

VILLAGE VIEW

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Time was, nobody on Cape Cod expected to see tourists start arriving until the weekend before the 4th of July. That was when schools let out after the middle of June and when Route 3 was a two-lane highway winding along the south shore from Boston through Quincy and Weymouth on down to Kingston. That was when traffic crept and poked along Plymouth's Main Street on warm summer days at a snail's pace before ascending and descending the hills of Manomet, skirted the Cedarville bogs and eventually arrived on Cape Cod.

Time was, Easter weekend heralded spring, but not a flicker of interest was shown by city-dwellers in the still-drab hillsides and shuttered shops along the byways of the Cape. That was when Bostonians and New Yorkers paraded their spring finery in their own neighborhoods and never dreamed of heading for a weekend sojourn at the seaside. That was when the sleepy little villages fringing Buzzards and Cape Cod Bays, and those lace-edging Vineyard and Nantucket Sounds, this time of year had hardly begun to stir from winter hibernation.

Time was, the only folks around to hear peepers shrilling in swampy places were native Cape Codders, and only the families of those who planted spring bulbs in the fall enjoyed their blossoms in April. That was when even the glory of the rose season passed its peak before lines of cars began streaming over what was, early on, a low narrow drawbridge spanning the Cape Cod Canal.

And even later, after the completion in the mid-30s of the two suspension bridges that connected the Cape to the mainland, those bridges were but lightly traveled until Independence Day weekend.

Things changed when a new Route 3 plunged its double barrel through Plymouth County woods. That's when traffic began picking up by Memorial Day weekend. Easter and Patriot's Day, though, brought few visitors to our shores; only the returning robins and redwings, the chickadees calling "phee-bee" and the lilacs bursting into leaf after crocuses had been superseded by hyacinths, forecast the coming summer.

Time was. Times have changed again. Our villages, even in winter, can't be called sleepy anymore. And this year, with Easter back-to-back in a do-si-do with Patriot's Day (not to mention a full moon), the Cape witnessed the opening of the tourist season at an earlier date than ever before. By Friday afternoon, the east-bound lanes of roads approaching the Canal were packed solid; the Mid-Cape highway and Route 28 to Falmouth were loaded with traffic. People in the few cars bound off-Cape must have felt they were swimming against the tide.

Hyannis was as busy as it usually is on a sunny summer's day (when everyone in his right mind either goes to the beach or stays away from the place if at all possible); and at motels, No Vacancy signs were winking on well before dark along both sides of Route 28.

Auto license tags announced many of our visitors had come from other than in-state areas. Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York and New Jersey plates were common sights. Some hardy travelers had even come from Pennsylvania to spend Easter here.

It's with mixed feelings we welcome the first flush of tourists. It's been a long fierce winter, and these visitors herald the opening of the coming summer season. We're relieved to see them and glad to put winter behind us once again.

But, with the Cape's growth in year-round population (over the past twenty years it's doubled), our roads are barely adequate at "rush hours" to handle normal local traffic even in winter. As we head into another summer, we wonder how we'll manage going to and from work, doing necessary errands, getting to doctor and dentist appointments on time, finding places to park within walking-distance of bank, post office, library, and paper store. Still, it's nice to know there are lots of people, these days, who want to come down-Cape well before beaches are manned, boats are in the water, or even before the leafing out of the trees.

Some come, of course, to play golf. And it's fine golfing

weather, albeit a tad windy. But not all who come are golfers; some come to the Cape, this season, because they're as sick of winter as we are, and although winter on the Cape is no picnic, winter in cities is worse. They're ready for a change of scene, the feeling of more space, the sight of blue water sparkling with sunshine, a calm pond under a blue sky, an open field greening on the edges, a woodland path where spring wildflowers bloom, and the sound of the pinkletinks making a racket in an otherwise still-silent evening.

And they found them all if they looked and listened. Despite the suburban character the Cape has now attained, those charms remain. Whoever walked an old woods road might have found the Mayflower in bloom; if it went unnoticed, insignificant as it is, the source of its sweet fragrance might have been a curiosity. Whoever scuffled through old brown leaves, and was lucky, might have come upon lovely Bloodroot with its snowy petals encircling a golden eye. Under a stand of pines or on a hillside overlooking a still pond, whoever looked might easily have found growing a patch of wild Lily of the Valley.

Along the Cape's northside, the infant leaflets of every maple tree had started to unfurl, forsythia was in full flower, and magnolia trees were blooming alongside the marshes. Golden willow branches tossed in the breeze, and on south-facing hillsides a few blossoms of shad bush opened in the warmth of April's sun. Surely, if our visitors looked closely, they noticed every tree and shrub bore swollen buds, each containing its treasure of May's flowers and summer's foliage.

At least, I hope they noticed. Those I saw, however, were doing things they could have done as easily without making the trip from home-- strolling paved sidewalks, roaming between racks of goods for sale, peering in display windows, and appearing somewhat aimless and slightly dissatisfied.

In the woodland where I wandered, no person came the other way. In the wetland, I found sphagnum moss brightly green on the banks of a tiny stream, but no sign of human presence. The narrow trail that passed a long-forgotten and near-rotted woodpile was marked with young wild cherry trees, slender, ruddy, smooth and narrow as whips; no people. Only the gentle west wind, the shafting sunbeams, the trickling stream, and the call of mating birds accompanied me.

Nothing stops their coming, these crowds from mainland cities and towns lying to the south, the north, and the west of us. Not the Cape's late spring, not the traffic, not the price of gasoline and motel accommodations. They arrive like the starlings and flock to the most crowded places they can find: the paved streets, the shops, the restaurants-- all places similar to those they drove miles to escape.

We are glad to see them. It is good for our economy. It has been a rough winter. Their appearance, like that of other spring-signs, means summer will soon be here. Along with our gladness there's sadness, as well. We wish they might learn to share the simple pleasures of our vibrant vernal season, to appreciate its unfolding, to see some of the miraculous activity going on around them while they, as though blind and deaf, seek commercial entertainment.

Our spring that emerges so tardily and shyly isn't wasted on native sons and daughters; but it goes about its lovely business unnoticed by our city cousins who've come all that way, but when they find themselves surrounded by it, don't know it's happening. And that's sad.