

These past two weeks have been delightful. Saturday, Feb 26 was the perfect beach day-warm, sunny and calm. It was so perfect I just had to take a dip. When I jumped in I remembered it was February! But my self-imposed rule is to dive completely under the waves at least three times before I can “count” it as really swimming. It was cold some but as soon as I stepped out of the surf I just enjoyed letting the sun dry me off.

A month ago I mentioned the Ocracoke term “buck” which is used for “pal” or “friend.” I am told that the 18th century English meaning of the term, “dashing fellow,” is probably related to the Old Norse word “bokki” designating a male colleague and that it came into use in the English language in the 14th century with the original meaning of “fellow.” O-cockers have retained the essential meaning of this unusual word for over 250 years. To my knowledge, Ocracoke is the only place in the US where this term has survived.

Recently I had a note from a friend inquiring about the address of another Island resident. I didn't know the person's PO Box number so I told him just to address the letter to her at Ocracoke, NC 27960. The Post Office clerks know everyone who lives here, I explained (I didn't tell him that he didn't even need a last name since she has an uncommon first name!). I received this e-mail response: “After living this crazy beat-the-clock crowded New York mile a minute, it is difficult to grasp this notion of writing a person's name and town on an envelope without a PO Box and/or street and having that letter delivered. □ Once again a reminder of why exactly Ocracoke is one of the good earth's special places.” I couldn't agree more!

I walk on the beach nearly every day. In addition to the many dolphins around this time of year, pelicans are often gliding gracefully over the surf, one wingtip only a fraction of an inch in front of a breaking wave. Sanderlings are always a treat to see as they skitter back and forth playing tag with the incoming waves. Willets winter here as well and are particularly striking when they take to flight because of their distinctive black-and-white color pattern. Lately, American Bitterns have been fairly common feeding in the low, marshy areas alongside the highway.

On Friday I was lucky enough to find this beautiful Scotch Bonnet that had just washed up in the incoming tide.



The Scotch Bonnet is the official North Carolina Seashell and, although I find them occasionally, especially after storms and hurricanes, it is always a delight to see one (especially a shell as beautiful as this one) sitting serenely at the water's edge.

In our last installment I mentioned Joe Bell who is buried in "Uncle Dan's and Aunt Sabra's" yard. Joe Bell moved to Ocracoke from Washington, NC sometime near the turn of the last century. According to the story told on the island, he came here to mend a broken heart. It was said that he never fully recovered after an unsuccessful romance. Although he resettled here, many miles from home across the Pamlico Sound (at that time only the mail boat made regular daily trips to the mainland), he never forgot the woman he loved.

In his yard, not far from where he is buried, Joe Bell planted small red and yellow flowers, "gaillardias." Because they grow so well in sandy soil and tolerate direct sunlight they adapted readily to the island and quickly spread to neighboring yards and then throughout the village. They bloom from early April through December or even later if the weather is warm. Islanders came to refer to them as "Joe Bell" flowers. He often wore these flowers in his lapel and distributed them liberally to friends.

After the National Park Service purchased their land on Ocracoke and constructed the continuous row of barrier dunes on the ocean side of what is now Highway 12 "Joe Bells," as well as various other plants, shrubs and trees gradually took root between the dunes and the sound. By the 1970's these bright, cheery flowers had migrated to the northern end of the island. Since then I have noticed many clusters of gaillardias along the length of Hatteras Island and north of Oregon Inlet as well.

On your next trip down the Outer Banks notice the "Joe Bells" along your route and remember a man who found Ocracoke after a difficult time in his life, but who continued to celebrate the world around him. The beauty and tenacity of these flowers are testimony to life and love and the human spirit. They are among my favorite flowers.



Ocracoke Lighthouse with Joe Bell flowers

Take care and we look forward to sharing more news of our island again soon.

Please let us know if there is anything you would like us to include in this newsletter or if you have any suggestions for ways to improve it. Just click [here](#) to send us a message.

Philip and the entire staff of Village Craftsmen