

As in most small rural villages and towns across America, Ocracoke children of several generations ago played with a variety of homemade toys, and enjoyed simple games like marbles, leap frog, and jump rope.

In addition, using leather balls made from old shoes, boys played a now almost forgotten version of baseball called “cat.” A colonial precursor to the national sport, cat survived on Ocracoke long after it disappeared from most other communities.

Also, with wind so prevalent along this section of the Outer Banks, flying kites was a favorite pastime of island children.

When spring approached Ocracoke boys (and sometimes girls) made wooden whistles from myrtle branches. This month’s newsletter explains exactly how to make a homemade wooden whistle just like the ones my father taught me to make more than a half century ago. I hope some of our readers will help their children and/or grand children make one of these whistles. It might be a good alternative to video games! Look for more information about other island games and toys in a future newsletter.

To make a wooden whistle, first find a straight section of a myrtle branch (I’m told that wood from the willow tree also makes fine whistles, and was the wood of choice in many mainland towns). Wait until spring, when the sap is running. Choose a section about 6 to 10 inches long, about the diameter of your thumb or middle finger, and cut it out with a sharp pocket knife. Be sure it is straight and without protruding branches or blemishes (see figure A).



Then simply cut off one end at an angle. Cut it so that the tip created is still slightly blunt (figure B).

Next cut a notch in the top of your stick. An inch or so back from the blunt tip cut straight down by pressing the sharp knife blade through the bark and into the wood. Then make the other side of the notch, starting a short distance beyond the first cut. Bring the knife back at an angle and cut towards the first cut (again, figure B).



About 5 or 6 inches back from the tip make a cut around the twig. Cut all the way through the bark, just down to the wood. The goal now is to slip the bark off of the twig. This can be tricky, so be very careful. The best way to do this is to tap the twig with the handle of

your pocket knife to loosen the bark. Be sure to tap on every part of the bark several times. Tap hard enough to loosen the bark from the wood, but not so hard as to crack the bark. You might even want to moisten the twig. If the bark cracks or splits you will need to start over again with another twig.

In between taps grasp the bark and gently twist. Again be careful not to split the bark. Eventually the tapping and twisting pressure will loosen the bark and you will be able to slip the bark off of the twig (figure C). Lay the bark off to the side, remembering to be gentle so as not to damage it.

Holding the naked twig, now enlarge the notch by cutting it longer and deeper, extending the cut back from the first cut you made for the notch. The length and depth of this notch will determine the pitch of the whistle. Don't make the notch excessively long (the bark will need to fit tightly when you put it back on your whistle), or too deep (you won't want to weaken the twig and break it).

Next slice off a thin sliver of wood on the top of the twig, between the notch and the tip. Don't slice off too much, just enough to let air pass through after you slip the bark back on (again figure C).



Finally, dip your twig into a glass or water, or puddle, or just moisten it with your mouth (don't use oleander or other poisonous branches!), and slip the bark back on, lining it up exactly how it came off.

Now you can entertain the children in your life with your new, authentic Ocracoke Island twig whistle. We encourage you to pass the skill on to all of the special children in your life. And if you have a mind to, send us a photo of your whistle.

Look for a photo (or more) of a real whistle on our [Ocracoke Journal](#) later in the spring.