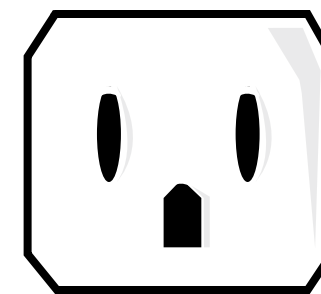


THE *General Log* SOCIETY

Nineteen families found a raw barrier island in the 1970s and made it theirs. They took advantage of the hardscrabble, primitive playground that was Bald Head Island and developed a vision for this place that still holds true.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT HULSEMAN



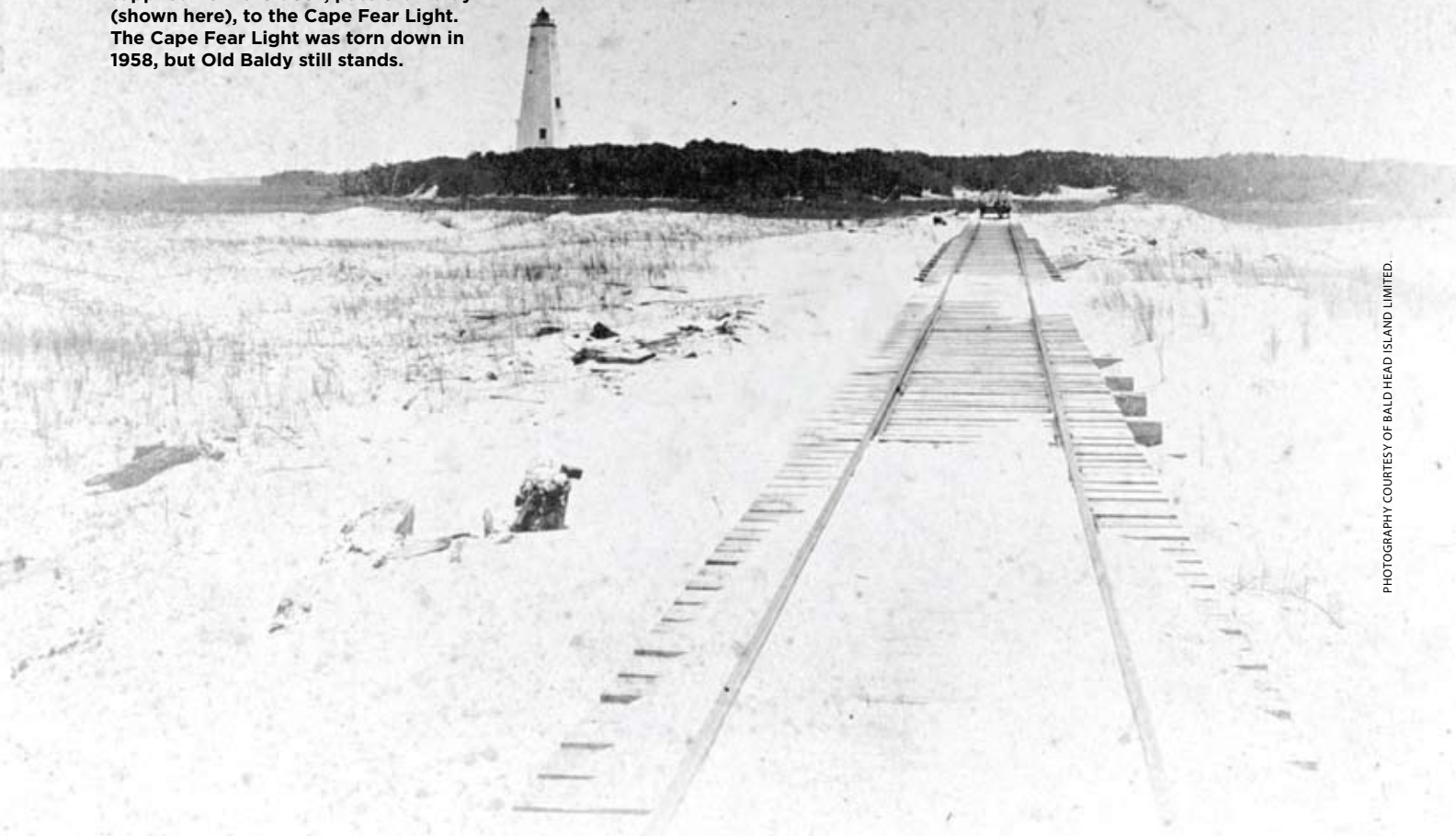
ne of the southernmost parts of the Old North State, one of the northernmost points of this country's subtropics, hard where the warmer, calmer waters of the Cape Fear River clash with the

