The Story of Oak Island Beach

By Ed Meade

GEOGRAPHICALLY, Oak Beach has long been the principal, inhabited, residential sector of what early maps of the area called "Oak Island Beach" - a barrier beach complex of seasonal structures built on grassy dunes, meadows and sand. It included Oak Beach, Oak Island, Muncie Island, Captree, Seganus Thatch and certain small, grassy islands adjacent to its border, all across Great South Bay from Babylon.

Existing historical data before 1900 becomes broken and sketchy as to building and development, but Oak Island apparently pre-dated Oak Beach as a settled community of seasonal houses. I am indebted for this information to Robert Morris of Newsday who has carefully researched our early foundling. He has discovered that the DeMott house on Oak Island was probably the first structure in these parts, having been built by the Oysterman's Association around 1880. This group harvested oysters commercially in the Oak Island marshes and flats and sold to such New York restaurants as George Rector's, where "Oak Island Oysters" were a featured course on the menu. Indeed, prior to the turn of the century, the oysters were prime and grew in great abundance in large beds towards the north of Oak Island. Some of these beds persisted until the late 1920's and 30's when, alas!, the high powered outboard motor changed Oak Island's cherished insularity. This remains the principal reason why today's Oak Island residents so jealously guard their clam beds and fishing and crabbing areas. The adjacent flats, marshes and creeks can no longer remain productive and self sustaining with the onslaught of a motorized flotilla coming over from the "mainland". Easy access to the area by day boaters and outboard craft has long posed a threat to the Island's fragile ecology of shellfish, finfish and waterfowl, for these things do not thrive in a crowded environment of clammers, hunters and picnickers, gleaning the Bay's bounties at will. The DeMott house is still intact on Oak Island and remains in the ownership of descendants of the original family who purchased it from the Oysterman's Association. Later, other families from the Babylon, Bay Shore and Amityville areas constructed houses for vacation purposes. Most of these were essentially day shelters built as a refuge from storms and mosquitoes, and included kitchens, bedrooms and porches. Most of these people were self-sufficient as to drinking water, sanitation, transportation, etc., and were able to get along on their own without a lot of servicing help. The rest of the older houses on Oak Island carried the names of most Babylon families as well as a few from New York, i.e.; Cooper, Searles, Thorpe, Cadwalder, Foster, Woodruff, Meade, Griffith, Shipman, DeKay, Koronski, Howell, DeGarmo, L'Hommedieu, Farrington, (Captree), Prohaska, Haff, Reevland, Kiesel, O'Shea, Terriere, Van Siclen, Wilson, Cornelius, Thornton, Cummings and Lyons - to name a few. The family rowboat, propelled by the "Armstrong Method" was the hallmark of the Oak Islander long before the dawn of the outboard motor.

Building on Oak Beach proper apparently started shortly after these first Oak Island structures went up - somewhere around the turn of the century. My own house was built in 1909 by Bill Resky, who was a boat builder by trade and owned and operated Resky's Shipyard, then located Jon the eastern end of Oak Beach on what is now the Oak Beach Association property. Bill was a skilled boat builder and he preferred house building in the off season; his houses often reflecting some unusual nautical touches. The large wooden boat shed at Resky's Shipyard was painted in many colors and hues, like the Biblical "Joseph's Coat of Many Colors", as a result of the constant wiping of paint brushes during the season of boat repair. In later years,

when the Boat Channel through the marshes from Jones Beach to the Fire Island Inlet was dug, the State, with Resky's permission, moved the shipyard to a location on the Seganus Thatch, more convenient to the boat traffic on the new State Channel.

My house, built by Resky with my father's help, has been moved three times. The original site at the time of my birth would now be a spot somewhere in the middle of the Inlet, probably in a mid-channel location, under some 25-30 feet of water. Most of the existing older Oak Beach houses were built during the 1900-1920 period as seasonal summer dwellings. As has been the case with many of these houses, my house has been redesigned and refurbished to accommodate year round family living needs.

The first regularly scheduled ferry service that operated between Oak Island Beach and the Mainland was the old side-wheeler Oak Island owned and operated by Captain Oakley of Babylon. Its heyday was the 1900-1911 period and it negotiated the narrow, winding channels of the Bay through heavy beds of eelgrass and the grassy flats. I am told that many times it would get stuck on a mud flat during its crossing and could only be released through active direction of moving passengers and freight about the deck. It carried a number of 55 gallon drums of water which the one man crew would roll from side to side until the boat was released. Hard-working Ern Arnold, later to become our dependable iceman, was an expert roller of drums and could usually be depended upon to press into service some of the male passengers who felt up to the exercise.

