

Hardee's Southport memoir brings history close to home

"Of Home and the River: Southport Stories From the Civil War to the Present," by Lewis J. Hardee, Jr. (Southport Historical Society, 2008)

By Jeffrey Stites
Pilot contributor

Some histories are place-focused. They tell stories through the natural environment and the ways man has changed it to suit his needs. People move through their environment, changing it and being changed by it as the years go by.

Some histories are more person-focused; telling stories through the eyes of man and his acts, both great and small. The people share the environment, which has its effects on them as it and they change over the years.



Jeffrey Stites

^ In his new book, "Of Home and the River: Southport Stories From the Civil War to the Present," Lewis J. Hardee, Jr. combines these two approaches perfectly. Hardee takes the time to focus on the fields and trees, as he tells the story of his ancestor's experiences fighting the Civil War in North Carolina. A house gets special treatment in the story of

a favorite third-grade teacher from Southport High School. Even the weather takes the stage in stories about Southport's own outdoor drama. Hurricane Hazel appropriately earned her own chapter.

The effect is a unique insight into Southport and its people.

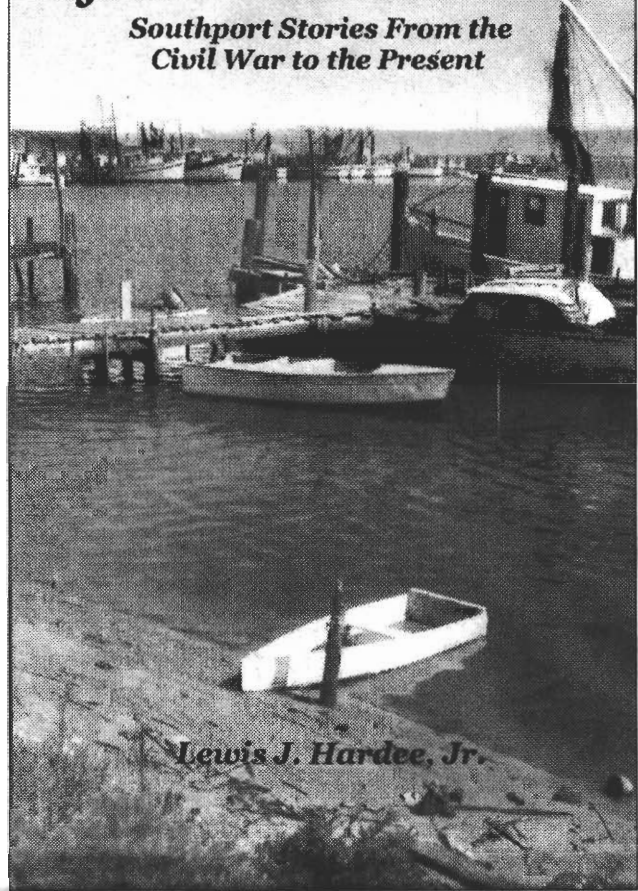
"Of Home and the River" begins, appropriately, with an ode to the Cape Fear — the river that gives Southport its name and personality. Hardee opens his chronicles with the role Southport and its men, including his own great-grandfather, played in the Civil War and, eventually, the newly reunited nation. Using excerpts from his relative's diary, Hardee gives his reader a peek inside the mixed emotions that the war forced on young men swept up by the tide of history. The quote from John Wescott's diary at the end of the first chapter should be inscribed in granite somewhere.

Hardee's work moves easily from history to memoir, as it tracks the lives of the shrimpers, teachers, preachers and children who brought Southport from the dark days of Reconstruction, to those as a busy fishing port and, finally, the tourist destination we see today.

To tell the story of Southport after the turn of the century, "Of Home and the River" more or less follows the life of Lewis Hardee, the author's quiet, hardworking father. The elder Hardee owned a series of shrimp fleets and a packing facility at the end of Howe Street until Hurricane Hazel arrived. Stories involving the fishing fleet, the Baptist church's new preacher, the barbershop and a dry cleaner's depict how Southport's citizens operated as a tight-knit community.

The culture of Southport is brought to life with chapters on the annual arrival of the carnival, the lighter side of church-going, amateur theater productions and the great Fourth of July parade. Hardee also allows his reader to see Southport in a wider context by introducing Mae Bramber, the mayor of

Of Home and the River Southport Stories From the Civil War to the Present



Southport, England, and August Kuigre, a refugee from Estonia. Perhaps no transplant to Southport has gone through as much as Kuigre to make it his home. These tales help illustrate what those of us who've not grown up in Brunswick County find so attractive in the area.

