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Historical Perspectives of Back Bay, Virginia

Barbara M. Henley

Introductory remarks to the Symposium by Mrs. Barbara M. Henley, a long time resident and former council woman of the city of Virginia Beach.

The Preface of Mann's (1984) *A Management Plan for Back Bay* begins: "Virginia Beach's Back Bay is a remote, untamed estuary lying in the lee of False Cape, a landscape and seascape of marshes and open water, dune ridges and islands, watermen and anglers going for large-mouth bass, ducks and geese carving flight formations against the open sky. It is also a thousand other things to thousands of other people."

When on Back Bay, one has the feeling that there indeed is one of the world's most beautiful, unspoiled spots. I am reminded of the image that is often portrayed in the comic strip "Family Circus." Little Billy discovers some new, hidden spot and he calls to his Father, "Hey, Dad. Here's a place where nobody has ever been before." And then the strip silhouettes the little Indian boy who played there, followed by the Colonial boy, and all of the other little boys who also discovered and played in that place. So it is with the system of bays, marshes and creeks that compose the Back Bay system, and the lands of the watershed that drain into the bays.

One of the earliest sources to help us know the history of this area are the autobiographical accounts of a Methodist minister, the Rev. D. Butts, who served the Princess Anne Circuit over a century ago in 1886-87. In his book (Butts, 1922), *From Saddle to City, By Buggy, Boat and Railway*, he describes his visits along the Princess Anne Circuit which included churches on Knotts Island, Wash Woods and Currituck Inlet, along with other sites in the County. This is a fascinating account of his work in the churches and with people of this area. We are treated to firsthand accounts of visits with the life savers at the beach stations, his hunting experiences, and an account of the effects of the Charleston, S.C. earthquake of August 31, 1886 on the bay area and Knotts Island.

I particularly like his description of the marsh road to Knotts Island. He wrote: "There are eleven bridges and twenty-two bends in that road. It is said that if you see a person travelling on that road a long way off you cannot tell which way the person is travelling till you get opposite on a parallel stretch! This may be a severe tax on the imagination, but of this I am sure, the road is about as crooked as the proverbial ward politician, and as rough as corduroy can make it."

He also describes the rescue of sailors from the bark "Clythia" and of the last to be rescued; he wrote, "a large market basket, and in the basket a beautiful brown haired ducking dog." This splendid animal became the brood dog for scores of ducking dogs throughout that region, and died at last of old age.

Of one of his hunting trips, he writes: "About 3:30 p.m. that day a large bunch of Red Heads were seen from our blind, coming toward us with the speed of the 'Fast Mail.'"

"We made ready to shoot, and when this cloud of flying life almost reached our decoys, each of us let them have a load...After they passed we gave them the other barrel. Ducks fell all around. It rained ducks for about a minute."

By the turn of the century, the secrets of the bounty of Back Bay had spread, and Back Bay was projected into national prominence as a wild fowler's paradise. The Munden Point Branch of the Virginia Beach, Norfolk and Southern Railway had increased travel access to the area, and wealthy Northern industrialists and financiers built fashionable private gunning clubs on the islands and along the shoreline of the bay area. It is safe to say that the tourist industry was going strong around Back Bay when the present strip was just a fledgling beach resort. Among those who made annual trips to the area at the turn of the century was President Grover Cleveland, an honorary member of the Back Bay Gunning Club.

The activities of the area were tied to the land and the bays. Farming or fishing were emphasized in the spring and summer, with local men supplementing that income as guides or in other capacities for the gunning clubs in winter. Regulations were quite different in those days. Food for the fowl was not left to chance. At least one hunt club purchased two carloads of corn at the start of the season. Market hunting of wildfowl provided income for many watermen. An account in the ledger of the Sandbridge Gunning Club, December 4, 1904 reads: "Arrived and rowed to the bay, baiting the blinds east and west. Many geese and ducks in the meadows and bay." "December 7th; Rest Day - L.H. Dixon arrived. Made a new gate for the East Dam and put it in place. Baited the blinds and saw many ducks. Fished with net in Sande Broad and caught the finest lot of white perch ever seen."
Barbour (1946) made this interesting technical observation: "The water just misses being fresh. The degree of salinity is about six percent that of sea water. If, as happens from time to time, because of storms and high tides, sea water invades the area, the salt content will, of course, be intensified. When the degree of salinity exceeds nine percent, a growth of barnacles appears, which symptom is viewed with alarm, because it means that the widgeon grass and wild celery are in jeopardy."

In his writings, Barbour gives us the real flavor of what the glory of the hunting days was like: "Old gunners can recall, as recently as the early 1930's, when they came to their blinds or batteries at dawn, a veritable cloud of ducks and geese over the waters of Back Bay..." "Guides invaded the area, the salt content will, of course, be intensified. When the degree of salinity exceeds nine percent, a growth of barnacles appears, which symptom is viewed with alarm, because it means that the widgeon grass and wild celery are in jeopardy."

