They Put the 'Craft' in Watercraft

Local boatbuilders ride a 600-year tide of history

By Bill Newcott | Photographs by Carolyn Watson

The 20-foot-long, cobalt-blue lake canoe occupies much of the length of David Greenhaugh's driveway. Even to a guy who doesn't know a dinghy from a deck boat, the workmanship is striking, the artisan's attention to detail unmistakable.

Just above the bow, the canoe's triangular deck plate — made of hard cherry wood — is stained like a fine piece of living room furniture. Inside the canoe, the gloss of white paint is smooth enough to see my reflection.

Between the white inside and blue exterior, embedded in the long, sweeping starboard gunwale at the top of the hull, a thin red strip of stained wood runs its entire length. This is the only evidence that the shell of this canoe is constructed entirely of redwood.

"I cut the strips myself in my workshop," Greenhaugh says, running his hand along the smooth ridge.

I imagine him setting to work on a pile of choice lumber. In my mind's eye he hews long lengths of virgin

David Greenhaugh's handmade Grand Laker canoe is a direct descendant of guide boats first used about a century ago on Maine's West Grand Lake.

redwood, freshly timbered from the American Northwest.

Then he interrupts my reverie.

"It used to be a pickle barrel," he says.

Assuming this is some sort of nautical joke, I laugh.

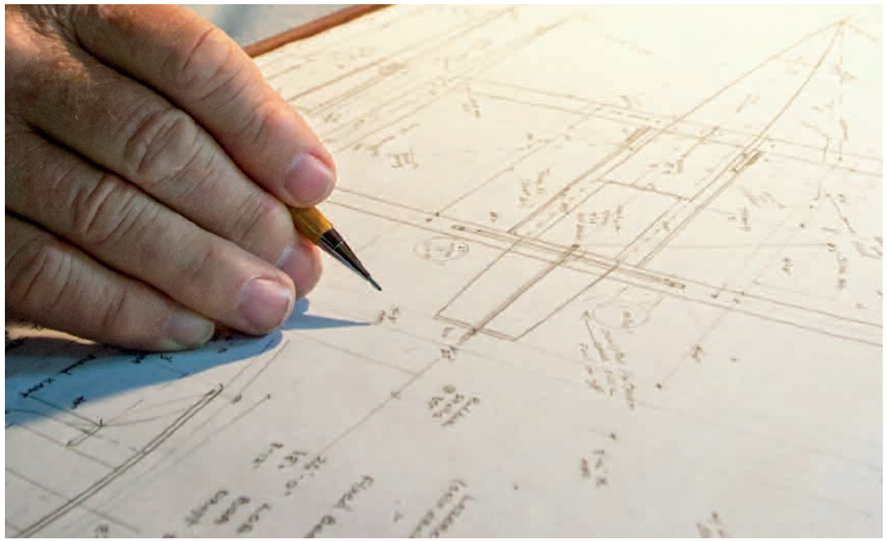
"No, really," he smiles. "I found this huge old pickle barrel in Atlanta, about 14 feet in diameter and probably 10 feet deep. It took many truckloads to get the wood up here.

"I cut it down into strips. I narrowed it into a quarter-inch by five-sixteenths, I guess. And I started from there."

With painstaking precision and unfathomable patience, Greenhaugh glued each flexible strip onto a frame. When the last piece was set in place, he had a canoe.

He bends a bit, tilting his head so his eye can trace the gentle arc of the gunwale.

"It's a good boat," he says. And Greenhaugh should know. He's owned "eight or 12" boats and built three of them.



Masked to protect his lungs from flying sawdust, Neil Stevenson fits the top on a pontoon for his newest nautical creation. His detailed plans guide every cut, sometimes down to a fraction of an inch.

If you want to know how long they've been building good boats in this region, look no farther than the Lewes History Museum. There, behind a glass panel, you'll find the remains of a 600-year-old dugout canoe, discovered in a local marsh. It's typical of the canoes built by the Nanticoke people, and as the name suggests, it was crafted by literally digging out the trunk of a felled tree.

The broad tree-trunk canoes of Delaware's native peoples were the precursors to later fishing and hunting boats built by subsequent generations of coastal Delawareans. Also in the Lewes History Museum is a broad-bottomed 1910 Delaware Ducker, shallow enough to negotiate the local wetlands and stable enough for a hunter to stand on its deck and fire a shotgun at flying fowl.

Variations of the Delaware Ducker plied the swampy coastal waters up and down the Eastern Seaboard. Most were built by their owners after eyeballing a neighbor's boat, so in a nautical version of the whispering game Telephone, the details of each craft could be subtly different. That's how an expert can tell the difference between a New Jersey Ducker and a Delaware one.

In the mid-1600s, before Lewes got its name, a Dutch shipwright named Cornelis Verhoef was hammering away off the waters of Canary Creek. By 1683 — after William Penn claimed the three counties on the Delaware River and bay as part of Pennsylvania — the Brits had gotten in on the act. Shipwrights William Beverly and John Brown began launching new boats into Lewes's natural harbor, the creek below what is now Shipcarpenter Street, which is today the Lewes-and-Rehoboth Canal.

Shipbuilding in Lewes really took off in the 18th century, with three or four major shipyard operations — including one operated by Cato Lewis, a former African slave who had bought his freedom, and his son Peter — turning out moderate-size ships, including at least one major schooner capable of carrying up to 72 tons of cargo. Where today children swing in the playground and couples walk arm-in-arm on the graveled paths of Canalfront Park, for centuries burly guys toiled, tools in hand, over the growing frames of ships under construction.

It took a lot of lumber to build those ships, and there were plenty of trees grow-

ing right nearby. But deforestation led to land erosion, which accelerated silting of the creek. The water became too shallow for launching larger craft, so by the late 1800s the center of Sussex County shipbuilding had shifted up the Broadkill River to Milton. Lewes never reclaimed the shipbuilding fame it once had.

But that was just a stopgap strategy: The die had been cast for the local ship industry. Coastal Delaware's rivers were too silted, the channels too shallow, the demand for ever-larger vessels too insistent. The professional shipbuilders moved on, leaving empty shorelines and, in all likelihood, layers of bottles, coins and tools sinking in the sediment below their old worksites.

The shipyards may have vanished from coastal Delaware, but the shipbuilders never did. Hunters still crafted their duck boats. Crabbers still built their skiffs. And still others, dipping into that primeval urge to become one with the sea, simply built boats because, well, that's how you get out onto the water.

That's what drives David Greenhaugh, the man with the 20-foot canoe in his driveway. We shake hands — my spindly writer's fingers disappearing into the mitts of a guy who makes his living as a mechanic. After I've admired his workmanship, he invites me inside for a cup of coffee.

Appropriate to the location of his house just off Pilottown Road, Greenhaugh is a former river pilot. A lifelong resident, for years he helped guide ships as they ventured beyond Cape Henlopen and up the Delaware.

As the morning sun reflects off the Lewes-and-Rehoboth Canal outside his front room window, Greenhaugh tells me he built his first boat about 15 years ago. Like the canoe outside, it was strip-built: made of small pieces of wood glued together and stapled onto a frame.

"Next, I built a dinghy for that boat," he says, indicating a painting on the wall behind me. I turn to see the image of a handsome wooden fishing boat moored to a rocky shoreline. And sure enough, standing on its side at the aft end is a dinghy. The large boat has long since been sold and now resides in New England.

"The dinghy is down in the basement," he says, and he takes me downstairs to visit it.

The shipyards may have vanished from coastal Delaware, but the shipbuilders never did. Hunters still crafted their duck boats. Crabbers still built their skiffs. And still others, dipping into that primeval urge to become one with the sea, simply built boats because, well, that's how you get out onto the water.

David Greenhaugh once let some friends paddle his Grand Laker canoe on Lake Champlain. "But it's really too big to paddle," he says. "Oars are the way to go."

