

"Is there an artists' colony on Ocracoke?" is a question I frequently hear.

"We do have a number of talented artists and musicians," I reply, "but, no, there is no formal or organized Artists' colony on the island."

Ocracoke Island suits artistic types very well, and it is not surprising that visitors wonder if an organized colony has ever been established here. Although there is no artists' colony on the island today, Ocracoke was the site of a small experimental community that flourished here more than sixty years ago.

The worldwide movement that spawned the quintessential artists' colony emerged in the mid to late 1800s and continued robustly through the early twentieth century. It is estimated that thousands of artists participated in nearly one hundred art communities in Europe, Australia, and the Americas during that time.

Scholars point to urbanization and industrialization as factors that influenced the movement. Romantic sentiments among many poets, writers, painters, sculptors, and musicians led to a growing nostalgia for rural life, country living, and peace and quiet. Artists, unlike more conventional types, were less constrained by society's predominant mores, and could afford to adopt bohemian behavior and fashions suitable to their more unstructured lifestyles. Because of the colonies' widespread embrace of pluralism and tolerance, they appealed to many eccentric artists.

In the early twentieth century Ocracoke was especially remote from cities, government interference in private affairs, and societal expectations. Without paved roads or ferry service, Ocracoke's primary link to the mainland was the four and a half hour trip by mail boat to Atlantic, on the mainland of North Carolina. The island's isolation and easy acceptance of strangers helps explain why a small group of artists and writers established their "Island Workshop" here in 1940.

Unlike many counterparts in Europe and elsewhere in the United States, the Island Workshop was neither a highly structured year-round community, nor an independent and self-contained community of transient artists and writers. Rather, it was a two-month long summer endeavor that was somewhat integrated into the year-round and long-established village of Ocracoke.

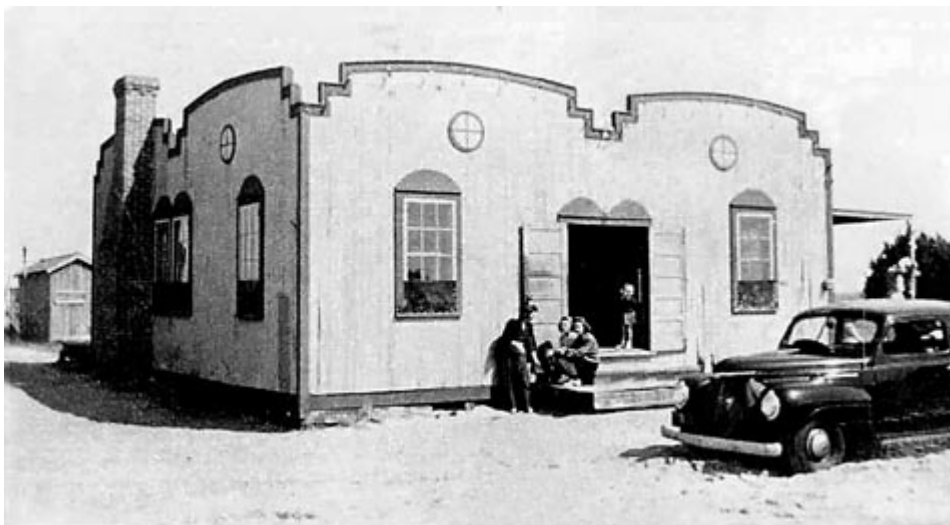
Sometime in the late 1930s a young man from eastern North Carolina, Vernon Albert Ward, Jr., found his way to Ocracoke. He had graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a degree in English, and a specialization in creative writing. Although more

educated than the local population, Ward quickly and easily settled into the community and made many friends. By all accounts, he was friendly, handsome, well-dressed, and polite. He was exceptionally athletic, and especially enjoyed swimming.

In the summer of 1938 Vernon Ward procured a job as manager of Stanley Wahab's three-year-old "Spanish Casino."

