Alice and Theodore Rondthaler had been married for a decade when Alice's mother came from Connecticut to live with them in Clemmons, North Carolina. Mrs. Keeney was suffering from the "Melancholies."

In New England in the mid-1930s the popular cure for her malady was withdrawal to the seashore. Alice soon made inquiries about possible resort destinations on the coast of North Carolina. Someone suggested Ocracoke. Ocracoke Island was isolated and far from the cares of the mainland. The natives were stress-free, relaxed and friendly, and, Alice was told, the perfect place to take Mrs. Keeney for the cure.

Alice asked about places to stay, and was told that Ocracoke had no hotels, but Aunt Mame took in boarders. She should just write to "Aunt Mame." Her address was simply, Ocracoke, NC.

About two weeks later Alice received a post card with this note written in pencil: "Aunt Mame ain't keeping folks no more but you can stay with me. Uncle Gary."

That was all it took. Alice and Theodore began making preparations for their first trip to Ocracoke, "on faith" as Alice recalled.

On the appointed day Mrs. Keeney sat quietly, never speaking, as the Rondthalers motored east to the coastal village of Atlantic. There they would meet the mailboat for the four hour trip across Pamlico Sound.

The next day, around noon, Alice, Theodore, and Mrs. Keeney boarded the *Aleta*, a 42 foot wooden vessel powered by a diesel engine. In addition to the mail and a small amount of freight the *Aleta* could hold about two dozen passengers. Theodore passed his expensive leather suitcase to the deckhand who promptly tossed it unceremoniously through the deck hatch and into the hold, where it landed on blocks of ice.

"Excuse me," Theodore asked with as much civility as he could muster, "why did you throw my luggage below deck?"

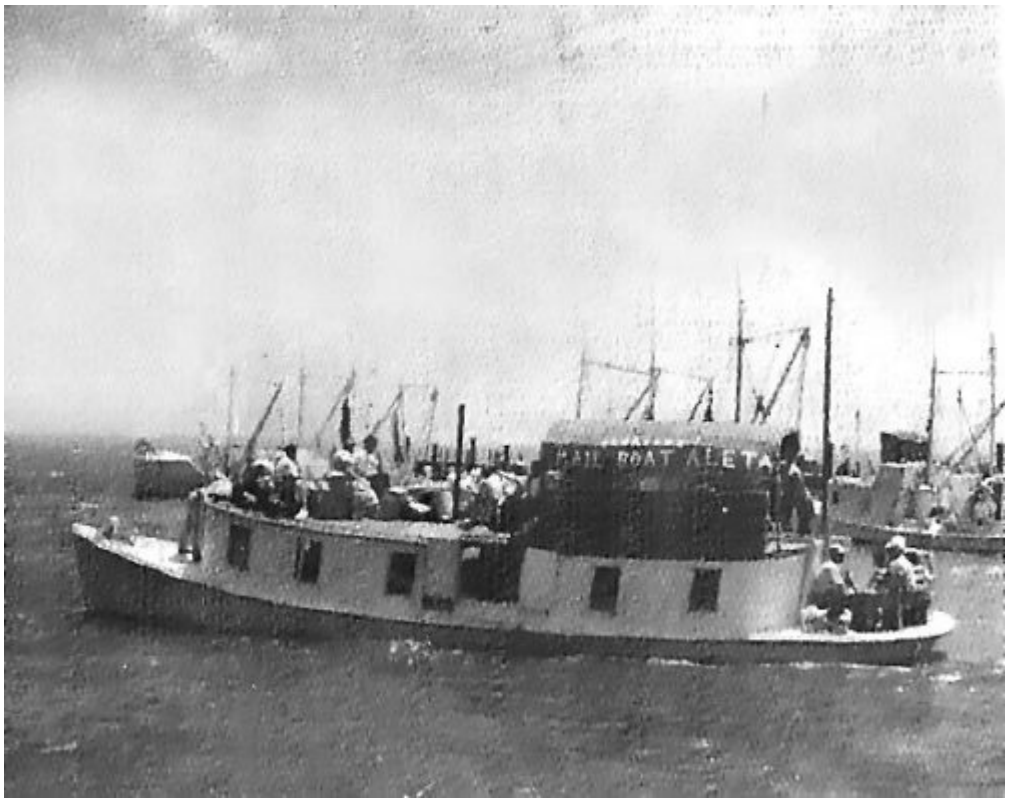
"Why, to keep the ice from melting, of course," came the answer.

