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Something Worth Understanding

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Something Worth Understanding

by Rachel Lewis

Nearly every year since my birth, I have spent a portion of each summer in the tiny harbor town of Cape Charles, Virginia. The entire town is just one square-mile, has 1100 inhabitants, and lies on the southwestern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia). My father grew up there, my grandmother still lives there, and now a brother runs a lawn business some miles from there. For such small, secluded, forgotten slices of Americana, the small hamlets that dot the Eastern Shore and line the Chesapeake Bay are vast in their evocation of a forgotten time and are nearly impossible to describe.

I feel lucky to have roots on the Eastern Shore. Not everyone can say they have connections with a place so off the beaten track that in some areas, most notably Tangier Island, the inhabitants still speak with an odd, English-type accent, a faint echo of years gone by, of Old World settlers long dead. My own grandmother has a distinct way of running certain words together and leaving certain letters off other words that marks her as a member of the Eastern Shore. When my father becomes animated about something, the old sound works its way back into his tone.

The words “by-gone era” and “yesteryear” have always held a certain fascination for me. Maybe it is because I was raised in a region of America where, for better or for worse, many people value older days. It’s not the kind of longing where you pretend that everything was perfect or even halfway so. Instead, it is a wanting to understand your origins. Perhaps it is secretly

selfish; perhaps you want it to better understand only yourself. Cape Charles is a place where I have never actually lived, only visited frequently and loved with a child's careless familiarity and then with the devoted realization of an adult. But I use it to help me understand my father, a strong, silent man of whom I am still learning; to better know my grandfather, mayor of Cape Charles before I was born, killed by cancer when I was five; and to connect with a somewhat different slice of Southern history, important to me as a child and lover of the South.

And then, there is the water itself. As a child, I feared the jellyfish that crowd the bay in the early summer. The beach at Cape Charles is not much to speak of: a long, narrow strip of land covered with dirty seaweed and flanked on opposite ends by rock and wood jetties. After I was stung several times, for me the bay became a bowl full of eye-irritating salt laced with clear, stinging tentacles. But as the years went by, my fears and pains grew to include much bigger things than jellyfish. My family moved to Florida when I was 10 years old; it was a difficult move for everyone. When the fierce longings for my old home grew to fever-pitch with the onslaught of awkward adolescence, I welcomed our summer trips to the Shore with gusto. The half-mile excursions from my grandmother's house on the edge of town to the beach became opportunities to reclaim something I'd lost. No longer was the water something to be feared, something that choked and stung. It became symbolic of my short past, something worth trying to understand.

For Cape Charles, water is both a blessing and a frustration of sorts. During the course of the 20th century, the Chesapeake Bay waters that surround the town have created life, taken it away, and given it back again. Water doesn't change; it ebbs and flows the same today as it did centuries ago. But human vision does change, and so use of natural resources alters as well.

The town did not exist 125 years ago. It was a marshy, windswept piece of earth near the bottom of a relatively wild jut of land. In the late 1800s, two shrewd railroad magnates saw a perfect opportunity and quickly seized the land. They planned

and developed a community of tidy blocks to be the southern terminus of the Delmarva Branch of the New York, Philadelphia, and Norfolk Railroad. Anyone who wanted to travel up and down the Eastern Shore had to pass through Cape Charles.

Within several decades, the town was a bustling hub for passenger and freight trains. Several times daily, ferries churned the bay's waters, carrying passengers, freight, and automobiles to and from the mainland. Up through the initial post-World War II years, Cape Charles served as a key site for the Ocean Highway, a popular train route from New York to Florida. The town greatly benefited from the American desire to forget war and depression: it is estimated that over two million people passed through Cape Charles annually in the late 1940s. There was music, cafes, a department store; the Miss Virginia pageant was even held in the town theater for some years.

But, like the deep drop-offs that mark the channels of the bay, Cape Charles stepped off into the unknown in the 1950s. Just when America was about to experience the economic post-war boom, the ferries moved operations to a different location. Several years later, the passenger trains stopped altogether as automobile travel began to replace rail travel. Without a convenient, quick way for people to go to and from the Shore, Cape Charles began to die a slow death.

Perhaps the most poignant kind of history is the kind that happens right on the cusp of a new era, when people don't know where things are going. My father moved to Cape Charles when he was five years old, just as the town began its decline. Even now he has the ability to slide right back into town life whenever he's there. He hops on a bike, the same rusty basket-cruiser he had as a boy, and rides off to check out old fishing holes and visit old friends.

A surprising number of people from his past still live in the area. I get him to talk about growing up on the Shore and what it means even now to be from a proud, private, forgotten little harbor town. He talks about bumming down country back roads,

fishing in the bay and various ponds, getting up early before school to hunt from his duck blind. He relates stories about starring in Friday night football games and how the entire town turned out to see the boys go at it with some cross-Shore rival. He talks about the way things were before racial harmony was even talked about in a positive light. A secluded town, cut off from the mainland, best accessible by train or ferry, and then later by a never ending bridge; it took some time for social progress to reach the Shore. Modernity made Cape Charles, wooed it, married it, and then left it out in the cold.