The Oak Island was finally retired from service around 1911 or 1912; its route replaced by Captain Norman Smith's Henry Ludlow and the smaller Ripple. The two ferries served the Beach faithfully for many years. Their Babylon base was at the "Steamboat Dock" and berthed at the "Government Dock" on Oak Beach, making stops at Wilson's Dock on Oak Island and Smith's Dock, which served the eastern end of Oak Beach. On occasion, they would also respond to the waving of a prospective passenger from the sidelines. Depending on the size of the crowd, either the Ludlow or the Ripple would leave the Government Dock at Oak Beach at 7 a.m., with stops at Oak Island and the east end of Oak Beach and arrive at the Babylon Steamboat Dock at approximately 8 or 8:30 a.m. The first return trip to the Beach left at 10:30 a.m., where O'Shea's and Ferraro's Markets made faithful deliveries of meats and produce in time to "catch the 10:30 boat". Likewise, they also made deliveries to the evening boat, which left the dock at 6 p.m. Oak Beach residents who came over for the day's marketing usually did their grocery shopping between the arrival and departure of the morning ferries.

The Steamboat Dock in Babylon was indeed a busy place around ferry time and generally the Oak Beach ferries could be depended upon to leave promptly in order to maintain a reasonably ontime schedule. John Bosch's taxi service did a rushing business in those days-meeting and delivering passengers in time to meet trains and do their shopping. In addition, there was an ancient trolley car that ran from the Steamboat Dock Plaza to Babylon village and thence moving west toward West Babylon and ultimately ended up in Farmingdale via Route #109. 1 remember riding on the old trolley as far as Farmingdale; often a bouncy and bumpy ride most of the way. I am told that Fountaine Fox, a prominent cartoonist of the day, and creator of "The Toonerville Trolley" and "Toonerville Folks" cartoons, derived his early inspiration from riding on the old Babylon trolley. Its tracks started at the Steamboat Dock, running north up Fire Island Avenue and Deer Park Avenue, then turning west along "Trolley Line Road" which paralleled the L.I.R.R. tracks as far west as Lindenhurst and Amityville.

"Meeting the Boat" was an important ritual at Oak Beach and Oak Island but, unlike the motorized scurrying of the Mainland, Beach residents crowded together on the docks with their express wagons (just as people still do on Fire Island) to transport food and other belongings between dock and home. Captain Smith finally abandoned the ferry operation in the late 1920's when it became evident that the Long Island State Parkway System would bridge the bay from Jones Beach to Wantagh and Freeport. For a few years Matt Summer, proprietor of Oak Beach's east-end store, ran another ferry the good ship Avocet - between Oak Beach and Babylon. Although the "Coming of the Road" in the early 1930's was to signal the end of the ferry as the sole link with the Mainland, doubtless there are Beach residents still, my own sons included, who remember the pulse quickening anxiety of Matt's efforts to bring the twice weekly runs of the Avocet to an uneventful confluence of boat and dock, midst the screeching protest of timbers and line handlers alike.

As with Matt's Ferry, which lingered on several decades beyond its need as a commercially viable form of passage, there is much about Oak Island Beach which reflects its antecedents-from the familiar names of generations of residents to the houses themselves - which, despite the changes wrought by the automobile and the electric light, serves to infuse us all with a sense of grace and purpose which transcends that of mere "summer place." And, as I reflect on the meaning of the Beach to me and my family, it occurs to me that, as with all good stories, they must continue to be told-held, cherished, and repeated, lest they pass like the Ludlow and the Ripple into oblivion. So it is, as perhaps Oak Beach's only surviving native son (so far as I know) that I sought to explore some of the earlier facets of Oak Beach life-periods which, for ease of understanding, may be said to be defined by such cataclysmic events of man and nature as the Coming of the Road in 1933, and the Hurricane of 1938.

Oak Beach As An Island Resort

Geographically, Oak Beach was bounded on the south by the open ocean, not the Inlet as it is today. Its western boundary fronted directly on the old West Inlet and worked northward toward Muncie Island and westward toward Cedar Island, now known as Cedar Beach, a prime Babylon Town beach resort. The Cedar Island of those days had a sportsman's club situated on its dunes and was widely used by its members for picnicking, clambakes, fishing and waterfowl shooting in season. It was a landmark and could be seen for miles, either from the Ocean or the Bay. Along with the Guggenheim Pond and shooting preserve at Jones Beach (now a bird sanctuary maintained by the Town of Oyster Bay) it was probably the last of the private shore clubs before they became public lands. The Beach's northern boundary was, and is, the "Lead", separating Oak Beach from Oak Island. Its far eastern boundary was "Havermeyer's Point" -marked by the old Clock Tower. The point was named after the Havermeyers, a prominent New York and Islip family of the period whose extensive holdings and wealth derived from their Caribbean sugar interests. This section is now part of the Captree State Park, but originally was an expanse of rolling dunes interspersed with beach plums and bayberry bushes. Before the advent of the State Boat Channel, Captree was a remote and quaint little cottage community that was separated from Oak Beach by a shallow body of water that was generally unnavigable for large sail and motorboats. Captree people, like their Oak Island counterparts, valued their privacy and their pristine ways as the 20th Century closed in on us with all its "improvements".

