-edge, sustainable and "green" building practices, they are today recognized as the first buildings on the island to have been completed as part of the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED for Homes program. LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

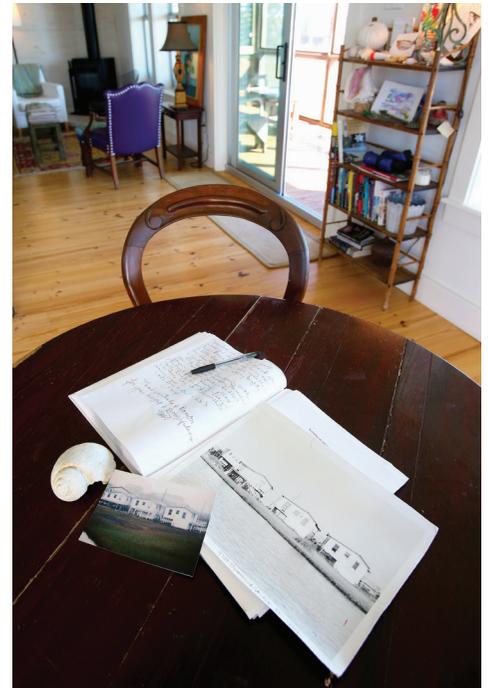
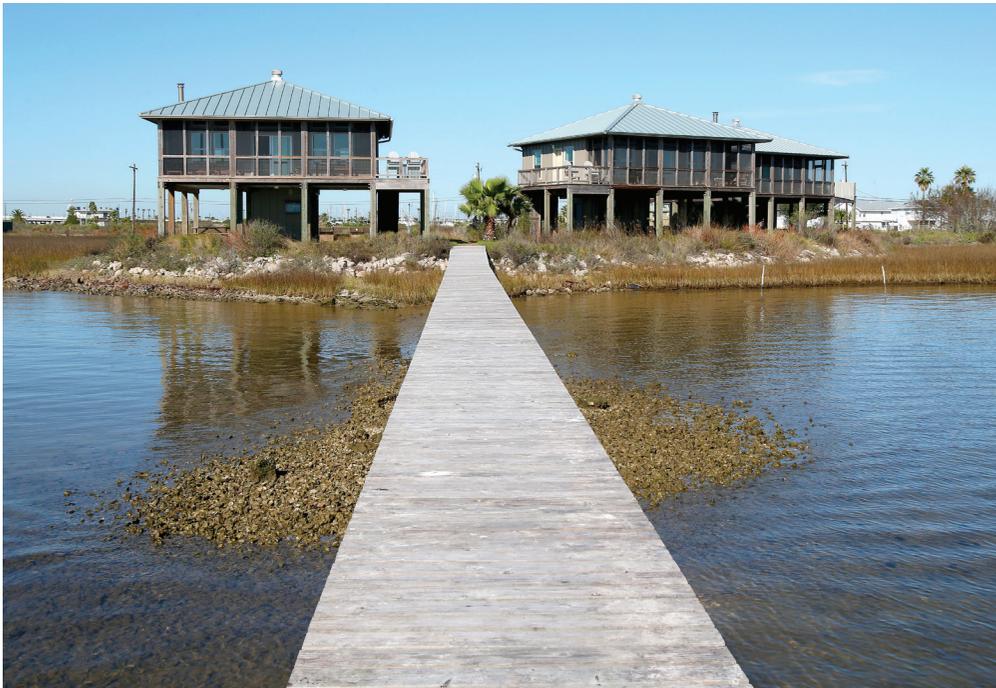
Known as Las Casitas, the camp compound serves as a centralized location in which the couple hosts their adult children and young grandchildren. Although each of the diminutive 760-square-foot structures has a slightly different interior and furnishings, all are designed according to a central plan.

To minimize energy requirements, each camp was positioned to make the most of both winter sun and what Chula Sanchez calls "nature's air conditioning," otherwise known as the bayou's prevailing southeast breeze.

The couple used repurposed materials wherever possible, and all wood was American-sourced, free from formaldehyde. Walls are made of pickled pine plank siding, and the East Texas pine structural flooring serves also as the finish flooring in uncarpeted areas.

