

The Forgotten Coast

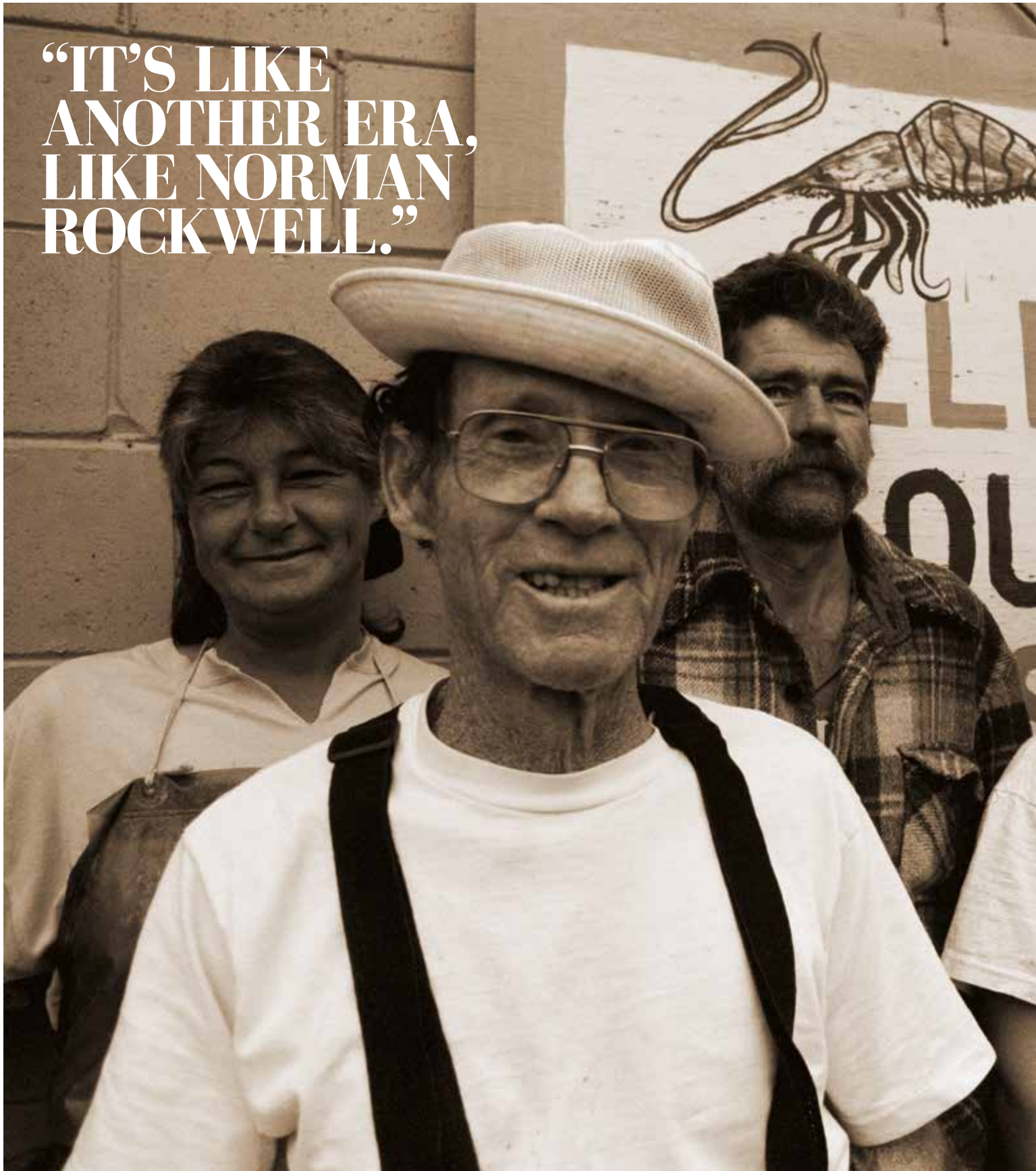
PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD BICKEL CAPTURES
MARITIME FLORIDA'S FINAL FRONTIER.

by MICKEY STANLEY / photography courtesy of RICHARD BICKEL





“IT’S LIKE
ANOTHER ERA,
LIKE NORMAN
ROCKWELL.”





