

"Halcyon Days on Cape May" by Claudia Beechman

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My family and I spent every summer in Cape May in the fifties and sixties, before the word "Victorian" inevitably preceded the name of the tiny island. Certainly, the prevailing architecture was Victorian with its gingerbread woodwork and generous porches, but the houses were mostly white or cream with dark green, red or black shutters. People back then didn't seem to be as interested in restoration as they were in "happy hour" or collecting tchotchkes earned from hours of playing skeeball.

However, Cape May vacationers were not philistines. For many years, Cape May boasted one of the most famous summer stock companies in the country, in the Cape May Playhouse. It attracted stars like Gloria Swanson, Alfred Drake and Edward Everett Horton and was housed in a white rambling barnlike structure across the street from the ocean.

My parents used to load two cars for our two month's stay at my grandparents' cottage. The Atlantic City Expressway hadn't been built yet and I remember passing through rural farming towns like Buena and Tuckahoe. When we arrived at the Egg Harbor bridge and could smell the ocean, we knew we were getting close. Our excitement increased as we passed a stream of seashore exits. Finally, we spied a tall red brick building on the horizon, the Admiral Hotel. Our little cottage was right across the street from the Admiral, which in the fifties, was a famous watering hole before becoming "The Christian Admiral".

We had barely unpacked before my sisters and I headed for Philadelphia Ave. beach. Our grandparents rented a tent from the Steger Company, a thriving business that rented tents for the summer. It also supplied umbrellas, chairs, rafts and Coca-Cola. The tents had bright orange canvas with green wooden supports. My grandparents' name was printed on one of these in black block letters. Each tent had a storage box which also served as a bench.

My grandparents would arrive in their straw hats, my grandmother bearing a long wicker basket filled with succulent plums wrapped in wax paper. We spent most of our beach time in the ocean. Sometimes, we rented a raft and every day, we bought ice-cold Cokes in green glass bottles that were kept in a big red cooler bearing the logo, "Coca-Cola". There were no other choices; not many existed then. We took walks on the beach with our mother who took us for evening swims when we got older. She taught us to bodysurf.

On other soft, summer evenings, we rode our bikes on wide, flat New Jersey Avenue. We made lifelong friendships with kids like us who came back year after year. Most of them were from Pennsylvania and New Jersey but there were also many vacationers from Maryland and Virginia.

Every night, our mother took us to the boardwalk. Compared to

Atlantic City or Ocean City, Cape May's boardwalk was and still is tiny, but for us kids it was a vast wonderland dominated by Convention Hall, which looked like a huge yellow and white wedding cake.

Behind the miniature golf course was The Green Mill, another rambling frame building. The Green Mill was a sort of clubhouse for teenagers, with basketball hoops, pool tables and refreshments. By eighth grade, I had learned to coolly set up the colorful balls in their triangular rack and hear the satisfying click-click-click of a break.

In March, 1962, a huge nor-easter, known locally as the Ash Wednesday storm, destroyed most of the Cape May boardwalk and the Playhouse. The beloved yellow and white confection called Convention Hall had collapsed into the ocean. When we returned that summer, we were heartbroken, yet we continued to play skee ball, ride the waves and bask in the freedom of another summer at the seashore.

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