Mounted hull-up on two wooden benches in Greenhaugh's spotless basement is the vessel, a rounded rowboat small enough to sit on the deck of a bigger vessel.

"The larger boat was named *Rain Dog*, and the dinghy is named *Pup*," he says, tilting it to one side. "This one's built of plywood. I put these steps here so my dog could get in and out. I can just about get it through that door over there."

Greenhaugh's masterpiece, though, is that long, wide-bottomed beauty in the driveway. Her name is *Ora*, and she's similar in size to ones in which the Iroquois once plied the waters of Lake Champlain.

"I built it because I had paddled a 14-foot canoe down the Broadkill one February, and my dog kept jumping from one side to the other to see birds. I thought I was gonna tip! So I decided to build a canoe that wouldn't flip over."

He spent about 500 hours crafting *Ora* over a six-month period.

"When you're building a strip boat like that, you work on it piece by piece," he says. "You can work on it for a half-hour and

Painstakingly designed on a drafting table in his windowed home office, Neil Stevenson's boats are artworks on paper and in practice.

then take days off — or you can work on it for days and take a half-hour off."

For Greenhaugh, building a boat is a means to an end: getting it into the water and setting off in it.

"The best thing about building a boat is finishing it," he says.

There's no doubt Neil Stevenson loves sailing on the boats he builds, but one look at his meticulously drafted plans — with finely drawn lines and hundreds of intricate notations accurate to a quarter of an inch — and you know the process of creation is every bit as precious to him.

We are standing at Stevenson's drafting table in a well-lit room at the rear of his house in Anne Acres, just west of Rehoboth Beach. It's the house of a boatbuilder; a wide-open space with beautifully finished, bare wooden beams that resemble below decks on a 19th-century frigate. And there's not a nail to be seen: Stevenson built the entire house using pegs.

"I've built about 12 boats," he says. "I still have some of them, including the best one I ever built: a 22-foot tri-hull. That's on a trailer. I've got a 25-foot catamaran at anchor. I have a motorboat in the yard.

"I also built a 12½-foot Herreshoff tender that I have out back. It's a real classic design, the kind the Herreshoff company would build for you if you got one of their yachts. When I sailed to Florida on my 32-foot tri-hull, I had that tender on the deck, and these guys in million-dollar sailboats would all yell, 'Nice boat!' They weren't talking about my tri-hull; they were talking about my tender."

Stevenson, a lifelong surfer who spent years working on pilot boats, has been sailing for four decades — most often his own boats, but frequently transporting other people's crafts. He's a living encyclopedia of boat engineering, freely quoting Howard I. Chapelle, author of the recognized bible of boatbuilding. He holds forth on the benefits of epoxy resin over polyester glue for affixing slats. But after all the prevailing and classic design theories have been consulted, for Stevenson it all comes down to one thing: Does it *look* right?

"I've read Chapelle cover to cover, all about lofting and measurements and diagonals," he says. "I say, 'Nah, that's too much

Big and little boats have emerged from the workshop of Bob Reed, including the 20-foot motorized skiff that sits in his driveway — built for fishing the waters of coastal Delaware — and a small sail-powered tender.

trouble.' I just take a flexible wooden baton and bend it until it looks right, and then build from there."

He's a big fan of trial and error, too.

"For my first boat, I just started bolting together pieces of junk boats. Built it from scratch. It was a really cool boat, but it was a failure — it didn't have enough floatation or wave clearance."

When he'd scraped together enough spare money from his work in construction and as a handyman, in 2002 Stevenson got busy building his second boat.

"I took into account all the failures of my first boat, and the second boat was a success," he says. "That's the one I think is my best ever."

His eyes fixed on his latest design — a project that's been gestating for a couple of years now — Stevenson considers whether his heart is most set on sailing boats or building them.

"Honestly," he finally says, "I guess I'm more interested in figuring it out."

Bob Reed rolls up the garage door to his workshop, located below a rental house he owns near the Rehoboth Beach maintenance yard. Like the other boatbuilders I've met, Reed's projects unfold at a site remote from his home near Rehoboth. As the door slides up, the smell of untreated wood floats through my nostrils.

I immediately see three boats — two smaller wooden ones and, toward the back, a fiberglass sailing craft.

"I built this little hunting boat and this tender," he says. The latter is a striking small boat, painted white inside and out. Seen from the rear, the profile of each individual glued plywood strip is clearly visible. Each one flares out a bit, making the two sides resemble the outline of an angel's wings.

"I 'scarfed' the planks together," he says. "You can scarf two pieces of wood by tapering them, so if you have two half-inch-thick pieces of wood you taper them from full thickness to nothing. Then you put the two pieces together and use epoxy to glue them."

Reed built the boat 10 years ago. I mention that it still looks seaworthy. "Eh, I don't really have a lot of confidence in it," he says. "Epoxy has a tendency to unzip — molecule by molecule it just comes apart."

So, we won't be going out in that one. He would, however, trust the hunting boat, a little number he built nearly 20 years ago.

"It's cedar on frame, and rather than caulking the joints I put epoxy and cloth on it all the way around" he explains. "You'd carry it in a larger boat, or [tow] it behind you, into the marsh until the water got too shallow. Then you'd get into this one, paddle off with a handful of decoys, and go huntin'."

By now I am realizing a surprisingly large percentage of boats are built to go on the backs of other boats. Reed's hunting boat would certainly fit inside the 20-foot skiff I see out in the driveway, the magnum opus of his boatbuilding career.

"Basically, I just took the lines of a Down East lobster boat and re-drew them and adapted them to my needs," he says, pulling a tarp back to reveal the deck, with its wheel console set in the middle.

"It's like those guys on the Eastern Shore for all these years, building their own boats just to make a living. They didn't have the money to pay somebody else to design their boats or build their boats. They fished in the summertime, and in the winter, if they needed a boat, they had to build it."

As a guy who has bought boats and built boats, Reed is able to compartmentalize the two pursuits.

"I look at it as any job," says Reed, who co-owns a Rehoboth Beach real estate company with his wife, Debbie.

Quickly he adds, "But I'm not getting paid for this one. I like to build things. When I was young I worked as an electrician's helper and built furniture, and then started building houses.

"Whenever you accomplish something there's a sense of fulfillment, and that is a reward in itself.

"But I'll tell you what. If I could find a commercially made boat that performed like my 20-foot skiff here, I would buy it."

There's a quiet verging on library-esque in Freddie's Barn, the former workshop of the Lewes Historical Society's longtime handyman, the late Fred Hudson. Cleared of all the clutter Fred left behind, the barn on the organization's Lewes campus is now a dedicated shipbuilder's shed. ➤

Read about another boatbuilder on page 82.

Neil Stevenson prefers to sail catamarans, like this one he built, because they're easier to maneuver alone. "I wouldn't mind sailing it to Florida," he says. "It wouldn't matter when I got there. Where I am currently is always my destination."

"I think Fred would be proud," says Marcos Salaverria, director of education for the historical society — who, along with society researcher Andrew Lyter, has uncovered much of the area's shipbuilding history.

In its 10 years of existence, the LHS's wooden boatbuilding program — created to sustain the region's long nautical history — has produced some 40 vessels. Most of them have been small boats, but in 2017 the group's replica of a Delaware Ducker — modeled after the original that sits in the Lewes museum — won the People's Choice Award at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's Small Craft Festival in St. Michael's, Md.

"It was quite something for a Delaware boat to win at a Maryland festival," Salaverria says with some satisfaction.

On this day, 11 volunteers — 10 men and one woman — huddle around the hull of another large boat, a 16-foot sharpie. It's a flat-bottomed, shallow sailboat that was first developed in Connecticut during the 19th century but, over time, became a mainstay of Chesapeake Bay oystermen.

The volunteers are painting the interior of the hull white to protect the Philippine mahogany wood from damage. The exterior will be coated with penetrating oil to preserve its natural color.