Fred and Shuckers

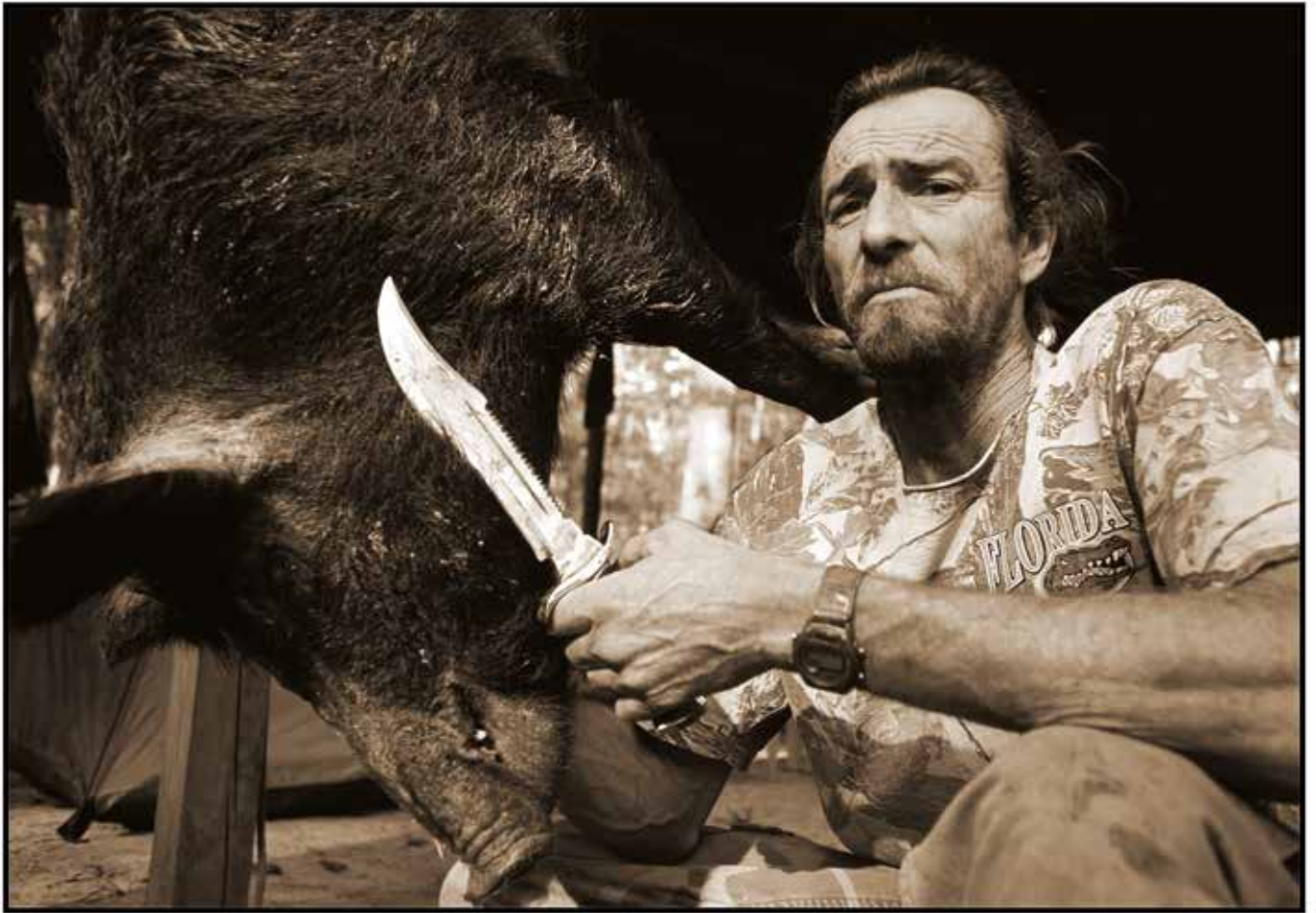
From its headwaters in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Chattahoochee River passes Atlanta on its western side before heading south along the Georgia/Alabama state line. It moves through Columbus and hits Lake Seminole, where it mixes with the Apalachicola River at the Florida/Georgia border. From there, the freshwater splits the Florida Panhandle, eventually pouring out into the Gulf of Mexico after a more than 400-mile journey. Standing at the mouth of the river is Apalachicola, Florida, a small town in Franklin County of fewer than 3,000 residents. Apalachicola is one of the most biodiverse, nutrient-rich places on the planet. More than 90 percent of Florida's oysters are harvested there, and 90 percent of the species in the Gulf spend some part of their life cycle in the region's estuaries. But all that is subject to change.

