LONELY CAPE HATTERAS, BESIEGED BY THE SEA

By WILLIAM S. ELLIS

Photographs by EMORY KRISTOF

Both National Geographic Staff

AT FIRST I SAW only the dolphins and the amberjacks, dappling the sea with their green-gold flashes. Then, from up on the flying bridge of our deep-sea fishing boat, Capt. Ernal Foster pointed to starboard and yelled, "See it? Smell the oil? Believe me now?"

The slick showed faint—a scatter rug of dirty rainbow stains—in the Gulf Stream off Cape Hatteras. No mistaking the odor, of course. So I became a believer in the story that the long-time skipper of charter boats insists is true.

The oil, Captain Foster told me, first appeared in 1942 and has been there ever since.

During the early months of that tragic year of maritime history, German submarines claimed a heavy toll of Allied shipping off Cape Hatteras and all of North Carolina's Outer Banks. Tankers and freighters plunged to rest in the already crowded "Graveyard of the Atlantic." And even now, after more than a quarter of a century, the waters remain stained by the lifeblood of war.

We were 15 miles offshore in seas so calm that the wreaths of

Golden calm of an August evening finds surf fishermen casting from Cape Hatteras, the tip of North Carolina's Outer Banks. This chain of Atlantic barrier islands shelters the mainland from ocean tempests. Heaped up by wind and wave, the Banks face constant onslaughts by their creators. Sands wash away from one spot to pile up in another, and inlets open and close at the whim of storms.

Lofty lifesaver, Cape Hatteras Lighthouse towers 208 feet, tallest in the Nation; its beacon can be seen 25 miles at sea. Next year the brick lighthouse will celebrate its hundredth birthday.

KODACHROMES BY EMORY KRISTOF (LEFT) AND GEORGE F. MOBLEY © N.G.S.

sargassum weed all around us lay quietly on the surface. Before we returned to port, however, this fabled piece of the Atlantic reverted to form, like water brought to a sudden boil. And I was glad, for this was the way I wanted to know Cape Hatteras, as mariners have known and feared it for hundreds of years—on an elevator of 10-foot swells, braced against a northeast wind strong enough to drive its chill through thick rubber foul-weather clothing.

The oil slick was gone now, obscured in the wash of the awful stirrings. We came upon treacherous shoal water, which the wind was peeling back to reveal a piece of rusted wreckage. I followed the fluctuations of the depth finder: 13 feet . . . 10 . . . 8 . . . The depth on either side of the boat was even less, for we were crossing the shoal through a narrow cut.

It occurred to me then that, though we were still nearly six miles out to sea, I could stand on bottom and have my head above water. Such are the traps of Hatteras that have snared vessels since the very beginning of American history.

Stage Setting for High American Drama

History is deeply inscribed in the sands of this coastal region. From the village of Kitty Hawk down to lonely Portsmouth Island, I found many a silent setting of dramatic events in the Nation's past. Here the first English-speaking colony in North America—Sir Walter Raleigh's famous Lost Colony—settled. Here, too, Wilbur and Orville Wright gave birth to today's Air Age. Pirates lived and stashed their booty on these shores, the same shores that defied British blockade attempts during the American Revolution.

Long-time summer resort . . . mountainous sand dunes and dense woods . . . refuge for nearly 200 species of birds, including Arctic-nesting snow geese—these also make up the region. More than anything else, though, the Cape Hatteras center slice of the Outer Banks stands as an open window on the violence of the sea.*

That evening, following our return to port, I walked along the beach with an old man, and we talked about storms and shipwrecks and the sassiness of mosquitoes. When I told him about the enduring oil slick, he replied, "Myself, I don't try to understand the things that go on out there, and I've lived here, man and boy, 74 years come February. I've seen the Atlantic do some things you wouldn't believe, and that's the gospel truth."

