

While driving, biking, or walking almost anywhere along the Outer Banks from early April through December you are likely to notice clusters of brightly colored red and yellow wild flowers. They are gaillardias (*Gaillardia aristata*), a member of the sunflower family. Drought tolerant and especially well adapted to sandy soil, gaillardias flourish on the Banks, even in direct sunlight.

Gaillardia (or Joe Bell Flower):



Gaillardias are so well adapted to the Outer Banks that you might think they have been here forever. In fact, they are native to the northern and western sections of North America where they are often called Indian blanket flowers, fire wheels, or paint brushes. The flowers were introduced to Ocracoke in the early days of the twentieth century by a gentleman from Washington, North Carolina who was just as colorful as the gaillardia, Joseph Nash Bell, Jr.

Born in Washington in 1850, Joe Bell seems to have been destined for adventure. When he was only fourteen years old he left home, lied about his age, and joined the Confederate army. His military career was cut short when a family friend recognized him and sent him home with a cavalry patrol.

After only one year at university and another at a business college, he was persuaded to attend watchmaker's school. His father, Joseph Nash Bell, Sr., and his uncle, Benjamin A. Bell, were established watchmakers and jewelers in New Bern and Washington, North Carolina. In his early twenties Joe joined the family business.

Joe Bell left Washington abruptly after a brief courtship with one of the young girls in town. For the next half century he led an unconventional life. He was in the Klondike in 1896, mining for gold. But like most novice miners in the unforgiving Yukon Territory he found little gold. Eventually he abandoned his search for gold and settled for a time in Dawson City where he opened a watch repair and jeweler's shop.

The Klondike Gold Rush:



In 1899, when gold was discovered in Nome, Alaska, Joe Bell moved his business there. The sea called him sometime later, and for a while he served aboard sailing ships plying the Pacific Ocean. By 1906 he was living in San Francisco. On the 18th of April the San Andreas Fault opened up along a 296 mile corridor. The resulting fires, caused mainly by ruptured gas lines, raged out of control for four days and nights. It was one of the worst natural disasters in the history of the United States.

Deciding that California was not for him, Joe Bell moved to New York, then back to North Carolina where he established an itinerant watch repair and jeweler's business. When his horse died he was ready for another undertaking. By the 1920s Joe Bell was living on Ocracoke.

Joe Bell's brother-in-law had purchased two homes on Ocracoke Island where he and his extended family spent summer vacations. It was the perfect retreat for the aging

adventurer. As caretaker of his brother-in-law's summer residences Joe Bell received free housing and the opportunity to continue his unconventional lifestyle. Ocracoke had not yet entered the modern world. None of the island homes had indoor plumbing, and electric power had yet to be introduced. All of the roads were sandy lanes, and the only connection to the mainland was by private yacht or the daily mailboat. No more than 550 people called Ocracoke home.

In the off-season Joe Bell enjoyed his solitude when he wished, or the companionship of friendly neighbors when that suited him better. It was not unusual for Joe and friends to gather around a jug of homemade meal wine and wile away the hours laughing, sharing stories, and playing poker. On one occasion, after imbibing copious amounts of their home brew, they set up a coal oil lamp so it would cast shadows against the living room wall. The revelers then took turns tracing around their shadows.

On another occasion Joe fell into the cistern while trying to dip out a cup of water to wash down strong drink.

Island life suited Joe Bell. He made a modest income repairing watches and jewelry. He even served as magistrate for a while. Although there were few small claims cases to be adjudicated on Ocracoke he did officiate at the occasional wedding ceremony.

Another Ocracoke visitor who fell in love with the island in the 1920s was Rex Beach (1877-1949), American novelist, playwright, Olympic water polo player, sportsman, and journalist. In Beach's 1921 book, *Oh, Shoot!: Confessions of an Agitated Sportsman*, he describes Ocracoke as the "centre of the goose-hunting industry." He goes on to say that "the houses are scattered among wind-twisted cedars or thickets of juniper and sedge, and most of them possess two outstanding adjuncts - a private graveyard and a decoy pen [for live decoys]".

Rex Beach:



Beach was also an adventurer. Like Joe Bell, he had spent time in the Yukon Territory prospecting for gold in 1896, and then in Nome in 1899. When Rex Beach came to Ocracoke Joe could often be found on Beach's yacht late into the evening drinking and sharing stories from his days in Canada and Alaska.

Joe Bell's most enduring legacy is the Joe Bell flower, for that is what islanders call the gaillardia. The most popular story has it that Joe Bell moved to Ocracoke to mend a broken heart. According to the legend, the woman he loved left him to marry another. In tribute to his enduring love for her Joe Bell brought gaillardia seeds to Ocracoke and planted the flowers in his yard. Some versions of the story claim he cast seeds to the wind, always wore a gaillardia flower in his lapel, and passed out flowers and seeds to anyone who would accept them.

As with any legend, Joe Bell's story got more fanciful as the years passed. Charles Whedbee,

North Carolina judge and raconteur, even published his version in which Joe Bell's wife Josephine, a midwife, died and her heartbroken husband discovered gaillardias growing out of a conch shell next to her grave. He decided to bring the flowers to Ocracoke, where they had spent many a happy summer.

In fact, Joe Bell never married. He did bring some of the red and yellow flowers to Ocracoke from California, but not as a way of mending a broken heart. He was simply a man of good taste who appreciated beauty. On the mainland he was known to dress in a dark suit with a necktie and a pearl stickpin. On Ocracoke he wore a collarless long sleeved white shirt, gold collar button (adorned with a garnet), khaki pants and red suspenders.

Joe Bell died in 1930. He was standing on his brother-in-law's porch when he had a stroke and fell to the ground. He was buried in a simple, handmade wooden casket in the yard. Joe Bell flowers were planted next to the grave, but they no longer grow there. Nevertheless, Joe Bell's legacy lives on.



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Joe Bell planted the colorful flowers in his Ocracoke yard almost a century ago. They quickly spread to neighbors' yards, then throughout the village. In time they migrated past the village and established themselves along the highway as far north as Hatteras Inlet. By the 1970s Joe Bell flowers had spread the entire length of the Outer Banks.

When you spy a cluster of his brightly colored flowers, think "there are joebells" (for on Ocracoke it is usually pronounced as one word), and remember the story of Joe Bell, one of many unusual characters who have called Ocracoke home.



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See also *To Ocracoke!* by Fred M. , especially chapter 10, "Uncle Joe Bell."