

By C.A. Weslager*

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The letter below was written following a trip to Ocracoke Island in 1949. When it was submitted for publication the author suggested that his observations made at the time of his visit might be of interest to researchers as the island would perhaps become less isolated as time passed. In the years since the letter was written Mr. Weslager's predictions have been realized to some extent. The letter as originally written was a personal communication between friends and was not intended for publication. It is printed below without revision or refinement.]

July 31, 1949

601 S. Maryland Ave.
Wilmington, Del.

Ocracoke Island, N.C.

Dear Willie :

Dr. Millard Squires and I have just returned from a week on Ocracoke Island, N.C., and I hasten to give you a brief account of our visit. First, let me thank you for the second set of reference material which arrived before we left Wilmington. This background material was extremely helpful, and I will explore the actual sources as the need requires.

We drove on a Saturday from Wilmington [Delaware] to Atlantic, N.C. via the Delmarva Peninsula and the Cape Charles Ferry. The ferry was very crowded and we sweltered in the heat of more than 100 degrees waiting for the second boat, because the first one could not take all of the vehicles in line. I understand that delays of 3 and 4 hours are not unusual on Saturdays and Sundays. The ferries now run all night — each one transports approximately 60 cars. The trip to Little Creek on the Norfolk side required 90 minutes. From Norfolk we drove to Washington, N.C., where we put up for the night in the Louise Hotel. We left early the next morning, arriving at Atlantic, N.C., at about noon in time for the mail boat to Ocracoke, which leaves at 1:15. En route we each purchased a fifth of bourbon so we would be prepared for snake bites (!) and near Atlantic (despite it being Sunday) purchased a case of cans of ale, which we tied up in brown paper. The doctor told the ferry captain that we were taking cans of milk to undernourished Ocracoke babies, although this was said with a wink. No intoxicants are sold on Ocracoke.

The mail boat is a small gasoline craft that makes the trip up and through the Pamlico Sound to Ocracoke in a few minutes less than 4 hours. There were several other congenial passengers. One sits atop the boat on facing benches under a sun canopy. I shouldn't want to take it on a stormy day, although we were told: "This boat will go when you don't want to."

At Portsmouth we were met by a skiff pulling alongside to get the bag of mail for that island, now reduced to 15 people. Similarly, at Cedar Island a small boat, poled by a native, pulled alongside us to get his bag of mail. I understand there was one envelope in the locked leather bag. This is the only contact these two islands have with the mainland, except by radio. All the way, we saw fish leaping from the waters, and enjoyed the freshness of salt water in our nostrils and the jewels glittering on the waves left in our wake. The sun shone brightly. I was afraid of getting seasick and the doctor had threatened to take shots of me on his movie camera if I did. Just what this threat did to my viscera I do not know, but at least I didn't get sick. Thus, we landed at Ocracoke in good fettle.

During the last war, the Coast Guard erected a large depot on Ocracoke, brought jeeps to an island which had never seen an auto, and installed electricity where lamp-light had been the only illumination. There were several hundred sailors and their families stationed there, and this contact greatly modified the culture of the people. Many daughters married sailors who took them to the mainland after the war — children of these marriages now come to the island to vacation with their grandparents. The Navy filled in a gut here, built a narrow cement road to reach an ammunition dump, erected a radar station, constructed new Coast Guard quarters, and otherwise "renovated" the place.

One building, apparently built for officers and their wives, although I am not sure of this, is now used as a hotel. It is not in the town proper (which consists of about 500 people all concentrated on the south point of the island) but lies halfway between the sound and the ocean. We lodged and had our meals here at a very nominal price. This hotel is operated by a one-armed South Carolinian from the mainland named Boyette, although it is owned by Stanley Wahab, the island's financier. The latter is said to be descended from an Arab sailor who allegedly was washed up on the beach a century ago and married into the Howard family.

This hotel is now frequented by fishermen from southern cities, and a few couples who are seeking rest. Some of the guests, with whom we became friendly, will interest you. There was Lester Johnston and his wife — he operates a retail grocery store in Bel Haven, N.C. [sic]. They came to rest. Olsen is an engineer with Western Electric at Winston-Salem. He and his wife came to fish. There was a handsome pediatrician from New York city, Dr.

Clement Cobb, bronzed from a two week exposure to the sun. (He walked nude on the beach whenever he got the chance, to get the full benefit of the sun, collecting shells and making bird studies. He is a very capable ornithologist.) Cobb came to rest preparatory to an operation. There were two spinster sisters who own a photographic business in Smithfield, N.C., a middle-aged librarian from Washington, D.C., who came alone, bringing bottled cocktails in her bag, and two partners who run a Buick agency in Raleigh. Finally, a dentist from Charleston, W. Va., his wife, their flapperish daughter (a blonde) and her red-haired boyfriend. The younger couple were gone off every day alone. I almost forgot an aged banker, who seemed near the condition known to the physician as "in extremis," and his wife who catered to his every want as one would care for a small baby.

There is no doctor on the island - only a midwife. Our two physicians (who were trying to relax) were besieged by natives who wanted advice on various ailments. Incidentally, I was much impressed by the wonderful teeth these people have, although they have no regular dental attention. Perhaps their seafood diet plays some part in this.

The guests themselves provided enough material for a novel, and our two bottles of bourbon and case of ale enabled us to break down any social barriers that might have otherwise existed. The island is dry — so the possessor of spirits is indeed a man to have as a friend. We swam daily in the ocean, despite the stories told us of the sailor during the war who had his posterior chewed off by a shark and bled to death before they got him to the station. The undertow is bad, and on one occasion I was glad that Dr. Cobb (he is 6 feet 6) was near me to give me a helping hand. I was caught in what the natives call a "sea pussy" which continued to take me out to sea. I should have allowed it to take me, and then when it had spent itself to swim back, but I was tired and was afraid I would have been unable to swim back. I felt I was in real danger — and I was glad Dr. Cobb was able to walk to me (it was over my head, but not his) and let me lean on him to catch my breath. This experience made all of us wary of the treacherous waters which the natives refuse to enter.