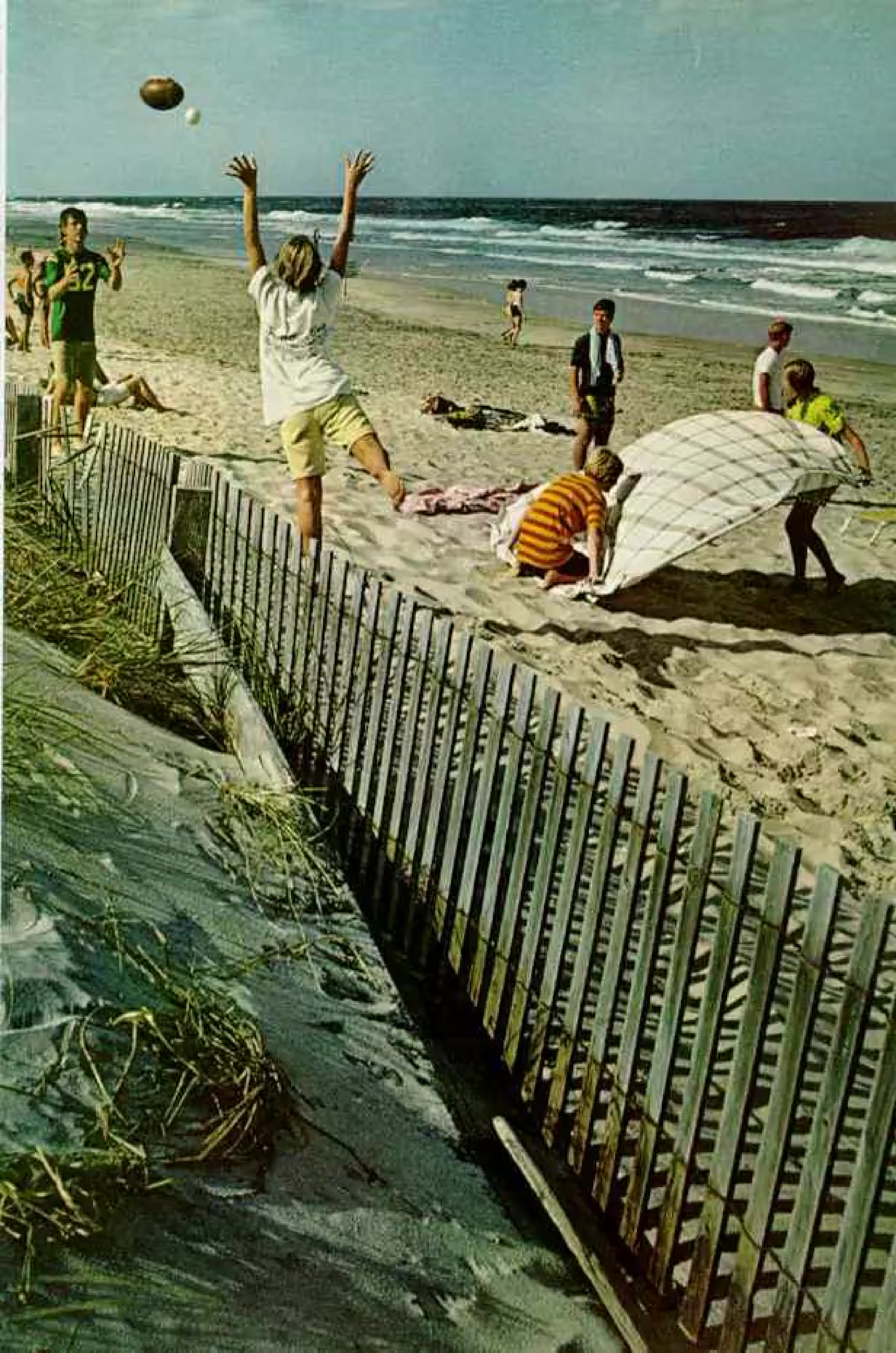
Other natives of the Outer Banks told me the same thing. To them, the ones who know it best, the sea at Hatteras is enigmatic and sometimes seemingly sorcerous, a place where winds and currents stir the ghosts of times when the cape exacted a toll of sorrow from passing ships (foldout map, pages 398-400).

At Cape Hatteras the chain of barrier islands making up the Outer Banks bends sharply in a protective embrace of the North

*See "October Holiday on the Outer Banks," by Nike Anderson, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, October 1958.

For all the Nation to enjoy: Cape Hatteras National Seashore, established in 1953 as the first of its kind in the country, extends for 72 miles, beginning near the southern end of Bodie Island and running the length of Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands. Eight villages within the federal domain remain under private ownership (map, pages 398–400). Beside a fence installed to stabilize the sand, youngsters play "double catch" with a football and a softball. Miles of such fences, four and five ranks deep, lie beneath dunes also anchored by beach grass and sea oats.

KODACHROME BY EMORY KRISTOF © N.G.S.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Carolina coast. To the north lies the great sweep of Hatteras Island beach, now under the care of the National Park Service as the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. Continuing southwestward, it encompasses Ocracoke Island. Beyond Ocracoke Inlet stretches the more recently authorized Cape Lookout National Seashore. In all, the federal preserve strings out for 125 slender miles.

Ghost Island Reclaims a Resident

Southwest of Ocracoke lies Portsmouth Island, now awash in the silence of total abandonment. As recently as last fall, however, when I visited Portsmouth, there were five persons living on it, two of them sisters.

