

Spring greetings from Ocracoke Island!

As warmer weather approaches, we are beginning to see many familiar faces returning to the island for rest and rejuvenation. Welcome back!

Many of you knew my father, Lawton Howard, a member of the early-morning coffee contingent on the Community Store porch, and a frequent, afternoon, behind-the-counter visitor at Village Craftsmen. He died on March 23, at age 90, in his own home, next door to where he grew up, surrounded by family and friends. Many people, both on-island and off-island, will miss him and his fabled good humor.

In past newsletters I have chronicled some of his history and amusing stories. You can read these accounts by following the links below:

[The Story of Lawton Howard](#)

[Amusing Stories About Lawton Howard](#)

Lawton Howard:



After my father suffered a mild back injury several years ago he stopped driving. My daughter, Amy, or I would take Dad for a daily ride. Almost every day he wanted to go “down below” to the pony pen and watch the horses. He was always interested in the health and well being of the herd. He knew that one of the mares was pregnant and commented on this nearly every day. On April 5, two weeks after my father died, a new filly was born.

Ocracoke’s newest member of the pony herd:



Interest in the once-wild Banker Ponies is a long tradition in the Howard family. My father often told me about the time in 1926 when he was 15 years old. It was July and the annual Independence Day pony penning was in jeopardy of not happening because several of the young men were squabbling about something and no one was prepared to round up the horses. My dad and his best friend, Ansley O'Neal, though still teenagers, decided that they were old enough to tackle this responsibility. They mounted their ponies on July 3 and rode all the way to Hatteras Inlet (this was long before there were any paved roads on the island) where they camped out under the stars. Early the next morning the two boys began chasing the first small herd southward, toward the village. As they encountered each succeeding herd they forced them to join the others. Occasionally some of the animals would swim out into Pamlico Sound and make the boys' job much more difficult. Finally, after a grueling day of hard riding in the blazing summertime sun Lawton and Ansley rode proudly into the village behind several hundred stampeding Outer Banks ponies. It was a proud day for them both, and a fond memory for my father until the day he died.

After the National Park Service purchased the majority of Ocracoke Island in the 1950's the herd was reduced to a more manageable size and eventually confined to a penned area in the middle of the island. I remember helping my Uncle Marvin build the first pony pen in the late 1950's. Captain Marvin was a native O'cocker who spent many years away from home sailing throughout the world, and then retired in the early 1950's back home to Ocracoke. He is well known on the island as a champion of young people and scoutmaster of the renowned Mounted Boy Scout troop. He wrote the following article, "Ocracoke Horsemen," which is reprinted from "The Story of Ocracoke Island."

Captain Marvin Howard, c. 1960 astride his pony, "Lady:"



"Ocracoke Horsemen," by Captain Marvin Howard:

We hear a lot about the fishermen of the Outer Banks of North Carolina, but few stories deal with the equestrians of the Outer Banks. Surely some of them deserve to be proclaimed as among the world's best for their daring feats on horse-penning occasions. This is particularly true of the old days when as many as two-hundred ponies were penned on

Ocracoke Island alone.

There have been wild horses roaming the Outer Banks since the landing of the Sir Walter Raleigh adventurers. None of these wild horses were ever large except the Pea Island pony which came from the original quarter-bred horse. (The quarter-bred horse, which has been developed as the finest cow-pony ever known, originally came from the Carolinas where they were bred for the quarter-mile race.) However, the ponies of the Outer Banks did vary in weight from five hundred to eight hundred pounds. They lived on the range the year round as wild as deer or wild horses can ever be. For sustenance they had only the salt grass, the boughs of live oak and red cedar, and when the winters were severe, they dug in the sand hills with their hoofs to get the succulent roots of the sea oats. These ponies no doubt had strains of Arab steed for in numbers of them there was untold beauty in color and build. They were fleet of feet, hardy, well lined, and full of muscle. They made fine saddle horses when properly trained. In recent times, two Ocracoke horsemen stand out. One was Homer Howard, the other was Monroe Bragg.

Homer Howard, (Lawton's & Marvin's father) c. 1942, aged 74:



Homer Howard with his Coast Guard Horse, 1912



There are many people on Ocracoke who can recall their daring feats. People who have seen jockeys in America and England and have been to numerous horse-shows, carnivals, circuses, fat-stock shows, and rodeos in California, Texas and Mexico say that only on Ocracoke on the Outer Banks of North Carolina does the catching of wild horses with bare hands take place.