Kitchen appliances are energy efficient, and countertops are of "paper stone," a

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Photos by Jennifer Reynolds

(Clockwise from top) Chula Ross Sanchez and her husband, Ramon Sanchez, built three fishing camps on Offatts Bayou in Galveston using sustainable and "green" building practices. Old photos of the fish camps before they were renovated. A screened-in, covered porch in one of the camps provides a place for visitors to enjoy the views and the breeze. In one of the fish camps, the kitchen island was built with reclaimed wood from a historic East End home.

sturdy, hard-surfaced product made from combining compressed paper with a non-toxic resin. A LEED-approved wood-burning stove provides heat on cool days. Utilities have been bundled and run underground to the framing footprint where they enter the structure in a centralized core.

Many of the furnishings in the cabin used by Sanchez and her husband are from the

estate of the late Dr. E. Burke Evans, a close friend and former faculty member at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston.

The main focus in the Las Casitas rebuilding project, however, was durability.

"They are designed beyond code and really over-engineered, but my goal was that they be durable, stay put and not be lost," she said.



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Photo by Jennifer Reynolds

Carolyn Gaido's Sportsman Road retreat, known as "Camp Gucci," pays homage to its coastal location through both design and décor.

'A ROAD OF HISTORIES'

Fish camps by their very nature are among the most vulnerable coastal structures. Perhaps the most dramatic loss of these local retreats — whether attributed to storms or lifestyle changes — has occurred on Sportsman Road in Galveston, once known as Anderson Ways. Both Hurricane Ike and a growing desire for waterfront, upscale homes has dramatically reduced the number of pure camp-style structures on this once isolated bayside strip.

The Sportsman name itself suggests the popularity of this area with hunters and anglers, and at one time it contained a significant concentration of rustic camps intended for weekend and vacation use by those who wanted to fish, crab and hunt.

Former Sportsman Road camp owners

include a who's who list of old Galveston families, a few of whom still own property on the waterfront strip. Some of these even continue to maintain their fish camps, although the area was seriously damaged during Ike and many structures lost to the storm weren't rebuilt. Other former camp locations are today occupied by large, new-construction homes.

In his book titled "Sportsman, A Road of Histories," Allen Pauly, who at one time owned property on the road, has compiled not only a written description of many of the camps, but also included photos. The photos are especially noteworthy because they were taken only a few days before Hurricane Ike rearranged and erased much of the area's built environment.

As told by islander Carolyn Gaido, who

still maintains a fish camp on the road, she and Pauly, a neighbor at the time, were discussing the road's colorful history and unusual structural styles one afternoon when he shared his wish to write a book about the area. On a subsequent outing in August 2008 to conduct a little research in the area, Pauly fortuitously brought along his camera.

The photos Pauly shot that day were going to become the last known documentation of the area before Ike made landfall, after which more than 20 of the houses on Sportsman Road would no longer exist.

Under such circumstances, Pauly's resulting book is even more compelling in that it offers not only an overview of the entire road and a timeline of the changing ownerships of its various properties, but a photographic record as well.

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MORE HUMBLE HUTS

As Pauly explains it, the road was originally called Anderson Ways based on it being the site of a 19th century boat repair business operated by Capt. J. Anderson. After Anderson died in the 1900 Storm, the rural unpaved strip that once provided access to his business began to achieve popularity as the route to the island's "in" place for outdoor adventure, especially fishing, hunting.

Because of these activities, the access to them soon became known as Sportsman Road, and in those early days — as remembered by Gaido — her uncle Joseph Torregrossa built a very no-frills camp used by the family on weekends and during the summer. She vividly describes the men playing poker and bocce ball, a form of land bowling originated in Italy, and her own thrill when, as a 5-year-old, she caught her first fish off her uncle's pier.

Gaido also recalls that although the men and children — not bothered by the primitive conditions or lack of running water — loved spending time at the camp, the women of the family preferred to remain in the city, and also that her uncle's was the first camp to replace its outdoor latrine with a real toilet.



Photos by Jennifer Reynolds

Camp Gucci is featured in Allen Pauly's book "Sportsman, A Road of Histories," which traces the area's earliest days and also includes Pauly's photos of homes taken a few days before Hurricane Ike hit in 2008.

Pauly's description of the camps gives further insight into the casual ambience offered by the road.