Truth be told, Alice and Theodore were immediately impressed with the unpretentious demeanor and straightforwardness of the captain and crew of the *Aleta*.

About two hours after their departure, when the mainland had fallen below the western horizon, and the *Aleta* was still out of sight of Ocracoke, Mrs. Keeney looked at her

daughter, and uttered the first words she'd spoken in three years. "Alice," she said, "where in the hell are you taking me?"

Mailboat *Aleta*:



The Rondthalers' first trip to Ocracoke would not be their last, for it was love at first sight. The people, the history, the community, and the lifestyle all resonated with Alice and Theodore, a couple steeped in commitments to equality, tolerance, simplicity, and peace.

Alice Keeney (1899-1977) was a young, single woman when she moved from Somersville, Connecticut to Winston Salem, North Carolina. There she worked as secretary for Rev. Howard Edward Rondthaler (1871-1956), a distinguished Moravian pastor who later served as president of Salem College, and still later was consecrated bishop of the Southern Moravian Province. Rev. Rondthaler was married to Katharine Boring, a Philadelphia Quaker.

Rev. Ronthaler's eldest son, Theodore Edward (1899-1966), was born in the parsonage while his father was pastor of Christ Church in Old Salem, North Carolina. The Moravian faith was central to his upbringing. Six generations of Theodore's forebears had served as

Moravian teachers and clergymen, in Saxony, Russia, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina.

Theodore attended private and public schools in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and in North Carolina. In the summers, from 1912, when he was thirteen years old, until 1921, he visited Pocono Lake Preserve in Pennsylvania to visit his grandparents. Pocono Lake Preserve was a summer camp founded by devout Quakers, Isaac Sharpless and Joseph Elkinton. The camp consisted of one hundred cottages and offered hospitality to members of the Orthodox branch of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends.

It was at the lake that Theodore developed a life-long interest in swimming, rowing, and canoeing. He also enjoyed music, especially playing his guitar and clarinet. Perhaps the most enduring lessons Theodore learned at Pocono Lake Preserve were the high ideals and principled testimonies of the Quakers.

Following graduation from high school, Theodore enrolled in the University of North Carolina, where he graduated in 1919. He was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, the student council, and Golden Fleece, the highest honorary organization on the campus. The Order of the Golden Fleece selected its members based on “service to the University as reflected in scholarship, motivation, creativity, loyalty, and leadership in academic and extracurricular pursuits.”

After receiving his B.A. Theodore pursued a number of interests, including unloading fish at Fulton’s Fish Market in New York City. He lived in the Bowery, an area “filled with employment agencies, cheap clothing and knickknack stores, cheap moving-picture shows, cheap lodging-houses, cheap eating-houses, [and] cheap saloons,” as it was described in 1919. Bums, prostitutes, gangs, “degenerates,” and thousands of sailors on shore leave frequented the Bowery. Theodore took a room at the YMCA, one of the first institutions of social reform in the Bowery. While rooming there he was frequently exhorted to better himself!

From the YMCA Bowery Theodore moved to New Jersey, where he enrolled in Princeton University. He received his master’s degree in English and Latin in 1923. During the next two years he toured Europe by motorcycle, and attended classes in Munich and Paris. With only enough money for his boat fare back to the states, Theodore earned his meals aboard ship by playing his clarinet at the captain’s table.

By 1924 Theodore had returned to North Carolina where he began teaching Latin at Salem College. There he met and fell in love with Alice Keeney, his father’s secretary. They were married in 1927. The following year the couple moved to Clemmons, North Carolina where

Theodore taught high school. He later became principal. The Rondthalers had two children, Howard and Alice Katharine.