"Don't dab the paint — brush it in," Bob Kotowski, a former Newark-area journalist and Philadelphia newscaster, cautions a volunteer. He showed up for the group's organizational meeting in 2009 and has been a boatbuilder ever since.

About nine months ago, this boat was a pile of wood. The crew, which convenes here twice a week — two or three hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays — is not quite halfway through the project. As with the ducker, the plan is to take the sharpie to schools and events to educate people about coastal Delaware's boatbuilding history.

To my untrained eye, this vessel looks almost ready to set sail. Why is it going to take the better part of a year to finish it?

"Oh, jeez," sighs Kotowski, and immediately I know that was a stupid question.

"This boat is going to need ribs on the inside, something in the neighborhood of 46 of them," he explains with admirable patience. "If we put the ribs in first, then we'd have to paint around them, because we want them to keep their natural color. Then we've got to do a bazillion deck beams. We've gotta make a skeg, we gotta make a keel, we gotta make a centerboard, we gotta make the transom. And we've gotta make the mast, which is a real long process.

"So, yeah, a year is about right."

All the time he's talking with me, Kotowski's eyes dart repeatedly back to the work in progress. He clearly likes talking about boatbuilding, but he'd rather be building than yakking.

"You're still dabbing," he finally says to a volunteer, and then he's off to show them all how to do it.

I leave the cool shade of Freddie's Barn and step into the hot, late-summer sun. To my right, a lineup of historic houses, brought here over the years for safekeeping, stretch into the distance like a Colonial Levittown. As I walk alongside the timbered frames I can still hear the fading chatter of boatbuilders' voices and the soft thumps and scraping of boatbuilders' tools.

They seem very much at home. ■

Bill Newcott, *an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic Magazine, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives near Lewes.*

Aging Bull

Meet Bob, the well-traveled supersized bovine who found a home near Dagsboro

Story and photograph by Bill Newcott

Bob the Bull is unmistakably the same oversized mascot who once stood on a corner in Ocean City, but his attire has changed a bit: Bob's checkered hat used to be solid red, and those sunglasses were framed with fashionable (but obviously fake) tortoise shell.

Something about tourist towns seems to inspire the oddest of oddball business attractions.

When I lived in L.A., my favorite doughnut shop was in the shape of a giant doughnut. In Florida I entered an alligator farm by walking into the mouth of an enormous 'gator. Atlantic City has the legendary Lucy, a six-story landmark in the shape of an elephant.

For a while I thought coastal Delaware might be an exception. Sure, there's the flying white baby grand piano atop the Keyboard America sign along Coastal Highway. And the retired crop-dusting plane posted above Midway Speedway. And then there's that swooping Huey helicopter behind the fence of Bethany Beach's National Guard training site. (Here's a joke I just made up: Heading north from Bethany you can visit Huey, Dewey, and Louie's Pizza.)

But those things aren't ginormous versions of something — they're totally life-sized. Overall, our neck of the woods seemed to have avoided that traditional tourist trap bigger-is-better mentality.

Then I met Bob the Bull.

You can't miss Bob. He's a roughly 15-foot-high, 20-foot-long black fiberglass bull. If Bob's sheer size won't stop you, his attire will: He's wearing a checkered chef's hat. And a red napkin tied around his massive neck. And sunglasses.

He sure got my attention. One look at Bob and I veered off Armory Road near Dagsboro, my tires crunching into the pebbled parking lot of the Parsons Farms Produce market. I found myself standing feet from the colossal bull's eye-level snout.

Next to me was a woman in shorts and a "Mamma Mia!" T-shirt. Even through her dark shades, I could see her eyes were wide in amazement.

"This is the bull from Ocean City, isn't it?" she chirped excitedly. "Isn't it?" she repeated, clearly seeking affirmation.

She seemed so certain I had to agree. But was it? And if so, how did this super-sized bovine find its way from Ocean City, Md., to a farm store in Dagsboro?

Soon I would learn that move wasn't even the half of it: When it comes to being a traveler, Bob is one well-seasoned hunk of beef. Over the past 40 years or so, he's lived in no less than four states and covered thousands of miles.

I headed inside, past the succulent-looking peaches and beyond the shiny apples, and found the owner, Paul Parsons. He was out back, sharing lunch with his wife, Brittany, their baby daughter, Scarlett, and Paul's dad, Preston.

It turned out Bob the Bull is a relative newcomer to coastal Delaware: He's been looming over the Parsons parking lot only since spring of this year. But his presence there had been Paul's dream for nearly two decades.

"I've wanted Bob here since 2003," he says. "I couldn't get him then, but last year I got a second chance."

Those who ventured south to Ocean City in the mid-1970s will remember Bob the Bull standing at attention outside Capt. Bob's Steak and Seafood House on 64th Street. He went by the name of Mr. Ocean City in those days, and he became a landmark families waxed nostalgic about all winter long while reflecting on their summer vacations. Generations of parents tracked their kids' growth by how high they measured up to Mr. Ocean City compared to last year's photo.

Besides those countless photos, waves of inebriated college students tried to climb Mr. Ocean City over the years — leading the owner, Bob Wilkerson, to coat it with Vaseline in an effort to discourage them.

Wilkerson bought his big bull from a Wisconsin company that specialized in such things. (FAST Corp. is still in existence, providing playgrounds with whimsical fiberglass slides and high schools with monumental fiberglass mascots. When Mr. Ocean City was delivered from a half-continent away, Wilkerson was surprised to see him roll into town on a flatbed pulled by a station wagon.)

In later years Wilkerson began to dress Mr. Ocean City in festive holiday costumes: as a bully ghost for Halloween, as Santa Bull for Christmas. Folks in Ocean City

couldn't wait to see what that bovine landmark would be wearing next.

Alas, in 2003 Capt. Bob's closed, and the new owners didn't want a big bull in the parking lot (the building is now occupied by Dead Freddies Island Grill, the name of which largely explains why I don't ever go to Ocean City).

It was then that Paul Parsons, hearing the bull was up for sale, got the itch to buy Mr. Ocean City. But the Parsons family was heavily involved in shifting their business from poultry to produce. For reasons hard to fathom, shelling out the money for a two-ton fiberglass bull in a chef's hat just wasn't in the budget.

"We really wanted that bull," says Parsons, still sounding a bit mournful.

So, Mr. Ocean City instead went to a buyer named George Katsetos, owner of Maria's Family Restaurant in Chincoteague, Va. He was renamed Bob the Bull in honor of his original owner — and also because he now lived nowhere near Ocean City. At first, the big fella took a place of honor in front of the restaurant, but then the city got involved, telling Katsetos the thing was just too, well, big. Reluctantly, he moved it out back, and the city wasn't too happy about that, either.

Bob the Bull is a relative newcomer to coastal Delaware: He's been looming over the Parsons parking lot only since spring of this year.

Humiliated and unwanted, Bob the Bull fell on hard times. Workers cutting nearby trees let a branch slam into his flank, leaving a gaping hole. Grass grew tall around him. People who'd loved Bob the Bull sought him out, saw the carnage, and left with their heads bowed in sorrow.

But Bob was not ready to be put out to pasture.

The town kept pestering Katsetos to get rid of the bull, and he finally gave in.

By some amazing stroke of luck, Paul Parsons' mother, Cora, saw on Facebook that Bob was once more on the market.

This time the Parsons family didn't flinch. They rushed down to Chincoteague the next day.

"I gave him a price," says Parsons, "and he said, 'You know he's got a hole in him, right?'

"I said, 'Yep!'

"It was a bargain. He just wanted it gone."

On Nov. 1, 2018, Bob the Bull was carted away on a flatbed — and taken straight to Stratoglass Fiberglass in Ocean City, a company that specializes in fiberglass fabrication and repair.