In 1935 Stanley Wahab had built his inexpensive replica of a Spanish style building on the island, near where the Back Porch Restaurant sits today. Made of plywood strewn with gravel while the earth-colored paint was still wet, the 400 square foot Spanish Casino mimicked an adobe hacienda. The flat roofed structure had extended and crenelated exterior walls with gently curving main sections. Windows were topped with decorative trim, and crosses within circles painted near the roof line suggested a southwestern theme. An open porch on the ocean-facing side was supported by peeled cedar posts, adding to the Spanish motif.

The Spanish Casino:



The interior was one large room with a raised platform on the western wall to accommodate a piano and musicians. Benches were placed along the walls, leaving a sizable dance floor in the middle. Island natives, Edgar and Walter Howard, brothers who had moved to New York City to play vaudeville in the 1920s and 1930s, came home periodically to entertain their fellow islanders. The popular music of the day included cowboy and western songs and ballads. Once in a while Edgar's banjo and Walter's guitar accompanied nationally popular entertainers who followed the Howard brothers to Ocracoke. At times, other island musicians played at the Spanish Casino. When live music was unavailable a jukebox served

nightly to provide tunes for round dances, jitterbug, and traditional island square dances.

Stanley Wahab included a small canteen to serve his customers. Candy, cigarettes, and soft drinks were popular items. Eventually the Spanish Casino also offered hamburgers. Some years earlier, under the influence of Mr. Shaw, one of the Methodist preachers, sales of alcoholic beverages had been banned on Ocracoke Island. It was a rare night, however, when homemade meal wine did not flow freely behind the building or on the other side of the sand dunes.

The Spanish Casino was part of Stanley Wahab's larger operation which included the Wahab Village Hotel (later renamed Blackbeard's Lodge), and separate motel units dubbed the Green Apartments.

The manager, Vernon Ward, was a budding poet who had made contacts with other writers and artists from western North Carolina, New York, and Europe. Whether it was originally his idea, or someone else's, the notion of an island workshop for artists and writers took shape, and Vernon Ward, who had remained on the island throughout the year, became the organizer and contact person. Soon a catalog was created, and advertisements placed in regional and national magazines.

Ocracoke's first season for the artists' colony was scheduled for July and August, 1940. Although the location was listed as Wahab Village, many of the classes were held in the local schoolhouse. Entertainment included dances at the Spanish Casino. Accommodations were arranged at the Wahab Village Hotel. The total cost for two months (room, board, tuition, and entertainment) amounted to a mere \$200. Attractions included "swimming, boating, fishing, dancing, and excursions." Ocracoke was hailed as the "world's widest and most beautiful seashore."

The Wahab Village Hotel:



Courses included painting, sculpture, art history, creative writing, history of literature, Indian crafts, and physical education. The Island Workshop attracted an impressive list of talented teachers. Among them was Blanche C. Weill, a San Francisco native who studied in Europe with educator Maria Montessori and psychoanalyst Alfred Adler. She started the

first Montessori school in Berkeley, California. Weill earned a doctorate at Harvard, and practiced child psychology in New York, Cambridge, and Boston. She was the author of two books, *The Behavior of Young Children of the Same Family*, and *Through Children's Eyes*, the latter published by Island Workshop Press.

Robert Haven Schauffler, well known expert on the lives of Beethoven, Brahms, and Schumann, also participated in the Island Workshop. Schauffler, author, lecturer, singer, and cellist, was the son of missionaries to Austria, and attended Northwestern University and Princeton University where he earned a B.A. in 1902. He served in WWI and was decorated with the Order of the Purple Heart. Schauffler was a prolific writer, contributing poems and monographs to numerous magazines and journals, including *Collier's Weekly*, and *Atlantic*. He wrote several travel books, as well as books and plays celebrating holidays and other observances.

Other presenters and teachers at the Workshop included Daniel Tilden, a Cherokee Indian Chief, and Anita Wetzler, a nationally recognized sculptress.