In 1935, while the Rondthalers were living in Clemmons, they discovered Ocracoke. They were instantly enamored of the island, and their one week vacation quickly expanded to three. They even bought a cottage, the old Dan and Sabra Tolson home, which at that time was owned by the McIlhenys, a mainland family that enjoyed spending summers on the island. Remarkably, it was not until two years later that the Rondthalers saw the inside of their new house. From then on they spent as much of the summer as possible on Ocracoke.

On December 7, 1941 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and suddenly the United States was at war. By the end of the spring school term in 1942 the T. A. Loving Company had begun work on a Navy Section Base on Ocracoke Island.

That summer Theodore secured a carpenter's permit which allowed him to work on Ocracoke. Because of his ability to read blueprints and use a surveyor's transit, Theodore was soon transferred to building the first paved road on the island, a one-lane concrete strip between the Base and an "Ammunition Dump," a row of protected and reinforced buildings used to store live ammunition.

By October the T.A. Loving Company had built barracks for up to 600 Navy personnel, administration and engineering buildings, radar and communications facilities, an electrical shop, offices, and a mess hall.

Alice and Theodore kept their permanent residence in Clemmons until after the war. In 1945 they took jobs at an experimental liberal arts college located in the mountains of North Carolina. Black Mountain College emphasized art, poetry, music, and design, which were integrated into the curriculum according to John Dewey's principles of education. Theodore taught several unconventional courses, including "History of Extraordinary Communities." No doubt he included references to Ocracoke, where he and Alice continued to spend their summers.

By 1948 the Rondthalers' children, Howard and Alice Katharine, were enrolled at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. At that time Alice and Theodore Rondthaler left their jobs at Black Mountain College and moved to Ocracoke permanently. Theodore was hired as principal of the local school, and Alice as one of his four teachers. In short order, as Carl Goerch put it in his 1956 book "Ocracoke," they were "considered as much a part of Ocracoke as the lighthouse or the Coast Guard station." Goerch goes on to say "there's a mutual liking and understanding existing between them and the natives of the island."

The Old Ocracoke School House:

(Photo courtesy of Earl O'Neal)

In his spare time Theodore enjoyed strolling through the village, using the many well-worn sandy paths that wound between modest clapboard houses, family cemeteries, general stores and chicken yards, and across makeshift wooden bridges that traversed languid tidal creeks. Mostly he was out and about visiting neighbors, or simply stopping to chat with fishermen mending their nets or with carpenters building a new skiff. When storms and hurricanes threatened, Theodore made it his mission to pass the word throughout the village.

Alice was just as gregarious. One islander described her as a "walking newspaper." In her wanderings about the village Alice collected the news: who was down with the flu, how many fish were brought to the docks, when the preacher's new baby was due, why the mailboat was late getting into the harbor. Eventually Alice published her local news in the school paper and in the Outer Banks weekly newspaper, the *Coastland Times*.

Every spring Alice organized a Junior Class trip to some distant city, maybe Raleigh, or even Washington, DC. For many of her students this would be their first opportunity to visit a city, hail a cab, eat in a fancy restaurant, or see a play.

Former students remember Theodore and Alice as "a mighty good principal and teacher." It would be an understatement to say that they were respected. This is not to say that Ocracoke students didn't occasionally play pranks – tacks on the teacher's rush bottom

chair, or a toad in the teacher's desk drawer. But Principal Rondthaler attempted to instill his values (fairness, respect, responsibility, and creativity, to name a few) in all of his students.

The Rondthalers remained at the school for fourteen years.

At retirement Theodore obtained his surveyor's license. At that time island deeds were notoriously vague. Corners were often indicated as "the large live oak tree," "the corner of Harry's chicken pound," or "the stake near William's shell pile." For several years he used his skills to provide more accurate deeds, and settle land disputes.

