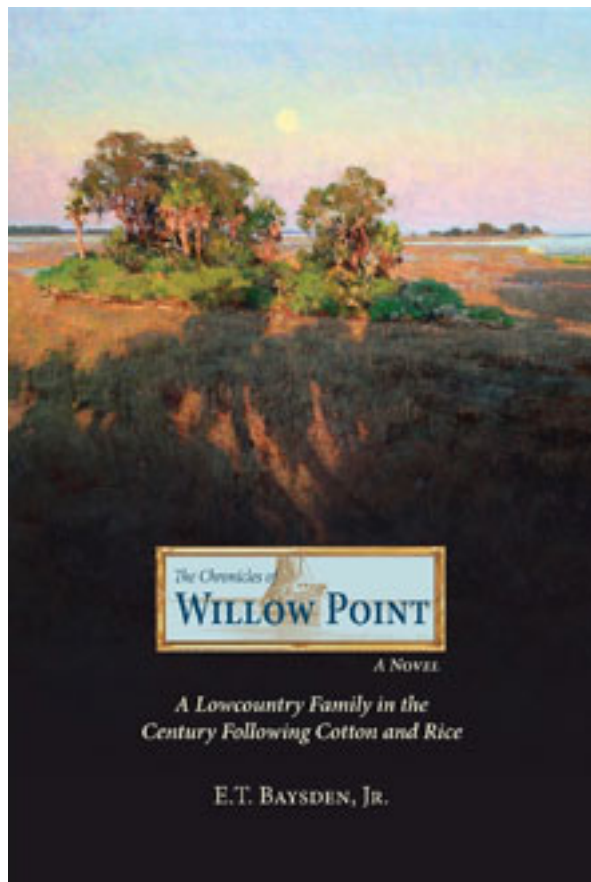




"This is a work of fiction, However, with a single exception (and as



*outrageous as some of them may sound) all the incidents described here really happened"...
Thus begins the Author's Note introducing The Chronicles of Willow Point, a new novel by
Beaufort's*

E.T.

Baysden

The following is an excerpt from that novel.

Chapter 41: Chechessee Creek Okatie, SC

Mack was crossing the Chechessee River Bridge at Lemon Island Marina when he caught sight of the monster. It took a moment to register, but he soon realized he was looking at an enormous shark, hanging by its tail from a scaffold normally used for weighing billfish. The tell-tale stripes on its side identified it as a tiger shark, but what a shark it was: easily over eleven feet in length and half a ton.

“Jesus,” Mack said out loud. “How did *that* get here?” It was well known that there were large sharks close inshore off Beaufort and Hilton Head, even in the mouth of Port Royal Sound. Shrimpers saw them often, and it was even rumored that the most aggressive of these, the Bull Shark, swam up the rivers all the way to, and into, fresh water. But this was a behemoth, a brute. And how, Mack wondered, did it ever get from

out there

to

in here

— a brackish tributary no more than 200 feet wide and ten to twelve feet deep, even at high tide. He had to take a closer look.

Six or eight people were gathered around the base of the scale as he walked up. “Well I’ll be damned,” he said, spotting someone he knew. “If it isn’t Johnny Malphrus.”

Malphrus was best known by his nickname, “The River Rat,” bestowed on him shortly after grammar school. He began crabbing and shrimping in high school, which he had abandoned early on to work at these things full time.

“Who caught this thing and how’d they get it here?” Mack asked. “It can’t have fit in anybody’s boat.”

“Nosir,” Malphrus answered, spitting Red Man Chew into a cup. “I towed it in.”

"Towed it behind *what?*" Mack was astonished.

"That twelve-foot skiff yonder," said the River Rat, gesturing with his chin at a small aluminum boat tied up to the pier, and spitting another stream of tobacco juice. "He were exactly the length of the boat, so I towed him in from astern."

"You caught that thing on a hook and line?" Mack was still incredulous.

"Yessir," he said. "Two miles off the beach at Dolphin Head."

