

September Greetings from Ocracoke Island!

Many of you have had an opportunity to visit us this summer, some are planning an upcoming Fall vacation, and others are on the island as I write. Warm greetings to all of you.

If you have been to the Ocracoke Opry at Deepwater Theater on a Wednesday evening this summer you are probably familiar with Roy Parsons, native island musician and raconteur. Roy plays guitar & harmonica, and he yodels! He played on vaudeville stages years ago, sometimes with the likes of Gene Autry, and worked in circuses, as well as on dredge boats in Philadelphia. He returned home a number of years ago to work for Sam Jones, and now the North Carolina Division of Ferries, and is also a regular at the Opry. Roy has a great smile, a twinkle in his eye, and a wonderful, if wacky, sense of humor. He always has a story to relate or a joke to tell, and he is usually the first to laugh.

On Sunday, August 19, Roy celebrated his 80th birthday with a party at the Methodist Church Recreation Hall. Family and friends stopped by all afternoon to extend birthday greetings, share good food, play and sing. Roy entertained us with songs and stories.

Roy Parsons entertains guests at his 80th birthday party:



Like many island men in the first half of the twentieth century Roy left Ocracoke to work up north. He tells this funny story. In New York City for the very first time as a teenager, Roy was fascinated with the buildings, the people and all the activity. He arrived in the early afternoon and found a boarding house in a row of brownstones. Anxious to see the big city sights, he paid the landlady, stowed his belongings in his room and set out to explore. He wandered up and down the city blocks for hours taking in all of the activity and excitement of New York.

Eventually it was time to return to his room. But Roy wasn't used to blocks and blocks of look-alike houses. He had neglected to write down his new address! He was lost. Even with the help of a city police officer he was unable to identify his brownstone from all the others.

Finally he resigned himself to the inevitable. There was no way to find his way back. As a last resort, he looked up another O'cocker who had preceded him and so avoided spending the night on the streets. He never did find his room or his suitcase, but the experience taught him a lesson on resiliency....and it provided grist for one of Roy's funnier stories.

You can hear Roy sing and tell stories at island events or on his tape, "Songs & Tales from Ocracoke Island."

Ocracoke is, of course, a part of North Carolina, and shares customs and traditions with other areas of the South. However, many visitors to the island are surprised to discover this long-time connection with the Northeast.

For most of our history Ocracoke remained isolated from the mainland by Pamlico Sound, nearly 25 miles wide. It has been only about 40 years since the first automobile ferry offered regular trips between the island and other ports in eastern North Carolina. Ferry service to Hatteras Island is only about a decade older.

For much of the 19th century schooners carried essential goods along the eastern seaboard and connected cities from New England to Georgia and beyond. Many Ocracoke natives owned schooners or were captains. As such they regularly visited the larger northeastern ports of Norfolk, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York. It was much more unusual for an O'cocker to travel to Raleigh or other inland North Carolina cities. My grandparents were both born on Ocracoke in the late 1800's and seldom left the island. However one place they did visit was New York City....by schooner, of course.

My grandmother's uncle, Isaac O'Neal, died at an early age in Philadelphia in about 1885. Earlier, back home on the island, another young man, Bob O'Neal, was dating an attractive young lady. As sometimes happens in similar situations, Isaac also began to pay attention to this young lady and eventually wooed her away from Bob. Bob was not very happy about the turn of events and was heard to remark that if he ever had the chance he would "put Isaac's lights out."

Before long Isaac shipped out on a schooner and found himself in Philadelphia. Bob had also signed up as a sailor aboard the same ship. One fateful evening Isaac was alone on board and decided to walk into the city. As he stepped onto the gangplank it gave way underneath him and he plunged into the Delaware river and drowned. He was buried in Philadelphia. When news of the tragedy reached Ocracoke, islanders remembered Bob's threat and wondered aloud if he had had anything to do with Isaac's mishap. The suspicion of a foul deed lingered but the cause of the accident was never fully determined.

Eventually my grandfather's cousin, Perry Howard, born 1882, also found himself in Philadelphia. He was a young man at the turn of the century and looking for work. By then schooner traffic was dwindling and jobs on sailing vessels were fewer and harder to find. Perry landed himself a position with the American Dredging Company and soon was promoted to captain. At the time he is reported to have been the youngest captain on the Delaware River.

It was not long before a steady stream of island men made their way to the City of Brotherly Love. Someone early on secured a job with the Army Corps of Engineers. Within only a few years many of the dredges and tugboats on the Delaware River had deckhands, mates and captains that hailed from Ocracoke. My dad left the island in 1927, when he was only 16 years old. Before moving to Philadelphia he had never seen a brick building, running water, or an electric light. Spying an empty light socket in his new room he explored by sticking his finger into the opening. Once was all it took!

My grandmother had always taught my father to be polite and courteous. She admonished him as a young boy to always greet folks that he would meet along the sandy lanes on the island. When he arrived in the big city he said it just about wore him out saying hello to all the people he passed walking down Broad Street!

By the 1950's there were so many men from Ocracoke living in Philadelphia, working on the Delaware River that one of them was heard to complain "Damn that Perry Howard for ever starting this!"

Someone else from home remarked that all one had to do was walk down Delaware Avenue with a plate of delicious smelling "old drum" (also known as channel bass) and all the O'cockers would pour out of the rooming houses and taverns like rats abandoning a sinking ship.

Back home "Old Drum Ocracoke Style" was an island delicacy. I have many fond memories of sitting at my grandmamma Aliph's table, family all around, stories and laughter filling the room, savoring a plate piled high with this distinctive meal.

It is actually as much a ritual or a ceremony as it is a meal. Nowadays, because of fishing regulations, the meal is usually fixed with puppy drum, although other fish can be used as well. The following recipe comes from the [Ocracoke Cookbook](#) and was submitted by Danny and Margaret Garrish:

"Boil drum in lightly salted water until it flakes. In another pot, boil about two medium

potatoes per person. Hard boil two eggs per person. Dice a good size bowl of onions. Dice and fry-out (render) salt pork until brown and crunchy.

Assemble at the table, fixing each plate individually. Mash potatoes with fork, flake drum in with potatoes and sprinkle generously with diced onion. Add salt, pepper and chop up the hard boiled egg in the mixture, adding a good helping of cracklings and grease. Sprinkle with vinegar if desired. Enjoy!

Be sure to mix enough on the first plate. Somehow the second plateful never tastes as good as the first. Never plan anything for a couple of hours after you eat this. Just slide under the table and rest a spell. Don't forget the baked cornbread and lots of butter."

Family & friends at a recent meal of "Drum Ocracoke Style":



A full plate ready for eatin':



All of us at Village Craftsmen hope you have a wonderful Fall, and if we missed you this summer we hope to see you next year, if not before.

Philip and all the gang at Village Craftsmen