colder, roiling currents of the Atlantic Ocean, Bald Head Island juts into the sea toward the treacherous Frying Pan Shoals. Barrier islands are as much the former as the latter — they are barriers — and so they bear the brunt of the surroundings' relentless assault. The water and the wind spray tiny shards of salt and sand. The dunes get hit first. They protect the maritime forest. The maritime forest gets hit next. It protects the marsh. A healthy barrier island has these three environments, needs all three, disparate but dependent, and the forest in particular is the most important piece of this delicate alchemy of reciprocity.

On Bald Head, the forest is atypically lush, verdant with red cedar and cabbage palmetto, wild olive and American holly, yaupon and loblolly pine, and finally the linchpin laurel and live oaks. The enduring species of trees sport

BY MICHAEL KRUSE

This photograph of Bald Head Island from the early 1900s shows the tram railway that transported construction supplies from the dock, past Old Baldy (shown here), to the Cape Fear Light. The Cape Fear Light was torn down in 1958, but Old Baldy still stands.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF BALD HEAD ISLAND LIMITED.

hardy, waxy leaves, resistant to the corrosive, airborne swirl — but just as important, maybe even more so, they grow in groups, like flocks of birds or schools of fish, better and more able together than they would be alone, and they form a dense, protective canopy. They interact. They cling to each other, and they move as a unit, their branches reaching to touch.

It's almost as if the trees hold hands because it's how they survive, and they know they won't if they don't.

To this island came 19 families in the 1970s. They weren't the first people to come to Bald Head. Small, mostly intermittent populations in the past had found their way — Indians looking for food, pirates looking for loot, Civil War conscripts from both sides, lighthouse keepers and Coast Guard rescuers, day fish-

There was no marina. There was no electricity. There were no restaurants or stores. There were no country clubs or swimming pools. There were no phones.

ers and hog hunters, soldiers to test their skills and Boy Scouts to set up camp. Developers came, too, different developers in different decades and eras, all of whom had wide eyes and big plans. Mostly, though, blueprints stayed blueprints, drawn but not built, which is why the 19 families found what they found. They arrived from Lumberton and Raleigh and High Point and Southport and Hendersonville and Hickory and Concord and Cary and Charlotte and Winston-Salem and Virginia and Connecticut. They were doctors and professors and owners of businesses and presidents of companies and publishers



of newspapers. They were the Bernes and the Bunns and the Capertons and the Congdons and the Caroons and the Cosgroves and the Crowells and the Cunninghams and the Dunlaps and the Grubbses and the Harpers and the Hayses and the McMahans and the Pooles and the Schmullings and the Thomases and the Tudors and the Westers and the Youngs. They showed up in Penn Yan motorboats driven into the middle of the island on a shallow creek in the couple of hours on either side of high tide because any other time didn't work.

There was no marina. There was no electricity. There were no restaurants or stores. There were no country clubs or swimming pools. There were no phones. The roads were loose sand paths. Empty lots were priced at please *please* buy, at \$15,000, at \$11,000, at \$10,000.

"There was absolutely nothing there," Bill Berne wrote in a collection of the memories of the families.

"It was beautiful," Bill Cunningham said not long ago on the phone from Florida.

"An escape," Charlie Young said. "An escape from the rat race."

"I loved it," said Charlotte Dunlap, who was drawn

to the place, instantly smitten, and still — a full-time, year-round resident all these years later. "I loved it from the minute I stepped on the island."