Theodore's Quaker background also helped him settle personal squabbles. He not only informally mediated quarrels between neighbors; he was also available as a counselor for couples experiencing marital difficulties.

Even after retirement Alice and Theodore continued to teach Sunday School at the Methodist Church. Theodore acted as lay preacher when the minister was off the island. Both are remembered for their familiarity with the Bible, and their ability to bring meaning to ancient texts by connecting them to current events and contemporary issues. The Rondthalers were always respected. They were also persuasive advocates for social harmony.

Sometime after Marvin Howard established the Ocracoke Boy Scout troop in the mid 1950s Theodore accepted the position of scoutmaster, one of many volunteer roles he filled.

Eight students graduated from Ocracoke School in 1965. Theodore had been retired for three years, and he was recruited as Commencement Speaker. He chose as his text two verses from the Biblical book of Amos: "Thus he shewed me: and, behold, the LORD stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand. And the LORD said unto me, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A plumbline. Then said the LORD, Behold, I will set a plumbline in the midst of my people Israel"

Theodore described the plumbline, a simple contractor's tool, and pointed out that the plumbline embodies the principal of dependability. Then his talk became personal. Addressing each graduate by name he spoke of the need for dependability – for Joseph and Reginald who were on their way to college; for June Yvette and Margaret who would be attending nurses training; for Jimmy who would be doing training in auto mechanics; for Vickie and Linda who were getting married; and for Armistead who would be pursuing electronics maintenance and repair.

Theodore also became chairman of the Ocracoke Board of Mosquito Control and was instrumental in implementing a policy of digging mosquito control ditches to drain breeding areas within the village.

Theodore died in April of 1966 after a struggle with cancer. His tombstone on Ocracoke reads “Yea, a man may say, thou hast faith and I have works: Shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.: James II: 18.

Theodore Rondthaler in Back Row, with Students (back row: Maude Ellen Garrish, Hazel Wahab, Peggy O’Neal, Wanda Simpson,& Josephine Howard; front row: Sigma Willis, Mickey Garrish, & Walter C. O’Neal):

(Photo from the Alice Rondthaler Collection, courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society)

After Theodore died Alice continued to give her time and energy to the Ocracoke community. She wrote for local publications, collected island history and stories, continued to be an active member of the Methodist church, and befriended both native Ocracokers and newcomers to the island.

Alice periodically invited friends to her cottage for seafood dinners. Alice almost always baked brown bread, and fixed baked beans with bacon. “Maggie,” she once said, “you can bring the green beans. Merle, you can bring the potato salad, and Sherrill, you and David

can bring the crab cakes." When Sherrill protested that she'd never made crab cakes, Alice countered that all she needed to do was walk across the lane and ask her neighbor, Rebecca Spencer, how to make crab cakes. "Rebecca makes the best crab cakes on the island," Alice pointed out. It was Alice's way of introducing newcomers to island natves.

Once, while on a road trip off-island, Alice was pulled over for speeding. She explained to the officer that she was listening to a tape of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and it was just not possible for her to drive slowly to that tune. The trooper found Alice's novel excuse entertaining, but he issued the ticket anyway…along with a warning to listen to different music while driving.

Alice continued to travel into her 70s. On her last trip to the mainland she contracted an infection, and died shortly afterwards from complications of pneumonia. Her body was returned to Ocracoke for the funeral, and carried to the community Cemetery, as so many before her, in Monk Garrish's old blue Jeep pickup truck.. She is buried beside Theodore. Her epitaph reads, "She hath done what she could." Mark XIV: 8.

Alice Rondthaler:

(Photo from the John Wall Collection, courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society)

Alice often said that once you get Ocracoke sand between your toes you'll always come back. Theodore frequently remarked that he couldn't thank Ocracoke or its people enough for what they had given him.

Ocracokers will always be indebted to the Rondthalers for their abiding love of this place, and for their many and valuable contributions to the school and the community.

Mrs. Keeney may not have known "where in the hell" her daughter and son-in-law were taking her in 1935, but Alice and Theodore quickly discovered where they were – home.