

by Lou Ann Homan

The morning started out as every other morning. Fresh home-made bread toasted and spread with peach jam, hot coffee with cream, and conversation about the plans for the day. What will my plans be for today? I think of all the possibilities. Guitar lessons. Volunteering at the museum. Beachcombing. Writing. I love this lazy summer with so many choices. I question Philip about his day, anxious to hear how he will spend this lovely, hot, cloud-free, azure blue day. I know he loves beach walking and napping and reading and blogging and even some cooking now and then. So I was surprised by his answer, yes very surprised. I didn't mean to stop sipping coffee or choke on my toast. I had to ask him to repeat it as I thought I heard wrong.

"Dig a well and put in a hand pump," he said it again.

Now, I know he has been thinking about this and even brought the old pump onto the screen porch. It made a lovely decoration as I added Scotch bonnets and other seashells to enhance this old antique. I even humored him with polite listening skills and attention as he ordered new "pump leathers" from the Red Hill General Store. It was an exciting day when they arrived. I 'oohed' and 'ahhed' over them, as any good sweetheart would do when the topic turns to pump leathers. He put them away on his desk, and I thought his interest had waned. I was wrong.

"You can dig a well and put in a pump in one day?" I asked him. "Do you know how to do this?" I didn't mean to be a doubting Thomas, but I was surprised that he knew how to do it and that it could be accomplished in one day. He was determined, and after breakfast retreated to the back yard to assemble his tools for this project.

I couldn't help myself. I called my sons. I have three of them living in other parts of the country. Now, THEY know about wells. They grew up on an Indiana farm where we had an old fashioned windmill and pump that we used for our water. We did not get water in a day, or as an announcement at breakfast. It was a long process. We did have a friend come douse or witch for water with peach branches. When he found a good vein, or so he said, we called the well driller. He brought his machine out to the farm and went down 85 feet and found a clean, cool vein of Indiana water. Then we had rods to assemble and put down into the ground, restore the pump, put up the windmill and then wait for wind. The whole process took a few weeks. In the meantime we dragged water home from town in jugs. And Philip wants to do this in one day?

Each son in turn gave his opinion after the first moment of silence. I could see their

eyebrows shoot up even though they are all thousands of miles away. Each one in turn said the same word, "Right," with the vowel drawn out.

I tagged along outside to witness this whole event. I thought it would be good to find the water first! But no, Philip was going to build the table for the pump first. He asked me where I would like the pump to be and how high. "We will use this for cleaning clams and fish and vegetables and watering our garden," he said.

Well, he doesn't fish and we don't have a garden, as of yet, but I am a positive person. It is possible that someday we will do both! I helped choose a spot...by the old wash house where we store the clam rakes and nail up old buoys when we find them. "That would be a cute place," I say in my female voice. He agrees.

He finds the wood for building the table. It is scattered all over the property...under sheds, in bushes. At one point he comes jumping out because of a brown recluse spider. I keep my distance and just watch as he brings out more tools. He begins to measure and saw. I get to hold the tape measure and catch the wood as he cuts. He hammers and marks and the frame is built. He goes inside to get the porch decoration and we decide exactly where it should be on the table. "Close to the edge," I say, "so that we can put our bucket or sprinkling can on a table underneath for easy watering when we get a garden." He doesn't catch the irony in my voice because I smile at him.

He marks the place on the wood where he will drill the hole for the pipe. I bring him glasses of water as he doesn't even want to stop for lunch. He hops on his bike to buy a coupling at the variety store, and bumps into William Nathan. He announces his intentions to William who tells him he needs a "point and a joint." After returning home with that piece of information, he takes the five foot galvanized pipe to the school to re-thread it, using the outside vise.

I take my escape on my bike while he is gone. I don't want to be around when the process fails. Maybe he will just give up and take a nap. I visit folks around the island and end up at Elizabeth Parson's shop. I sit in the back on a small stool as we visit and share stories. The door to the shop opens and it is Philip. He is covered in sweat and is as excited as a boy on his first day of summer vacation. "Come home, you don't want to miss it." He had been looking for me all over the island. I tell Elizabeth that he is putting in a well. She doesn't say a word, just nods. I can tell she is on my side. I bid her farewell and Philip and I bike home.

I go inside to get my camera and find a point of location away from the well drilling. Bill Jones, a new island transplant, happens to be biking by. Bill is friendly and curious and is

enticed into the project. I try to warn him with my eyes, but this is a 'guy thing' and they are both giddy. I watch Philip haul out a high bench and the hose. They hammer the three foot point part way into the ground through the hole. The point, I found out, is a gift from cousin Eddie's shed, along with the galvanized pipe that was screwed on to the top.

Point & a Joint Ready to Sink:



Closeup of 3 foot long Well Point:



Visualize this: Philip climbs up onto the bench, and puts a long PVC pipe down into the ground. He attaches our water hose to the top as Bill turns on the water. They both push and twist when the point and the pipe begin to slide into the earth as the PVC pipe filled with water leads the way!. I photograph and guard my camera from spurting water on this on-shore drilling project. I am right to do so as the hose pops out and Bill runs over to turn it off. I again try to warn Bill, but he appears to be in this for the long haul.

