For packinghouse owners like Dennis Henderson, one of the battles is getting people to buy wild-caught shrimp instead of foreign, farm-raised varieties, which are usually cheaper.

Along the morning dock, water-weighted oxygen, seemingly administered in pudding-thick doses, comes scented with mangrove, fish, and diesel fumes. The humid smell is perversely appealing, like cheap plentiful food forced on a starving sailor. A pale sun lays light like wet cotton, in nearly immobile layers, warming the Trico Shrimp Company on Main Street.

Trico is buying Denty's catch. The bill-capped shrimper slides over the port rail of the *High Life* and onto the dock in a single fluid motion. Dressed in a generic T-shirt, blue jeans, and formerly white athletic shoes, he doesn't seem to notice the humidity or the temperature.

But Denty is concentrating like a tightrope walker on the economics. "It used to be, on a good year we could gross $200,000, maybe $220,000 on a boat," he says. "Now it isn't even half that. Crew used to collect $2,000 or maybe $2,200 for 20 to 30 days. Now it's maybe $1,000, $1,200. So it's harder to get good crew."

More than ten men, half of them shirtless and several hoping to join the next boat out, gather on the high dock to watch as fat pink shrimp roll up a mechanical conveyor belt projecting from the hold beneath the stern deck. The shrimp are already packed into net bags about the size of small hay bales, each containing thirty to forty pounds of fresh frozen.

"Fresh frozen" is neither a contradiction nor misleading, but the shrimpers might better call it fresh and frozen.

New refrigeration technology means that only a few so-called ice boats remain in the shrimp fleet—most now rely on below-deck freezers that can reduce the temperature of shrimp just hauled from the warm gulf water to almost forty degrees below zero, Fahrenheit, in a mere ten minutes.

Most of the shrimp go up the conveyor belt, across the dock and through the gaping door of the packinghouse. There, the body bags are plucked from the belt, dropped quickly on a digital scale and weighed, then lifted and stacked neatly onto a wooden pallet. A forklift moves the pallet through the rear door of a refrigerated, eighteen-wheel trailer-truck.

But some of the catch bypasses the boat-to-truck track and goes straight into Dennis Henderson's sorting room. Co-owner of the packinghouse with a boyhood friend and sole owner of nineteen boats, all of them out fishing off the Texas coast, Henderson, 51, has come down to greet Denty, a man he respects.

"I own nineteen boats, but I unload sixty," he explains. "Four years ago, we were getting $1.50 more per pound on average for these shrimp. What you want are the big ones 'cause you make more money. Nowadays you get anywhere from 75 cents a pound for the real small shrimp up to $3.90 a pound. The average are the 19/21 size—we get $2.75—or the 22/25, for $2.10 a pound."

The value of each pound of wild-caught shrimp multiplies almost exponentially outward from the dock. Watching his shrimp roll out of his hold, Denty notes that he will get $1 a pound by selling to Henderson, or about $7,000 in gross pay for the trip. That means he can still call himself a shrimper because he'll make enough to pay his bills and get back out a week later.

Henderson is selling fresh large shrimp at his counter for $5.35 per pound with the heads on, or $9.99 without.

At a Winn-Dixie supermarket only about two miles from the docks—a place some captains use to supply their boats before long trips by spending as much as $1,200 on groceries—there is no fresh Florida shrimp for sale, only imported shrimp.

At a new, upscale Publix several miles away, the fish counter includes a small selection of large Florida pink shrimp, billed as absolutely fresh, for $12.99 a pound with heads on, or $16.99 with heads off.

Coming Home

While Henderson has a good head for those numbers, most of his three hundred to four hundred employees laboring in various corners of the business probably don't care.

Inside the packinghouse, several men and women work furiously over a huge tabletop pile (the shrimpers' word for any catch is "a pile"), popping the heads off individuals two at a time, one shrimp in each hand. The best can do about two shrimp a second, preparing the succulent pink Gulfies for Henderson's deli-style glass counter out front, or for his area restaurants, or for various other local markets.

This is always a good moment for Denty, home from the sea. He smiles and flips out his cell phone. "Hi, honey," he says matter-of-factly. "The parking lot in about twenty minutes. I love you."