"Of Home and the River" finishes with two of its most autobiographical chapters. One chronicles the author's work staging "Revolution," an outdoor drama hosted by the Town of Southport in celebration of America's bicentennial. The personalities and anecdotes included in this chapter could themselves have been a book. The final chapter is a moving account of the elder Hardee's last days. Anyone who's seen a loved one try to end his or her life with dignity will appreciate the emotions displayed here.

For those native Southporters, born and bred, this book is full of memories. Though, anyone who's spent more than a short visit at the mouth of the great Cape Fear River will recognize names, places, buildings, trees and, most importantly, the spirit that defines Southport.

"Of Home and the River" is available at the N.C. Maritime Museum at Southport, Waterfront Gifts, CardSmart, PJ's Restaurant, Magnolia Gifts, Southport Visitor Center and Beach Road Books.

TODAY

D SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2008 | www.StarNewsOnline.com

NEW & NOTABLE

Southport's high points

New from the Southport Historical Society: "Of Home and the River: Southport Stories from the Civil War to the Present" by Lewis J. Hardee Jr. (\$24). Rather than a chronological history, the volume is a light, bright collection of anecdotes and high points about the colorful seacoast town, ideal as a Christmas gift. The author is a hometown boy – Southport High School, Class of '54 – who graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and did graduate work at Columbia University. A composer – he wrote "Revolution!" Southport's outdoor drama for the 1976 Bicentennial – Hardee was longtime music director for the Wagner College Theatre on Staten Island.



Hardee **retells** a variety of tales, including **yarns** about the oldtime Fourth of July parades, a notable visit from the Lord Mayoress of Southport, England, the 1948 arrival of 15 Estonian refugees, who sailed the Atlantic in a tiny fishing boat to escape Soviet occupation, plus an account of Hardee's great-grandfather's memorable service in the War Between the States.

Given the author's theatrical background, there's naturally a lot of material on community theater in Southport and the old traveling carnivals that used to visit the community. Naturally, a whole chapter is devoted to Hurricane Hazel.

Hardee's latest adds humor to history

'Of Home and the River' uses charming tales to recount Southport's past

"I am a Southporter, and I'm afraid we natives can't help ourselves from finding humor in any subject, no matter how grim. I should further add that if certain passages in this book are a bit salty, it can't be helped. Southport is a port, and ports are salty."

— From "Of Home and the River" by Lewis Hardee Jr.

By Lee Hinnant
News Editor

Lewis Hardee Jr.'s latest book tracks the history of Southport and Brunswick County since the Civil War. From the grim to the hilarious, "Of Home and the River" offers nostalgic insight from the viewpoint of a well-traveled Southport insider.

The 357-page work, published by the Southport Historical Society, offers 18 chapters spanning from the war exploits of Hardee's great-grandfather to the death of his father in late 1996. Included are dozens of historical photographs and illustrations.

As the book progresses chronologically, Hardee introduces readers to a wide cross-section of residents, their adventures and, sometimes, mishaps.

Hardee's prologue, "Children of the River," is alone worth the price of the book. It sets up the coming stories in a manner that is poetic and real, but not sentimental.

In the preface, he practically apologizes for capturing the people and some of their stories authentically. "I am a Southporter, and I'm afraid we natives can't help ourselves from finding humor in any subject, no matter how grim," Hardee writes. "I should further add that if certain passages in this book are a bit salty, it can't be helped. Southport is a

port, and ports are salty."

Hardee, professor emeritus at Wagner College in New York, said he wrote the book as a series of vignettes.

Hardee graduated from Southport High School in 1954 and earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He served in the Counter Intelligence Corps during the Cold War, including a stint in Panama.

He has composed for and written a number of musicals, including two that toured the country. His previous books include Southport's "signature" cookbook and "The Lambs Theatre Club," published by McFarland & Co. in 2006. Hardee is a longtime member of The Lambs Inc., the nation's oldest theatrical club, and serves as the group's historian. He is also vice-president of The Lambs Foundation Inc.

The book is available to members of the Southport Historical Society at a discount price. Hardee will conduct a book-signing on Sunday, December 21, from 1 to 3 p.m. at the Art Shak, located on North Howe Street in Southport.

"Of Home and the River" is also available at the N.C. Maritime Museum at Southport, Waterfront Gifts, CardSmart, PJ's Restaurant, Magnolia Gifts, Southport Visitor Center and Beach Road Books.

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