Using the Water Hose:



Closeup of Water Hose Extension:



Working the Well Point Down:



They reassemble, turn on the water and the pipe goes down a few more inches. Bill looks at his hands and realizes that blisters have already appeared. I shrug my shoulders as if to say, "I tried to warn you."

Getting Closer:



But now it even gets more exciting. They decide they cannot push it through as they must have hit a heavy pocket of sand. "Let's get the sledge hammer." Philip announces.

"Yes, let's." says Bill. I feel I am caught up in drama of death and survival. Will there be water? Who will hold the sledge hammer? Is the clinic open?

The sledge hammer is found as well as a piece of wood six inches by four inches with two large nails sticking up. Philip tells Bill to hold the wood over the pipe while he swings the hammer to push that pipe down. I move to safety and holler out, "I don't really think this is a good idea," but I am too late as the hammer is moving up into the air. I don't want to look, but I keep taking pictures. The hammer comes down on the side of the wood shoving it into Bill's hands. He let's go and blood is everywhere. I continue to photograph this historic event as Bill's blood christens the new well. I apologize profusely to Bill and then wonder why I am apologizing. What were they thinking? By the way, during this process the pipe did



not budge!

Bill Jones' Bloody Hand:



I take Bill into the kitchen for a clean up and a band aid. The cut is deep and the skin is torn away. I can barely look. I do my best to stop the bleeding and put on a band aid. I look out the window. Philip is still working. I whisper to Bill, "I would get out now." He nods. I walk him to his bike and he waves farewell, with the other hand.

Philip Working Alone:



I go back to the scene of the crime and continue the photographs. Philip is determined. I cheer him on, and the pipe goes down. Two islanders appear on their golf cart, Dave and Dave. They heard about the excitement over at the Howard house and made their way over. They also said, laughingly, word was out that Philip was building a fish cleaning table. They also see the trail of blood, I tell them the story as well. By now the pipe is almost in position.

Five More Inches to Go:



With the iron coupling on the pipe Philip hammers away as the two Daves watch.

Using a Sledge Hammer with Two Visiting Engineers:



After several more whacks on the pipe, it is finally just right. Philip wraps teflon tape around

the pipe threads, then screws on the pump which has already been fitted with the new leathers.

Applying Pipe Thread Tape:



Attaching the Hand Pump:



The moment of reckoning appears. Philip primes the pump with water, I hold my breath. Dave pumps. The sound is squeaky and reminiscent. Philip used this same pump at this house, his grandparents house, years ago when he was a child. He is caught up in that memory. He wants his grandchildren to know the thrill of pumping water and to understand the old ways of the island so they can be preserved and honored. Memories of ancestors pool around both of us as Dave continues to pump. I watch Philip's face and I want there to be water.

And then...a small trickle of brown water appears with sand and silt, but the stream grows heavier and clearer. We cheer. He has done it...in one day. Dave and Dave taste the water, and announce that it is clean and salt-free. They hop on their golf cart and ride away spreading the news in the village.

Two Happy Engineers:



Success:



Philip finishes the top of the table and pulls over a small bench to hold buckets and our sprinkling can. We gather old clam shells and place them on the ground to hold back the sandy mud. I pump and it feels strong and self-sufficient. I also taste the sweet, clean water.

Completing the Bench:



The following day Philip goes next door to gather up the next generation, Lachlan Tweedie Howard. Lachlan has his cool guy sunglasses on and fleece pants. Philip brings a crate for him to stand on and tells him the story of his great grandparents and teaches him how to pump the water. His interest is short as he is only three. Someday Lachlan and the other grandchildren will understand. They will tell this story to their children as well.

Lachlan Working the Pump:



I love having this pump in the backyard. It has only been there for three days, but I use it all of the time for the few plants that we do have. Besides it looks really cute by the old washhouse!

A View of Our New Pump:





As for Bill, we took him and his wife, Lida, out to dinner last night to the Jolly Roger. It was the least we could do to help defray his medical costs!

A geology note from Philip: Ocracoke, like the rest of the Outer Banks, is low and narrow.

As rain falls on these barrier islands water filters through the sandy soil. What does not run off into the Atlantic Ocean or Pamlico Sound flows below the surface where it mingles with underlying sediments that are saturated with salty ocean water. Although some intermixing occurs, fresh water is less dense than salt water, and forms a floating lens above the salt-laden water.

The boundary between the fresh and salt water layers varies with the tides and rainfall, but Ocracoke nearly always maintains a fresh water lens that is about 10 - 15 feet thick, and which lies about 4 - 5 feet below the surface. Our new water supply is surprisingly clear and sweet-smelling, though island ground water is sometimes darker with an odor. In any case it is always perfect for watering plants or rinsing off after a day at the beach. And a well point and pump can be installed here in less than a day!