

Winter is a time for walking on the beach. Sometimes it is cold and windy, but the island is quiet this season of the year, so a stroll along the water's edge is almost always an opportunity for solitude and reflection.

Winter Beach



Earlier this month, as I climbed across the dunes I was treated to a pod of dolphins not many yards off-shore. Close to two dozen of these intriguing mammals were swimming leisurely south along the beach.

As I watched the dolphins move methodically away from my vantage point thousands of black cormorants flew overhead, intent on warmer weather to the south. One after another flock (some with scores of birds moving in fluid formation, others numbering only a dozen or fewer) passed by. Many were flapping their wings just inches above the water while an equal number flew 50, 60 or more feet above my head.

I was reminded of the diversity of life on this fascinating planet. I was equally aware of my reasons for choosing to live here, on Ocracoke Island. My rich family history plays an important role, to be sure, as does the rewarding sense of community that we enjoy. But the closeness to nature and her constant reminders of a simplified life almost always encourage a tranquil sense of awe and appreciation.

As I followed the cormorants another thought entered my head as well, and a broad smile came over my face. I was remembering reading about an incident that occurred on Ocracoke beach in February, 1887. I knew about this humorous encounter because Ellen Marie Cloud had compiled numerous abstracts from miscellaneous newspapers that were published in Beaufort, NC between 1876 & 1893. Following is this account as recorded in "The Weekly Record" Beaufort, NC, Thursday, February 10, 1887:

"Messers Dan Williams and Ben Neal while patrolling the beach at Ocracoke during a stormy night last week were compelled to lie down to escape injury from a tremendous flock of geese making their way down the Banks. In the meantime Mr. Williams, while lying flat on his back, caught four of the geese alive. This story seems almost incredible, but it is nevertheless true."

If you've ever seen such a huge flock of birds you would be a believer, as I now am!

This is also the time of year for whale sightings on Ocracoke. Many of you may not be aware that whaling was an activity engaged in by some of our early Outer Banks settlers. In fact, "Try Yard Creek" (one of the remnants of seven old inlets on Ocracoke) was named for the facility located nearby for the "trying" or rendering of whale oil from blubber.

Whales today are rare, of course, especially close to shore, but most local reports of these majestic creatures occur in late November or early December. In all the time I have walked this beach, especially in the off-season, I always keep my eyes open for whales. I was rewarded only once, however, two years ago.

Just days after Thanksgiving, 1998, I was sitting on a dune enjoying a cool but pleasant early afternoon quiet time. Suddenly, just beyond the breakers, a massive black form broke the surface of the water. Immediately I stood up for a better look as the creature disappeared from view. It was moving southward parallel with the shoreline so I walked along, in that direction. In short order I caught another glimpse of the whale's enormous back as it gently rolled along, apparently feeding in the nearby waters.

This leviathan was in no hurry. I could easily keep up with its pace as it surfaced several more times just off-shore. Of course, I was hoping to see it breach or blow, but it never even treated me to a view of its head or flukes. Eventually it simply disappeared, presumably headed back to the open sea. Nevertheless I felt blessed to be visited by such a massive, yet graceful, creature. Ocracoke is often full of surprises....almost always pleasant ones!

Of course, the island is quiet this time of year. But the winter darkness is softened by numerous holiday decorations.

Vince & Sue O'Neal's House



In addition the school as well as the Methodist & Assembly of God churches sponsor Christmas programs for the community. We have also come to look forward to the wassail party that is hosted by the Ocracoke Preservation Society. An open house at the museum is combined with hot cider, homemade cookies, chamber music and the lighting of the

community Christmas tree. It is rumored that Santa might even show up!

We are also all looking forward to the annual community pot luck and party at “Jimmy’s Garage.” Jimmy and Linda and Jamie move all the cars and engine parts out of the way, clean everything up spic & span, and bring in picnic tables from all over the village. Everyone brings a covered dish to share and after supper the music and dancing begins. Everyone is sure to have a rousing good time again this December 14.

All of us at Village Craftsmen wish you sincere holiday greetings! May the rest of 2000 be filled with joyful celebrations, delicious food, close friends, loving family and time for rest and relaxation.

Philip, Lawton, Dallie, Jude, Travis, Amy & Julie