While workers continue to shift shrimp from his hold, his wife of twenty-two years, Ella, is coming to meet him in the parking lot. The couple's daughters, ages 19 and 7, await their dad back at the family's modest suburban home in Punta Rassa, a few miles to the north. "I won't let them come down here to the docks," he says. "I've been here too long, and these men can be rough."

Denty is a family man, like many shrimp boat captains. He is coming home again for the umpteenth time, alive and with a hold half full of shrimp. Last year, however, he almost didn't make it back, an experience many longtime shrimpers admit to having had at least once.

Fishing hard into inclement weather, he lost control of the boat.

"Now I just ride it out somewhere if there's anything. I won't fish through that eight- or ten-foot stuff anymore, 'cause it ain't worth it," he says.

Shrimpers spend weeks at a time at sea, working long hours in sometimes dangerous situations.

Even after Steve Denty returns from several weeks at sea, there's plenty of work to be done before he can catch up with his wife and daughters.

The weather had caught him out about forty miles off the coast of Mexico, slamming waves over his deck, which happened also to be his lifetime investment, his primary business location, and the single source of his livelihood. The storm killed the engines, swamped the vessel he had named for his oldest daughter, *Miss Tanya*, and sent it to the bottom.

Only by luck did Denty avoid a permanent marriage to that boat on the bottom, which means his family lucked out, too. Another shrimper happened to be fishing nearby.

"They got close enough to pick us up," he says laconically. "We managed to get into a little dinghy and ride across to 'em. It scared me." He pauses, glancing around the peaceful morning scene. "I was lucky," he adds.

In the parking lot, Ella listens to her husband's story with a bemused grin on her face. On long trips the two stay in touch by cell phone, mostly—and obviously that can get iffy, depending on signals, she notes. "I keep an eye on the weather reports when he's gone," she admits, "but you try not to drive yourself crazy. It's always a worry and if you let it, it'll worry you to death.

"Sometimes you have to wait to find out: do I still have a husband?" She chuckles. Her demeanor is meant to suggest she's made of stern enough stuff to handle the stress.

Old Pride, New Practices

After that trip, Denty and his wife, who grew up on the southwest coast as the daughter of a blue-crab fisherman, thought long and hard about changing their own lives. Pride was part of their decision not to, and so was Dennis Henderson.

Like nearly everyone else they know in the business, the Dentys are determined to make it on their own.

When state government employees arrived at the docks last year to offer "welfare" for shrimpers struggling and out of work, Ella recalls, "Everybody down here just got up and walked away. Nobody would take it. We don't want that kind of help. We can take care of ourselves."

Pride got them the attitude, but Dennis Henderson sold them the boat, in part by persuading them that traditional shrimping still has a lucrative future. He also made it affordable for the Dentys, who could invest only with the very limited insurance money they received following his loss at sea.

A rich man by the standards of most shrimpers, Henderson grew up around Ft. Myers Beach and the shrimp industry, too—his father was a welder who repaired boats. He's done everything in the business: fished on the boats as a teenager, sorted and packed shrimp in typical dockside work, fixed the boats himself, started his own welding and repair business on the docks, like his dad did, and finally become an owner.

Now Henderson owns both the surf and the turf, so to speak. He's got a couple of packinghouses; a variety of nearby waterfront properties; an entire shrimping operation in Freeport, Texas, including docks and packinghouse; several Lee County restaurants; some cattle land in east Lee County; and even a trucking firm to ship his shrimp where he wishes.

Last but not least, Henderson owns a significant fleet of shrimp boats.

"I see nothing but a bright future for us," he claims. "I always say, whenever times seem to get bad in shrimping, that's when to invest in it."

Henderson put his money where his mouth was, too, not only persuading Steve Denty to stay in the business by buying another boat, but buying four more aging boats himself.

Many consider such men foolish.

Sixty miles east of San Carlos Island, in the cow and citrus country of Hendry County, OceanBoy Farms owns 1,500 self-contained acres studded with almost forty ponds devoted to raising Pacific white shrimp.