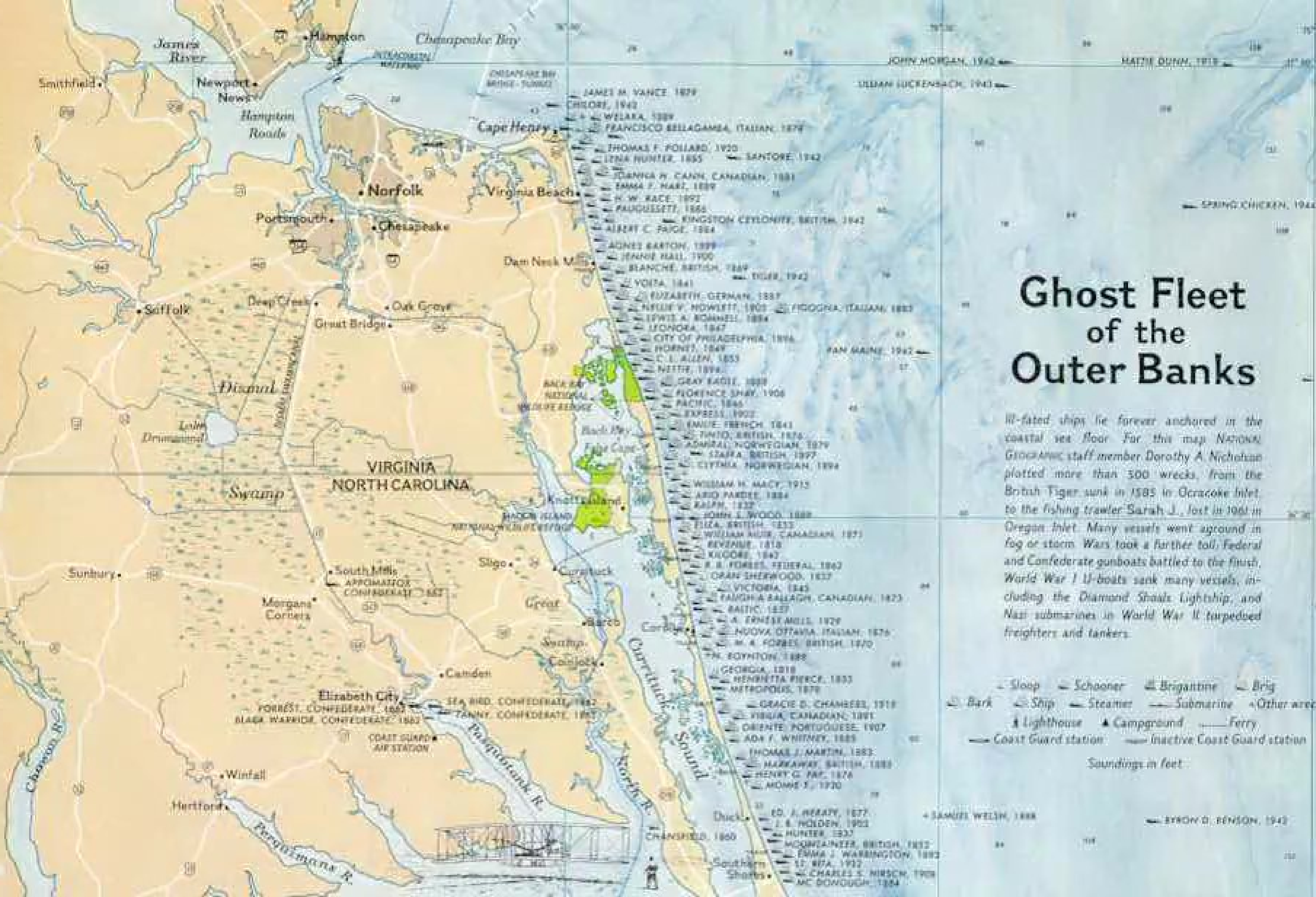
Henry Pigott was born on the island 75 years ago and has lived there off and on for 67 of those years. I found him at work painting the front porch of the house of one of the sisters, a spinster.

"There was a time," Mr. Pigott told me, when "two, maybe three hundred" lived on Portsmouth Island. In 1846 the Government constructed a seamen's hospital there. Inlet pilots built imposing homes, ship traffic was heavy, and the community flourished.

But that's all past now. Heavy growths of wax myrtle and other bushes of trampoline-like resiliency cover the island. The former post office building, not much larger than a tool shed, stands padlocked; inside, a net of

Roster of the wrecked, ships' nameboards decorate a house in Old Nags Head. Collected over the years by the cottage owners, most of the weathered boards were salvaged from vessels driven onto the shoals; others washed in from the sea.

Snug harbor of Ocracoke offers sanctuary to fishing boats and pleasure craft, beckoned home by its 146-year-old lighthouse. Pilots who guided ships through Ocracoke's inlet in the early 1700's founded the village. Today ferries link it with Hatteras Island and the mainland.