Almost from the very beginning, Oak Beach was a special and chosen spot for writers, musicians and people from the arts. However, it was the Coast Guardsmen and their families who represented the permanent population and the Coast Guard Station was generally looked to as the seat of government authority when

such direction was needed. The old Oak Island Beach Life Saving Station, later the Coast Guard Station, was probably built around the turn of the century although we have no factual information on this. It was one of a chain of nearly identical stations that were positioned about five miles apart all along the eastern coast of the United States. About half way between all stations was a "key post" with telephone, and clock which was regularly punched at night by the shore patrol from the nearest station. A familiar nightly sight to early residents was the lone surfman on shore patrol trudging slowly to the "key post" to report any potential navigation hazards to the nearest station.

During stormy periods, many a coasting schooner in distress was saved by the Coast Guard crew dispatched by surfboat from the nearest station. The launching of the Coast Guard surfboat was always a dramatic moment in the rescue operation - especially when the seas were high and breaking on the beach. There was a rigid order to the process of launching the surfboat; the officer-in-charge of the station, called the "Captain", planned the rescue strategy and directed the crews in their respective assignments. The surfboat was usually towed from its barn to the beach on a wide-rimmed wheeled cart, pulled by the station's single horse. Manned by the 8-man crew, with the "Captain" at the steering oar and the other seven crewmen positioned in the boat, each assigned to a rowing oar, all rowed to the beat set by the captain /helmsman.

Launching of the surfboat was often a tricky and dangerous maneuver, particularly in a winter northeaster with 8-10 foot waves breaking on the beach. The captain's skilled handling of the boats was an art known only to the old-time Coast Guardsmen and commercial beach fishermen. Again, when the surfboat returned to the beach, often with rescued passengers aboard, it was up to the captain /helmsman to guide it safely through the breakers. These men were truly heroes in ¥ stormy sea situation, and their rescue work gave rise to the old Coast Guard motto: "You have to go out (when a ship is in distress) but you don't have to come back!"

Another rescue operation depended upon the use of the "Lyle Gun" and breeches buoy. The “Lyle Gun" was a heavy brass cannon used for firing the rope attached projectile to ships in distress that were grounded in the surf-an exercise in ship-to-shore rescue work intended to get the safety rope and breeches buoy between the vessel in distress and the shore based rescue post. When the rope was stretched between ship and shore, the breeches buoy was the means of transporting the ship's passengers to safety. This exercise was regularly practiced by the Coast Guard crew members, usually in the meadows to avoid danger to the cottages. The "Lyle Gun" would fire the projectile and rope over a "T" shaped pole to simulate the rescue apparatus between ship and shore. Oak Beach residents would turn out in force to watch the drill, an exciting show for all, complete with signal flags and all the trappings of rescue work.

Not surprisingly, there was always a closeness between the Coast Guard and the seasonal visitors in those days. In many cases, the Coast Guard in their off hours would help out the residents with minor construction and boat repair needs. I also remember, as a boy, that the Coast Guards would, at some point during the summer, launch the surfboat from the beach and row it in a circular course seaward-dragging a large seine net. Having completed the course and hauled in the net they would entrap thousands of fish-flounder, fluke, bluefish, weakfish, skate, sands harks and crabs; eventually every species of marine life that inhabited the shore area. These were then given to Beach residents who came in droves with their market baskets for the bountiful catch. It was a very special event of the season and reflected the close bond between the Coast Guards and other residents.

I have another memory of an early Oak Beach vignette: that of Captain Edgar Frost sailing his black sloop the Ripple around the east end of Oak Beach when the bluefish run was on, and, while sailing his sloop, hand-lining in bluefish as fast as he could handle the lines. I don't ever recall witnessing another such incident that impressed me as much; that figure of the lone boatman, steering his sloop along the edge of the breakers with tiller between his knees, pipe clenched in his teeth, sheet rope in one hand and fishing line in the other-all at the same time. When one considers all the variables of sailboat navigation in the surf such as changeable winds, waves, tides and safety priorities, this was truly a remarkable piece of seamanship. Any motorboat fishing scene would necessarily pale by comparison with such a feat. "Teeter" Frost was an Oak Beach original, - a colorful old Yankee, - wise in the ways of the sea, bay, boats and household construction, and a good man to have in your corner when help was needed of any kind. He owned several houses which were rented each summer to vacationing families from New York and New Jersey. His wife was a charming and gentle lady who knew most of the Beach people of the day and who could often be seen sitting and knitting in the large Frost bay-window overlooking the passing parade on Savannah Walk. The old Frost house was later moved to Babylon when beach erosion became severe, and is still positioned near the bay on a quaint street. Both Frosts survived to a ripe old age and I suspect that it was quite a shock having to move from their beloved Oak Beach home to Babylon in order to escape the ravages of beach erosion, as did many other people of the period.