On a recent drive from New Orleans to Apalachicola, I met with photographer Richard Bickel at his gallery downtown on Market Street. For decades, Bickel has been photographing the people of Apalachicola, most of whom make their living on the water. But, for the past several years, the Bay has been tanking out, and according to Bickel, the fishermen are getting "about 20 percent of the catch right now."

Twenty years ago, Bickel was brought from his hometown of Pittsburgh to Apalachicola on assignment—photographing for the now-defunct *Travel Holiday* magazine. "This was 1994," Bickel says, "and Apalachicola was pretty much unknown (happily) to the tourist hordes heading to the rest of coastal Florida. It was a hardscrabble fishing port, and still some ghosts of that remain today." A year after his assignment for *Travel Holiday*, Bickel bought a home in Apalachicola and moved there "lock, stock, and barrel," he says. He soon began work on the first of his two books on the people of the Bay and the adjacent forest swamps called *The Last Great Bay: Images of Apalachicola*. Bickel's work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *The Times of London*, and others.

Handsome, with silver hair and in his early sixties, Bickel greets me inside his shop wearing a collared black shirt with dark pants. He speaks quietly with measured eloquence. His fuel-efficient car with push-start ignition is parked just out front in a line of large SUVs and Ford F-150 trucks. At first, Bickel might seem better suited for a gallery in SoHo than the swamps of West Florida, but as he describes his photographs, it is clear that his admiration for this region and its people is unimpeachable.

The town of Apalachicola, which was originally named Cottonton and then West Point, was ceded to the United States by Spain in 1821. In its almost two centuries, the area has seen the rise and fall of many different industries, including timber, sponges, and, of course, cotton. There was a successful railroad to help move timber, until supply ran out. This was a boomtown, and like all boomtowns built on industry, there was a class stratum. Today, Apalachicola makes its money off of tourism. People come because of its Old Florida charm—a quality that was forged from the various hand-dirtying industries that tourism has since replaced. Downtown Apalachicola is now beautifully maintained and restored, hosting novelty shops, coffee and ice cream joints, antique stores, inns, and even a newly opened brewery. The neighborhood has many palatial, multimillion-dollar second homes. There is one group of locals, however, who have yet to be completely run out of town. They are the fishermen.



Boar Hunter Knife

PEOPLE COME BECAUSE OF ITS 'OLD FLORIDA' CHARM.

And, as their catch continues to dwindle and the Bay's ecological needs are left unmet, the seafood industry in this part of Florida may go the way of the timber, sponge, and cotton industries that came before.

Back in the gallery, Bickel shows me a photograph he took of a baptism for the Prayer Chainers Mission of God, a black fundamentalist church that practices water immersions deep in the swamp forest outside the village of Sumatra, Florida. On the opposite wall, there's a striking print of a 12-year-old boy seated behind the wheel of a muscle car. He's covered in mud kicked up after a bog race. "It's like another era, like Norman Rockwell," Bickel says. In one photograph, a heavyset fisherman is holding 40 pounds of snapper. In another, a former U.S. Army Special Ops soldier is carrying a rifle while a knife dangles ominously from his neck. Bickel guides me over to an image of a well-tattooed man making a fist on a dock nearby. "He was an itinerant shrimper," Bickel tells me. "His IRA plan was to go back to the hills of Tennessee and make some moonshine and grow his own dope."

