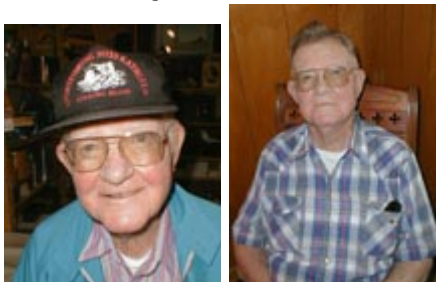


Warm greetings from the folks at Village Craftsmen!

Winter is one of our favorite times on Ocracoke. The weather may be chilly (this winter has been even colder than usual) and hardly any of the stores are open, but it is a time for family, friends and community. Sometimes we get together just to visit, and often some of our local musicians will bring their instruments so we all enjoy an impromptu concert. At other times we gather to play cards or share a meal or even to dance the night away. The school, one of the churches, the Civic Association or the Ocracoke Preservation Society might also host an evening of fellowship. In these ways Ocracoke is much like a traditional village from the past. Gatherings like these are opportunities to share stories, pass on news, laugh together, and find common solutions to community problems.

This Saturday a group of friends has planned a pot luck dinner. Young and old alike will gather for an evening to just enjoy each other's company. One of those we expect to be there is my father, Lawton Howard.



Many of you know my dad from visiting the Community Store early on a summer morning. He was often one of the "old men" sitting on the front porch. He celebrated his 89th birthday last October but has had some health problems lately that now make it difficult for him to drive and climb steps. Nevertheless, you might see him in the Village Craftsmen on your next island visit.

Lawton was born on Ocracoke in 1911. He was the tenth of thirteen children born to Aliph and Homer Howard. If you have ever wandered into the graveyards across the street from Village Craftsmen you will have noticed the many small family plots there. Many of the graves are of children because infant mortality was so high. Ocracoke was even more isolated a hundred years ago, childhood diseases were common and medical care on the island consisted almost exclusively of home remedies. Lawton was one of seven children who survived.

My dad never had much formal schooling and he left the island when he was sixteen years old to join a number of other Ocracokers working for the Army Corps of Engineers on dredges and tug boats in the Philadelphia area.

After spending 35 years working on the Delaware River he retired. He and my mother, Kunigunde, moved back home to Ocracoke in the early 1960's. It was something he always talked about doing. As they say, you just can't get all of the sand out of your shoes!

Since then my dad has become something of a local character. He laughs easily and enjoys telling jokes and funny stories at any opportunity. Although my mother, who died in 1989, would shake her head and wave her hand in the air to indicate that she thought he was being too silly, everyone else seemed to enjoy his off-beat sense of humor. He has been known to keep a bucket under an electrical outlet just so he can tell visitors that he is catching the extra electricity that runs out of the sockets, in case of an emergency. He likes to entertain children by telling them that the stripes on the Cape Hatteras lighthouse were originally painted straight up and down and then the tower was twisted to make them spiral.

If you are a woman beware of my dad's deception. He often tells women that it is his birthday just to garner an extra hug. And it works every time! At the Jackson's Christmas pot luck party at their garage two months ago I sat at a long table with my dad. Women walked by all evening and said a polite hello to me. When they caught sight of my dad, however, they enthusiastically threw their arms around him, kissed him on the cheek, held his hand and generally made fools of themselves. All I can hope is to have inherited some of his octogeneric charisma!

Lawton is also a self-taught and accomplished craftsman. He helped me build two houses but he is most proud of his 18' traditional Outer Banks skiff.



This boat is all wood and he built it entirely without written plans. Usually in the summer it is docked at the Community Store or out in the sound helping me and friends rake clams. This summer you may see it in the yard behind the Village Craftsmen where I will be working to make a few repairs.

My dad also made the helm, which as you can see, demonstrates his considerable attention to detail and aesthetics.



Although curiously my family members are not know as commercial fishermen (once when I asked my dad if his father had ever been a commercial fishermen he replied, "I know he went out with Uncle Wheeler once.") they often had a close association with boats and the sea.

My great-grandfather, James Howard (whose photo you can see in the Village Craftsmen), was keeper of the US Life Saving Station on Ocracoke at Hatteras Inlet at the turn of the twentieth century. He was stationed there when the "Ariosto," a British, schooner-rigged steamship went ashore and broke up during rough seas on Christmas Eve, 1899. At least five crew members drowned before the surfmen could reach them, but eight were rescued and shared in my great-grandmother Zilphia's Christmas dinner. Although the ship was lost, much was salvaged and eventually found its way into island homes.

Before he left, the Ariosto's captain, R.R. Baines, a native of Antwerp, thanked James for his heroic efforts and offered the platform rocking chair from his personal quarters as a parting gift of appreciation. The chair remains in the family today. Thirty years ago my father completely disassembled it, re-glued it, re-caned it and re-finished it. It now sits prominently in my father's living room as a reminder of Ocracoke's honorable maritime history.



In addition, my father copied the separate parts of the chair for patterns and made two dozen reproductions, all of them constructed with at least some driftwood that we gathered from the beach in the 1970's. Most of these chairs were sold in the Village Craftsmen, but several family members, islanders and other friends also are proud owners of these examples of my father's superb craftsmanship



In recent years, as his energy and physical abilities have declined, my father has turned his attentions to other activities. After my mother died my dad lost no time collecting a sizable inventory of tasty recipes that he graciously shares with family and friends. His pan of hot buttered rolls, bread pudding or rice pudding is always enthusiastically received by all of the folks who work at Village Craftsmen.

When he was 83 years old he also took up another new hobby. Although he had read the newspaper all of his life, he had never read a book. In 1994 he read "Alicia," a 400 page account of a young Jewish girl during the holocaust. Since then he has read dozens more, including "To Kill a Mocking Bird," "Silas Marner," "The Clan of the Cave Bear," and his favorite, "The White Dog." I think he should be nominated as the "poster child" for National Library Week!

If, on your next visit to Village Craftsmen, you see Lawton sitting behind the counter be sure to stop and say hello. He is an important part of our living island heritage.

We hope you are having a happy and productive winter and we hope to see you on your next visit to Ocracoke.

Philip and all of the staff at Village Craftsmen