Unlike Henderson, who quit school in the tenth grade, or Denty, who graduated from high school but turned down a chance to go to college in order to fish, co-owner David McMahon holds a doctorate in marine biology.

His operation, which produced two million pounds of Pacific white shrimp last year and aims to produce a lot more than that in the future, is a self-contained, completely organic shrimp farm, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The USDA awarded OceanBoy the coveted niche-market label, "Organic," earlier this year.

The farm is nothing like those in Asia or South America, which add potentially health-threatening antibiotics and preservatives such as sodium bisulfate to their shrimp. OceanBoy uses, cleans, and recycles artesian well water pumped from

1,000 feet below the surface and then given the minimum salinity needed to keep Pacific shrimp alive. Workers raise tilapia to feed the shrimp for as long as 220 days, then harvest them for sale both in the United States and Europe.

McMahon is unequivocal in his prognostications of the future for Denty and Henderson. "The days of wild-caught shrimp are over," he says to anyone who asks.

"We have the blueprint to feed the world," announces Stutts Armstrong, vice president of marketing, recruited from a fifteen-year career promoting salmon in the fisheries of the far west to sell shrimp for OceanBoy. "In France, the UK, elsewhere in Europe, the market's huge."

The so-called blueprint, though, calls only for feeding the world of the well-off, at least initially. The organic American-farmed shrimp is no less expensive to consumers than the wild-caught varieties.

If Florida shrimpers could figure out how to market the extraordinary taste and freshness of wild-caught shrimp, figures Henderson, they could sell in large quantities to Europe, too—especially if they could charge enough to get around the tariffs. But marketing has never been their forte.

"We hope to get some of that going, and there's a Florida Shrimp Wild and Wonderful ad campaign to promote wild-caught shrimp, too," he says hopefully, citing a taxpayer-supported state project. It's a campaign tiny by most advertising standards, not quite $1.5 million aimed at radio and TV.

Political Shrimp

The problems of the traditional trade, however, are magnified across eight states, where shrimpers have formed a political organization known as the Southern Shrimp Alliance.

Although proposed solutions to those problems are various—ranging from "find another job," to "provide better marketing," to "quit supporting foreign competitors with United States aid," to "tax the imported shrimp" (the solution championed by the Southern Shrimp Alliance)—no one disputes the difficulties faced by shrimpers.

"I'd love to be very optimistic about their future, but I'm afraid events and times are catching up to them," says U.S. Congressman Ron Paul, whose south Texas constituency includes a number of

"This be the verse you 'grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be.
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."

– Robert Louis Stevenson, "Requiem"

Not far from San Carlos Island, where shrimp boats seem to be fixtures, is a thriving aquaculture company—another threat to the wild-shrimp industry.

Shrimp boats have more amenities than when Steve Denty started in the business, but they're very expensive in a business where it can be hard to make ends meet.

shrimp concerns. "They're in pain, and we should do everything we can to stop it."

Known as a friend to shrimpers and described by his staff as "a libertarian Republican," Paul does not favor imposing tariffs on imported shrimp flooding the country from nations that receive U.S. economic aid in a variety of forms. But he doesn't oppose the tariffs, either. (The Department of Commerce imposed these duties on shrimp from China and Vietnam in late July, and is likely to include several more countries on its list in January, shrimpers say.)

"The tariffs may help a little bit, but you're just treating the symptoms with a band aid," argues Paul, a medical doctor who once owned a shrimp boat himself. "If it were free trade and we couldn't compete, then I don't think we should do anything about it."

But it isn't free trade, he says; or more accurately, it isn't fair trade. Since 1999, Paul claims, the United States has provided $1.8 billion in financing and insurance through the Overseas Private Investment Corporation to seven nations that have come to dominate the U.S. shrimp market with cheap, farm-raised produce: Thailand, India, China, Ecuador, Indonesia, Vietnam and Brazil.

None are part of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the congressman points out. And each exported more than twenty million pounds of shrimp to United States consumers in the first six months of 2002 (similar export numbers continue), which is why American shrimp now account for only about fifteen percent of the market, according to the American Seafood Distributors Association.

"What my boss would do," says Jeff Deist, Paul's Washington, D.C.-based aide, "is: First, let's put a moratorium on new regulations. And second, let's stop subsidizing nations that are the biggest competitors in shrimp production."