Barbour continues, "During the winter months, the bays would freeze tight, with the exception of an airhole here and there. I recall a wildfowling friend of mine considering himself quite fortunate in knocking off one hundred and six Ruddies in such an airhole. Today, of course, such slaughter seems absolutely indefensible. But as I have said before, at the time these performances were chalked up they were regarded merely as outstanding days with thousands of birds available. The Raised Eyebrow Department was conspicuous by its absence."

"Let me now acquaint you with an old-timer's daily routine. You would be awakened about three-quarters of an hour before sunrise and sit down to a breakfast that left nothing to be desired. After stowing away, let us say, hot cereal, ham and eggs, some pancakes and several cups of coffee, you would go down to the dock and impatiently await the first showing of the sun, which, to mix a metaphor, constituted the green light to start you on your way for whatever the day might hold in store. Other gunners, too, of course, would be getting under way. In a few minutes the sunrise sky would be laced with ducks and geese flying hither and yon because of the disturbance (Barbour, 1946)."

"In this mind's-eye project of ours, let us say we are going to tie out in the northwest head of Fisher's Cove. The two gunners would install themselves in the blind and the guide would get busy with the greatest possible dispatch in staking out the decoys. Twelve to fourteen live birds would soon start to dabble and preen themselves. Their number would be supplemented by a varying number of block decoys, and soon all would be in readiness. If a goodly number of birds had been using the cove, at least three-quarters of the birds to be killed on that day would be in hand by ten o'clock. Our shooting tapers off, and we toy with the idea of lunch. It is pretty hard to resist the impulse to gnaw on a cold roast Teal or to have a cup of hot soup long before the noon hour has struck. Even though our sport has begun to taper off, it is always a pleasure to watch the antics of the live decoys and observe the ruthless routine of the marsh, where an eagle soars on high, watching for a crippled duck, and perhaps a marsh hawk or two are engaged in their never-ending search for prey (Barbour, 1946)."

"By this time, a goodly number of wildfowl have been garnered. The live decoys, with their wheezy 'crate calls,' are serving notice that the time is at hand to consider returning to the clubhouse. On our return to our spacious living room the day's doings are reviewed with our confreres. Such discussion is enlivened by a toddy or two, designed, presumably, to dispose of the day's chill."

The evening meal was described by Barbour (1946) as follows: "Dinner was indeed a gastronomic hurly-burly. Lynnhaven Bay oysters were forthcoming as a matter of course. Perhaps some side bets would be made on the number of oyster crabs that might be found ensconced in their hosts. Before their virtual disappearance, a dish of terrapin might brighten the occasion. With the terrapin now about gone, perhaps a six- or eight-pound rockfish, taken offshore the same day with a drag seine, would put in an appearance. This, together with a roast duck apiece, with a side dish of collards and sweet potatoes, would almost forestall any keen inquiry in the matter of dessert. If some member were to be so kindly as to furnish a bottle or two of Burgundy, so much the better. Again we repair to the living room. After a somewhat labored bit of chit-chat on the day's sport, we are off to bed."

As Barbour (1946) summarized: "The Back Bay area undoubtedly will provide sport for wild-fowlers for many years to come, unless conditions become more severe and the regulations affecting duck shooting are increased. While the abolition of baiting and the discontinuance of live decoys was unquestionably necessary because of the reduction in the number of birds, it is to be hoped that the stock will increase in due course of time and once more the wildfowler's heart will be gladdened by the sight of thousands of ducks
over Back Bay, as he wends his way toward his blind in the glory of the dawn.”

Any history must include mention of the storms of the past. Old timers emphasize that overwash from the sea was not an abnormal occurrence. The Granddaddy of storms seems to be the hurricane of August 1933. My mother-in-law was at the Horn Point Gunning Club at that time. At first light the next morning, they saw the house of one of the beach families floating in North Bay. Watermen rescued the family of Coast Guardsman Toler. Mr. Toler had rushed home the evening before to take his family back to the Number 4 Station for safety, but it was too late. As the house broke up, Mr. and Mrs. Toler and their three young children clung to the house top all night, one young child clutching a puppy and another hanging on to his kitten, as they listened to sounds of horses and cows and other livestock floating by throughout the night. The wave of seawater inundated the western bay shore, and each person who experienced that storm has his own tale to tell.

Just as there are many silhouettes to be drawn of people who have known and loved the Bay in the past, undoubtedly there are many silhouettes to be drawn in the future.

In our chapter in the history book on Back Bay, perhaps it will be written that we took very seriously our role as true caretakers of this wonderful resource. For instance, one of the guides who lived those marvelous experiences on the Bay said to me: “I’ve had my day, and I’ve enjoyed it. I would like for my grandchildren to know it, too.”

Bibliography

Butts, D.G.C. 1922. From Saddle to City By Buggy, Boat and Railway, pp. 166-198.
