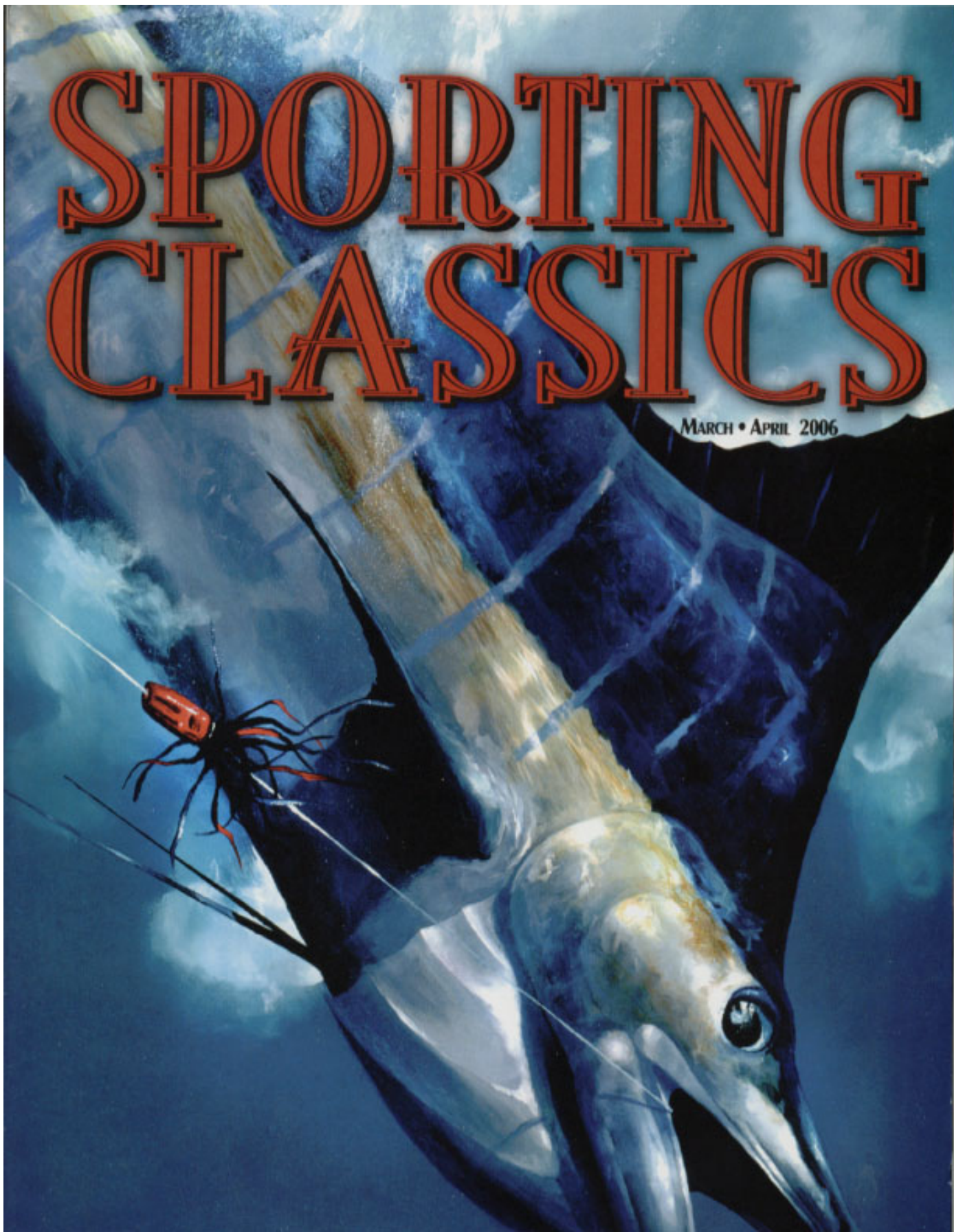


SPORTING CLASSICS

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by Larry Chesney

ETERNAL

For the sportsman, this South Carolina

SPRING

coastal community is an island for all seasons.