They loaded precut boards and beams on rented boats, these 19 families, so they could build their Bald Head homes. They burned through 150-horsepower motors rigged on the backs of skiffs shuttling materials and men. They sometimes lost appliances and furnishings on river crossings that turned unexpectedly rough. They had tug-pushed barges that ran straight onto beaches with labeled lumber wrapped, so it wouldn't warp in the wetness. They had four-wheel-drive Scout jeeps with half-inflated tires, so they wouldn't get stuck in the sand. They drove pilings deep down into the ground where the granular soil was sufficiently stable. Many of them did a lot of the work on their own, logging hot, dirty days before ending in the evenings with quick dips in the cooling lagoons. They followed simple plans to erect unostentatious homes.

When *The State Port Pilot* reported the arrival of power to Bald Head Island on January 28, 1981, residents knew the community they had created was about to change.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS HANNANT

The Westers and the Bernes were the first two to start, and then there were a few more families after that, and then a few more, and then a few more, a couple of houses here and a couple of houses there, until all of them were living hidden behind the dunes or overlooking the marsh or nestled within the thick of the forest.

“Nobody fussed, and nobody complained,” Thad Wester said recently, sitting in his house on Bay Tree Trail, a cross between a vacation getaway and a cottage in the woods.

“We weren’t building to sell,” he explained.

When the families were finished, when they had moved into their second and seasonal homes, they used gas-powered washers and dryers and fridges and stoves. They used gravity-fed water tanks or wells in their yards. They used candles on tables and kerosene lanterns hung on hooks on the walls. The Cunninghams ran a car-battery-powered black-and-white TV, and the Dunlaps did the same with a stereo, settling on a soundtrack of James Taylor and the Eagles, John Prine and Jackson Browne, Randy Newman and the Red Clay Ramblers. They used generators, too, all of them did, of all shapes, sizes, and kinds — 1.5-kilowatt Hondas, 3-kilowatt Briggs and Strattons, 5-kilowatt Homelites, 7-kilowatt Kirloskars, 9-kilowatt Indians, 17-kilowatt Onans. They turned them on when they needed power and turned them off when they didn’t. Some used them more often than others. Some hardly used them at all.

And they had CB radios. They gave their houses names — Skylark and Hilltop and Neptune, Sandfiddler and Sand Dollar and the Raccoon Hilton, Blue Crab and C Turtle and the Seven Cs, Tree House and Pilot House and Happy House — and they tuned their CBs to the same single frequency. All of them did. So everybody could hear everybody.

Anybody need anything?

Anybody have extra gas?



Bald Head’s Generator patriarch, Dr. Thad Wester, is one of three society members who still live on the island. If he looks hard at the world around him, he can see traces of what they created years ago.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS HANNANT

Before members of the Generator Society came to Bald Head Island, lighthouse keepers lived in these quarters (shown here in a photo from the early 1900s) and tended the Cape Fear Light, which stood on the island from 1903 to 1958.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF BALD HEAD ISLAND LIMITED

Anybody got any limes?

They were on the island. They were not alone. Eventually, together, they would come to call themselves the Generator Society. It wasn't until later the less literal meaning turned true.

They all “knew,” Bill Berne wrote, electricity was on the way, certain to come “any day.” But 1972 became 1973. And 1973 became 1974. And 1974 became 1975. And that's the way it was for the rest of the decade. Even as the developer put in the beginning of a proper marina, even after the greens on the golf course were finally finished, the power on Bald Head Island came from something else.

In the meantime, the families brought most of their food from the mainland in cardboard boxes and coolers: beets, tomatoes, and niblet corn in cans. They brought steaks, too, but were sure to cook them fast because they didn't keep. They worked out an arrangement with the downtown grocer in Southport. He took orders by CB and sent the food on a boat the same day followed by a bill once a week. What they didn't buy they caught, fishing the creeks with nets and the ocean

with poles, feasting on bountiful flounder, trout, and drum. They clammed and crabbed and musseled. They plucked the occasional scallop.

They went for jogs and spotted sunning alligators and foxes that seemed to wonder who they were and why they were there. They watched loggerhead sea turtles trudge up onto the sand to lay their eggs and then used mesh wire to protect the nests from hungry raccoons. They picked up the prettiest shells.

They gathered frequently for cocktails, cherishing ice cubes, calling them “Bald Head diamonds.”

They played golf in spikes and nothing else just because they could.

Or so goes the story.

So many stories.

There was the time Charlie Young got up at night to get a drink of water and ended up wielding the butt of a broom to chase away a possum.

