

Southport man uses skills to focus on saving the cape

By Andrew Dunn

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Look out my window, Mike Rice encourages as you walk into his Southport home for the first time.

He takes you to a large bay window by the kitchen table looking out over Dutchman Creek, where herons peck at the fish that make their way through the tidal waters.

It's that type of view, says Rice, 72, that drives him to spend his mornings in front of a computer he assembled himself, compiling reports.

For the past few years, he's been an integral part of the fight against the N.C. International Terminal, the proposed megaport on 600 acres near his home.

Formerly a member of the No Port Southport steering committee, he broke away to launch a new organization with a more ambitious goal: protecting the land at the mouth of the Cape Fear River forever.

But demanding projects are nothing new. Just as important as the view to Rice's work is the fact that he simply can't sit around idle. He must have something to keep his mind occupied – and the more challenging the better.

"Sometimes I get a little too brave. Sometimes I take on things I shouldn't," he said.

"At least I'm not walking around a golf course wearing bright green pants."

Part-time passions

From the time he was a boy, Rice has been the type of person who likes to take things apart.

Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., in October 1938 but raised in Washington, D.C., he was a continual tinkerer.

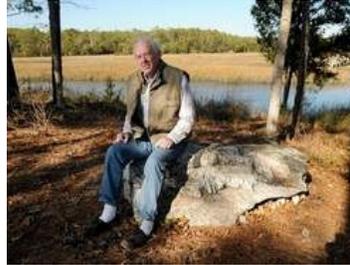
Today, he still has a garage full of cars, parts and tools. The black 1987 Volvo is on its second engine and has 320,000 miles.

So naturally, he became an engineer.

But over the next several decades, his career took him from the West Coast back east, and from engineering to transportation consulting to Wall Street law firms.

He actually wrote the book on equipment financing. It was published by Aspen Publishers Inc. with the title "Equipment Financing."

But he ultimately settled on business law in private practice – which he still says is



STAFF PHOTO BY Paul Stephen/Wilmington
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Southport resident Mike Rice has led the research efforts for the No Port Southport and Save the Cape organizations.

boring and tedious work.

After a few years of retirement, Rice and his wife decided to get a winter place.

Looking at the climate map of the country, Rice said he saw a long finger of the tropical climate zone that stretched from Florida all the way north into Southeastern North Carolina. That's what brought them to Southport.

While cars have long been a part-time passion, they're not the only project that has occupied his time.

In the 1970s, Radio Shack came out with one of the first personal computers, one ambitious do-it-yourselfers could put one together from a kit. He jumped at the chance.

He taught himself patent law while commuting to New York City and passed the bar, but he couldn't bear to practice in that area.

He assembled the cabinets that hold the books in his office today.

And in Connecticut, he built a 50-foot-by-30-foot garage, after a heart bypass and his 60th birthday.

He said he had found a guy who was going to build it, but the man left after only putting in the foundation.

"I said, 'Well, I have a pretty good idea of how things should be done.' So I ordered some lumber," he said.

Accidental advocate

Rice never was an environmental type of guy.

"I don't have much affinity for the squishy things," he said.

His limited experience with the outdoors came from a summer of tent camping while driving cross country in a truck – from New York to Vancouver Island and back – with his six kids in tow.

"That had nothing to do with communion with the land," he said. "We could put up tents and stay for \$4 a night."

The family saw a bear rattling trash cans in a state park, and one night turned into a week on the banks of Lake Okanagan.

He never was very politically involved either, except for a couple of school board campaigns in the early 1980s on Long Island.

But there were signs along the way that stopping the proposed port could be in the future.

"He likes things to be left as they are," said daughter Connie Brown, who also lives in Southport. "He doesn't like industry infringing."

She said the family moved from Long Island when it seemed the city was encroaching.

"You don't do ugly things, whether it's treating friends right to treating the environment right," Brown said. "You do things right, you do things honest."

Key player

Rice heard the announcement in 2006 about a potential port coming to his new neck

of the woods, but he said he didn't pay much attention.

A few years later, the N.C. State Ports Authority released some reports.

What Rice read made him think of passing Port Elizabeth on the New Jersey Turnpike during his years up north.

Particularly when he was a transportation consultant, his job took him to railroad yards in California and past smoke stacks and tank farms and container yards.

"Unless you've seen areas that have been devastated and then restored, and the effort it takes to restore them, you don't realize what's ahead of us," he said.

So he joined a team of retired MBAs and Ph.D.'s and other locals in the fledgling No Port Southport advocacy group.

Rice was the only lawyer.

"We were appalled at the complete lack of information on the port by people who were making budget decisions," Rice said.

He was a key player in putting together the reports the group would present as it went to local governments around the county and to Raleigh. Sometimes he worked from his Connecticut home.

"What was most valuable for us was his mind," said Celeste Plassman, an officer in No Port Southport. "He's very dedicated, he's very talented and he's very smart."

Plassman said it is difficult to separate out the specific things that any one member did because they all worked together, but that Rice played a significant role.

And among the groups he lobbied, he became known as someone who diligently attended meetings and made presentations without bitterness.

"Mike has been very impressive," said Jesse Capel, a member of the Ports Authority board of directors. "You might not agree with him, but it's hard to make any personal criticisms."

Save the Cape

Last year, Rice decided to leave No Port Southport, joining fellow advocate Toby Bronstein to form a new group that they say has a different focus: stopping the proposed port and then preserving the land as a national seashore.

The rest of No Port Southport wasn't interested in joining, Plassman said, because they felt that attention still needed to be paid to the matter at hand: stopping the port. And, as Rice admits, the national seashore campaign could take decades.

But Rice's job hasn't changed much. He recently completed a 55-page report comparing ports throughout the Southeast, which he and Bronstein presented to N.C. Secretary of Commerce Keith Crisco.

Their goal is first to stop the N.C. International Terminal, which while the latest word is that it is on hold, Rice and Bronstein aren't convinced.

Then the plan is to get the land use changed, and finally have the area preserved.

As a team, the two work well together because while Rice is a master at churning out analyses, he said he's not as comfortable taking the lead publicly. Both Rice and Bronstein said that they balance each other out.

"He's absolutely passionate about this project," Bronstein said. "He inspires me."

Critics

Of course, Rice's work is not without its critics. Especially in a down economy, many in the government and the public believe the proposed port would be a boon to the area, bringing thousands of jobs.

"In my mind, that waterway belongs to all the people, not just Southport," said Earl Brinkley, a member of the governor's logistics task force. "I think they've hurt the people of North Carolina more than they have ever realized."

Rice said he understands that argument, but doesn't agree with their conclusions.

"People do need jobs," he said. "That is a very legitimate point."

But he said the port wouldn't bring nearly as many jobs as some people predict.

He said ports today are highly automated with few employees. The rest of the workers, he said, are truck drivers, who can be from anywhere.

In essence, a container terminal's job is to import goods and export money and jobs, he said.

"Some people think that any kind of job is better than no job, and maybe so," he said. "For \$3 billion we can do better. We can be more creative."

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