Eventually my father, Capt. Joseph D. Meade, succeeded Frost as the officer-in-charge of the Oak Island Beach Coast Guard Station. Following his own retirement from the Service, my father, with a natural penchant for writing, wrote a column for the Babylon newspapers called "Oak Island Breezes" which chronicled life "on our droning shores" -as he put it. Under the pen name "Neptune Jr", these were written with a tongue-in-cheek twist and were often laced with some humorous poetry that related to people and events of the day. As was his style, these columns were always written with a kindly touch but never an embarrassment to any of the characters to which he referred. One such classic was entitled "The Man with the Rubber Oars", a gentle spoof on one of our Beach characters whose plight in a rowboat was witnessed by many as the ferry arrived, but who otherwise remained unnamed.

Then there was the saga of the unbelievable rapid painting of the Coast Guard surfboat. Once each summer the Coast Guard Commandant from Headquarters would, unannounced, pay an inspection visit to the local stations. On one such occasion, the Coast Guard on lookout in the Tower spotted the Commandant's boat rounding Mott's Point at the east end of Oak Island. Knowing that the surfboat had not been recently painted as scheduled, and as was expected, he immediately sounded the warning to the crew who sprang into immediate action. There was a 10-gallon pail of white paint in the boathouse and in 15 minutes the boat was painted, through the use of two brooms and the 10-gallon paint pail.

Later, the Commandant was heard to congratulate the Captain on "the fine appearance of the boat and equipment" but remarked also on "the thickness of the paint" and the “strange" condition of the two brooms. Some explanation was made that apparently satisfied his curiosity. This incident, however, reflected the resourcefulness of the old-time Coast Guard crews when faced with a crisis situation. They were used to "making do" on short notice, without an abundance of equipment and automated support.

Speaking of "making do" and short notices, it might be appropriate to comment on my own earliest association with Oak Beach. This came about in August 1911, when my parents were "in residence", my

father being Captain of the Coast Guard Station. It was planned for me to arrive at our house in Babylon, but things did not work out that way. My mother had invited several cousins from New York to spend a few days at our then, new, beach house. Fortunately one aunt was knowledgeable in matters of medical assistance at birthing and in being on the scene during such activity. I am told that things "began to happen" and my mother dispatched my father to fetch our family doctor, one Dr. Woodruff of Babylon, who also had a summer cottage on Oak Island. The rest of the story has been recounted to me several times over the years. My father legged it, crossing the meadows to the rowboat and thence to Oak Island where he found Dr. Woodruff savoring some clam chowder for lunch. Without further adieu, he grabbed Dr. Woodruff by the hand and rowed him across the Lead, then virtually towed him by the hand back through the meadows to our house.

In the meantime, I had already arrived. Dr. Woodruff pronounced the birth a resounding success and closed the ceremonies with a "well done" comment to my aunt and assorted helpers. Like the older country doctors of his period, he apparently was not overly surprised at the turn of events and from a health standpoint, everything worked out well and ended happily for all concerned. The fact that I had arrived about two weeks ahead of schedule did not seem to faze him -even though our household routine was necessarily changed considerably-to say the least. Later, the Coast Guard Station broke out the signal flags and touched off the Lyle Gun with a resounding salute.

About six weeks later, a second birth occurred at the Beach, to another of the Coast Guard families, the Albins. So far as I know these were the only two native sons born here and, with the pattern of hospitalization for birth established shortly thereafter, it is unlikely that such incidents would again occur. For me, living and growing up at Oak Beach became an orderly rotation of seasons interspersed with school periods spent on the mainland in Babylon and other such brushes with "civilization". Of course, there were no ferries running in the off-summer season and our transportation to the mainland was by Coast Guard boat-or by individually-owned sloops belonging to one or more of the Coast Guard families. These were the last days of sail and people who sailed their Great South Bay sloops -mostly old "sandbaggers", a term coined for their employment of ballast-were rapidly being converted from sail alone to motorboats.

As I have suggested, the Early Beach (or Era I as I refer to it) was known essentially as a summer resort. In the beginning it boasted five hotels -all of which were actively operated for a period of years. They were:

(1) Arnold's "Ocean View House", located at the western end of Savannah Walk. All of our boardwalks had names then - and most were named after ships that had been wrecked somewhere off our coast, i.e., "Savannah Walk", "Drumelzia Walk", etc.

