

A few days ago, Sundae Horn, our local community librarian, sent me a copy of the sheet music for "The Ocracoke School Song." Arnold Sundgaard wrote the words; Alec Wilder composed the music. With the annual PTA Variety Show coming up, Sundae thought it would be fun for the kids to revive the song that she remembers hearing students sing once about fifteen years ago. Principal Leslie Cole located a copy in the school files and shared it with Sundae, who asked me, "Any idea who Arnold Sundgaard was?"

Not only did I have no idea who Arnold Sundgaard was, I had never seen or heard of the song.

These are the words:

There's a school on the sands,  
on the sands by the sea;  
You can see where it stands  
by a green cedar tree.

There a mocking bird sings  
and the gulls fly above;  
O the school on the sands  
is the school that I love.

There's a light on the bay,  
and it shines from the shore.  
It will show you the way  
to the bright school house door.

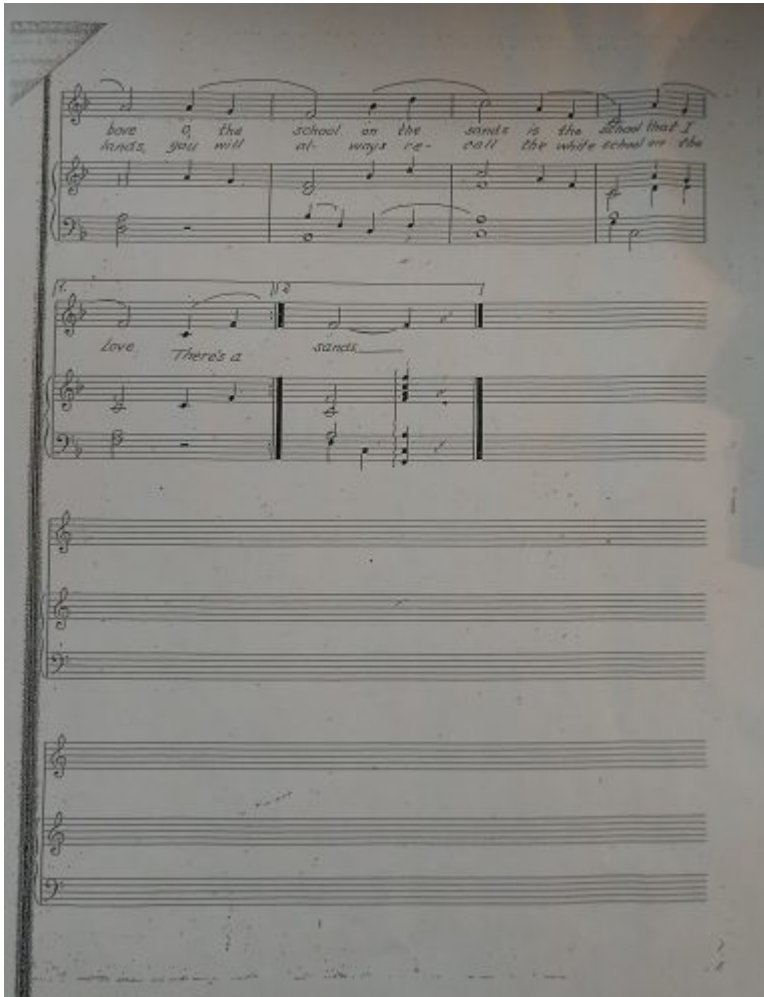
Though you travel from home  
to the far distant lands,  
You will always recall  
the white school on the sands.

THE OCRACOKE SCHOOL SONG  
words by Archie Lundgaard  
Music by Alex Walter

*mf*

There's a school on the sands, on the sands by the sea, you can see where it stands by a green ca-ear tree. There a mock-ing bird sings and the gulls fly a-ear door; Though you travel from home to the far dis-tant shore, It will show you the way to the bright school house.

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Thanks to the world wide web I soon learned that Arnold Sundgaard (1909-2006) was a nationally recognized American playwright, librettist, and lyricist. In addition to writing short stories and children's books, he taught at Columbia University, Bennington College, and the University of Texas. He specialized in drama and theatrics, and was probably best known for his role in the production of six Broadway plays. He even has his own Wikipedia page: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold\\_Sundgaard](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Sundgaard).

Just as on the "Ocracoke School Song," Sundgaard often collaborated with the prominent composer, Alec Wilder (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alec\\_Wilder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alec_Wilder)).

This new wealth of information led to the even more puzzling question, how did a prominent, celebrated lyricist come to write a beautifully simple song in homage to Ocracoke's tiny school?

After a little more research I discovered “The Lowland Sea,” a one-act folk opera (Libretto by Arnold Sundgaard, Music by Alec Wilder), written in 1952. You can listen to it here: [https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/wilderworld/episodes/2014-02-16T20\\_57\\_28-08\\_00](https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/wilderworld/episodes/2014-02-16T20_57_28-08_00), as performed May 16 & 17, 1963, in Dolton, Illinois, at the Thornridge High School Spring Musicale.

According to the liner notes, “‘The Lowland Sea’...was written as a remembering of the sea and sea songs - of dunes, of harbors, of voyaging, of loneliness, of waiting. It is hoped that it will seem familiar to anyone who has walked (or wanted to walk) the streets of Nantucket, or has waited for the evening mail boat at Ocracoke.”

I contacted Arnold Sundgaard’s son who said that his father and Alec Wilder visited Ocracoke, probably in the late 1940s or early 1950s, and mentioned the island frequently. Our isolated island village seems to have made quite an impression on them. Sundgaard’s son explained that his father and Wilder enjoyed the island and working in the peace and quiet. Unfortunately, no one alive remembers having met them. Nevertheless, it turns out that some of the school’s alumni remember singing “The Ocracoke School Song.” Mr. Theodore Rondthaler (school principal from 1948 to 1962) included the song at various school gatherings, the elementary teacher, Ms. Davis, taught it to her students in the 1960s, and Ms. Mary Ellen Piland discovered it and introduced it to her students in more recent years.



The 1917 Ocracoke Schoolhouse

The old 1917 schoolhouse, painted bright white, was replaced in the early 1970s with the current, larger and more modern building. But, thanks to Sundae, the school students are again learning to sing “The Ocracoke School Song.” Maybe now it will be recognized and

preserved as the official song for the Ocracoke School.