

The SUMMER KID

This is the story of a Brooklyn kid who started coming up to the Cape when he was eight years old. That was in 1952. The kid and the Cape have changed mightily over the years, but we're both still here.

My parents were professional musicians whose band had played at Camp Edwards during World War II, so when time came for them to decide on a vacation spot, the Cape was a logical choice. Their band had also played at the Barclay, a roadhouse that occupied the space that the Chapoquoit Grille does now. The land between the main highway and the railroad track was owned by Bert and Mary Bowman, whose son Stan had built - with the help of his Uncle Fred English - some cottages for summer use. It was one of these cottages that the Black family rented for the summer.

The transition from apartment-dwelling city kid to summer Cape Codder was not at first an easy one for me. There were strange un-Brooklyn-like things to contend with, like ticks and poison ivy and a refrigerator that was quite literally an "icebox". Hood's milk tasted funny, as did the bread made by Sunbeam or Giusti's. If you needed something, you had to drive to get it, or walk down to George West's market in West Falmouth Village. (The walk became less of an ordeal once we discovered the availability of penny candy in the little shop across the road.) Or the route guy came around once a week in his truck to see if you needed anything. Yikes!

There were kids around other than the ones you were used to, but they talked funny and never heard of stickball, and even if you managed to teach them the game, you couldn't keep score because there were no "sewers" (manhole covers) to tell you how far the ball was hit.

I have never been shy about exercising my right to kvetch (which reminds me - as a Brooklynite, my conversation was liberally sprinkled with phrases from such exotic dialects as Yiddish and Sicilian, all of which I am certain rendered my speech patterns even less comprehensible to the Cape Codders with whom I attempted to communicate), and today as a parent I wonder at my own parents' patience with the griping I felt I had to do. I credit them today with seeing the greater good that lay ahead, although I realize that even they were sorely tested in their resolve when I came down with some communicable disease - I think it was chicken pox - not long after our arrival in West Falmouth. They never said it, but I'm sure they welcomed - not without feelings of guilt - the resulting cessation of complaints as I lay in the tiny cottage bedroom speckled and feverish.

But wonder of wonders - I recovered and began slowly to discover that this Cape Cod place was really not too bad, and for all it lacked of Brooklyn it made up for with charms of its own, like Chapoquoit Beach where I learned to swim and the ponds nearby where I learned to fish. I also discovered that the open space between the cottages and the Bowmans' farmhouse could be cleared for baseball

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purposes. I can assure any parent of a restive child that attaching the kid - surgically if necessary - to the handles of an ancient rusty manual lawnmower and then somehow motivating said kid to try reducing two acres of Cape Cod's hardiest weeds to the consistency of the Fenway Park infield will do wonders for the little person's delicate psyche as well as his or her appetite. After a morning of fighting weeds, a Sunbeam sandwich and a big glass of Hood's best didn't seem too shabby at all.

The family protocol was as follows: three of us - my Mom, younger brother, and I - would remain in the cottage, phone-less and TV-less, all summer. My Dad would work in Manhattan during the week and then come up to spend the weekend. I fondly remember the Friday night excitement of preparing for Dad's arrival on the Cape Codder, which always included washing the car and getting an ice cream cone from the Iris on Main Street. Any food shopping that Mom had to do was done at the Ten Acre store across the street, and if we had time to kill we could watch the doughnut-making machinery in the front window. Even for a jaded know-it-all city kid, this was pretty exciting stuff, and nothing in the vast impersonal world of today's doughnutry (to coin a phrase) can even come close to the decadence of one of Ten Acres' hot fresh gems still dripping grease. "Yummy" would be the operative word here.

The Cape Codder, operated as it was by the infamous New Haven Railroad, would often be delayed, which meant that we'd usually have time to kill waiting for it down at the Falmouth station. We'd pass the time with games of one sort or another, and my Mom - a card enthusiast from her days on the road with my father's band - would teach us wide-eyed innocents various species of poker, gin rummy, blackjack, etc. I don't recall any money being involved, but I do recall that the card games were excellent if unusual pastimes while we awaited the arrival of the train.