Pointing to another of his large-format black-and-white prints—this time of a salty fisherman gripping 10-foot oyster tongs—Bickel says: "This was a friend of mine. In addition to being a lifelong oysterman, he was a brawler, fighting in all the juke joints along Apalachicola Bay. Kind of an unlucky friendship," he continues. "But I think I can get along with these people because we're all self-starters, and we don't

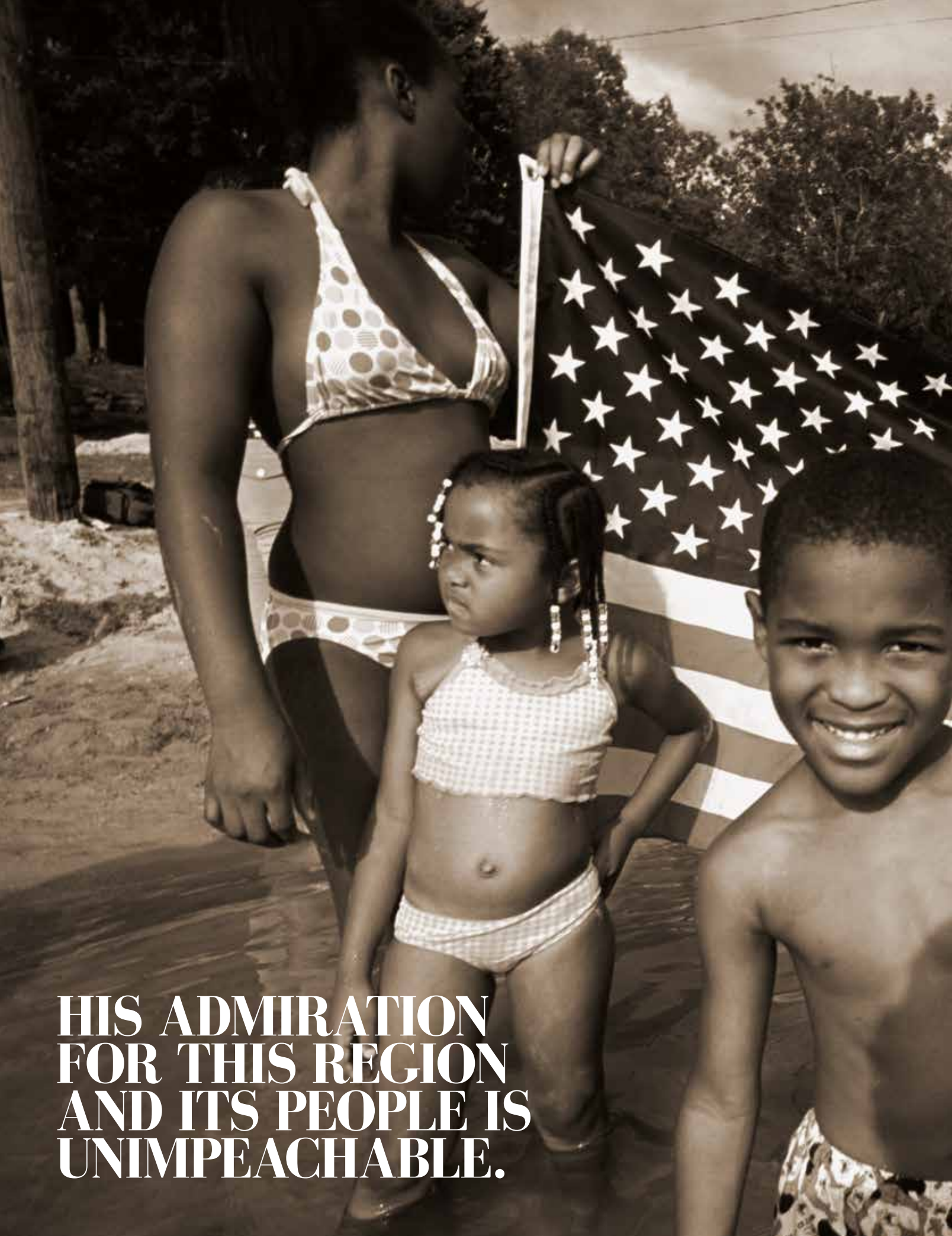


Miss Lillian

have to answer to anybody, really.” For Bickel and others in town, this kind of locals-only kinship comes honestly. In fact, the shared values of self-sufficiency and professional independence are at the heart of Florida’s enduring character. But, somewhat ironically, the fate of the Apalachicola region may ultimately lie in the hands of Georgia and the federal government—the two things Floridians hate most.

After touring the gallery, Bickel walks me two blocks around the corner to the office of his friend, Shannon Lease, executive director of the Apalachicola Riverkeeper. Founded in 1998, this water conservation office is an affiliate of the original Riverkeeper, formed by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in 1983 to combat the polluting of the Hudson River. Lease and the Apalachicola Riverkeeper work to preserve the purity of the area’s water as well as the wildlife that depends on it. The office here tries to first resolve issues of contamination through mutually beneficial negotiations, but when that fails, the Riverkeeper employs the Clean Water Act of 1972 as well as the Endangered Species Act of 1973 to litigate against corporations and governing bodies whose actions jeopardize the Apalachicola River Basin.

“I went to visit a friend in Tallahassee,” Lease tells me. “We went out on their pier, and my friend’s just talking about how beautiful the [Gulf floor] is there. But there’s nothing on the bottom, just all sand. And then I start thinking, how am I going to describe the glop that is our Bay? The mush, the rich, diverse, nutrient-filled glop that



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Tattoo Guy