The most colorful of the Workshop organizers and teachers, however, was Madame Helene Scheu-Riesz (pronounced Shoy-Reese). According to islanders who knew her, she was very friendly and outgoing. She has even been described as "bubbly." Mme Scheu-Riesz, as she preferred to be addressed, was born in what is now the Czech Republic in 1880, but spent most of her life in Austria. At age 38 she published her first novel, *Der Revolutionär. Eine Lebensgeschichte* (*The Revolutionary, A Biography*), which came out during the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. However, she made a name for herself as a narrative writer, poet, playwright, editor, journalist, and translator. She was active in the Austrian Women's Movement, and was especially interested in making books available to children. She edited the "Sesambücher," a series of classic works, in German, for young people, and translated Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* to German.

Helene Scheu-Riesz:



Mme. Scheu-Riesz emigrated to the United States in 1937, after her husband, Gustav Scheu, died. Even though she had been baptised as a Protestant before leaving Europe, as a woman of Jewish heritage she undoubtedly felt threatened by the rise of National Socialism in Austria. True to her old-world traditions, she continued to wear gathered skirts, blouses with laced bodices, and a small scarf or peasant's cap over her salt and pepper hair. Earrings and red shoes highlighted her colorful dress. Mme Scheu-Riesz, short and thin, spoke with a thick German accent.

In Europe, Mme Scheu-Riesz and her lawyer husband moved in intellectual and artistic circles. She was a major figure in pre-World War II society, hosting dinners and salons that attracted artists, writers, philosophers, and politicians. Well-known and well-connected literary figures, composers, artists, actors, and architects frequented the Scheu-Riesz home. It is not known how Mme. Scheu-Riesz came to know Vernon Ward, but clearly they were moving in the same circles once she arrived in America.

No record survives listing the Island Workshop students. Local sources indicate that only a handful of people were ever enrolled in classes, maybe 8-12 people at any one time. Dare Wright, popular 1950s photographer and author of children's books, several set on Ocracoke, seems to have had a connection to Vernon Ward, and may have participated in the Workshop. No doubt the extreme isolation of Ocracoke contributed to the small number of students. In 1940 no ferries served the island, and the journey across Pamlico Sound on the 42 foot wooden mail boat Aleta took four hours.

Island Workshop Advertisement:

READY FOR THE TAKE-OFF

**ISLAND WORKSHOP**  
**For Artists and Writers**  
In Wahab Village  
On Peaceful Ocracoke Island  
**July 1 : August 31, 1940**

AT THE WORLD'S WIDEST AND MOST BEAUTIFUL SEASHORE

Courses in painting, sculpture, history of art, creative writing, radio script writing, history of literature, Indian crafts, physical education.  
Special sections for beginners.  
Swimming, boating, fishing, dancing, excursions.  
Fifteen miles of ocean beach.

•  
**All Expenses for Season—Board, Room, Tuition  
Entertainments — \$200**

•  
For catalog write  
**VERNON WARD : Ocracoke, N. C.**

No local islanders are known to have taken advantage of the courses offered.

Most of the teachers (Vernon Ward, Daniel Tilden, Miss Weill, and Miss Wetzler) lived in two apartments in the Wahab Village Hotel. Mr. Schauffler, whose wife and children accompanied him, rented a house on the Point Road (now Lighthouse Road).

1940 was a time of upheaval in Europe. In 1933 Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party [the Nazi Party] had assumed power in Germany and was appointed Chancellor of the "Third Reich." He repudiated the Treaty of Versailles two years later. In 1938 Germany annexed Austria. In September 1939 Germany invaded Poland. The events in Europe were causing anxiety and concern throughout the world, and Ocracoke Island was no exception.

Before the United States declared war on Japan and Germany in 1941 (and established a Navy base on the island in June of 1942) Ocracoke had been one of the most isolated communities in the country. Few outsiders visited the island, and most of them were anglers and hunters.