Regulations, perhaps the most deeply resented, may be the least of their problems, shrimpers admit. Those regulations come, among others, in the form of the archly named "fish exclusion devices" and

"turtle excluders"—open loops roughly the size of kitchen cutting boards that must be inserted in every net. And they create steady losses of ten to twelve percent, estimates Henderson. Losses not compensated by any steady increase in shrimp profits to boat captains and crews.

None of those facts apparently concerns the American Seafood Distributors Association, which strongly opposes tariffs and offers the better-marketing solution as a way out of hard times for traditional shrimpers.

"The realities of the global supply situation, particularly with aquaculture, have really come to hit hard on the domestic shrimp industry," says the association's president, Wally Stevens, in a recent conversation with newspaper reporters. Head of a Boston-based seafood marketing company known as Slade and Gorton, Stevens recommends better marketing for traditional shrimpers.

Members of his association, such as the Red Lobster or Long John Silver's seafood restaurant chains, benefit from low-cost shrimp, argues Henderson, which is why they tend to be delighted with the status quo.

"Of course they don't seem to mind putting our food supply in somebody else's hands as long as they're getting it cheaply," he adds bitterly, suggesting that one way to give consumers a choice would be to require labeling, something the U.S. government is considering. "Then you could see if you were eating something loaded with antibiotics and preservatives or not," he notes.

The Bottom Line

For men like Steve Denty, these national and international debates create political fog of the first order, nearly unfathomable. And they always boil down to only two sets of figures—those in the black and those in the red.

Denty will walk away on this day having grossed $7,000 for his seventeen-day effort.

Diesel fuel for his engines will run him about $1.30 a gallon, and the main engine can burn twenty gallons an hour, or about 4,000 gallons for the trip. (Those engines will also require forty gallons of oil.) If he tears a net, it could cost him anywhere from hundreds to thousands of dollars, depending on whether he has to repair it or buy a new one. If he has to rebuild the engine, he can plan on spending $20,000.

There are state licensing fees—several thousand dollars' worth per year—and the essential insurance, as he knows from the loss of his last boat. That runs about $13,000 per year.

Plus, he's paying for the boat, which is like paying for a house. Shrimp boats these days are generally cheaper than they used to be, because shrimpers continue to go out of business. But cheaper isn't cheap. They can run from $150,000 for a nearly unserviceable craft that requires restoration, to more than $1 million for a new boat. "I wanted something I could go fishing with right now, and this boat was ready," Denty says. "Plus, Dennis gave us a once-in-a-lifetime deal."

The Dentys got the *High Life* for $100,000—a 1982 Desco Marine with a 3412 Caterpillar engine and a backup, two 45-foot outriggers (the long arms that characterize a shrimp boat in action), and the four 40-foot nets that accompany them.

Scaled with rust but safe and serviceable, the boat had a number of luxuries Denty didn't grow up fishing with—heat and air conditioning in the living quarters, hot- and cold-running water, a shower. His dad, he recalls, had a 56-foot boat and a hand water pump.

And Denty added a new laptop computer with software that allows him to map his own fishing routes in vivid color over sometimes treacherous bottoms that can snag and tear nets. That's a nearly priceless guide, based on his own knowledge that tells him where the shrimp will be—from Ft. Myers to Freeport, Texas, from Cabbage Key to Key West, from Marco Island to Mexico, and from Tampa to the Tortugas.

With all that, he seems happy—his wife, Ella, too. Trouble or adversity is nothing they can't handle, apparently. In a parking lot conversation they defer to each other, praise each other, and talk about their current sacrifices as if nothing could worry them less—no health insurance until their income picks up, for example, and a new landscaping business for Ella to help make ends meet.

"We've lost some, but we'll get it back," Steve Denty says.

"I'll tell you one thing we haven't lost," Ella adds, smiling at him. "Pride. We've got a lot of it."

Roger Williams is a freelance journalist who lives and works in Lee County.

Shrimping is a way of life that some families have followed for generations. But as the challenges grow, more shrimpers are struggling to retain their pride and a life they love.