(2) Muncie Island Hotel - a complete resort with a large clientele from various parts of the country. It had its own private ferry service, with the Nokomas and Senecas making two trips a day to the Mainland. Originally designed by one Dr. Muncie and his family as a sanatorium for convalescents, its emphasis was on fresh ocean air, miles of beaches, boating, swimming, fishing and related seashore activities. A thriving colony of substantial houses surrounded the hotel, many of these attracting people from all over the country, some of them widely known, and treasuring its privacy. One of these was a reigning Hollywood star of the day, Alice Brady. This lent a touch of glamour to the community and attracted other stage luminaries. Some of these houses, including the Muncie Island Hotel, were ruthlessly buried under an avalanche of mud and sand by

the huge hydraulic dredge Empire State which was dispatched by the State Park Commission to dredge the present State Boat Channel with little regard for structures and properties.

(3) Strong's Hotel - a large wooden structure located in what is now the Oak Island Association property. It was owned and run by a Bay Shore family and for some years was a thriving hostelry.

(4) Wessel's Hotel - located at the western terminus of Oak Beach, near the old West Inlet. Not a deluxe resort, Wessel's was considered a bar-stop for fishermen and fishing parties. Owned and run by a family from Lindenhurst, eventually, like the Muncie Island Hotel, it was buried beneath the sand.

(5) Van Nostrand's Hotel and Pavillion - one of Oak Beach's well-known landmarks of the day provided rooms and excellent meals (shore dinners, etc.). Owned and operated by Captain Sid Van Nostrand - a kindly old-timer from Babylon whose ancestral roots went back to the early Dutch settlers on Long Island. Captain Sid's hospitality was widely known to hordes of vacationers, fishermen and day boat visitors. In the pre-Prohibition era, "Sid's" thrived with fine food and drink and was widely known as a good sea-food house.

ERA II - THE COMING OF THE ROAD

Some of these hostelries survived for a while - but the "Coming of the Road" in 1933 signaled the end of Era I for Oak Beach - and a way of life that would never again be the same. With the Road came many new faces and personalities, mostly of a type that "discovered" the Beach from their automobiles. These were definitely a different breed from those who knew and loved the Beach as it originally existed, including a strong flavor of the do-it-yourself life, without which these hardy settlers could barely survive.

The newer breed wanted modern conveniences and did not necessarily abide the old settlers' unashamed love for the more pristine beach life. Toward the end of Era I a number of the original families began to leave the Beach for other areas of Long Island, some moving to the East End and Fire Island, others moving away for good. These people did not take kindly to the influx of automobiles, new faces and modernization.

When the West Inlet was filled in, Oak Beach lost its flavor as an island resort and became, for many, merely an extension of the Jones Beach peninsula. My father - and other Oak Beach residents - fought a long and losing battle with the State in an effort to make the State bridge the West Inlet (instead of filling it in with sand.) Alas, time has proved their opinions right for serious erosion started at Oak Beach almost from the day the West Inlet was closed.

I remember my father's argument that the West Inlet functioned as a natural spillway (as in a dam) between the Ocean and Bay waters and served as a vent for excessive tides during storms. Nevertheless, the State had made up its mind (and budget) to fill in the Inlet - not to bridge it, and much valuable beach land was washed away during this period - especially along the ocean shore of Oak Beach. Houses were moved about in a hop-scotch pattern and there were many arguments as to whose lease applied to the correct lot. Some houses were actually positioned on two or more lots, thereby causing much confusion.

When erosion reached its peak in the 1930's, my father finally persuaded Babylon Town to erect a stop-gap system of placing old wooden coffee barges "end-to" on the ocean-front beach. When grounded and filled with sand they were effective for years as jetties, if a bit unsightly, but did their job in helping to stop further

erosion and build more beach. Were it not for this move, much of the present beach shoreline would have been swept into the Inlet. They were so firmly anchored to the beach that they even survived the Great Hurricane of '38 and went on accreting sand for years to come.

Swimming in the days of the "Old Beach" was somewhat of a ritualistic practice. On warm days, most families could be found on the beach starting in late morning, usually after the arrival of the "morning ferry"; the beach and dunes being an active social center for all adults and children. Later in the afternoon, usually from 2:00 to 3:00, the community swimming and "beaching" repeated this process until the afternoon shadows lengthened and the wind became strong.

Despite the absence of lifeguards and a specified swimming zone, there were rarely incidents of either a drowning or near-drowning. Families tended to stay close and carefully monitor the children's activities, despite the trembling surf and undertow. As the Fire Island Inlet changed and gradually replaced the open ocean fronting on the south side of Oak Beach, tidal actions became more dangerous to swimmers than waves and undertow.

