

VILLAGE VIEW

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You'll probably find it hard to believe—and so do I considering the unending stream of visitors that floods across the canal bridges year after year, arriving earlier every spring and continuing later into every fall—that there could still be some folks who've never come to Cape Cod.

Meeting such a one, last winter, I found myself stumbling over my own words, almost incoherent, when she asked me, "What is Cape Cod like?"

Well, what is Cape Cod like? Doesn't the answer to a question like that depend on a lot of variables?

Does the questioner mean in springtime when the shrubs and bulbs are in flower, and all the new leaves are unfurling, and when such cold rains follow the occasional peeks of sun that we ask each other, "Will summer ever come?"

Or in summer when we welcome the cooling southwest breezes off Vineyard Sound, and traffic and parking problems make every errand a challenge like playing musical chairs? Or in autumn when trees turn crimson, orange, and gold, and cranberry bogs stretch brick red sheets over acres of lowland, and the very air is crisp as an apple? Or in winter when that season finally steals across Cape Cod Bay and down the peninsula to strip all but the evergreens of color and leave us with monochromatic landscapes?

Should I speak of Hyannis, Orleans, Falmouth, or Provincetown? Or Cotuit, Centerville, or Chatham? Truro, perhaps, or Sandwich? Or Barnstable village? Monument Beach or Craigville Beach? Dennis, Harwich, Bourne, Brewster?

Does the questioner mean, "Tell me about the terrain," or "How's the fishing?" It might be that the remarkable variety of shopping opportunities would intrigue this lady; or maybe the area's historic background. Or golf. Or bicycling and hiking trails. The National Seashore Park? Or culture: art, music, drama, jazz, crafts, band concerts, libraries and museums . . .

Perhaps I could best describe Cape Cod by telling about its people. But should I start with Cape Codders, native-born? Or relate how the population has changed in four decades with unprecedented growth in numbers of retired couples . . . matched by, if not exceeded by, thousands of young families now permanent residents of this narrow sandy spit, come to serve summer tourists, retirement communities, and scattered remnants of older families that are, still, to be found?

Or maybe I could tell about a little family of birds in Osterville.

As most of you who are familiar with the village know, the Daniel block begins at the foot of Wianno Avenue, a street stretching a country-mile from the heart of the village to Wianno Head where it ends at the beachfront. Half-a-dozen or so local businesses occupy the Daniel block, a row of stores at street level. Above are offices and storage rooms. Below are cellars and more storage space.

At regular intervals, along the front length of the building, stand round wooden columns supporting a wide overhead roof that provides shade to the storefronts from the morning sun and shelter to window-shoppers using the broad sidewalk in rainy weather.

And, in summer, at the leading edge of the roof, and spaced evenly between each of the columns, hang baskets of multi-colored flowers. Visitors to Holland see similar flower baskets hanging and blooming in Amsterdam.

Every morning Bill Thomas, who works at one of the shops, brings out a short stepladder and several pitchersful of water. He mounts the ladder, lifts down the baskets, and waters the flowers, finishing with a final pitcherful for the windowbox that tops the fence at the end of the block.

Bill likes escaping the store for a little while, is happy to be outside in the fresh air; he enjoys his flower-watering chore. This summer he's enjoyed it more than ever before. For special reasons.

Early in June storekeepers in the block, watching Bill Thomas at his watering, noticed he paused longer at one basket than at any of the rest. Before unhooking the basket from the eyelet screwed to the underside of the roof, he rapped the basket's base gently and spoke to, apparently, the plants it contained. At first nobody thought much about it, but Bill's pause, his rap, and the conversations continued, day after day, until curiosity got the better of one of the shop workers.

"Bill, are you talking to those plants?" she asked from her doorway.

"Oh, no. I'm talking to the bird, telling her to wake up, that I'm here to water her garden."

"Bird? What bird, Bill?"

"Come see. There's a nest in this basket, built right down under the foliage where no one but me would ever notice. And the mother bird has laid her eggs in the nest. She's setting them." He lowered the basket to eye level.

There, hidden carefully in the middle of a miniature garden, a garden no larger than a foot in diameter, was tucked a neat cozy nest containing five small eggs. Bill watered the plants tenderly, directing the stream well away from the nest. He rehung the basket then, and moved along to the next.

Every day, Bill watered the plants. Every day, the mother bird flew when he rapped on the base of her aerie and warned, "Wake up, little bird." Every day, as soon as he replaced the basket, she returned to her nest.

Within two to three weeks, the baby birds hatched. All day the mother foraged. All day the babies awaited her return flights, greeting her with chirping demands for food.

To Bill, she looked like a sparrow but, as the babies fledged, he noticed one of the five was growing red breast feathers. Finches, he decided after discussing possibilities with bird-watcher friends. The mother bird came and went in a never-ending cycle of flight, collection, flight, delivery. The babies, and their appetites, grew.

One day, hardly two weeks after hatching, only two little birds remained in the nest. Three had flown. Next day, the nest was empty. With a week yet to go 'til the Fourth of July, all that remained were a few tiny fluffy feathers.

Bill continues his daily waterings. The nest is undisturbed. The mother finch, he's been told, may return and lay another clutch of eggs, once her first brood is safely launched and feeding for itself.

Up and down the Daniel block, shopkeepers and workers, alike, are hoping to hear soon that another four or five eggs have appeared in the snug nest.

That's what Cape Cod is like.