Captain Jim Howard was keeper of Hatteras Inlet Life Saving Station for a good many years.

Captain James W. Howard, (Homer's father) c. 1888, aged 49:



He owned quite a few cattle and wild ponies on Ocracoke. Jim bought a two-year old Arabian horse from somewhere on the mainland. His son, Homer Howard, broke and trained this horse for running the wild cattle and penning the wild ponies. His name was "White Dandy," though he was mottled with gray.

James Howard astride his horse, White Dandy, c. 1888



On "White Dandy" Homer on many occasions started at the north end of the island in the cool of the morning, driving the herd of wild ponies south. He rode merrily along across Tar-Hole Plains. There he would come upon a second herd of ponies headed by "Old Wildy," a long, rangy stallion. This herd, too, he would start driving southward. The third herd he encountered at Scraggly Cedars, then the Great Swash. After passing Great Swash he came to Knoll Cedars where the sheep pen used to be, and from there on southward the driving got touchy and more strenuous for the herds from the north were reluctant to go farther south and would try to cut through the thickets or sand hills back northward.

There were about two-hundred wild ponies in those days. They had to be driven over sand hills, through bogs, across creeks, through marshes, and through woodland thickets of myrtle, cedar, oak and yaupon. At about ten o'clock in the morning of pony-penning day, the horses could be seen spread out on the plains around "First Hammock Hills," just north of Ocracoke Village. Each little band was headed by a tough and stringy stallion. They ran hither and thither, their manes and tails flying, heads held high, ears pointed forward, and necks arched to meet a foe. And whenever the stallions met, they did battle-biting, kicking,

pawing — until the rider closed in. Then, they veered off from each other, returning to their herds. It was no easy task to drive these wild ponies sixteen miles southward to the corral in Ocracoke Village.

Ocracoke boys perched in a big live oak tree with one limb at least thirty feet long to get the first view of the ponies as they were driven down the sandy road to Cockle Creek, the harbor. There were no docks in those days; the ponies were herded along the shore and in the shallow water to the corral by people on shore and in boats. After all the horses were penned and the bars closed, the people went home, ate dinner, and then returned for the branding and selling of the stock.

There were buyers from the mainland who wanted the ponies for saddle horses or for farm use. As soon as people began to climb the corral fence, a general movement among the stallions started. Hoofs began to fly, and teeth snap, with much squealing and snorting. Then, suddenly someone on the fence would yell “Homer’s caught the motley roan over there.”

To catch a wild stallion with nothing but bare hands took wit, agility, strength and stamina. Homer Howard would walk quietly through the mares, slapping them on the rump, working his way between them slowly, gradually — getting closer and closer to a great stallion — crouching panther-like, ready, alert — and in a flash he was astride the stallion, holding its mane with his left hand, throwing his elbow over the horse’s withers, hooking his knee behind the elbow of the horse’s front leg, reaching out with his right hand to catch the horse’s lower face just above the nostrils, clamping down tight, and sticking there with the tenacity of a bulldog. The stallion would rear, pitch, squeal, snort, paw the air for thirty of forty minutes, but finally, out of wind, tired, and afraid, he stopped his violent struggling. Slowly the horseman eased his grip; immediately, the stallion lunged and reared. Only after several attempts did the horse admit his defeat. “Old Widdie”, “Guthrie Sam”, and “Rainbow” and others were truly great stallions and had the spunk and grit to put up terrible battles. Their tusks, or cutting teeth, were long from age and could be used to cut and slash, and their forefeet and rear hoofs held a wicked kick.

They used mostly McClellan saddles in those days, never western. Here again, Homer Howard was a master horseman, as he crawled astride and called for the blindfold to be snatched off. Then with a mighty heave the wild horse began to buck or run or sun-fish — backing, twisting, turning, rearing — coming to a full stop with head down, stiffened legs or standing on his hind feet, groaning in every nerve, his body sweat-soaked from his efforts, nostrils extended, expanding and contracting like a bellows. But finally he was out-mastered by the victorious horseman.

On your next stop to visit the Ocracoke pony pen try to imagine these stories of outstanding horsemanship, Fourth of July Pony Pennings, and the long history of the Outer Banks ponies. And be sure to look for the new filly.

Until next time, our best to you all from

Philip and the entire staff at Village Craftsmen