The center of formal social activities was, and remains, special events held by the Oak Island Beach Yacht Club, which reached gala proportions on holiday weekends -Decoration Day, July 4th and Labor Day - and which provided dancing each Saturday evening to live orchestra music. Social life at the Beach throbbed with color and enthusiasm around the old Yacht Club dances and many a beach romance budded during this era. The holiday weekends were also marked by swimming and boat races - sail and power. Rounding out the activities were the boxing matches held every so often at the Yacht Club, often pitting the talents of local amateur contestants, my father and Bill Resky among them.

Eras I and II also spanned the Prohibition period. The whiskey fleet, known as "Rum Row", anchored just beyond the 3-mile limit (and later the 12-mile limit) provided some dramatic activity for Beach people who were sometimes witness to the quick unloading of a cargo of whiskey as the rum runners attempted to evade the Coast Guard anchored in their path. The sudden roar of the rum runners' engines would signal the beginning of this maneuver and many a beach home became the final resting point for a case of "made-on-the boat" scotch or rum. Official Washington did not really have its heart in the enforcement of the Volstead Act when we observe that the Coast Guard was pitted against the rum runners' fleets of high powered sea skiffs with only slow, hand rowed surfboats anchored in the Inlet Channels.

There were some amusing scenes that evolved from the rum running days. A prominent Bible-quoting "dry" resident of the day was spotted walking along the shore, carefully cradling a bottle of rum row scotch under her arm while, at the same time, trying to disguise the contents of the package. The ladies of the church and prayer society never really forgave such an incident and reputations were summarily reversed on such occasions. Some of the prominent "drys" of the day even had quite well stocked cellars, comparable with some of the thriving New York "speakeasies" of the period; a factor that would invariably make its way around in local news exchanges.

Eras I and II were marked by the existence of invaluable life support systems which should not go unmentioned here. For example, outdoor plumbing was serviced by Willie Seamen as he made his midnight rounds with his "covered wagon" - a long two-wheeled cart that contained several cans which were carefully emptied at some mysterious "Burying Ground" up west. No one ever made much of an effort to

discover just where Willie buried his treasure, but as Willie described it, this was a section where bushes and grasses grew in profusion for years to come. Once in a while, Willie's wagon would go off the boardwalk with rather disastrous results for those living near the scene. Generally it took several days for the spill to be corrected and the aroma to dissipate.

Oil was supplied to fuel the lamps and stoves of Oak Island Beach by John DeGarmo - known locally as "John D. - the oil -man" and delivered from a two-wheeled cart with five gallon cans for ease of handling. "John D.", his inverted corn-cob pipe clenched in his teeth, was a familiar sight as he slowly threaded his way along the boardwalks with only inches to spare on each side of his cart wheels. I do not ever recall seeing his wagon go off the boardwalk.

The other major element in our life support system was the ice delivery process. It was started by John Arnold running his converted sloop the Fat Ann between Babylon and Oak Beach on specified days. This was succeeded by a larger and more powerful ice boat called the Dusky Dora with John's son Ernest Arnold as the skipper and deliverer of chunks of ice. After a prolonged hot spell, Ern's labors were in heavy demand as housewives waved for ice deliveries from their back porches and called frantically for attention. Somehow or other Ern Arnold always seemed to come through in time to save the contents of the icebox, although there was many an anxious moment between the arrival of the Dusky Dora and delivery of a fifty pound ice chunk to the icebox of the day.

As "Neptune Jr." put it, the loss of ice during a hot spell was more attributable to the "chipping away" than it was to the "melting away"! Automation came to the Beach in the form of Servel refrigerators, fired by either propane gas or kerosene, which hastened the departure of the ice¬ boat deliveries. There is still a strong demand for Servel refrigerators on Oak Island.

John Tooker, "Poet Laureate of Captree", was our fish supply man and was Oak Beach's only casualty of the 1938 Hurricane. His body was found entwined in the double anchor ropes of his sailboat. It was presumed that, as the storm increased, he tried to secure the boat with extra lines and became tangled in them during the process. John is gone but not forgotten for his poems are published in a book that is available at the Babylon Public Library. (Also see L. I. Forum issue of Sept. 1977.)

In reflecting on some of our earlier Beach days, one becomes aware that all needs were somehow met by hard working and enterprising people like Capt. Smith, John and Ern Arnold, Willie Seamen, "John D.", Johnny Tooker and other self starting entrepreneurs. They were our friends and lifeline to civilization and seldom let us down when help was needed. Oak Beach life thrived on their willingness to provide a much needed service.