"*Christ*," thought Mack. "*I'm even afraid to hear* the details!"

"Weren't that much to it," said the River Rat. "I've hooked this same fish before."

He went on to describe how he'd left the dock they were standing on before first light, motoring through the inlet with a 25-horsepower outboard and heading south on the coast until he was offshore of Dolphin Head, one of Hilton Head's best beaches, using a water tower onshore to position himself.

"I just dropped the hook and started chumming with chicken guts. Used a whole sheep's head, bleeding but still alive, for bait. Hooked another one before this one, even bigger. They's great whites out there and the resorts know it, but they try to keep it hidden, just like in *Jaws*."

The shark, he went on to say, had towed *him* at first, pulling the boat all the way down to Palmetto Dunes, a distance of about eight miles. "I barely had gas to get back to Lemon Island, towing all that weight," he said. "But him towing me all that distance must have wore his ass out too 'cause he finally come to the surface and I pulled him in close enough to get that anchor in him. He kept on fighting after that and I thought he was going to pull me out to sea, but finally he

just sorta give up, and we headed home.”

Unknown to Malphrus at the time, after the feat of towing a thousand-pound shark fifteen miles behind a twelve-foot boat, his problems had just begun.

They decided to take the shark into Beaufort to Island Outfitters, an outdoor store where there was a certified scale, required for claiming a record. But the beast wouldn't fit easily into even a full-size pickup. It took six men and a backhoe (used

for moving oyster shells at the marina) to wrestle it up onto the bed of a Ford 350, and even then, the tail had to be pulled up over the cab and lashed down through the rear windows. The huge, menacing head hung out over the tailgate, dripping a trail

of bloody slime. They crossed four different rivers on the way to Ladies Island, home of Island Outfitters and its registered scale.

The tiger shark, now named “Tony,” caused quite a stir in Beaufort. It tipped the scale at 1,150 pounds and appeared on the cover of the Beaufort *Gazette*. It caught the eye of Game Warden Cliff Mullis while reading his morning paper over breakfast.

Hmmm, he thought. I see some problems here.

The Tiger Shark, *Galeocerdo cuvier*, is one of only a handful of sharks known to attack man. They are considered second only to the great white in aggressiveness, though bull sharks may be responsible for more attacks, which go unrecorded. Most of the documented tiger attacks in U.S. waters have occurred in the Pacific, especially around Hawaii.

Tigers, which are known scavengers, can grow to over sixteen feet in length. Though the River Rat's shark was less blengthy than that, he remained around the scale for most of the day, answering questions and posing for photos. He was convinced he would be a state record

holder, once it was processed through Fish and Game. But titles didn't mean much to Malphrus. What he wanted – and needed – was to get some cash out of his catch. He just couldn't figure out how.

The edibility of tiger sharks is a matter of much speculation. But word of the catch had found its way to the Purrfect Catfood Cannery in central Georgia, which offered \$500 to come haul the shark away to its rendering plant.

"If this continues, I'm going to need a calculator," Mullis, the game warden thought, watching the action from across the street when the catfood truck showed up. They were aware it was illegal for them to buy fish from anyone but a licensed broker.

The River Rat, who wasn't aware of much of anything, certainly wasn't aware that he faced a \$2500 fine for killing a tiger shark out of season. He didn't even know there *was* a season. He had thought he was just ridding the world of another trash fish. Mullis busted them both.

When he heard all this, Malphrus first thought he would have to leave the country. But, since all the money he ever had was what he got from yesterday's catch, he didn't have the funds to even leave Beaufort, just like he didn't have the funds to step up to those ridiculous fines.

"You hear about all this stuff with the River Rat?" Billy Clement asked Mack later that week. "Sounds like they going to send that little fucker to the cleaners. Don't you know Judge Barefoot? You ought to call him and ask for mercy," he said with

a laugh.

"You know, that's not a bad idea," Mack said, surprising Billy. "Malphrus can't pay those fines, and he's liable to end up in jail over this nonsense."

