

I first came to Ocracoke Island in 1945. I was almost one year old.

My father was born on the island in 1911. When he was 16 years old he left home. Like most young men of his generation, he moved to Philadelphia to work on dredges and tugboats on the Delaware River.

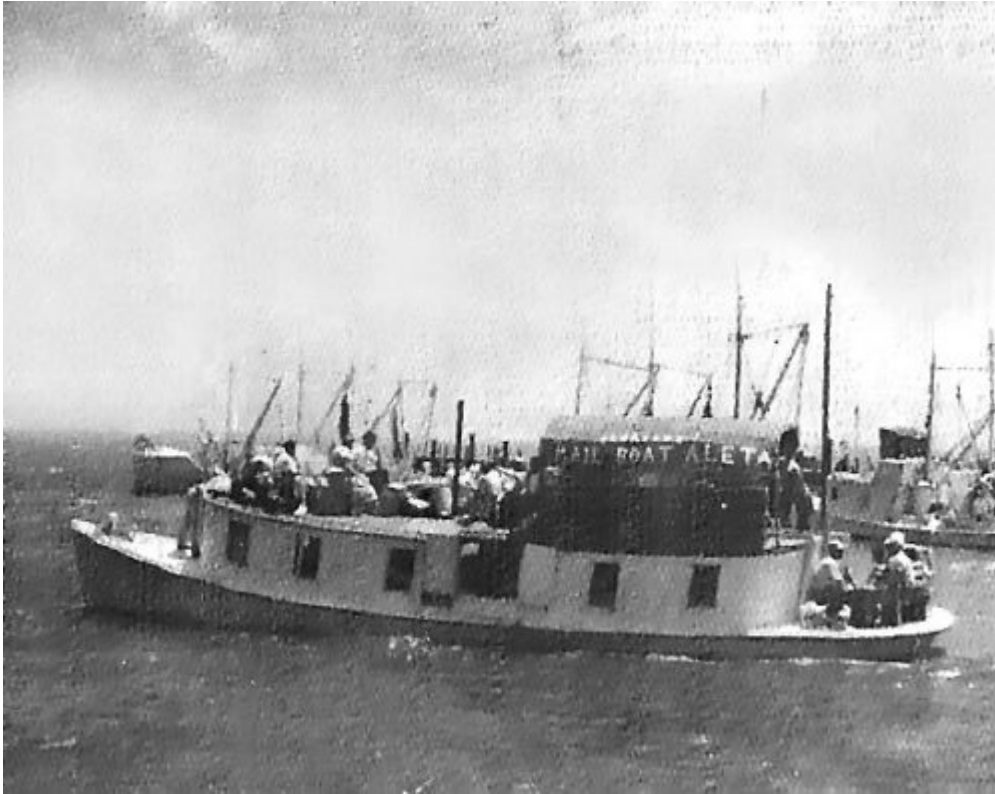
Although my father married a girl from Pennsylvania and lived up north for the next thirty-five years, he brought his family back to the island every summer.

In the 1940s the road trip from Philadelphia to Ocracoke consumed three days.

After my father came home from work late Friday afternoon, he and my mother loaded the car. My brother and I sat in the back seat as we headed south. We drove into Virginia until my father got tired. Then we found a place to spend the night.

The next day we headed toward Atlantic, North Carolina, on the shores of Core Sound. In Atlantic we stayed with Julia, a family friend, and parked our car in her yard. The next day, around noon, Julia drove us to the docks where we boarded the mailboat *Aleta* for the four hour trip into Pamlico Sound and northeast to Ocracoke.

Mailboat *Aleta*:



This all changed in 1950. In that year Frazier Peele started the first car ferry operation across Hatteras Inlet. In 1951 my father decided we would drive our 1948 Plymouth to Ocracoke. This new route would only take us two days, but required three ferry crossings.

We left home early Saturday morning and drove south through the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia, arriving at Cape Charles, Virginia by mid-day for the 85 minute ferry ride across the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. The 300 foot long *Pocahontas* was capable of carrying between ninety and one hundred automobiles, or a combination of cars, diesel powered semi-trucks, and other vehicles.

After landing in Virginia Beach we followed the Ocean Highway around Norfolk, then turned east on less well-traveled roads, toward the Outer Banks.

My father knew we wouldn't arrive at Oregon Inlet before the departure of the last ferry of the day, so we were prepared to sleep in our car Saturday night. Mom packed sandwiches and soft drinks, and Dad fashioned tight-fitting screens for the windows of our Plymouth. We inserted the screens just before stopping (it was dusk), and not a moment too soon. Immediately the air outside our windows was filled with clouds of voracious blood-thirsty insects hovering just a few inches from us but prevented from reaching their goal by the

thin wire mesh.

We had barely finished our repast when headlights approached from the rear. A vehicle pulled up behind us, and the engine died. We all peered out the rear window. Three fishermen sat in a surplus WWII Army Jeep...with no top.

In less than a minute the commotion began. First there were howls...shrieks...and yelps. Then there was slapping and smacking...jumping and hopping about...and cussing. In a moment of misplaced altruism my mother suggested we invite them into our car. Even she immediately realized this was a foolish idea. My parents, my 15 year old brother and I, along with several pieces of luggage, left no room for three burly fishermen.

It was painful to listen to their cries of anguish, but thankfully that did not last long. After a few minutes we heard the fishermen hurrying away. Their voices faded, and we did not hear them again until the next morning.

As we were waiting to board the ferry my father walked back to speak to the men behind us. "What did you do last night," he asked. "It had to have been a miserable time."

The fishermen explained that they had never experienced anything as unpleasant in their entire lives. The only recourse they had was to wade out into Pamlico Sound. When they reached a depth of about three feet they simply sat down. The water came up to their chins.