In the earlier Beach environment crisis situations were infrequent and usually not of a serious nature. For example, grass fires have always posed a threat to the cottages but, for the most part, they were quickly extinguished by a responsive army of men, women and children using shovels, brooms and water buckets with gusto, concentrating their efforts on the nearest danger.

Some incidents were humorous to behold and were quickly forgotten. I recall once passing the house of an excited lady calling for help from some unseen threat. Upon investigation, I was met at her front porch screen door by a huge blue claw crab, its pincers extended in the "on guard!" position. The poor lady, clad in

a house dress and sneakers, was fighting off a whole bunch of crabs with a broom. In addition, an entire basket of eels had been spilled on the kitchen floor and their slimy writhing mass looked like a visitation from the Medusa. Using available pots and pans, I did the best I could to help clean up the mess of animated seafood. It had been Johnny Tooker's fish delivery day and somehow the containers for the crabs and eels had been upended, but the crisis was soon over and peace restored to the household.

THE HURRICANE OF '38

Era II with all the newcomers and some of the old-timers ended abruptly with the shattering hurricane on September 21, 1938. The destruction wrought by the great storm left the Beach a shambles of smashed houses, overturned boardwalks and general ruin. The result was disbelief and shock on the part of residents, most of whom had gone home after Labor Day and were not in residence when havoc struck. Following the storm, many tourists and curiosity seekers came to buy up what they could from the wreckage of smashed houses. Some people bought houses, or parts of houses, for a pittance.

Not surprisingly, there were some amusing stories that came out of the mayhem wrought by the Hurricane. One eager opportunist made the mistake of inviting in a resident Coast Guardsman to see his half completed cottage. At one point the Coast Guardsman cried out: "Hey, you've got my wainscoting lining your dining room!" The man well knew his lumber and would not be denied, although an unresolved and long-standing argument prevailed.

After the Hurricane many of the "old-guard" left the Beach for good, selling what they could or passing the remaining possessions on to their friends and relatives. Despite the condition of many of the cottages, this "newer breed" looked for more refinements in the form of electric lights, telephone service and modern plumbing and cooking equipment.

Many of us who have spanned all three eras can become nostalgic about the "old days", i.e., "the soft glow of kerosene lamps lighting the houses at night", "meeting the boat for supplies", "country living", etc., but I must confess that few of us would be willing to go back to the old ways of living at the Beach now that most of us have the conveniences for comfortable living the year round.

FROM SAIL TO POWER

At this point, it might be in order to chronicle the further development of motorized boats and engines. The sharp putt-putt of single and double-cylinder Bridgeport engines could be menacingly heard punctuating the air in the Lead and Bay as the new motorized boat age dawned at Oak Beach. Slow as these boats were, they were dependable and easy to repair when necessary. I remember that the "make-and-break" spring mechanism on the old "Bridgeport one-lunger" could be replaced and fixed, when necessary, through the use of a safety pin - which would permit the engine to run smoothly for days. The engines were cranked by hand and turned a large 2-blade propeller at some 350-400 rpm. They were generally dependable under all circumstances of use -including digging their own channels to get off a mud flat or bed of eelgrass.

The late 1920's and early 1930's saw the converted automobile engine block gradually replace the old "putt-putt one-lungers" as newly designed marine motors came on the market. These were essentially

automotive-type blocks which the manufacturers designed from scratch for motorboats and higher speeds in general. One recalls the names Kermath, Palmer, Victor and Hall Scott.

I remember a notable challenge race between two speedboats generally considered the fastest in \the area. One was the Irene, owned and raced by Chester Ketcham, a red painted speedboat with a displacement-type hull and the Blackbird, belonging to Fowler Ward of the Oak Beach Association and Babylon. When the final match up was made, on a July 4th weekend, the race was hardly a contest - the Blackbird running away from the Irene on the course that extended from the Oak Island Yacht Club (now the Kappenberg house) to Mott's Point on Oak Island. The long, narrow displacement hull of the Irene was no match for the V-bottom sleekness of the Blackbird as it skipped over the waves between Oak Beach and Oak Island running away. I think that the handsome Blackbird remained the speed queen of the Bay, at least until the beginning of the mass-produce Chris-Craft runabout era in the early 1930's. These boats were not built for rough water, only for speed and show in calm waters.

It remained for the enterprising rumrunners to develop fast, seaworthy boats that could negotiate choppy waters at high speeds. The classic Seabright Dory, a rocket shaped clinker-built fishing dory, could be landed in the surf if necessary but could not accommodate high horsepower. Starting with this early prototype, the bootleggers took the basic dory design and flattened the bottom lines adding a square stern. Powered by the Liberty water-cooled engines from the World War I Army training planes, these skiffs could get up on a plane, and in all kinds of weather, carried a substantial payload of people or "goods".

