



Coastal Point

The Local Voice of YOUR Community

Local residents recall area's past for crowd

By Kevin Roberts

Special to the Coastal Point

On March 12, the Ocean View Historical Society held a presentation on the growth of the Ocean View/Millville/Bethany area over the course of their lifetimes and those of their ancestors. Two speakers – Wanda Powell and Mary Hocker Collins, who both have spent their lives watching the area grow – discussed their memories of growing up in the community.

On the evening of the event, guests packed into the old Ocean View Town Hall on West Avenue, filling the room to the brim. Numerous influential faces from the Ocean View area were present for the trip down memory lane; such as state Rep. Gerald Hocker, a relative of Mary Hocker Collins; Mayor Don Minyon of Millville; and Mayor Gordon Wood of Ocean View.

"If you're a real local, you're related to everybody in town," Wood commented. "I can prove that. I'm related to myself in nine different ways."

Richard Nippes, an Ocean View town councilman and one of the founders of the Historical Society, opened the meeting by discussing the society's intent to found a museum dedicated to the history of the numerous towns that make up the coastal community. Originally, the society planned to use one of the oldest houses in town as home base for the museum.

"We are leasing the house, which was built in 1862, from the town at the generous price of \$1 year but were not sure that the facility is safe enough for public use. There are some problems with the foundation, and we've noticed termite damage, which could call for costly renovations," noted Nippes. "The house is one of the oldest in town, and we would definitely like to preserve it," he added.

"At the moment," he explained, "we're looking into what grants we can receive and are considering the construction of a new building to house the museum. We would like to keep the museum within the historical district."

Presently, there are 83 houses within Ocean View town limits that are eligible for the National Registry of Historic Buildings. According to Nippes, "We would like to see as many of those houses preserved as possible, before they are demolished to make way for something new. People will be amazed at how rich our history is."

Although the room was warm and crowded on March 12, spirits were high as spectators added their thoughts and memories to the forum. The floor was then turned over to Powell and Collins, who recalled some of their personal memories of days past.

"I was born and raised here in Millville," Powell began, "which almost didn't get its name. In the beginning, it was just a few homes built around a saw mill, but as the 20th century approached the hamlet began to grow.

"In order to have a post office," she explained, "the town needed to have a name. Many residents wanted to name the town Dukesville, as there were many people with the name Dukes living there. Elijah Dukes was the town's first postmaster, and he also had a shipping and lumber mill. The post office was also a grocery and hardware store. Elijah even sold 128 acres of oceanfront property in Bethany Beach for \$2,500."

"As the town expanded, the residents wanted a name that was more descriptive of the town," Powell said. "The name 'Millville' was chosen because of the numerous mills in the area. Millville started as a hamlet, later was considered a village, and now a town. If we continue to grow, we will one day be a city."

"My grandparents, who lived in Millville, went on vacation every year to Bethany Beach," Powell noted. "They would load their wagon with the three children, a large tent, plus all of their supplies and supplies for the animals. Then Grandpa would tie the cow to the back of the wagon, and took a crate of chickens, as well as the family pets. That way, they could stay for a week and have fresh milk and eggs. "

"When my grandfather was in charge of the Indian River lifesaving station," she recalled, "there was a bad nor'easter. When the ocean calmed down, they saw something floating towards shore, which turned out to be a

chicken. The chicken was standing on a board, rocking back and forth. When they got the chicken on shore, it continued rocking back and forth, and then died."

"Another time," Powell said, "my grandmother was visiting the station and they were having a hurricane. Grandfather told her they needed to get her to shore before things got worse. He waited until it was high tide, put her in a wooden barrel and floated her inland. I know it sounds far-fetched, but she swore it was the truth."

"Every year, the Gypsies came to town. I would be sent indoors when Grandmother saw them coming," Powell related. "She used to say that if the Gypsies didn't like you, they would put a spell on you; and she knew someone that had happened to. Grandmom always used to give them a cold drink, and cookies or cake."