"The strangest thing happened that day," adds Parsons' dad, Preston. "When we pulled into the fiberglass shop, a car pulled in behind me. It was the daughter of the man who used to own Capt. Bob's Steak and Seafood!

"She jumped out of her car and said, 'I'm just so glad someone saved him!'"

It took a winter of work, but by spring of this year, Bob the Bull was ready to roll.

"They did an amazing job," says Paul Parsons. "He was too big to get into their shop, so after they repaired the hole, they actually had to cut another entryway so they could work on him from the inside all winter."

On March 20, Bob was loaded onto another flatbed and gently rolled the 20 miles or so to Dagsboro.

Since then, Bob the Bull has been discovered by the popular Roadside America website, and that's bringing in big-bull seekers from all over.

"I thought they'd be interested in the history of it," says Parsons. "But, no, they just want to see the big bull.

"We want to get back to making costumes for Bob, like they used to down in Ocean City. But there are only so many hours in the day."

I left the Parsons family to finish their lunch. Back outside, Bob the Bull continued his eternal gaze, peering over the rims of his sunglasses.

"He's had quite a busy life," says Parsons. "We like to say Bob the Bull has retired to the farm." ■

Bill Newcott, *an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic Magazine, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives near Lewes.*

Let Us *Spray*

As coastal farmlands vanish, a longtime local crop-dusting family finds work farther from home

By Bill Newcott

Photograph by Kyle Kaminski

Crop-dusting biplanes aren't flown for the sake of nostalgia — the double wings provide extra stability in quick maneuvers.

The sound awoke me, and even before my brain kicked into gear, I recognized it: The dive-bomb roar … the seconds of near silence … the renewed urgency of an airplane swinging into another approach.

It was unmistakable. There was a crop-duster in the neighborhood. And he was very close.

Yanking jeans over my pajama shorts, I grabbed the car keys and shouted an incomprehensible explanation to my wife (Carolyn's used to this by now). Driving out to the main road, I stopped, rolled open all the car's windows and the sunroof, and tried to discern precisely where the sound was coming from.

Then I saw him. Above a ridge of trees, the yellow glint of a biplane's wings caught the early morning sun. It took some maneuvering through unfamiliar roads, but finally there he was in full view, swooping like a lemon-colored condor over a Robinsonville Road cornfield.

I spotted the pilot, his yellow helmet clearly visible through a window, and marveled at his dramatic approach — how he seemed to leap from behind the tree line before plummeting to just a few feet above the corn, nearly close enough to reach out and run his hand along the waving stalks. My eyes tried to track him as he skimmed the surface at 150 mph, and I held my breath as he barreled right toward the power lines along Webbs Landing Road. Surely he'd cleared wires like that a thousand times, I told myself, and surely he'd do it again.

He did. With inches to spare, it seemed. Then, in a wide, graceful turn, the biplane disappeared to the north.

I was sorry to see him go. Even in the seven short years I've lived here, I've noticed that visits from the crop-dusters are becoming less frequent. The day seems close when, after the last cornfields have been smothered by concrete and clubhouses, crop-dusters will no longer come to us. We'll have to go to them. ➤

While Jeff Chorman barely skims the surface of one field, other members of his team are out spraying crops all across Delmarva.

And that's just what I'm doing. It is now a few days later, and I have followed that little yellow plane to its home base: Chorman Airport, about 30 miles northwest of Rehoboth near Greenwood. It is 5 a.m. on the Fourth of July, but the place is buzzing with activity as a small army of workers tinkers with engines, mixes chemicals, and rolls open hangar doors to reveal a virtual air force of agricultural aircraft. The windsock atop the main hangar droops limply, and in the still, inky light of pre-dawn, the air is a mix of fertilizer and aviation fuel.

"I hear it's a holiday today," says Jeff Chorman with a wry smile when I meet up with him in the break room. Chorman runs the day-to-day business of Allen Chorman & Son Inc., established three decades ago by his dad.

"I used to ride in these twin Beeches with my dad when I was 10 to 12 years old. I'd look at him sitting there, and I'd think he was God."

The senior Chorman, now 73, is something of an aviation legend in these parts. Tributes to him line the walls of this room: certificates from the State of Delaware and Sussex County honoring his contributions to agriculture. Allen began piloting crop-dusters for longtime Sussex County aviator Joe Hudson in the 1960s, flying out of Rehoboth Airport — which is these days commemorated by the names of the streets that once served it: Airport Road and Cessna Drive near the American Inn.

Allen bought the business from Hudson in 1987. Jeff started flying crop-dusters for his dad when he was 18, in high school.

Together, the Chormans and their staff have buzzed virtually every farm field on the Delmarva Peninsula. Since the 1990s they've owned this airstrip — plus some 20 aircraft, including a helicopter.

As I describe how I stalked his employee in the yellow biplane that recent morning, Jeff smiles and shakes his head. Overzealous observers have no idea, he says, how much trouble they cause his pilots.

"It happens all the time — they get in the way!" he says with a laugh, but he clearly means it. "Sometimes people hang out on the downwind side of the field, and everything's blowing towards them.

"Eventually you have to fly away to make them think you're done. Then you come back when they're gone."

Remembering how the yellow biplane had abruptly left the scene as I jockeyed below him taking pictures that morning along Robinsonville Road, I summon up an apology. But Chorman waves me off. He enjoys his work too much to let distractions like me ruin it for him.

"I just love the flying," he says. Then he offers to take me up and show me why.

The sun is just revealing itself on the eastern horizon as we walk past an array of yellow single-seater airplanes, each mounted with a spray unit under its wings. From a large hangar, a worker on a cart has just towed out a twin-engine Beechcraft. It's the company's biggest plane — and also its oldest, by a long shot, a decommissioned U.S. Coast Guard duster that's been airborne since 1943.

Photograph by Kevin Fleming

I climb up the plane's fold-out stairway and inch past two large plastic containers filled with insecticide: We're heading to kill mosquitoes at the Trail's End campground near Wallops Island, Va., about 80 miles south. The dashboard is defiantly analog, with an array of dials and switches Gregory Peck might have fiddled with in "Twelve O'Clock High."

"The whole reason I ever wanted to be an ag pilot was to fly these twin Beeches," Chorman says. "I used to ride in 'em with my dad when I was 10 [to] 12 years old. I'd look at him sitting there, and I'd think he was God."

Faster than I expected, we're airborne, swinging around to the south. Chorman has issued me a pair of earplugs, but even with them and the yellow safety helmet, the roar of the right engine — just a few feet outside my open window — is deafening. ➤

Finding the Field

It's one thing to use Google Maps to direct your car from Milton to Millsboro — it's quite another to get accurate-to-the-last-inch directions from an airport in Greenwood to a specific row of string beans somewhere south of Selbyville.

But even roaring along at 150 mph, Jeff Chorman and his crews can easily eyeball their way to just about any neighborhood on the Delmarva Peninsula. "We know the area very well," says the guy who's been flying over the landscape since he was in high school.

Beyond seat-of-the-pants navigation, however, each of Chorman's planes has two GPS features: one for general directions and one that guides the pilot through each individual swath over a patch of land or body of water.

Also, while driving is pretty much a two-dimensional activity, flying is definitely 3D, so there's additional technology to aid in that regard: On an iPad that each pilot carries is a GIS program — short for geographic information system — that relates longitude, latitude and altitude. ■

Take a virtual ride in a crop-duster! Check out Bill Newcott's five-minute video of his visit to the Chorman Airport at this link: delawarebeachlife.com/our-content/videos.

Making his approach, Jeff Chorman prepares to spray mosquitoes at the southern tip of the Delmarva peninsula. Aside from some GPS guidance, the analog instruments of his 75-year-old Beechcraft — plus panoramic window views in front and above — give him all the information he needs.

As the farms and small towns of the mid-peninsula slide past beneath us, I squint to the east, trying to catch a glimpse of the Delaware beaches. A ribbon of silver shines on the Atlantic, and for a moment I mourn the fact that I didn't live in coastal Sussex County when it was still green and rural.