sustains a \$7.5-billion seafood industry in the northern Gulf of Mexico. I decided not to explain it to her." According to American Rivers organization, in 2016, the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River Basin was the most endangered river in the country. This is not a distinction Lease takes lightly, but trying to convince the local population that water conservation will be the make-or-break issue for their livelihood has been an uphill battle. "We're not the most popular group," she says. "There's a lot of people whose interests are not the same as ours." Atlanta, for one, is holding back a lot of the Apalachicola's water. Florida's appeal to get Georgia to release more freshwater was recently shot down in the Supreme Court, but Lease is not giving up. Her region needs that glob.

After speaking with Lease, Bickel drives me over the John Gorrie Memorial Bridge, which spans the mouth of the Bay, to nearby Eastpoint, where he photographs many of the fishermen working there. Eastpoint is a low-income community of primarily oystermen who live in trailers and tract homes inside parks situated mere feet from the Bay. We're there to visit an oyster-shucking house on Patton Drive. There's no sign out in front, just dozens of perforated bags stacked shoulder height on wooden pallets. In them is today's catch. Two workers dressed in plastic aprons are using high-velocity bladed machines inside to crack apart calcified shells before scooping out and consolidating the oysters into plastic containers. In the back, three men are drinking cheap beer and running the fresh shelled oysters through a mechanized metal cylinder for cleaning. These oysters will be packed on large trucks and distributed to restaurants as far north as the Carolinas.

Without proper environmental protections and regulations, the Apalachicola Basin will no longer support a seafood industry. Shucking houses like the one on Patton Drive will shutter. Already, Eastpoint has gone from 10 such houses to only three. Next door, Apalachicola will continue on its course of beautification, having lost its devil-may-care community—that Old Florida attitude people come from all over to see. For Richard Bickel, the success of the Bay and the River and the Basin means the survival of Apalachicola's blue-collar roots and profound natural beauty—two things he's been documenting for 20 years. Whether of moonshiners, brawlers, or oystermen, his photographs will be an enduring record of the last class of men and women who gave this town that good kind of grit. ▲

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