

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Rural seaside charm, according to the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce, evokes the elusive indescribable aura that draws to our peninsula each year visitors by the thousands.

And yet, wherever on Cape Cod we find visitors flocking in uncountable numbers, there remains practically no vestige of rural seaside charm.

Most seaside areas open to visiting tourists resemble their counterparts in urban areas; there's nothing rural about them. On the contrary, they're commercialized to within a millimeter of the zoning and sign-code restrictions.

Well within the memory of living Cape Codders rural seaside charm was unavoidable in every village from Sagamore to Provincetown, around the backside of the Cape down to Orleans, all along the south shore to Falmouth and up the bay to Bourne.

Not so, today. Still, the hordes keep coming, descending the double-barreled highways leading to the Cape Cod Canal and the bridges, and converging upon the centers of commerce rather than spreading out and seeking the remaining poke-holes of rural or seaside charm.

Do any still exist? Indeed they do. You'll find them if you noodle around the back streets of any of Barnstable County's fifteen towns. There's rural charm quite undisturbed in Bourne, Sandwich, Falmouth, Mashpee, and Barnstable.

Below the mid-Cape, there's plenty of rural and seaside charm, albeit not promising much excitement, in Yarmouth, Dennis, Harwich, Brewster, Orleans and Chatham.

Further down-Cape, there's both rural and seaside charm to be found in Eastham, Wellfleet, Truro, and even in Provincetown. In these four towns, it's difficult to find seaside or rural charm that doesn't combine the two, since there the lower-Cape narrows to but a few miles in width.

For the tourist, of course, the trick is to find rural seaside charm replete with motels, restaurants, gas stations, evening entertainment, boat ramps, public beaches and camper parks.

And where these amenities are provided, any semblance of charm has given way to gross commercialism. Is charm to be found amongst gas stations, rows of motels, gift shops and bar rooms?

Is there a public beach parking lot that's not paved, fenced and gated, marked off and patrolled? Do they charm? Hardly.

There once were beaches where anyone could go at will, but there were no parking lots for the hundreds of cars that today would make a tie-up to shame the Sunday afternoon exodus on Routes 3 and 28.

Sandy Neck was a perfect example of rural seaside charm. It was open to all who would make the effort to reach the beach. There was no charge. There was no gateman; not even a gate. If you went to the beach, you left your car at the end of the dirt road, or as near the end as you could find a shoulder to park.

Burdened with beach gear, extra shoes, portable cookstove, hotdogs and rolls, tonic, and whatever other paraphernalia you considered indispensable to your journey, you set out across the dunes, walking the quarter-mile through ankle-deep sand. If you forgot something, you did without it.

After what seemed a long long walk, the blue waters of Cape Cod Bay hove into view between two dune-faces, and you were surrounded by and immersed in seaside charm. So, also, were the half-dozen other groups of hardy adventurers who had made the trek.

You picked a spot, half-way between the foot of the dunes and the water's edge, far from other people, and spread your blanket.

Perishables were piled carefully in the shadow of one of the great hills of sand that seemed to curl over, at the top, like a breaking wave. The shade there protected them from the blazing sun. The stove, an ornery metal contraption resembling a folding luggage rack, was set up to the leeward of the blanket, and the first order of business was searching and gathering driftwood for the fire.

In those days, the lure of seaside charm wasn't so strong and widespread among visitors to the Cape that driftwood couldn't be found readily. Once fuel was collected, you were free to roam the dunes, wander up the beach and, as the tide receded, play on the flats that rose from the sea lifting to view a treasuretrove of star fish, clams, sea urchins, and sand dollars, all of which made for fine collecting.

The hours sped, the sun dropped in the western sky, the picnic was cooked and eaten; all remaining litter was repacked and carried out as you trudged again through the soft sands, back to the car in the gathering dusk.

That was seaside charm. After such a day's excursion, the plodding hike through the sand, the hours of running up and down the beach, after all the weiners, pop, and toasted marshmallows you could eat, there was no desire for night life. All anyone wanted was to rinse the fine grit off his feet and fall, exhausted, into bed.

Then came progress. It came in the shape of a threat that if we, the people of Barnstabletown who owned Sandy Neck Beach, didn't develop it and make it accessible to the public, the state would appropriate it and the Commonwealth, in its wisdom, would do it for us and everyone else in Massachusetts.

In Town Meeting assembled the arguments, twisted and turned, pro and con, yea and nay. In the end, the town voted to develop Sandy Neck, build a paved road to the edge of the dunes, a parking lot, a gate to be manned during the summer, and that a charge should be made to any non-resident of the town.

It was done. Over the years, the parking lot was enlarged. A comfort station was built. Rural seaside charm went by the board. Now there's a mobile refreshment stand parked in the lot where the beach visitors buy their hot dogs, tonic, sunlotion, icecream. They bring their own beer. And so forth.

On a recent Sunday afternoon we drove to Sandy Neck; mid-spring, it was, with the pussywillows fattening and the shad bush glowing like a bride in the woodland.

There were town employees at the gate; there were cars parked along the narrow pavement leading to the beach although the parking lot was but half-full. There were a surprising number of people, most of them wandering around on the paved surfaces, drinking from bottles.

Scattered about the parking lot were more bottles; most were beer bottles. The considerable trash and litter blowing about was, to put it mildly, unattractive. In some of the neatly white-lined parking places, bottles stood upright where they had been left. Most were empties; some were shattered, some awaited an unsuspecting tire. Seaside charm... We picked up a dozen or more bottles, and carried them home as of yore. It was the only reminder of the well-remembered days of seaside charm at Sandy Neck.

Now there's talk at Town Hall about Hathaway's Pond being a good site for a camper park. Ride over to Hathaway's Pond; please do. It's just off Phinney's Lane, north of Route 132, on the road to Barnstable Village. Drive in, enjoy the quiet peace of the place. That's rural charm.

Picture it, if you can, as a camper park. Watch the gentle play of light and shadow, cloud and sunshine, wind and calm on the water and through the woodland. It's yours; you, the voters of Barnstabletown, purchased most of it with your tax dollars.

Do we need the comparatively few extra dollars campers might bring to the coffers of those who peddle entertainment? Is rural seaside charm of any value to you? Is Hathaway's Pond where you want to see a camper park?

It will need toilets, shower-rooms and a laundry. It will need a store. It will need electrical and water hook-ups. It will need a sewage dumping area.

What do we need? A camp site? Or to maintain Hathaway's Pond just as it is? Another commercial center? Or this small pocket of stillness, this gentle place, this vestige of rural charm?

There's not a lot of it left.