



Outermost Oil on Copper, Cape Cod National Seashore

Nature's Legacies on Cape Cod

by Rick Fleury

Driving along Route 6A in Brewster not long ago, I passed a small sign along the road that read:

“HELP SAVE THIS VIEW” – marking a beautiful view known as the Quivett Marsh Vista.

Looking further into it, I found out the view had been blocked for some fifty years by what was known as the Skyline Motel, but a recent demolition revealed this long-hidden vista. Now, the small parcel of land was being sold -- and a local land trust was working to acquire the land. The parcel would then connect to 100 acres of town-owned marsh of Quivett Creek and an additional 70 acres of beach and upland in neighboring Dennis known as Crowes Pasture Conservation Area.

This is just one of many efforts underway in all towns across Cape Cod to “Take Back the Cape” – either returning land that was developed to its original, natural setting, or set aside undeveloped land for future generations as open land through grassroots efforts by individuals, trusts, towns, the state and federal governments.

Today, nearly 7000 acres of Cape Cod have been set aside as open land by local land trusts, another 1000 acres in Wellfleet create the Mass. Audubon's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, and an additional 44,600 acres comprise the Cape Cod National Seashore, 40 miles of “the great Outer Beach” stretching from Nauset Beach in Orleans and Chatham to the tip of Provincetown at Long Point – which includes the Provincelands, the second-oldest “common lands” in the United States, second only to Boston Common, set aside by the Plymouth Bay Colony in the 1600s as a fisheries reserve.

All told, these nearly 53,000 acres are the legacies of nature we have inherited on Cape Cod and, like a family heirloom, are now ours to treasure, maintain, protect and pass on to future generations.

“A special place doesn’t stay special by accident,” said Margo Fenn, former director of the Cape Cod Commission. And, Mark Robinson, current executive director of The Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts, adds “We succeed when nothing happens.” The Compact was formed in 1986, and assists and oversees local land trusts in towns all over Cape Cod.

“We pretty much have coverage from stem to stern,” says Mr. Robinson. “But,” he says, “it’s only through lots of behind the scenes work to make sure that nothing happens.” Laughing at the irony of the positive in the negative, he adds, “It’s very rewarding when nothing happens.”

Mr. Robinson, and many like him, lament that more was not done in terms of acquiring land on Cape Cod for conservation and preservation in the 1950s or 1960s before land values began to skyrocket, but such is the nature of man.

“Back then people didn’t see the development threat,” says Mr. Robinson. “Until people feel the anxiety of losing their open space, they’re not necessarily roused to activity.”

And, walking the national seashore, one can easily forget about the threat of development. There is peace in the air, and justifiably. The legacy of this national seashore is one of ten in the United States – the first being Cape Hatteras, established in 1937 as part of the New Deal.

When the Cape Cod National Seashore was established in 1961, it was considered “an urban-oriented park unit” and given a high priority because of its high quality, its vulnerability to development and its proximity to Boston and the ability to serve the heavily populated southern New England region.

But, it was also part of an established, long-settled community, which included Provincetown and an area population in excess of 200,000 inhabitants. Certain histories describe the process: “...it was necessary to create a fragmented park with numerous inholdings and special arrangements with landowners, municipalities and the state.”

In other words, The Kennedy Bill, signed by John F. Kennedy in 1961, was not met with unanimous, unfettered support. Longtime residents of these Outer Cape communities saw the federal government coming in and deciding what was to become of their land, their way of life and, in many cases, what they could and could not do on their own family properties.

While today, much of this initial opposition has waned, and most agree the seashore is a major win for Cape Cod and the nation, some still grumble about being told what is and is not tolerated by the Park Service.

But, walking anywhere within these many miles of ocean beaches, dunes, woodlands, freshwater ponds, marshes and historic sites, it is hard to ignore the foresight and wisdom that won this chapter of Cape Cod history.

Foresight seems to be the key in conservation and preservation efforts. While it is easy to enjoy the natural beauty around us, it is only with foresight that this enjoyment can be assured. Such was the case with my former editor and friend, Henry Beetle Hough, longtime editor of the Vineyard Gazette and a legendary conservationist on Martha's Vineyard.

Mr. Hough and his wife, Betty, lived on Pierce Lane in Edgartown. From the north window of their living room, the Houghs looked out on a field known as Sheriff's Meadow and a small ice pond. In winters past, ice was cut from Sheriff's Meadow Pond and stored in an icehouse. But, with the advent of electric refrigerators, the icehouse had become irrelevant, and rumors began that Sheriff's Meadow would soon be developed.

The Houghs decided to buy Sheriff's Meadow and conserve it. Mr. Hough would later recall, "I had \$7,500 from magazine rights from *The Women's Home Companion* for a book. It was the only time I ever had \$7500 at one time, so we decided to preserve the ice pond and its surroundings." Yet, while the Houghs were prepared to buy the land, none of the existing conservation groups on the Island wished to accept it. Undaunted, the Houghs created a conservation organization: The Sheriff's Meadow Foundation. Named after this property, the foundation was formally chartered on April 2, 1959. Borrowing \$6000, the Houghs bought additional acreage around the pond.

Today, Sheriff's Meadow Foundation owns over 2000 acres of conservation land on Martha's Vineyard and holds conservation restrictions on an additional 600 acres. Properties range in size from less than a quarter-acre to more than 400 acres. Properties are located in each of the six Island towns, and the larger properties host ten miles of public walking trails.

This one particular walk, with Mr. Hough and his dog Killie in the Spring of 1985, I will always remember: "*...just about this time, we walked around the pond, Mr. Hough and Killie and I, and sat for a rest at the dam between the pond and the mudhole. Mr. Hough grabbed budding branches and brought them to his nose as I pushed him in his chair around the pond. The wheels left marks that stayed for weeks afterwards. Mr. Hough had a warm jacket on and his bright red cap.*

He asked for the walk – after my suggestion several times before – but he asked when he was ready. He'd been thinking about it from the start. It was a great idea.

And he and Killie and I stopped at the dam and we were quiet. It was sunset, and a bright moon was sharing the dusk sky. We stopped, listened, smelled, and breathed deep the cool late-May air, the air as precious and passing as that moment, never to be forgotten."

That was Mr. Hough's last trip around his beloved pond, but not mine. I return to Sheriff's Meadow whenever I can, and can always rely on a walk around the pond. The tracks have faded, but the memories and its profound beauty remain forever – thanks to the foresight of Mr. and Mrs. Hough, and the continuing efforts of the Sheriff's Meadow Foundation.

Conservation efforts are alive and well in these parts. “There’s an appetite for it,” Mr. Robinson says, thankfully pointing to the continued appropriations from Cape towns at Town Meeting for land acquisitions. Efforts to “Take Back the Cape” are succeeding, and these Cape Cod legacies will continue for future generations.