"When the Indians came to town, it was a different story," she said. "I was allowed to watch the entire procession. They had everything – children, animals, ponies and alligators. The alligators were in wooden cages. One year, an alligator got free and was spotted for a few years around town."

"Bethany was really the place to go in the summer," Powell said. "The bowling alley opened in 1930 and remained until the 1962 storm destroyed it. The theater was great. They had folding chairs and, after the show, they folded up the chairs and used it as a dance hall. The theater was destroyed in 1944."

Entertainment wasn't limited to Bethany Beach, though.

"Every year, the carnival came to town and was located where Lord's Landscaping is now," said Powell. "The only ride I remember was the swings. I saved my money all year and had enough to ride the swings one time every night."

"One year, they announced they were having a talent contest. Pauline McCabe and I had been taking tap dancing lessons from my cousin Bob for 2 cents a step. We practiced a dance routine and had handmade dresses that were almost alike. We decided to enter without consulting our parents. The night of the show we did our tap dance routine, and the Army band played for us. We won, and received \$10."

In addition to the fun, there were also more serious moments in long-ago coastal Delaware.

"I started at Lord Baltimore in 1934," Powell noted. "We started with 46 in our class, and in 1946 we graduated with 17. A lot of classmates dropped out of school to work for their families."

Life wasn't easy for many local residents, and many lacked the modern conveniences that people now take for granted.

"When I was in junior high school, I was the only girl in my class with an indoor bathroom. My friends loved to come to my house. I thought they liked me, but they liked my bathtub. I used to like going to their houses to use their privy. That way we could sit side-by-side and look at Sears Roebuck."

Times certainly have changed, as Powell noted of her attempts to stay in fashion.

"The other girls were starting to use lipstick, but I wasn't allowed to have any. I could hardly wait for Easter, because you could rub the red jelly beans on your lips. It was just hard to save enough beans to last from one year to the next!"

But even in winter there was something to do.

"In the winter, ice skating was a big activity. On Sundays we would go to White's Creek. At night, we would skate at the Eagle Pond in Cedar Neck. It was surrounded by trees, and we always had a fire going near the pond. It wasn't that deep, so if the ice would crack, nobody was in danger. "

Despite the area's rural character and isolation from big cities, national and international events still had an impact locally.

"When World War II was declared, the day after Pearl Harbor, we all tried to do our patriotic duty. Every afternoon after school, I would go to the fire house and roll bandages until dinnertime. In the evening, we would knit 5-inch squares, which the ladies would put together to make afghans. There was a tower in Cedar Neck which was used to spot airplanes. I was one of the volunteers, and our job was to spot where planes were coming from and which direction they were flying. We would report in by phone."

"Our town was included in the blackout. Windows were completely covered at night, and car headlights were painted half black. There were two checkpoints on Route 1. You had to stop at the first checkpoint, and tell them where you were headed. If you took too long to get to the second checkpoint, they would check your trunk."

And local events sometimes traveled beyond the Delaware beaches, as well, even if the location kept residents a little isolated from the rest of the world.

"I remember going on a bus with the McCabes to the 1939 World's Fair. I was at college when Dad called me to tell me the Indian River Bridge had fallen in on Feb. 10, 1948. I never stayed in a hotel until my senior trip to Washington, and never stayed in a motel until my honeymoon. Dad always said he could never believe anyone would want to go on vacation when we had the very best right here."

The Ocean View Historic Society holds meetings monthly, on the third Tuesday of the month, from 1 to 3 pm. Meetings are presently held at the old Ocean View Town Hall building, at 32 West Avenue. As the society grows, there will be a number of opportunities for those interested to become involved, members noted.

"We need people to help us with fundraising, cataloguing of items and helping us get as many of the 83 historic homes on the Registry as possible," said Nippes. "We're always looking for more help, and we feel that this is a great way to help pull the various local towns together. We don't want the museum to reflect any one town in particular, rather the entire community here."

Published in Coastal Point, April 10, 2009, Volume 6, No. 15