"There's very little farmland left over there," Chorman tells me later — the engine is too loud for any kind of conversation while airborne. "Along Route 1 from Five Points south — that was the best farmland in the state."

Still, for anyone concerned that agriculture may be evicted from the region anytime soon, the view from 500 feet is reassuring: As far as I can see the land is a patchwork quilt of farms away from the coast, interrupted by the occasional long, low chicken house.

Somewhere east of Seaford, Chorman removes his hands from the pilot's yoke and gestures toward the one that's sitting in front of me. It had never occurred to me he might let me take the wheel. Uncertainly, I assume control, and in that moment I recall a long-forgotten childhood dream, one that was born one Saturday morning watching "Sky King" on television. I'm flying.

Gently, I ease the yoke to the right, and I feel us tipping, ever so slightly. I have the presence of mind to glance over at the attitude indicator, in front of Chorman. Sure enough, the little white plane on the indicator is following my lead, first to the right, then to the left. Too soon, Chorman resumes control of the plane, but it's just as well. I have no idea where we're going.

Soon the seaward side of the peninsula bends in to meet us, and Chorman brings us in to barely 100 feet up. We cross the marshy shoreline of Chincoteague Bay, double back, and head for the expansive stand of trees that shades the mobile homes and campsites at Trail's End. To the folks down there, the Doppler effect raises the pitch of the engine's sound as we approach, then lowers it as we pass, just the way war planes do in the movies. To us, the engine's drone remains constant.

We're making six passes over Trail's End — a milk run for Chorman, who's accustomed to spraying land parcels far larger than this one. Each time we bank to the left over the bay, I look to the pilot's seat and see nothing but Chorman's profile and, below him, sun-dappled water.

We are heading back north, but Chorman wants to show me one more thing before we land. On his smartphone — for this is how we must communicate despite sitting side by side — he types out: "I'm going to take us over a field as if we're crop-dusting."

The Beechcraft skims the treetops of a wooded area. Beyond I can see a large field carpeted with low-lying string beans. As soon as we pass the trees, about 100 feet up, the Beech plunges into a deep dive, and in what seems like less than a second we're barreling across the field at 150 mph.

We are 8 feet above the ground. A 6-foot farmer raising his hand in our path would risk losing it. The furrows of beans extend straight ahead, close enough for me to make out individual leaves 50 feet or so ahead but becoming nothing but a blur as the plane passes directly over them.

We are approaching another stand of trees, one that moments ago seemed very far away. The Beech pulls up like a rearing horse. The view outside the windshield is a whirl of beans, tree trunks, leaves and sky. Simultaneous with our ascent, Chorman is already banking, preparing for the next pass. I am completely disoriented, literally unaware of up, down, or sideways.

I am as thrilled as I've ever been in my life.

Too soon, we're on the ground again. My pilot is back in the break room chatting with a colleague about today's jobs: more mosquitoes near Dover, nearly 200 acres of string beans on three different farms and a cornfield in Liepsic. And that's just before lunch. Later he'll be fertilizing corn in Sudlersville, Md., and potatoes in Hurlock, also in the neighboring state. He hopes to be back home in Broadkill to watch the Fourth of July fireworks with his wife and two daughters.

"You need a lot of equipment and dedication to succeed in this business," he adds. "But mostly, you need a very understanding wife."

And then he is out the door. Those string beans won't spray themselves. ■

With a last-second maneuver, a Chorman biplane pulls up just in time to clear the treeline over a Lewes-area cornfield.

Bill Newcott, *an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic Magazine, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives near Lewes.*

Photographs by Bill Newcott

The Disney Next-Door

By Bill Newcott | Photographs by Carolyn Watson

Visionaries behind three coastal Delaware attractions have more in common with the famed theme park pioneer than you might imagine

Al Fasnacht has been loading youngsters like Molly and Jake Moorhead on Funland kiddie rides since he bought the place in 1962.

A mercifully cool onshore breeze wafted off Rehoboth Beach and filtered through the bustling arcade of Funland.

The mid-August sun had already set behind the boardwalk shops and hotels, and it seemed like everyone who'd been sweating and sunning on the sand that day was now crowding into the mom-and-pop amusement park. Determined teen boys desperately tried to impress their girlfriends at Super Shot basketball. Families patiently waited their turns at the carousel. Nervous young parents strapped their toddlers into the round-and-round fire engines, perhaps experiencing for the first time the anxiety of watching their little ones do something without them.

For my grandkids and me, the day was coming to an end. We trudged along Delaware Avenue, our flip-flops slapping against the soles of our feet as the music and merriment of Funland faded in the thickening night air.

I felt a tug on my hand.

"Papa," my 5-year-old grandson said, "can we come back to Disney sometime?"

Al Fasnacht laughs out loud when I tell him that story.

"Disney!" Funland's 91-year-old founder smiles. "That's rarefied company to be in!"

He thinks for a moment.

"But you know, I get it."

There is, in fact, a common thread that joins small-town folks like Al Fasnacht with global titans like Walt Disney: a desire, bordering on fanaticism, to share a particular vision — and confidence that the world at large will invest its time and money to experience it. The only real difference among them is scale.

Tourist regions like coastal Delaware, where visitors are always looking for something new, are especially fertile grounds for such visionaries. As I sat down with three very different next-door Disneys — an amusement park owner, a campground operator, and a folk artist — it quickly became clear that they see the world a little differently from the rest of us.

They also make that world just a little bit richer. ➤

Al Fasnacht: Along for the Rides

It was the helicopter ride that first got his attention.

Al Fasnacht and his family, who owned a little picnic park near Harrisburg, Pa., were on vacation in Rehoboth in 1962. They dropped in on what was then known as Sports Center — a handful of boardwalk rides and games owned since the 1930s by the Dentino family. Fasnacht, then in his mid-30s was intrigued with the way the copter ride allowed even a child to control its movements. He fell into conversation with the owner.

Today the park is still under family ownership — five generations of Fasnachts have trod Funland's pavement — with the gray-haired, bespectacled, and still-spry Al on the job every day from opening to closing.

Peer through the fence at Funland each morning and you'll see him patrolling the grounds, cleaning up trash from the previous day. After dark, he heads out to the park's oldest attractions — the kiddie rides — lifting excited kids on and off the boats, fire engines, and Skyfighter rocket ships.

Unbelievably, those three rides have been in Funland even longer than Fasnacht has.

"Just last year a gentleman told me he rode the fire engines 70 years ago!" he says, eyes wide with amazement.

I later did a little back-of-the-envelope math and figured that over seven decades each of those fire engines has traveled more than 160,000 miles — nearly three-quarters the distance to the moon. They even travel in the off-season, when the family hauls them back home to Harrisburg, where they are refurbished.

"Those fire engines couldn't have looked any better when they were new than they do now," Fasnacht says with obvious satisfaction. He's also proud of Funland's crown jewel: The Haunted Mansion, open since 1981. Running only at night — to ensure no daylight seeps in to ruin the effects — the ride lifts guests to a dark, family-friendly scary space above the park's vintage bumper cars.

Funland's Haunted Mansion is no cheap carny attraction: For 10 years, the worldwide Darkride and Funhouse Enthusiasts club conducted a poll to determine America's best haunted house attractions. Every time, Funland's Haunted Mansion finished in the top 10 — and in 2006 it landed in second place, ahead of those other Haunted Mansions in Anaheim and Orlando.

"That's quite an honor," says Fasnacht. "All those huge conglomerates running their amusement parks, and here's little dinky Funland in lower, slower Delaware!

"From the start, I didn't want one of those haunted houses where guys are chasing you with chain saws. I wanted something for the family; something to entertain and amuse.

"I love loading guests at the Mansion. A couple of years ago this lady had a little guy, 4 or 5, who did not want to go. He was holding onto the fence, begging her to turn back. She literally dragged him on.