There was the time the Bunns stayed on the island during a hurricane and took cover in Old Baldy, the state's oldest standing lighthouse, but still plenty sturdy, and they climbed the 108 steps to the windowed tip-top, where it was only them and a roosting white owl, and they all watched in awe of such breathtaking power.

There was the time Charlotte Dunlap got a big, rusty fishhook lodged in the meat of her calf, and Thad Wester, a pediatrician back in Lumberton, put her on a picnic table on a porch and turned spot-duty surgeon, albeit one drinking a beer, which was fine because so was the patient, and so was Pat Thomas, who serenaded the scene while playing his accordion.

And there was the time one Easter weekend when the Harpers' garage caught fire without them even there and all of a sudden the CBs crackled — "Fire at the Harper house! Fire at the Harper house!" — and Wester and others organized lickety-split an old-fashioned bucket brigade with golf

carts racing from lagoons with 20-gallon cans filled with water. People poured them on the burning wall, and they stomped out tiny fires in the leaves and the shrubs, and the garage was a goner but at least the house was not.

"Summoned the troops." That's how Wester put it.

"Very soon a tremendous camaraderie existed and a closeness that is usually achieved only after many years of friendship," Bippi Grubbs said in the collected recollections.

"We really needed each other back then, took care of each other, appreciated each other," Bynum Tudor said in an oral history interview done a few years ago and recorded by current resident Marilyn Ridgeway.

"Depended on each other," Charlotte Dunlap said, growing in groups, branches reaching to touch.

There was no playground.

The kids just ran.

They left their houses in the mornings and didn't come back for hours and sometimes for entire days. They fished in the creeks. They skied down the dunes that felt like mountains. They wandered in the woods and searched for treasures: white bones of animals long since dead and old

During the early years of Development and Modernization of Bald Head Island, there were families who endured Inconvenience and Privation in exchange for the Privilege of Being Married to Bald Head in a unique way known only to a few. In Recognition of those families and their Accomplishments, they are hereby declared Members in Perpetuity in ...



THE GENERATOR SOCIETY.

buttons of Civil War soldiers the same. They had some rules, but just a few, like stay away from the spots where the currents were stiffest. It was kind of like Camp Baldy. Only they were in charge.

"They loved it," Lee Wester said. "They could do anything they wanted out here."

"Just so safe," Charlotte Dunlap said. "And such an adventure."

"You rarely saw other people," Marshall Dunlap said. "You could walk the beach for days and never run into anybody."

"Me and my brothers, we would go exploring," David Berne said.

His dad, he said, used to drive them in his jeep to a spot on the island, any spot, drop them off and tell them to find their way home.

But they never got lost. How could they get lost? Lost on Bald Head? If they ever got disoriented, if they ever didn't recognize where they were, just stop, they were told. Stand still. Hush up. Listen for the ocean and walk toward the sound of the surf.

Toward the ends of many afternoons, they all came together, usually gathering on East Beach, for what they took to calling TPP, or Total Population Parties. The kids' job was to collect a mess of driftwood to make a fire. The women brought hush puppies and coleslaw. The men cooked the fish they caught that day or boiled a big pot of shrimp or made chowder from fresh clams. They ate and told stories and jokes. They played guitar and sang songs. They even shared some coveted "diamonds" for drinks.

The sun set.

Night fell.

Out came the ghost crabs skittering on the sand and the bright white stars in the sky.

At the Dunlaps' by the beach, where they almost never ran their generator for light, the adults lit the lanterns, probably a dozen or so latched to the walls, 6 or 7 feet off the floor. They played Monopoly or dominoes or checkers or chess. The kids ran up and down the beach, around on the dunes, just enough light from the moon. They clambered up a ladder to the wide, flat deck on the roof of the house. From there, they could see the hulking cargo ships,

with their blinking lights, coming in off the Atlantic and approaching the mouth of the river. They went back down in the house and grabbed all the cushions, dragged them back up to the deck, and finally closed their eyes.

Electricity was coming. This time it was real. It was May of 1980. Carolina Power & Light was saying soon. Thad Wester made jambalaya for a meeting of the property owners on the island. He and some of the others recognized the significance of this shift.

He gave framed certificates to the 19 families.