On quiet, moonlit evenings of any given summer in the 1920's, the night air was often punctuated by the sudden roar of a Liberty motor being accelerated to outrun the Coast Guard. In fact, it became embarrassing to most skiff owners of the day to speed across the water at too rapid a speed, since the sight fairly shrieked with the charge "Rumrunner!" However, the old square-stern rumrunner dories were an important step in the genesis of our modern sporty sea skiffs.

The 1930's were essentially the last years in which water transportation turned on sail alone. Sailing was to become purely a sport rather than a means of getting from here to there and motorboats became the order of the day, both for commerce and pleasure. While numerous improvements in motorboat power and design evolved in reaction to Prohibition, other improvements developed in response to more natural problems in our immediate vicinity. As the bays became choked with eelgrass and seaweed, the "S" shaped weedless propeller was developed for boats to successfully cross the Bay. The plague of eelgrass that descended on the entire Bay area sometime in the late 1930's remains as one of the unexplained phenomena of nature. I have heard many opinions as to its origins and disappearance but none of them were official pronouncements by responsible marine agencies of the government.

Good as the eelgrass was for shellfish, crabs and fish life, I doubt that any of us would like to see it return to these waters. Who can forget the sight of the Bay, clogged and choked from shore to shore with enormous beds of eelgrass and seaweed? It became necessary for the ferries to reverse their engines two or three times during a crossing to clear their wheels. This chapter in the life of the Great South Bay was a dramatic example of Nature gone awry, for a period, with no known cure. Eventually, Nature found its own cure when the eelgrass disappeared as quickly and mysteriously as it came. And following suit, the higher rpm 3 and 4 bladed propellers replaced the old "S" shaped two-bladed "weedless wheels" which did not provide enough

speed for ferries and pleasure boats in general. Today, there are a few isolated patches of grass, but no vast impenetrable beds such as then existed.

EPILOGUE

We are now well into Era III of Oak Beach life. I, for one, strongly favor our present pattern of life even with all of the aggravation generated by aggressive commercial interests with little or no sensitivity to the traditionally family oriented character of Oak Beach. Today, our problems - pollution, noise, cars, noisy visitors, - seems to be more of a man-made nature and steps are now being finally pursued to blunt the intrusion of greedy commercial interests. The Town seems to make only fainthearted efforts to enforce its own laws and regulations but this is a condition that has long prevailed. In the old days of Era I and II, innkeepers and commercial interests voluntarily displayed a higher sense of responsibility to the community than do such people today, where the "quick buck" seems to be the measurement of success. Additionally, lacking an active Coast Guard and Crew today leaves an empty space in Beach life, for these were always the central bodies of law and order for residents of the Beach. The privacy and stability of Oak Beach has always been threatened not only by the caprice of sea and storms, but political forces as well. The Corps of Engineers has long been the principal target of residents' complaints as their mammoth "boondoggle" efforts to stabilize the Inlet Channels and dredge the sandbars have failed to stop the constant erosion of the shoreline. The Corps will deny any blame for our erosion problems, but people who have long lived here know better: they have eyes and good memories. At times it would almost seem that a callous Bureaucracy has been Oak Beach's principal enemy, whether that has been represented by the Town, the State or the Corps of Engineers. These institutions have exercised harsh and unwanted powers over the Beach residents to give in to their own demands - which, at times, have been unyielding and of a "one-way-street" nature. The pattern has always been "what big government wants - it gets (big government being either the federal, state or town controlled structure.)

This winds down a long love affair that I have had with Oak Beach, as the land of my origins, and still my present home. As time goes on I see much evidence that many of our newcomers become increasingly attached to our beaches swimming, boating, sunsets, etc., and these sentiments foreshadow a return to things that reflect the early charms of the "good old Beach" days. Two examples would be the emergence of community projects through the formation of the oak Beach Civic Association, as well as the frequent socials sponsored by the Oak Island Beach Yacht Club.

It must be clearly recognized that certain people, mostly old timers like Don Hendricks and Mary McGeveran have reintroduced and rekindled much of the old Oak Beach spirit and tradition into our present mode of living. So much of this has been a labor of love for Beach people, leading the community projects back to the spirit of yesteryear.

Under the shadow of a congested metropolitan New York, where, but Oak Beach are the structures so artfully positioned and scaled to the human dimension that its charm is enhanced by the random informality of the community's unstructured pattern? May we all keep the faith and pass along the torch to our juniors and followers. We still have our Bay, Inlet and Ocean, our dunes and swimming and walking beaches, our sunsets and starry skies. Let us strive to maintain these blessings, unhampered by either local commercial greed or oppressive municipal edict.

E.D. Meade

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