"When they came back around, the kid had this big smile on his face. I asked his mom how he handled it, and she said, 'I don't know — I had my eyes closed the whole time.'

"An hour later that little twerp was back in line with another family member!"

It's 8:30 p.m. and Al Fasnacht is in his element. He's standing by the rotating Skyfighter ride, hand at the ready to hit the big red emergency stop button if one of his young charges should start to climb out prematurely.

One little girl, ignoring the frenzied waves from her cheering parents, has eyes only for Fasnacht. Each time around, she smiles broadly, reaching her right hand toward him a she sweeps past. And each time around, he returns that smile, nodding encouragement as she soars through what, for a 3-year-old, is the adventure of a lifetime.

"This is the best time of my day," he tells me without removing his eyes from the ride (one of the first things Funland operators learn is to never get distracted by conversation).

"People just seem to get special enjoyment out of watching their kids, their grandkids, their great-grandkids on the same rides they enjoyed when they were young. And they always seem to make a special effort to tell us how much it means to them that we're still here.

"My friends back in Harrisburg always tell me I should stay up there and just let the kids run Funland. I tell them, 'You don't understand. The kids *are* running the business.'"

For one moment, Al Fasnacht shifts his gaze from the Skyfighters and looks me in the eye.

"Funland doesn't need me," he says. "I need Funland."

Feeding the kids, Kenny Hopkins tends to Holly Lake campground's tribe of goats.

Kenny Hopkins: The Great Outdoors

"There's a BEAR in the campground!"

Kenny Hopkins has gotten a lot of urgent phone calls in the 33 years he's been running Holly Lake campground near Long Neck, and as he listened to the frenzied voice on the line, he knew two things:

One: He had to get out there to investigate, and

Two: "That wasn't no bear."

There's been just one bear sighting in Delaware since Colonial times — although, admittedly, it was just last year in Newark. But Hopkins dutifully patrolled Holly Lake's 1,000 campsites and finally came up with the likely culprit: a big black Labrador.

Hopkins wasn't upset, though. The mere fact that one of his campers thought an honest-to-goodness bear might come ambling past his tent flaps confirmed that Holly Lake is everything he wants it to be.

"This is just an old-fashioned campground, the kind you used to go to with your family when you were a kid," he says. "Inside our gate you leave the hustle and bustle of the city. You'll see wildlife: deer in the daytime, raccoons at night, and the ants will try to take your food.

"And while you definitely won't see a bear, you can imagine you might.

"We've got dirt roads, dirt lots, and leaves all over the place from all these trees. It feels like you're really going camping.

"Other campgrounds clear-cut the trees, pave the roads, and have concrete pads. But then you might as well just go camping in the Walmart parking lot."

We're sitting in Holly Lake's Country Campstore and Restaurant. It's a converted old barn, brought to this site by Hopkins' father-in-law 55 years ago. When Holly Lake opened back then, it went without saying that the locale was too far out in the country to ever become hemmed in by development. Today this length of Route 24 is bristling with strip malls, gas stations, and sprawling communities — but for a blessed few hundred yards, where a canopy of trees still leans over the road, the low-slung red roof of Holly Lake's slightly ramshackle store beckons irresistibly, as if from another era.

The story of Holly Lake entwines two longtime area families: Kenny Hopkins is of the Hopkins Dairy clan; his father-in-law, Bob Raley, was a pioneering local land developer and co-founder of Nassau Valley Vineyards near Lewes, Delaware's first commercial winery.

When Kenny married Raley's daughter Suzette 35 years ago, he got into the camping game by default. But he took to the new gig like Holly Lake's wood ducks take to the marshy ponds that dot the campground. In the face of encroaching development and a culture that values FaceTime over actual face time, Hopkins toils year-round to create an authentic wilderness experience every summer.

And it's not just for his campers. Take the petting zoo — an old-timey roadside attraction located just behind the camp store, hard against Holly Lake Road. A small gravel parking lot invites passers-by to pull over and run their fingers through the coats of the dozen or so goats that dash to the fence for attention. Buy some animal feed from one of the dispensers and you can become a goat's best friend; the critters practically climb over the barrier to get at you. ➤


Holly Lake's petting zoo is an attraction for both campers and passing motorists.

Wander around the perimeter of the fence and you'll encounter chickens, pigs, white-tailed deer — and a small herd of animals with short legs, squat bodies and twisting antlers that all but scream "reindeer."

"They're actually fallow deer," says Hopkins. "Everybody thinks they're reindeer. In fact, my mother-in-law got them for my father-in-law for Christmas."

I am in Hopkins' pickup truck, bouncing along Holly Lake's unpaved roads. We pass 30 log cabins he's put in during the past few years, and drive by the concrete pad where in a few weeks he'll be erecting a teepee, just to see how visitors like it. Each camping area is identified by a hand-carved wooden sign bearing the relief image of a woodland creature: raccoon, owl, duck, and so on.

Besides the simple but insistent demands of campground maintenance — two years ago he hauled 1,000 tons of composted leaves off the property — for Hopkins the most difficult balance is in keeping up with modern vacationers' demands while maintaining Holly Lake's timeless, rustic appeal.

"Everyone wants WiFi," he says with a hint of exasperation. "It's the first question people ask us. So we had a company out of Texas put up 52 towers, each with a 300-foot signal radius."

He draws the line at cable TV, though.

"The cable company wants $250,000 a year to put cable in," he says. "If I'm gonna spend that kind of money on something, it's not gonna be cable!"

Holly Lake's 100,000-gallon swimming pool is a recent addition, surrounded by a stockade fence meant to resemble Fort Apache. It's a popular party spot, and although he's not required to by law, Hopkins keeps lifeguards on duty at all times.

"Hiring them is such a pain in the neck," he notes. "If you hire a girl, all the teen boys hang out next to her all day, distracting her. If you hire a boy, he wants to flirt with all the girls all day. If you hire one of each, soon they're dating and if one takes off you lose both of them. Such a headache." But he laughs, so I figure to him it's worth the trouble.

We swing around back toward the country store, once more passing the zoo. Admiring a grouping of those fallow deer, huddled near a shelter, I mention how much my grandkids would love to see them.

"They're also good eating," he adds. Sometimes the farm boy has to assert himself.

Judy and Lou Hagen: Proving Their Metal

The first thing you notice is the life-size giraffes. Or maybe the enormous sword-fish, thrashing away in a life-or-death battle with a poker-faced fisherman. Then again, it's hard not to notice the mermaid, fairly bursting out of her flimsy bikini top as she lounges provocatively on a park bench.

Aw, heck, forget them: The real show-stopper is that 20-foot-long flying dragon, threatening to breathe fire on the cars zipping by along Route 24 near Millsboro.

You know that scene in "The Wizard of Oz" where Dorothy exits her black-and-white farmhouse and steps into a kaleidoscopic world of oversized flowers and weird Technicolor characters?

That's sort of what it's like to pull into the driveway of Judy and Lou Hagen. For nearly two decades, their fanciful (and, frankly, slightly twisted) metal sculptures have loomed over passing motorists, inviting one and all to stop by and see what else is lurking behind the couple's house.

As the tires of my car crunch down the gravel drive, it's clear I'm not in Kansas anymore. Up ahead I spot a wildly colorful batch of 3-foot-long dragonflies. Looking a little closer, I notice their big round eyes are actually painted ball bearings. And their tails are bent drill bits. And their legs are the tines of old rakes.

There are birds made from car bumpers. Some flowers are fashioned from tilling rotors. Others have garden spade petals. Here and there stand squat little turtles made from military helmets.

But mostly there's Judy Hagen, her blue eyes flashing from beneath a crown of silver hair, her small frame seemingly weighed down by a heavy, well-worn denim jacket.