Judge Napoleon Bonaparte Barefoot was enjoying his nightly martini when his telephone rang.

“Judge, this is Mack Pinckney.”

A pause. “Yes sir, I know you knew my dad. I’m calling you about Johnny Malphrus. I heard he is scheduled to come before your court next week. I just thought you might need to know some things about him.”

“Well, I doubt you can tell me anything I don’t already know,” said the judge, not meaning to be curt but already thinking about all the stuff he was going to have to untangle on this case, “but go ahead.”

Mack composed his thoughts for a moment and then said, “Johnny had a pretty bad deal from the very start. You remember that his father, Leon, was about as sorry as they come. People used to say he was responsible for the term ‘White Trash.’ He even came to be Johnny’s daddy in a real unorthodox way. Leon and Pearl, Johnny’s “mother,” were leaving the Jasper county fair in Ridgeland about twenty years ago, and not until they got home did they discover that someone had left a perfectly healthy baby boy on the back seat of their old Chevrolet. They had no other children, so they decided to keep him, like you might decide to keep a stray kitten you found at the dump. Thinking that the county might not want to award a child to a pair as dysfunctional as them, they just never told anybody. So, Johnny was brought up sort of like those fairytale children raised by wolves. Leon and Pearl were always drunk

or drugged up when they could get the money from robbing ATM machines. (Someone had taught them how to hack into the transaction history to pick up passcodes, which they’d take to another machine from the same bank.)

“He might have a lot of sense, because his genes were somebody else’s and, apparently, he has a real good heart. But he took the first opportunity he could get to distance himself from his folks because their crimes were a lot worse than catching a shark out of season and I can promise you he never even knew there *was* a season on sharks.

“So, barely able to read and write, he was back on the rivers, by himself, in all kinds of weather, scratching out what living he could. Judge, catching that shark was like a windfall to him. He thought his luck might just be turning around. He had no intention of breaking the law, and I think he deserves a break, if you can give him one.

“But there’s more,” Mack continued. “When Johnny was about ten, the old man started to pay attention to him in the wrong ways. Even at that age, he knew perversion when he saw it. When he came home from school one day to find that

Leon had killed Pearl with an ice pick and then shot himself, he looked on it as liberation. The county put him in a succession of foster homes, but none of them could hold him. He kept running away, and he always surfaced on the Colleton or Checheesee River, in that twelve-foot aluminum boat, which was the only thing he ever wanted from the old man.

“For a while, he used the boat to offload drugs from yachts on the backside of Edisto Island. He found it a lot easier (and better paying) than pulling crab traps on freezing, windy days in the middle of winter. But then the big drug bust came down

and he was lucky to sneak out just a step or two ahead of the law. He’d have probably kept doing it, but old man Lowther at Lemon Island told him the boat had to be locked up every night – with the key in Lowther’s pocket. That is, if he wanted the marina to keep buying the shrimp and crabs he brought in. “So, there he was, barely able to read and write, by himself and back on the rivers in every kind of weather. He thought catching that shark was sort of a sign. He never meant to break the law, or even *knew* he was doing it. I really think he could use a break, if you could see your way clear to cut him some slack.”

“Well,” the Judge finally said, “let me hear what he has to say and I’ll see what we can do.”

That turned out to be a reduction of the fine to \$1,000, payable over a year in fish and shrimp, at wholesale rates, delivered to the county jail. The River Rat was also required to do 250 hours of community service, which could be used teaching kids

to fish.

“You see there, Bubba,” Billy said when he heard of the settlement. “Justice is still alive – in the

backwaters of Beaufort County, South Carolina, at least!"

E.T. Baysden has spent most of the last half century in the SC Lowcountry, where he served as chief marketing officer for Sea Pines Resort, Callawassie Island, Spring Island, Oldfield Club, and Palmetto Bluff. He is also the author of The Rock Jaw Ladies Club: A Memoir of the Other Vietnam . He is a fly fisherman, an Episcopalian, and an avid Tar Heels fan. To learn more about his novels, visit www.baysdenbooks.com