When life again flirted with the thought of returning to town, it took the form of yet another wonder of progress. In 1964, the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel officially opened for traffic. Taking off in Virginia Beach and touching down on the wild marshes of the Shore, the bridge stretched seventeen miles across the Chesapeake Bay and boasted two mile-long, underwater tunnels. It was, and still is, considered one of the modern engineering marvels of the world.

The opening of the bridge came as a boon of new hope. It was a chance to reconnect with the mainland, to regain lost opportunities. But it wasn't quite enough. People crossed the bridge and continued to zoom right along Route 13, on up the Shore into Maryland and the Northern Atlantic states, not bothering or needing to take the two-mile detour to Cape Charles. A lifeline was back, but this time it bypassed Cape Charles completely. Trains had pumped blood into the town, but the bridge pumped it right past, like a rerouted artery.

As before, the town learned to adjust to the new presence. They used the bridge, and the bridge used them. My father's high school buddy, Tommy Bennett, worked for the Bay Bridge-Tunnel Corporation one summer in the early 1970s, painting a section of the bridge that towered high above a shipping channel on the Shore side. He worked from a bucket boom that was lowered over the side of the rail. The safety feet that braced the truck on the bridge were not put down properly one day; the truck pitched over the side and Tommy plunged to his death in

the bay. They found his body two weeks later when it washed up on Smith Island. My father was attending college in Richmond at the time; after graduation, he started a football coaching career on the mainland and never made it back to the Shore. It wasn't long before Tommy's memory faded away into obscurity, right along with his town.

Crossing the bridge, you notice the rhythmic, bumping lull of the sections. Over the course of seventeen miles the combination of the wide, blue expanse of the bay and the steady, bouncing motion of the sections becomes hypnotic. I didn't find out about Tommy and how he died until I was older. That is probably a good thing, because as a young child I always experienced a slight twinge of adrenaline and fear when our Suburban crossed the bridge each summer. The no-turning-back feeling hits a quarter of the way across, and the tunnels feel like the center of the earth. But from a distance, whenever I saw the high arch of the bridge section where Tommy died, I knew we were almost there. And when we touched down on the Shore, it was a just a matter of minutes and the passing of a few ham-and-peanut shacks on Route 13 before the detour to Cape Charles. The bridge had become both a giver and taker of life.

The town's fortunes still rise and fall with the tides, but time won't give up on the place. This time it is mainland interest in the Shore as a vacation getaway that is fueling the latest rediscovery of Cape Charles. Some inhabitants are meeting the newcomers with not a little reluctance, but after the lean years of the past several decades, a lot of the reaction is positive. A multimillion dollar Arnold Palmer-designed golf course lies just outside of town. It was built just a short ways from an old seafood packing plant, a decayed, old fashioned building that the woods and weeds overtook long ago. The building is so old, even its second ended years ago; before desegregation, the top floor housed a school for black children.

Way out on the other side of town, spiffy new condos have quickly risen on the bay. To make way for them, contractors got

rid of King's Creek landing. A twisting, rickety maze of warped wooden docks, the landing served boats that rode in from the bay and found rest in the brackish waters of King's Creek. The rotting sea air smell is gone; the ancient, beached boats on the far bank are gone; the creaky boat houses, insides echoing with drips and drops, are gone.

Yet the feeling of yesteryear persists. Complete with squawking seagulls, a beachside boardwalk, turn-of-the-century residences, and a quaint downtown on Main Street, the town is caught in a time warp, left over from its rail town days. Old men ride around in basket bikes; small shops creak with warped wood and dust when you enter; rusty old cargo trains lie around in some places. Huge portions of rail are overgrown with weeds so high that you don't even know the tracks are there until you ride over them with a bike and the jolt racks your body. The jolt startles you into speculation or remembrance about the tracks, depending on whether you are a visitor or someone with real roots there.

During one of my last summer visits on the Shore before we moved to Florida, I developed a penchant for bike exploring. I would set off in the morning on a little black bike my grandmother kept for our use and spend a good part of the day visiting different sections of town. It wasn't until my father went out searching for me one day, found me near the old Baptist Church, placed my bike in the back of the truck, and wordlessly took me home that I realized my family was worried over my daily absences.

My bike wheels would start at King's Creek, move on to Jefferson Street, the still predominantly black section of town, cruise the boardwalk by the bay, then go up and down all the streets that emptied out near the boardwalk. My wheels usually took me downtown to Main Street before heading home. It was on one of these excursions that I met a beautiful elderly woman outside the antique store. Someone introduced her as a former Miss Virginia. I didn't know it at the time, but she was the sister of the woman who had been my grandmother's neighbor for over

40 years. She must have been crowned in the theater back in the town's heydays. I wish I could have had the foresight to ask her about that era, the only glamour the town has ever known.

Soon after, my family moved to Florida and my world changed. If I could talk to that Miss Virginia again, maybe she, as a member of a triumphant, swinging generation in America's history, would agree that it is not always necessary to look back hundreds and thousands of years for the most telling or fascinating history of humankind. The best may be the kind that happened 10, 40, or 75 years ago. It is the type that is close enough to touch, to remember, to be living still in some cases. The fact that it may be as close as a relative's memories but just as resoundingly gone as an ancient civilization is what it makes it so bittersweet, what makes it something worth understanding.