I find Judy emerging from her shop out back. It's there that she and Lou have for 19 years sanded, shaped, welded and painted fanciful sculptures made from the mountain of metal they've found at flea markets, yanked from yard sales and acquired at auctions. ➤

Judy Hagen has been a blooming metal sculptor for nearly two decades.

She sits to chat in the doorway to what passes for a showroom — actually a two-car garage. Lou walks by, gives me a friendly smile and shakes my hand. But he moves on immediately. Lou, Judy explains, doesn't like to be interviewed.

"Lou doesn't play well with others," Judy laughs. "He's more of a man of action."

Married at 18, Lou and Judy, now both 69, spent 30 years in the long-distance trucking business.

"When you own your own truck, you'd better know how to repair it," she says. "So Lou took welding classes, and he became a good welder."

She doesn't really know when she and Lou began adapting their practical skills into artistic ones, but around 2000 they found themselves creating a life-size dinosaur from spare metal parts and setting him up out by the road.

"We called him Dino," says Judy. "Then we made the giraffes, Norma and Lola. And Big Al the fisherman, and Puff the dragon."

As we sat there in the open garage, a large SUV came rolling up the U-shaped driveway, which loops between the Hagens' house and their gallery/workshop. The driver slowed and peered out from behind the tinted windows, but didn't stop.

"That's a drive-by," says Judy. "Happens all the time. People see the sculptures out on the street and they just can't resist. They've got to see what's back here!"

From the start, the enormous metal figures made a great advertising gimmick — but the Hagens weren't selling anything. Not yet, anyway.

"We never intended this to be a business," Judy says. "We were just having fun. Actually, I just wanted to make some Christmas presents."

But give away enough ingeniously artistic Christmas presents and pretty soon you're creating a demand for your work. And if you're really, really good, the art world just might come calling: The Hagens have two sculptures at Baltimore's prestigious American Visionary Art Museum, which specializes in the creations of outstanding untrained artists.

One of them, a leather-clad woman on a motorcycle, does a wheelie just above the museum entrance. Judy called her Dolly, and it's clear she misses her.

"She's technically on loan," she says, "but how can I take her back?"

Judy is giving me an impromptu tour of the grounds — open to anyone who happens to answer the siren song of her street sculptures. I admire a life-size mermaid figurehead, her torso made from what looks like a cylindrical propane tank, her ample naked breasts created from two old-school oil-filled construction torches. She spits an arc of water into a pool. Above, two whimsical fish-like sculptures, their scales and bones adapted from bicycle parts, among other things, pivot with the wind.

As if she knows what I'm thinking, Judy offers an explanation.

"My brain is wired different," she says, almost apologetically. "Don't ask me to sit down and read a book — but I'll look at a car bumper and see a bird."

Who can count the visionaries in coastal Delaware? The mini golf course owner, the sand sculptor, the museum curator, the boutique brew master … each has a story to tell, a vision to share, and the profound hope that they are not alone in the certitude that their passion is of transcendent value to others.

One more thing the amusement park owner, the outdoorsman and the folk artist have in common: Their passions all came out of nowhere and took each of them by surprise.

For the rest of us, that raises a banner of hope: Perhaps we can all be visionaries, if only we keep our eyes open. ■

Bill Newcott, *an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic Magazine, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives near Lewes.*

Rolling Stones

By Bill Newcott

How the ruins of Cape Henlopen's lighthouse ended up in your neighbor's living room

It was just a matter of time until the sand dune beneath the towering Cape Henlopen Lighthouse, standing above, gave way. The end finally came in April 1926, when rubble spilled down the face of the dune and the lightkeeper's house dangled over the edge.

It's the shimmer that catches your eye, the glitter-like sparkle that winks at you from a neighbor's fireplace. Or from the chimney of an old house. Or from behind the rhododendrons in a garden.

For a radius of roughly 20 miles around Lewes, little outposts of glimmering granite, a rock otherwise foreign to these parts, populate homes and businesses. The stones' points of dancing light seem to twinkle against a background of blues, reds, and grays, their patterns subtly morphing as the slanting sunlight changes its angle throughout the day.

Most likely, those stones are remnants of the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse. The towering structure stood guard at the entrance to Delaware Bay from 1765 until 1926 when suddenly, with a great crash heard only by the seagulls, the tower was no more.

In a land of sand, gravel and seashells, where most homes are made of fired brick or "stick construction," the dark granite stones of coastal Delaware have tales to tell — stories of geologic upheaval, geopolitical conflict, natural disaster and innovative commerce. ➤

John Hall's floor-to-ceiling fireplace is made of lighthouse granite that had been sitting in a Lewes yard for nearly 40 years. Up close, sparkling mica crystals catch the light.

John Hall's home on Gravel Hill Road near Millsboro, built in the late 1970s, is a modest ranch house. But as I enter the front door the first thing I see is the spectacular living room fireplace. Carefully pieced together in a jigsaw pattern, extending from floor to ceiling, more than 60 granite stones of varying shades frame a gas hearth. Hanging to its right is an original painting of the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse, back when it was still intact on its sandy bluff.

The stones' 15-mile journey to this spot took nearly 40 years. Hall — who has just come in from his backyard garden to show me around — explains their circuitous path: They were salvaged by Isaiah Howard, who owned a house on Savannah Road near Lewes's present-day Army Reserve Center. Years earlier, Howard had been a "surfman" — a rough seas rescuer in the days before the Coast Guard — stationed at Cape Henlopen. Family lore says the load was hauled out by mule and wagon.

But Howard apparently had no plans for the stones beyond bringing them home. They ended up as a rock garden in his yard.

"Then in 1972 or so," Hall says, "my mother-in-law, who was a niece of the family, handled the Howards' estate. She moved the rocks down the road to *her* rock garden! Then we moved them here when we built this house in '76.

"My father-in-law was a mason. A Lewes boy he worked with busted up the stones with a hammer and chisel to make the fireplace."

Hall's home is a mini museum in honor of the lighthouse — besides the painting he has miniature models, a large photographic poster commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Great Fall, and an 1891 letter to Isaiah Howard regarding disability payments: The life of a surfman was tough on the body.

As I leave Hall's home, I notice the glinting face of a cantaloupe-sized hunk of granite in his front garden.

"Yep," he says. "That one didn't make the cut."

For about 160 years, the Lewes-area coastline was punctuated by a 69-foot-tall exclamation mark: the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse. Perched atop the cape's Great Dune, its light sat at an elevation of 170 feet, visible for more than 20 miles at sea. The light was envisioned by a group of Colonial Philadelphia merchants who grew tired of their shipments ending up on the shoals of the lower Delaware Bay. They held a lottery to raise funds, then went to work financing what would be the sixth lighthouse built in North America.

Nearly a century later, inspectors commented that the lighthouse was "well built," largely because its walls — 6 feet thick at the base and 4 feet thick at the crown — were constructed of unusually high-quality rubble: relatively small chunks of granite that had been placed into forms and bound with a precursor of concrete.

Ordinarily, builders would use local stone for rubble, but the Cape Henlopen light's builders wanted their structure to stand up to the roughest northeaster. They contracted for granitic gneiss to be brought to the site from a quarry, probably located near Chester, Pa., just south of Philadelphia. That's where the Appalachian Piedmont yields outcroppings of Chester Park gneiss rock — notable for its embedded crystals of mica. About 570 million years ago, those rocks were created from sediments associated with an arc of volcanoes off the coast of ancient North America. Some 100 million years later, as continental plates collided, the rocks were pushed about 12 miles underground, where they were subjected to immeasurable pressure and heat and metamorphosed. Finally, those same tectonic forces nudged the rocks back to the surface, dark and speckled and beautiful.

