

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, June 6, 2011

Delaware Coast Natives, 1920s and 1930s: I must tread easy on the history of Rehoboth Beach, as there is an active historical society there whose members know much more than I. However, I'll preface by saying that on a 1779 map of the Delaware River and Bay, Rehoboth Bay is called "Ronaboth Bay," and Cape Henlopen is called Cape James. Possibly William Penn thought the cape should be named for his good friend, King James II. We know a Methodist Camp Meeting was established in what is now downtown Rehoboth in 1876, and the railroad arrived about 1900, coming right down the middle of Rehoboth Avenue, with the passenger station located in the first block from the boardwalk. I believe I was told that for a short time a spur swung south along the beach to Dewey Beach, where it terminated at the Douglas House. Rehoboth was dry; Dewey was not.

Nine years before they were married, my parents visited Rehoboth in my father's new 1912 Stanley Model 74, accompanied by several members of both families and at least one other car. In 1925, they rented the Bradford cottage on Maryland Avenue, and in 1926 and 1927, the Handy cottage on the same street and closer to the ocean. While some home movies exist, my only direct recollection of those days was when I fell down the steps at the Handy cottage and knocked out my six lower baby teeth. At that time, ice was delivered daily by horse cart to the numerous cottages, and teams of oxen brought in produce from the local farms.

Although the summer months probably tripled the population, the year-round count for Rehoboth was about 600. Of these, my estimate is that 200 were natives. Some were real "down-homers," philosophers with great instincts and common sense but with little formal education. Here are a few I remember.

John Tracy: John was weatherbeaten and lived like a hermit, almost a homeless person, but he was seen daily in the center of town spinning his tales of old. I recall the anxiety of the population in the height of a real Nor'easter in August of 1933. The waves were washing down the perpendicular streets, and there was great concern for many of the cottages. Tracy was asked what he thought. He said if it didn't tear things up in the next two hours or so, the worst would be over. His opinion was dead on.

Rufus Roach: Rufus ran a small gasoline station on Rehoboth Avenue about two blocks from the canal bridge. His regular ESSO gasoline (16 cents per gallon) was dispensed from an electric pump, but ESSO Ethyl was dispensed from a hand pump (18 cents); Rufus had to pump up the gasoline into a bowl that held 10 gallons, then it ran by gravity into his customer's tank. Although he had no education, Rufus decided he wanted to run for mayor. My father liked Rufus and tried to help him get elected. Unfortunately, he didn't make it.

John A. Kunsman: John was a housepainter and an overall handyman who was a winter caretaker for a number of summer residents. Like Tracy, he had a weatherbeaten complexion, and no matter what the occasion or item of conversation, his expression didn't change. Perhaps he never enjoyed a laugh in his life. Despite this, he was a loyal and trusted custodian of my parents' houses (at one time they owned three), and he never overcharged. John Kunsman had a boat on the Rehoboth and Lewes Canal, and he took several of us to Lewes for an afternoon trip. Once he visited Yorklyn, but he was out of his element.

George Shockley: I never knew Shockley (my father did), but he had a local reputation of one who could solve problems when everyone else had failed. During World War II, a large ship ran aground at Rehoboth, and she was really stuck in the sand. The Corps of Engineers and other contractors had tried unsuccessfully to dislodge her. Someone said, "Get George Shockley." The profit from the job would be the ship itself and all her contents. George was not long in accomplishing the task; everyone was happy, and Shockley had a nice pocket of change.