"We stayed out there in the sound all night," one of the men said. "It was the only way to survive."

After landing on the south shore of Oregon Inlet we drove 55 miles to the landing for Frazier Peele's new ferry. Travelers who have crossed Hatteras Inlet on North Carolina's state run ferries will have a mental image of no-nonsense, 150' long steel vessels capable of carrying 30 or more vehicles. Frazier's ferry was different...much different.

By the mid-1950s Frazier Peele had constructed a wooden four-car ferry that included a pilot house, railings, and a vehicle ramp.

Frazier Peele's mid-1950s Ferry:

Frazier Peele's 1951 vessel was decidedly more primitive. Originally his ferry was simply a shad boat on which he nailed wide planks to form a platform for one car.

Frazier Peele's First Ferry:



By the next year he had fastened two boats side by side on which he constructed a wider platform that could accommodate two cars, sometimes three.

The ferry had no ramp. Frazier simply laid two sturdy planks from the deck to the ground. after the first vehicle was safely aboard, Frazier moved the planks to the other side for the next car. A third vehicle could sometimes be loaded at right angles to the first two. After managing to get the front tires onto the platform, Frazier and other men standing nearby lifted up on the rear bumper, swung the car ninety degrees, and deposited the rear tires on the deck.

Frazier, who later became Port Captain for the NC Department of Transportation, Ferry Division, stood, or sat on a fishbox, with one hand on the tiller as we motored away from the landing.

On this particular trip, once out in Pamlico Sound the drivers and passengers migrated to our side of the vessel to chat with my father. The ferry heeled over, and I glanced out the side window of our car. There was nothing to see but water. From the other window I could only see the top of the car beside us...and blue sky. What excitement! For a child who had just finished first grade, this was a fabulous adventure.

My mama was not as enthusiastic.

We crossed the inlet at low tide. There was no dock on the north end of Ocracoke. In fact, there was no road on Ocracoke...just miles of sandy beach. At low tide a standard automobile could usually manage to drive from the inlet to the village on the hard-packed sand below the high water mark. But, because it was low tide, the ferry was unable to

maneuver very close to the soundside beach.

After anchoring his vessel 100 or so feet offshore, Frazier positioned the loading planks and directed the disembarkation. My father backed our Plymouth into the Sound, then drove through six inches of salt water, onto the beach.

Disembarking in the mid-1950s:



It was 14 miles to the village. The three drivers had conferred on the ferry. If one of the cars managed to get stuck in the sand, the others would not stop. No reason to have three vehicles mired down in soft sand, they decided. The goal was to get at least one car into the village. If the others failed to arrive promptly the Coast Guard would be notified. Then the “coasties” would drive their all-terrain vehicle down the beach, hoping to arrive at the scene of the bogged down car before the tide came in.

Driving the Beach:



VERY MAN is a roadbuilder on the Banks. Here the first car off to the ferry in the morning blazes a trail across the beach. Others follow in the tracks he makes. (Photos by Hemmer.)

(The caption reads: “EVERY MAN is a roadbuilder on the Banks. Here the first car off...the ferry in the morning blazes a trail across the beach. Others follow in the tracks he makes. (Photos by Hemmer.)”)

Once within sight of the village, another obstacle loomed before us. In the 1950s there was virtually no vegetation between the eastern edge of Ocracoke village and where the National Park Service campground is today. This stretch of wide tidal flats was dubbed the Plains. Three miles long, and a mile wide, the Plains was inundated by seawater during storms and hurricanes. Other than soft sand, broken seashells, tern nests, and tidal pools, there were only a few low dunes crowned by hardy and tenacious sea oats.

My father had driven fourteen miles on the hard beach, but because he had learned to drive in Philadelphia, he was uncomfortable driving in very soft sand. He was wary of trying to cross the Plains, so he made arrangements with his boyhood friend, Ansley O’Neal, to meet us at the edge of the surf.

My father slid over to the passenger’s side of the front seat, and Ansley took his position behind the steering wheel. He depressed the clutch, put the car in gear, and we were off for another adventure. Soon after Ansley shifted into third gear we were racing along the beach. My six year old mind was sure we were traveling at least 100 miles per hour. Then we turned, bumped over the berm of the beach, and went flying across the Plains.

Small tidal pools, nascent dunes, shells, and ocean debris that has washed ashore created an obstacle course for Ansley. He was having difficulty negotiating a clear path. Suddenly he opened the door, and stood up, keeping his right foot mashed down on the accelerator.

His left arm rested on the opened door; his right hand gripped the steering wheel. Peering over the hood, Ansley piloted our Plymouth on a zigzag trajectory across the Plains, kicking up sand and shells in our wake.

For a few moments I was part of a thrilling scene. I imagined we were fugitives, bank robbers or gangsters, fleeing federal agents as the car fishtailed back and forth, and bullets from automatic weapons whizzed by.

The adventure came to an end as the car plowed through the soft sand, and gradually lost momentum. In short order, however, we arrived at a hard-packed sandy lane at the edge of the village. Ansley stopped the car, stepped out, chatted with my father for a few minutes, and walked home. We proceeded to the School Road, and turned down a narrow lane next to Aunt Tressie's house, scattering clucking and squawking chickens along the way.

Grandmama Aliph was expecting us. She had already killed, plucked, and cleaned a chicken. As we unpacked and carried our luggage into the cottage, she put the chicken in a pan and placed it on the wood stove. In short order we were sitting at the rustic wooden table enjoying fried chicken, sweet potatoes and collards.

Thus began one of many magical summer vacations on Ocracoke Island for a young boy in the middle of the twentieth century.