Another favorite game was some kind of horse race, in which the movements of the various cardboard horses - I believe representing Kentucky Derby winners of years past - were determined by a spinning pointer. No self-respecting gamer of 2014 would go near this unless she were an antique game collector, but we sure had a lot of fun with it.

Finally someone - usually a kid - would spot the headlight coming around the curve down-track, and - barring anything unforeseen - we knew that the Cape Codder and its cargo of beloved humanity was shortly to arrive in Falmouth.

My Dad was always happy to arrive, happier at some times more than others depending on whether the train was equipped with a club car. I remember my Dad getting off the train one night in the company of a man none of us had ever seen before. They gave every appearance of being big buddies of at least thirty years' acquaintance, but in the general excitement of the arrival, we kids missed the fact

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that my mother was in obvious confusion as to the identity of my father's boon travelling companion. Her confusion was not lessened upon hearing my father declare that we would now be driving said Boon Companion - if a name was ever attached to BC, I don't recall hearing it - to someplace in Hyannis. Of course we kids were delighted, but my mom - who had put in a long day and would now, for obvious reasons involving vigilant police and laws encouraging sobriety on county roads, be required to drive our happy wanderers out to Hyannis and - hopefully minus Boon companion - back to Falmouth - Mom as I say seemed to share our delight in a more muted fashion.

Fortunately for all concerned, a car pulled up with a family of its own to claim Boon Companion, and after more or less tearful goodbyes, BC was off to Hyannis. My mother allowed a brief period of merciful silence to intervene before addressing the inevitable. "Who was that?" she asked, to which my father replied "I have no idea - I never saw the SOB before in my life."

I will go to my grave convinced that exactly the same conversation was going on in Boon Companion's car.

A final recollection involving train travel: my Dad returned to the city (as we always referred to New York - I don't think we even knew Boston was there, and Providence wasn't a real city, just a pain in the neck on Route 6) on the Neptune, whose schedule was if possible even less of a sure thing than the Cape Codder's. The reason for this was the fact that the Neptune had to wait for the last Vineyard boat to arrive in Woods Hole, and if said boat were delayed by bad weather ... the conclusion you should reach is not a pleasant one. It certainly wasn't pleasant for the victims (there was no club car on the Neptune).

On one particular night, things got really interesting: there was a Cape-wide power failure at just the time when the Neptune would begin its southbound trip. Newspaper archives could supply all the details, but all I know is that for a couple of city kids like myself and my brother, it was really scary. Back in the apartment, you blew a fuse, you called the super, a donation was made, it was fixed - end of incident. But up here ...

It turned out that some moron had been shooting at seagulls - duh! - and managed instead to shatter one of the main power cables supplying the Cape. Except for those lucky few equipped with generators, there wasn't a light anywhere on the Cape, including signal lights along the New Haven Railroad right of way. So the train sat where it was until the situation was corrected, which may in fact - in those primitive low-tech days - not have been until Monday sometime. (Nobody ever wondered why the New Haven didn't have some kind of backup electrical system - they were lucky to have trains.)

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In the meantime there was a trainload of unhappy anxious Weekend Daddies - this in the days before cellphones were even a gleam in anyone's eye - and houseloads of Summer Moms frantically calling employers back in civilization to let them know why Ted or Herb or Fred or Max would probably not be in the office today. We didn't even have a phone - we had to use the Bowmans' (1024W1 - why in Heaven's name do I remember that number after fifty plus years?)

Looking back on it, I'm of the opinion that today's "always and everywhere" communications would have taken a lot of the excitement out of the Friday night experience. "Stuck in buzzards bay bridge problem wtf love dad" ...? Heck no - more fun to watch for that headlight!

I treat elsewhere of Hurricane Carol in 1954, which we fortunately survived with minimum damage. The sight of the relentlessly-rising storm surge moving across the Great Sippewissett Marsh towards our little domain is something that will probably remain with me till I can't remember anything else. I recall some vicious thunderstorms too, the like of which we don't seem to get any more (or at least as often), which suits me just fine.

I could write a lot more on this marvelous topic - me - but I'll force myself to stop. I'm a true wash-ashore now, living in Falmouth and loving the Cape as much as ever, grateful for the wonderful memories of summers long ago.

As Irish people say, God be with the days!

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