The certificates were playful but not frivolous.

"During the early years of Development and Modernization of Bald Head Island," the certificates read, "there were families who endured Inconvenience and Privation in exchange for the Privilege of Being Married to Bald Head in a unique way known only to a few. In Recognition of those families and their Accomplishments, they are hereby declared Members in Perpetuity in ...

"THE GENERATOR SOCIETY."

The nine-and-a-half-mile 23,000-volt circuit stretched from a CP&L substation near Southport, running overhead, underground, and underwater. The headline in Southport's *State Port Pilot*, on January 28, 1981: "Lights On At Bald Head As Power Line Complete." The report quoted Thad Wester.

He talked about "safety, convenience and desirability" — but the advent of the ease of buttons pushed and switches flicked, he added, "causes mixed emotions, for we realize that reliable power will attract many more people ..."

The generators weren't the point, only "a common bond," he later wrote in a letter to his grandchildren. "The idea of the Generator Society actually had less to do about generators than it did with the people who chose to pioneer those early years at Bald Head. ... Not a single one of them failed to develop an emotional relationship with the island. All without lots of conversations realized how fragile the beautiful ecosystems on Bald Head are ... and supported all measures to guarantee that we will return the island to our children's children as near like we found it as possible."

Bald Head today is not precisely what it was. There's a post office. There's a village hall. There's a grocery store. There's a country club with a fitness center that offers yoga and Pilates. There's a golf shop. There's a spa. There's a reliable ferry that runs every hour and people wait for it by looking at the screens of their iPads and phones. Boutiques sell "beach flair." Visitors show up with purses that are a little too fancy and dogs that are a little too pretty and boots that are a little too nice.

But there's no minigolf. No movie house. No blocks of condos stacked on sand like games of Jenga. And there aren't any cars, only golf carts, and the speed limit is all of 18. Bald Head is a hard place to be in a hurry. It can be frustrating at first for people more accustomed to a faster pace, which is most people, from most places. But there's no choice. The ferry trip is 20 to 25 minutes of more or less mandated downshift, and once on the island you scoot around in a cart and people wave because they think they know you, or at least they think they will before too long, and they're probably right because barely more than 200 people live on the island year-round, so you wave back. Who wants to be the only stranger? Park the cart and walk around and the

sound is a rare kind of silence in which you can hear the calls and chirps of shorebirds and songbirds and the pitter-patter of animals' paws in the forest.

The Generator Society? Most of them are gone. They've moved back to the mainland to be closer to medical care, or they've moved to Florida to be warmer in the winter. Many of them are dead. Bill Berne. Bynum Tudor. Pat Thomas. Only Thad and Lee Wester and Charlotte Dunlap still live here

pretty much all year long. They used to have an annual get-together, the 19 families, but it hasn't happened for a while.

It remains an appropriate name, though, the Generator Society, an earned name, even now, maybe especially now, because they started something on Bald Head that has not ended. Is not over. They didn't knock down the dunes or raze the forest or pave the marsh to build their homes.

"They had a vision, and that vision was living in harmony with nature," said Suzanne Dorsey, the executive director of the Bald Head Island Conservancy. "I think their core vision defined the future of the island."


"They were really the root structure of what came next," said Mary Beth Springmeier, the head of the island's historical association.

"They're exemplary in terms of what you might do to preserve an ecosystem as well as stabilize an island," said Bill Smith, a biology professor at Wake Forest University. "Barrier islands should follow the example of Bald Head."

Thad Wester sat in his living room one recent weekend morning. He's 86 now. He still walks every day through the forest to the post office, but his thoughts often scatter, and on his couch he couldn't always recall what he wanted to recall. He paused for long stretches to stare at the ceiling while scanning his mind for memories that had gone momentarily blank. The old clock on the wall ticked audibly and inexorably. It was clear he knew what he wanted to say. It was in there somewhere. Finally Bald Head's Generator patriarch got it out.

"It was not easy, but it turned out OK."

"We like where we are."

"It's a beautiful place." 

Michael Kruse, a graduate of Davidson College, is a staff writer at the Tampa Bay Times, where he has won state, regional, and national reporting and writing awards. His most recent story for Our State was "The Avett Brothers" (January 2013).