Extracting the granite from the earth was, as Colonial workers might have said, bloody hard: 1700s quarrying technology was still literally in the Stone Age. Workers may have heated the quarry's granite wall with searing fire, then splashed the rock face with cold water to create fractures. Next they would have pounded wooden wedges into the cracks and expanded the crevices by soaking the wedges with water, causing chunks of rock to fall away. Or they may have simply dropped heavy iron balls onto large granite outcroppings. In any case, the resulting rocks were absolutely random in their size and shape. ➤

Born the year after the lighthouse fell, Lewes historian Hazel Brittingham wrote a book about the landmark, "Lantern on Lewes." Her collection includes a commemorative plate, sold as a high school fundraiser.

From Chester, it was a simple matter to load the granite onto boats and float it down the Delaware to Lewes. When they were unloaded, the jumble of stones resembled ship ballast, which may have led to the persistent belief that the lighthouse was made from ballast taken from merchant ships.

As sturdy as the outside of the lighthouse was, however, the inside structure was made of flammable wood — which enabled the British to nearly burn the whole place down during the War of 1812. (The lighthouse keeper had refused to sell them some of his cattle for food.) Pretty soon afterward, the light was up and running again — but the inescapable fact was, no matter what anyone did to preserve it, the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse was doomed from the start.

That's because the tower was constructed on nothing more than a great big sand dune, and sand dunes, by nature, come and go. For years government engineers tried to devise ways to keep the relentless powers of nature from eroding the Great Dune, but in 1924 they declared surrender and decommissioned the lighthouse. For locals, it was the beginning of a deathwatch.

"The people around here became very protective of the lighthouse — they almost personified it," says Hazel Brittingham, a lifelong Lewes resident who was born the year after the structure fell and wrote a book about it.

"They'd head out there saying, 'I just want to check up on her and see how she's doing.'"

The view looking up the dune after the lighthouse fell shows extensive rubble as well as the light's cylidrical base and the lightkeeper's house teetering on the edge of collapse.

There had not been any particularly rough weather in the days leading up to the grand finale. Just a week earlier, the local residents had stood in the lighthouse's shadow engaging in an annual Easter Monday tradition: rolling eggs down the cliff. (See page 60 for more on that tradition.)

Still, a century and a half of storms had done their work. Let's let the Gospel writer St. Matthew take it from here as he quotes Jesus talking about the guy who built his house upon the sand:

"The rain fell, the torrents raged, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell — and great was its collapse!"

At about 12:45 p.m. on Monday, April 12, 1926, a local man whose name is lost to history, stood on a bridge spanning the new Lewes-and-Rehoboth Canal, looking toward the lighthouse.

"He looked away for a moment," says Brittingham, "and when he looked back, he couldn't believe it. She was gone!

"One day you could stand at the Lewes Dairy, or on Lewes Beach or Rehoboth Beach, and see the lighthouse standing up there against the sky, just as it had for over 150 years.

"And the next day … nothing. It must have been very strange for them."

Spilled over the sands below and into the churning sea beyond, leading up the eroded cliff like a jumbled staircase, the guts of the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse were on nauseating display. Word spread and soon a crowd gathered, Lilliputians picking over the bones of a fallen Gulliver. ➤

"He looked away for a moment," says Brittingham, **"and when he looked back, he couldn't believe it. She was gone!"**

Visitors at the Lewes Historical Society gift shop on Savannah Road often ask volunteer Joan Gray about the granite fireplace that has stood against one wall since shortly after the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse fell. The craftsmanship is meticulous — including a delicate teardrop stone as a centerpiece.

It may have started with someone taking a small granite stone as a souvenir. Soon, wagons were showing up to tote off piles of rocks. Slowly, and then with surprising efficiency, the carcass of the lighthouse began to disappear. One can hold only so many hunks of granite under one's arms — especially when one is also trying to trudge across a sandy beach. So larger scale transportation of granite stones from Cape Henlopen to area homes and businesses became a cottage industry. The opportunity was pretty sweet: The materials were free for the taking and all a resourceful businessperson needed was a horse-drawn cart or a newfangled motor vehicle in which to haul them. One such entrepreneur was James Travis, a local contractor who was instrumental in scattering the remains of the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse throughout Sussex County.

"He was my grandfather," says Jack Travis, who lives in Baltimore but visits Lewes regularly to drop in on his dad. "James Travis made many, many trips hauling stones to Lewes and Rehoboth in his Model A truck, building fireplaces, mostly."

It must have taken several trips to deliver enough stones to complete an ambitious project dreamed up in the 1920s by the owners of Sandy Brae Stables, located along the newly established state highway that is today's Route 1. They covered the first story of the stables' main house with hundreds of granite stones — and inside they commissioned two enormous granite fireplaces.

Today, thousands of drivers zip past the place — right next to a Bob Evans restaurant at Midway — oblivious to the history behind the house, which was subsequently a funeral home, a wicker furniture store, and now the Willow Marie & Co. specialty boutique.

In fact, if you open your eyes to its presence, you'll start spotting lighthouse granite all over the place.

The red brick building at the corner of Savannah Road and Second Street in Lewes started out as a bank, then became a millinery and notions store and later a bird shop. Now it's home to the Lewes Historical Society's gift shop — and along one wall, dominating the whole place, is an especially striking granite fireplace (above). A particularly artful creation with deep, varied colors, the hearth has at its center a lovely, teardrop-shaped stone.

In the months after the fall, one pile of granite came to a rest a good 10 miles due west of Cape Henlopen, along the Lewes-Georgetown Highway (usually called Route 9 today) — where a dairy farmer was building a new home. Today the house is occupied by Old Wood Delaware, where owners Mary and Marty Bueneman sell salvaged furniture and reclaimed art. Inside, among the lamps and pottery, you'll find a fine granite fireplace — and outside are several granite pillars, some supporting the carport.

How many authentic Cape Henlopen Lighthouse granite stones are out there? No one has ever tried to count, but a recent Facebook appeal for lighthouse granite stories yielded more than 60 comments and no less than 14 reports of fireplaces, walls, bars, and stairways constructed from the rubble.

Is that even possible? Could the ruins of the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse have yielded enough stones to build fireplaces all the way from the beach to Millsboro? Or has the story become an easy, impossible-to-verify selling point for generations of real estate agents?

See this link for our Facebook post asking about the lighthouse rubble: https://bit.ly/2Q2tT2x

"Well, just look at it," says Hazel Brittingham as she sits at her dining room table, waving her hand over a photo of the fallen lighthouse, the ruins looking like the spine of a beached sea serpent.

"The walls were 6 feet thick at the base. It was seven stories high!"

Indeed, photos of the catastrophic aftermath offer a cutaway view of the lighthouse, revealing what had been a cylinder constructed with thousands upon thousands of granite stones. A lingering look at those images raises a question not of the fireplaces' authenticity … but of where did all the rest of the stones go?

Although the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse fell in 1926, pieces of it remained on the beach long after. Here members of the Pyle and Landman families sit atop a large block of stone resting in the surf in August 1930.

Also lost to the shifting sands of Cape Henlopen were the lighthouse keeper's quarters, a frame house just a few yards from the base of the tower. Brittingham pushes a photo of the lighthouse and the quarters across the table to me.

Her 91-year-old eyes don't see as well as they used to, but she has this particular photo memorized.

"You can see the man on the porch of the house," she says. "He's the lighthouse keeper, don't you think? But look closer."

I push the grainy old photo nearly to my nose.

"Can you make out a woman and a child standing there in the shadows?"

I can, just barely.

"The lighthouse keeper's wife and daughter," she suggests, and there's no reason to doubt that.

"There are people attached to that building," she says softly. "It's not just a lighthouse. It's people, too."

And that is the pulse that runs through all those fine stone fireplaces, each one burning with personal histories. It's a stream of humanity that flows from 21st-century living rooms to a man with a mule cart. It runs through a keeper and his kin posing on the porch, past a stubborn lighthouse steward defying an enemy, splashing over the calloused hands of workmen prying hunks of minerals from the face of the Earth.

They are not just stones. They're rocks of ages. ■

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Photograph courtesy of Charlie Pyle