It's a given. From Maine to Miami, I-95 is in a constant state of turmoil. A gazillion vehicles of every shape and size, flying at every speed and direction, in a mad dash to be somewhere other than where they are. But when you take South Carolina Exit 28 off the hectic north-south pipeline, you leave the chaos behind and enter a parallel universe where things slow down to a crawl. Even the name of the exit hints that you're going to a calmer place. Coosawhatchie.

Take a sigh of relief as you one-finger-wave good bye to the interstate below and take Highway 462 east – a two-lane that carries you past salt marshes of spartina grass waving golden in the sun. You gaze at tidal creeks lined with oyster beds and see leaping schools of blueback herring being chased by who-knows-what. Above you, a canopy of outstretched live oaks blocks the sun and cools the asphalt beneath. You zip past a few roadside stands with barbecue and antiques, and an ancient pickup with a hand-painted sign that reads FRESH SHRIMP. Likely caught that morning in one of the creeks you just passed. Another couple of twists and turns and you slide across Callawassie Island to to a place called Spring.

If your blood pressure still hasn't stabilized, the situation gets better, so hang in there. At first glance, the island appears to be uninhabited. And compared to most East Coast communities, it truly is more akin to a deserted tropical island. Here, the silent majority consists mostly of deer, raccoons, bobcats, alligators, shorebirds and wild turkeys that begrudgingly share 3,000 acres of semi-tropical paradise with a handful of very lucky human residents.

But there were people on the island before. Long before. Over 12,000 years ago the Yemassee Indians resided here, followed by European explorers and then cotton planters. Beginning well before the Revolutionary War, a sprawling cotton plantation thrived until the Civil War. The main house, built of tabby – a mixture of oyster shells, lime and sand – was burned by Union soldiers. Its ruins still stand near the Old Tabby Links golf course.

For decades after the war, the island was used primarily for subsistence farming and hunting. In 1964 wealthy New Yorkers Elisha Walker, Jr. and Mrs. Lucile Thieriot-Walker purchased Spring Island as a winter home and hunt club. Later it was purchased for development.

Learning that a 5,000 home/two golf course community was planned for Spring Island in the 1980s, Jim Chaffin bought the island from the developer. Chaffin saw a golden opportunity to create a different kind of coastal community on Spring. The final plan included 400 homes and one golf course. Twelve-hundred acres were set aside in a land trust.

"Spring Island is a park with a community in it," said Chaffin, "as opposed to a community with a park in it."

Located midway between Beaufort and bustling Hilton



Head, Spring Island is a sportsman's nirvana. Fishing and hunting are as much a part of the South Carolina Lowcountry as shrimp and grits, and the variety of gamefish is mind-boggling. On Spring Island alone, there are bass ponds and saltwater impoundments filled with shrimp and redfish. A community dock on the Chechessee River provides access to inshore and offshore fishing. Cobia, tarpon, reds and seatrout highlight the creek fishing while blue marlin, wahoo, king mackerel and dolphin patrol the reefs offshore.

For the hunter, there's Pleasant Hill, a classic southern plantation lying just a short drive inland. This beautiful property offers island residents their own personal quail preserve. And unlike typical released bird operations, thousands of Pleasant Hill's birds are quite wild, having been released into the woods and fields prior to the season. Along with quail, the Lowcountry region offers an abundance of waterfowl, dove, deer and wild hog hunting.

Publisher Chuck Wechsler and I recently joined residents Troy Shaver and John Foltz for a day of shooting at Pleasant Hill and found ourselves stepping back in time. Sure, that's a fairly hackneyed phrase, but when the shoe fits . . .

After a breakfast of homemade biscuits and Spring Island honey in the century-old house, we walked past Spanish moss-draped oaks to our waiting mounts. On horseback, accompanied by a mule-drawn wagon carrying eager setters and pointers, we chased quail through the shadowy pines for a couple hours, then returned to the plantation house to enjoy Miz Charlie's fried catfish and sweet tea. Afterwards, came a cigar and a rest in the rockers on the porch before the afternoon hunt.