The beach here, incidentally, is the largest I have ever seen — full two miles wide, but in case of storm must be quickly deserted, because the waves rise and inundate it. Sometimes if you are at the water's edge a storm can come up so suddenly that you are drenched before finding shelter.

The island is covered with heavy sand and only jeeps can navigate. Several of the natives have them and provide taxi services to visitors. We hired one driver to take us to Hatteras Inlet at the north point of the island. We went when the tide was right so that we could sweep up the beach as each wave washed in and out. The idea is to get the jeep wheels on the sand that the water has just laved — otherwise one either sinks, or slides, and the

minute that happens a wave rolls over you and the jeep is carried away. It was a thrilling and dangerous ride. One must also travel fast in order to keep from sinking in the sand. There were four of us and the driver, and he was the only one who didn't seem frightened.

Between Ocracoke village and Hatteras, the terrain is bleak — the sea on one side, the sound on the other, less than a mile separating them. All along the beach are remnants of wrecks — one called the “ghost ship” is still partially intact. Offshore, one sees the masts of wreckage extending above the water level at low tide. The heat was terrific — no trees — just wild grass here and there. There was a flock of wild horses grazing on a patch of grass at the end of the island. We were told that they dig in the sand with their forepaws to expose surface water. The hotel had a large rain-water reservoir on the roof to supply drinking and sanitary facilities.

The bird life between the town and Hatteras is extremely interesting. Large black skimmers fly parallel to the shore, skimming at the surf with their scooped beaks. We saw several flocks of duck-like Hudsonian Curlew, and a number of species of terns, among which was the Royal Tern, a beautiful bird with a brilliant orange-red bill. There are, of course, sand pipers by the hundreds. We actually drove through these flocks of birds they are so numerous on the beach.

The Ocracoke Coast Guard Station on the north end of the island of the Hatteras Inlet is gradually being washed away by the sea. The lighthouse tower is leaning badly and waves lap at its base, whereas it was formerly 200 yards inland. The officer in charge told us that they had experienced a terrific twister the previous night, and it took nine of them to hold the door of their quarters shut. I explored this end for Indian remains (as I had done the southern end) but found no traces of any kind. At this point, one has the feeling that this handful of Coast Guardsmen are at the end of the earth — our last frontier, so to speak. Their contribution to this island community is very great, as it is to the ships that would otherwise be driven into the treacherous shoals and reefs that surround Ocracoke. These men can tell many stories of ships in distress in these hazardous waters.

The south point of Ocracoke near Ocracoke Inlet is less desert-like than the country between it and Hatteras Inlet, but there are a number of sand dunes. There are also large clumps of red and white myrtle and here and there a water oak. Fig trees are common, and the fruit was still green; we are told that the figs ripen in August. Yucca, with large white flowers, known to the natives as Spanish bayonet is common, as are Eupon [sic] trees whose leaves are used to brew a medicinal tea. The only other blossoms of wild flowers in bloom were the Gailardia, known locally as “Joe Bell” flowers, from an individual who first brought the seeds to the island. There is also a little pink flower called “snake flower” (if you step on

it a snake will bite you) which we could not identify. One of the visitors said she knew it as the “tidal pink.”

There is only one colored family on Ocracoke, the Bryants. Mrs. Bryant is aged 68, and she was born here, and so was her mother, she told me. She gave birth to 13 children, all but one son having left the island. Mr. Bryant is a grave digger among other things. I am told that a corpse is not embalmed — merely placed in a coffin and buried. Because of the extreme heat, the body is interred usually the day following the death.

When I showed her some tiny shell fish gathered at the water’s edge, Mrs. Bryant said I should carry them home in a container of ocean water which “breathed.” The “breathing,” I surmised, referred to the ebb and flow of the tide. I bought a necklace from her made out of these shells. Mrs. Bryant’s son Julius pointed out to me the “pilinterry” bush, commonly called the “toothache tree.” Its leaves are chewed to relieve an aching tooth.

Unable to find any Indian remains, lore or tradition, on Ocracoke, I began a place-name study, the results of which I enclose for any comments you care to make. I was much interested in the Elizabethan-like dialect of the barefooted natives, but did not have sufficient time or equipment to try and get any recordings nor any data on the genealogies of the island folk.

My doctor friend went fishing two or three times with one of the native “captains” and his best morning’s catch (rod and reel) was 90 blue fish. Other guests at the hotel brought back sheepshead, mullet, mackerel, drum, etc. Of course, the native fishermen net these by the thousands, as they do shrimp. The “captains” own and operate small motor boats and can take visitors to the best fishing spots.

On the return trip (also by the mail boat) we purchased 80 pounds of shrimp at Atlantic from one of the shrimp boats, iced it and brought it back in the car. We iced three times en route, and it was in wonderful condition when we arrived home. We have it frozen now in a deep freeze and can eat it when we have the urge. These shrimp are tasty, but much smaller than the Gulf species.

There is much more to tell you, but this letter is getting longer than I intended, and the balance of the story must wait until I see you.

With best regards,

Faithfully yours,

C. A. Weslager

*Mr. C. A. Weslager was President of the Eastern States Archeological Federation and resided in Wilmington, Delaware. He was the author of seven books and numerous historical papers and essays.