The artists and intellectuals who participated in the Island Workshop were viewed by some

locals with curiosity, and even with a degree of suspicion. They were described as "Bohemian" and "mysterious." Mme Scheu-Riesz's German accent and old-world costumes especially set her apart. Rumors circulated throughout the village suggesting that she and her fellow artists might be German spies. Although only a handful of islanders held this view, those closest to the artists reported that they were secretive, and reluctant to socialize with villagers. Workers at the hotel noticed that Workshop teachers and students covered their books and poems, and turned papers over whenever others approached them.

Most of the Workshop participants enjoyed spending their days on the beach. Islander, Jake Alligood, had an old flat bed truck that he had converted to an island taxi, and he often drove them across the tidal flats to the ocean. It was not unusual for the teachers and students to walk to the beach after dark. Mme Scheu-Riesz seemed especially interested in the flashing beacons and other navigational aids, about which she asked numerous questions. She was also observed making frequent calls, by ship to shore radio, from the Coast Guard Station.

Several island teenagers, intrigued by the exotic artists and intellectuals, and looking for adventure, decided to snoop around their quarters. They had listened to adults as they discussed the artists' unconventional behavior and different lifestyles. Connections to foreign countries, strange dress, and a degree of eccentricity had made them suspect. Could the artists really be undercover Nazi spies?

The "detectives" never discovered any incriminating evidence.

Mme. Scheu-Riesz's Jewish heritage points to something quite different from a suspected German spy. Rather, she appears to have been a committed progressive thinker. In Europe she hosted socialist salons, worked with her husband to broaden the viewpoints of "dreadfully nationalistic" Viennese primers, and was active in the burgeoning "first wave" of the women's liberation movement. Mme Scheu-Riesz's name appears in 1921-1929 records of correspondence in the Quaker-affiliated Swarthmore College library's section on the National Council for Prevention of War. She is pictured in a 1921 photo of the Third International Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

According to information from the Library of Congress, Mme. Scheu-Riesz also had a connection with Sigmund Freud, with whom she carried on correspondence in 1930. And she frequently combined her interest in art with her passion for politics.

Vernon Ward seems also to have been a progressive thinker, for he flirted with socialist and perhaps even communist ideologies. In a March 18, 1942 letter to his congressman, Herbert

C. Bonner, he refers to "certain [of his] letters rather friendly to Russia..." that were published in the Raleigh newspaper, *The News and Observer*. In the same letter he also acknowledges a rumor about his "personal morality" which he claims is "no longer valid." According to local sources, Ward was also a conscientious objector.

The Ocracoke "Artists' Colony" (the Island Workshop), operated for only two summers (1940 and 1941). The December, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor changed everything. In the next six months hundreds of merchant vessels were torpedoed by German submarines off the Outer Banks. By the summer of 1942 the US Navy had constructed an Amphibious Section Base with as many as 600 personnel stationed on the island. Ocracoke was no longer the quiet, isolated retreat suitable for an artists' colony.

Six months later, the Spanish Casino, which had already begun to disintegrate, was closed on the recommendation of the Navy commander. Shortly afterwards the building was demolished.

Although a rumor surfaced that Mme. Scheu-Riesz and several others from the "colony" had been detained and/or deported in 1942, nothing supports this. According to some sources, Mme Scheu-Riesz operated an art gallery in New York City after WWII. For more than ten years she was involved with the Island Workshop Press there. In 1954 she returned to Vienna. She devoted the rest of her life to school reform, writing numerous adaptations of fairy tales and translating children's books from English to German. She died in 1970.

Vernon Ward went on to become a professor of English at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. He published several books on poetry. In the early 1960s he created and edited *Tar River Poets*, a literary journal devoted to publishing poems by members of the Poetry Forum in Greenville. At his retirement in 1978 the name of the journal was changed to *Tar River Poetry*, and submissions were opened to other poets. It has been listed as one of the top ten poetry journals in the United States. Ward was married and was survived by a daughter and son when he died in 2000.

After World War II Dr. Blanche C. Weill, dedicated child psychologist, devoted her life to the care of troubled children. She died in California in 1974.