Seems that "stepping back in time" fits just like a glove.

For the non-hunter, the same stables that keep the hunt horses happy also provide boarding for the island residents' personal horses. Miles of marked trails over the plantation's natural setting make it an equestrian's dream.

On Spring Island itself you'll also find first-rate stables, horse pastures and riding trails. In addition, there is boating, shrimping, crabbing, kayaking, swimming, hiking and a twelve-acre sporting clays course designed by Dan Carlyle. And because of the mild climate, the Old Tabby Links

designed by Palmer and Seay offer superb golf year-round. Just don't be unnerved by the rookery of egrets watching your approach shot. There's also an eight-acre practice facility with a green and bunkers. And if you need a little help on that nagging slice, there are three pros at your disposal.

For the tennis enthusiast, there are four well-kept clay courts. A short walk away, there's a professionally staffed fitness center with aerobics room and instructors. And if you work up an appetite, two clubhouse dining rooms can take your order.

But we came to hunt, so with over-and-unders tucked safely in our saddle scabbards, we followed the lead of William Fripp and his dogs.

Hunt 'em up!" Huntmaster William shouts as the English setter ranges through the dry sorghum stalks. My horse Cricket prefers this terrain, as he seems to have a limitless appetite. He browses on the seed-heads, falling slightly behind the others. But this ain't I-95, so there's no rush. We can take our time and enjoy the sights and the sounds of the hunt.

Suddenly the dog gets birdy, doing a one-eighty and slinking down, tail erect and trembling. He begins to creep in a bit too close to the covey and William hollers "Careful now!" and dismounts. We follow suit, sliding out our 20s from the horses' shoulders and flanking our guide as directed. William steps past the quivering hound and slaps a leather lanyard against the brush. Five birds erupt in five different directions and four shots follow. Two birds tumble while three sail off toward the surrounding pine thicket. One has the forethought to make a beeline for the wagon and horses, making himself a non-target. Above us, two red-tailed hawks shriek their approval of our misses, hoping to cash in on a cripple or two later in the morning.

Of course, when you visit an island, you can pretty much bet that there's water nearby. So Chuck and I felt obliged to arrange a springtime visit and wet a line or two. Earl Mason, Barry Neal and Robert Horning were our willing guides, residents who have found a piscatorial paradise. With so many types of fishing in and around Spring, the semi-tropical climes mean

something is always biting somewhere. Even in the dead of winter, big spottails school up in the marsh grass and can be caught with shrimp or fiddler imitations.


With so many fish and so little time, our angling experience was a quick walk down the buffet line – a morning for cobia in the Chechessee River, an afternoon on the saltwater pond for redfish, a morning of bass fishing in a quiet pond. We were only marginally successful, but it wasn't for lack of fish. Maybe it was the moon phase or a lack of angling skill on Chuck's part and mine. Regardless, we were both blown away by the variety of fishing opportunities within reach of the island's inhabitants.

One of the most refreshing aspects of a visit to Spring Island

is the sense that what you see is how it will always be. No plans for a hotel or condos, no Wal-mart or theme park on the drawing board. The people who reside here, whether part time or year-round, share a common philosophy – they are stewards, not masters, of an extremely fragile ecosystem.

Spring Island recently won the Urban Land Institute's Sensitive Development Award. Quoting the Institute:

"Spring Island is a purist's recreational community that focuses on protecting its environmental heritage. Its no-and low-impact land and habitat management philosophy emphasizes economic viability, community livability and environmental sensitivity in preserving an authentic piece of South Carolina's Lowcountry for future generations."

To find out more about Spring Island, call 843-987-2200 or visit www.springisland.com. 



Horses graze beneath the wide-spreading arms of ancient live oaks on idyllic Spring Island. Below: Fishing on both fresh and saltwater ponds can be an everyday event for the island's residents. Opposite: The beautiful 17th green of Old Tabby Links, designed by Arnold Palmer.