"The structures were called 'camps,' short for fishing camps, small houses built by the

families or moved there from the East Side or Crash Basin; some were former military barracks," he wrote.

The camps were intentionally small, with one or two rooms, and made of such materials — usually wood — as could be accumulated without too much expense or effort. In the early days, they often were constructed without permits or even plans, and not built to any code other than that to which the materials included in their construction could be adapted.

Adding to the housing provided by the privately owned camps on the north of the road and facing onto the bay itself, there was a grouping of a half-dozen or so structures described as "shacks" on the south side. These even more humble huts catered to tourists and operated under the name Merry Mark Courts.

HIGH-DOLLAR HOMES

According to Pauly's book, well-known Galvestonians who set up vacation houses on Sportsman Road included Dee Dee and Danny Perugini, who named their place Camp Dancie in honor of their young daughter, who today is one of the island's best known public relations professionals,



A commissioned work by artist Jack Morris portrays the now lost landmark J.W.'s Bait Camp.

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Dancie Perugini Ware. Other camp names included Alamo on the Bay, Lone Star Camp, Bunny Camp and Lache Pas La Patate or “Don’t Drop The Potato,” a Cajun adage that loosely means “Hang In There.”

Carolyn Gaido’s own camp was christened Camp Gucci by family members because of its owner’s fondness for designs sold under the well-known fashion label. It also, however, is a far cry not only from the original camps that lined the road, but from its own original self. Gaido’s once rustic structure built more than a half-century ago as a true fish camp is today a showcase home offering the latest in modern conveniences.

Such changes are becoming more common not only on Sportsman Road but throughout the coastal area. As more people embrace the possibility of full-time waterfront living, the concept of chilling out in a rustic camp is being replaced with the idea of establishing a modern family in a permanent dream home. And there’s no denying that a few whacks from a major storm or two helps speed the trend along.

Increasingly, people who want the more upscale fish camp experience without the commitment are opting for rentals, such as Fish-n-Lodge on Bolivar Peninsula. Operated by Jacki and Jeff Nielsen, who also own a fishing charter and bicycle rental service, the lodge can sleep 10 and offers all the comforts of home — including Wi-Fi and Netflix — plus a postcard-perfect view that overlooks a canal and a small harbor filled with shrimp boats.





“You get the laid-back pleasures offered by a fishing camp, but without the hassle. Once here, you don’t even have to go fishing if you don’t want to.”

– Jacki Nielsen



A small inlet flows almost up to the back of the house, where a welcoming fire pit encourages a brief pause to enjoy the scenery from one of the surrounding Adirondack-style chairs.

The trip to Fish-n-Lodge is a scenic coastal tour in itself. Accessed from the east, visitors pass through historic High Island and then along the beach-front road that runs the length of the peninsula. Accessed from the west, the trip includes a free ferry ride during which dolphins and seagulls frequently make the trip alongside. Once at the peninsula’s Loop 108, a few twists and turns lead visitors past Horseshoe Marsh and an Audubon bird sanctuary inhabited by assorted avian wildlife.

Although “fish” is in the name of the lodge, Jacki Nielsen has observed that most people just hang out and relax there.

“The most popular activity seems to be doing nothing,” she said. “Once people get here, you can almost see them unwind as they begin to take in the fresh air and sounds of nature.”

Fishing gear, however, is available to those who fancy dropping a line in the nearby waters, a public boat ramp is only 300 feet away, and a fishing boat charter can be arranged. Bicycles and golf carts also are available for exploring the area and nearby beach combing.

“You get the laid-back pleasures offered by a fishing camp, but without the hassle,” Jacki Nielsen said. “Once here, you don’t even have to go fishing if you don’t want to.”



Photos by Jennifer Reynolds

(Opposite page) Jacki and Jeff Nielsen’s Fish-n-Lodge on Bolivar Peninsula offers guests a getaway minutes from the ferry landing with views of the Intracoastal Waterway and a small fleet of shrimp boats. Adirondack-style chairs surround a fire pit overlooking a small inlet. A large, partially covered deck is the perfect place to relax after a day of fishing. (Top, from left) A colorful, glass tile backsplash gives the kitchen a coastal feel. Chairs line a deck overlooking a fleet of shrimp boats in a small harbor off the canal. The lodge can sleep 10 and offers all the comforts of home.