Robert Haven Schauffler spent much of his adult life pursuing music and poetry, although his career touched on many other topics, including literature, travel, the military, and holidays. He died in 1964 at the age of 85.

Nothing further is known about Daniel Tilden or Anita Wetzler.



Between 1940 and 1947 Island Workshop Press, an outgrowth of the Ocracoke artists' colony, published a number of books and pamphlets in New York City, including the following:

- Through Children's Eyes, by Barbara C. Weill (1940)
- Will You Marry Me?, edited by Helene Scheu-Riesz (1940)
- Fiddler's Luck : the Gay Adventures of a Musical Amateur, by Robert Haven Schauffler (1941)
- Stories of the Underground Railroad, by Anna L. Curtis (1941)
- The Quakers Take Stock, by Anna L. Curtis (1944)
- The Story of Liberty, by Louis Kaufman Anspacher (1944)
- Shakespeare as Poet and Lover, and the Enigma of the Sonnets, by Louis Kaufman Anspacher (1944)
- Democracy is Not Enough, by Scott Nearing (1945)
- The Soviet Union as a World Power, by Scott Nearing (1945)
- United World, the Road to International Peace, by Scott Nearing (1945)
- See Here, Private Enterprise!, by H. Sabin Bagger (1945)
- The Master Race Mentality, by Louis Kaufman Anspacher (1945)
- War or Peace?, by Scott Nearing, (1946)
- The Revolution of Our Time, by Scott Nearing (1947)

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A note about research: For years I had heard stories from islanders about the Ocracoke Artists' Colony. The two central figures mentioned were Vernon Ward and Madame Helene Scheu-Riesz. I was able to gather some information about Vernon Ward, but was unable to learn anything further about Madame Scheu-Riesz. No islander remembered how to spell her name, and everyone pronounced it as "Shereese."

I searched the Internet using various spellings and finally found information about a Helene Charisse. I discovered that she and her family were professional dancers. Her mother was a personal friend and admirer of Isadora Duncan. The family (Helene's mother and her ten children) danced in Europe, Africa, and the United States, including twice at the White House during Calvin Coolidge's term.

When the children reached adulthood and went their separate ways Helene continued dancing alone, and eventually founded a dance studio in Indianapolis.

An article written by Helene's husband after her death in 1981 referred to her mother as

Madame Charisse. It was only a short leap to imagine that Helene was also called Madame Charisse after her mother died.

I decided that Helene Charisse was the colorful woman who had participated in the Ocracoke Artists' Colony. She was involved in the arts as a professional dancer, and she was from Europe. Although Helene Charisse was born in Paris I imagined that her family might have been German-speaking, or perhaps Ocracokers had misidentified or misremembered her French accent. Helene Charisse was born in 1909, so she would have been about 31 years old in 1940. Islanders remembered her as older, but I thought that time and memory might have conspired to cause them to be mistaken. After all, I reasoned, how many Madame Charisse's could there be? I was convinced that I had located the right woman.

In October of 2008 a frequent visitor to Ocracoke showed me the Island Workshop advertisement that she had purchased on Ebay (see image above). It was the first time I had heard the official name of the Artists' Colony. Back to the computer I went. Armed with the key phrases, "Island Workshop," "Vernon Ward," and "Ocracoke" I stumbled upon a December 30, 1940 Time magazine article mentioning Ocracoke Island and the book, *Will You Marry Me?*, published by the Island Workshop Press, and edited by Helene Scheu-Riesz.

Eureka! The woman who had lived on Ocracoke in 1940 and 1941 was Helene Scheu-Riesz, not Helene Charisse. With this new information I searched the Internet again and was rewarded with thousands of hits. It was only a matter of patience and diligence until I was able to put together a more comprehensive and more accurate picture of the Ocracoke Artists' Colony.

Madame Helene Scheu-Riesz was Austrian, as the islanders told me. And she did speak with a German accent. Also, she was about sixty years old when she arrived on the island, exactly as my sources remembered.

I learned a valuable lesson — trust your local sources!