Ghost Fleet of the Outer Banks
Ill-fated ships lie forever anchored in the coastal sea floor. For this map NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC staff member Dorothy A. Nicholson plotted more than 500 wrecks, from the British Tiger sunk in 1585 in Ocracoke Inlet to the fishing trawler Sarah J., lost in 1961 in Oregon Inlet. Many vessels went aground in fog or storm. Wars took a further toll; Federal and Confederate gunboats battled to the finish. World War I U-boats sank many vessels, including the Diamond Shoals Lightship, and Nazi submarines in World War II torpedoed freighters and tankers.
Sloop
Schooner
Brigantine
Brig
Bark
Ship
Steamer
Submarine
Other wrecks
Lighthouse
Campground
Ferry
Coast Guard station
Inactive Coast Guard station
Soundings in feet
Chesapeake Bay
James River
Hampton
Smithfield
Newport News
Hampton Roads
Norfolk
Portsmouth
Chesapeake
Virginia Beach
Cape Henry
Dam Neck Mills
Suffolk
Deep Creek
Oak Grove
Great Bridge
Dismal
Swamp
Lake Drummond
VIRGINIA
NORTH CAROLINA
Knotts Island
Sligo
Currituck
Sunbury
South Mills
Morgans Corners
Great
Swamp
Camden
Elizabeth City
Winfall
Hertford
Chowan R.
Perquimans R.
Pasquotank R.
North R.
Currituck Sound
Corolla
Duck
Southern Shores
JOHN MORGAN, 1942
HATTIE DUNN, 1918
ULLMAN LUCKENBACH, 1943
JAMES M. VANCE, 1879
CHILORE, 1942
WELAKA, 1889
FRANCISCO BELLAGAMBA, ITALIAN, 1878
THOMAS F. POLLARD, 1920
LENA HUNTER, 1885
SANTORE, 1942
JOANNA H. CANN, CANADIAN, 1881
EMMA F. HART, 1889
H. W. RACE, 1892
PAUGUSSETT, 1886
KINGSTON CEYLONITE, BRITISH, 1942
ALBERT C. PAIGE, 1884
AGNES BARTON, 1889
JENNIE HALL, 1900
BLANCHE, BRITISH, 1869
TIGER, 1942
VOLTA, 1841
ELIZABETH, GERMAN, 1887
NELLIE V. HOWLETT, 1905
FIGOGNA, ITALIAN, 1883
LEWIS A. ROMMELL, 1884
LEONORA, 1847
CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, 1896
HORNET, 1849
C. L. ALLEN, 1853
NETTIE, 1894
GRAY EAGLE, 1889
FLORENCE SHAY, 1906
PACIFIC, 1846
EXPRESS, 1902
EMILIE, FRENCH, 1843
TINTO, BRITISH, 1876
ADMIRAL, NORWEGIAN, 1879
STAFFA, BRITISH, 1897
CYTHNA, NORWEGIAN, 1894
WILLIAM H. MACY, 1915
ARIO PARDEE, 1884
RALPH, 1837
JOHN S. WOOD, 1889
ELIZA, BRITISH, 1833
WILLIAM MUIR, CANADIAN, 1871
REVENUE, 1818
KILGORE, 1847
R. B. FORBES, FEDERAL, 1862
ORAN SHERWOOD, 1837
VICTORIA, 1845
FAUGH-A-BALLAGH, CANADIAN, 1873
BALTIC, 1837
A. ERNEST MILLS, 1929
NUOVA OTTAVIA, ITALIAN, 1876
M. A. FORBES, BRITISH, 1870
N. BOYNTON, 1889
GEORGIA, 1818
HENRIETTA PIERCE, 1833
METROPOLIS, 1878
GRACIE D. CHAMBERS, 1919
VIRGIA, CANADIAN, 1891
ORIENTE, PORTUGUESE, 1907
ADA F. WHITNEY, 1885
THOMAS J. MARTIN, 1883
MARKAWAY, BRITISH, 1883
HENRY G. FAY, 1876
HOWE F., 1930
ED. J. HERATY, 1877
J. B. HOLDEN, 1903
HUNTER, 1837
MOUNTAINEER, BRITISH, 1852
EMMA J. WARRINGTON, 1893
ST. RITA, 1932
CHARLES S. HIRSCH, 1909
MC DONOUGH, 1884
CHANSFIELD, 1860
SAMUEL WELSH, 1888
BYRON D. BENSON, 1942
SPRING CHICKEN, 1944
PAN MAINE, 1942
SEA BIRD, CONFEDERATE, 1862
FANNY, CONFEDERATE, 1862
FORREST, CONFEDERATE, 1862
BLACK WARRIOR, CONFEDERATE, 1862
APPOMATTOX, CONFEDERATE, 1862
COAST GUARD AIR STATION
BACK BAY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
MACKAY ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Epochal flight of the Wright brothers lasted for 12 seconds as their flying machine lifted above the sands near Kitty Hawk, December 17, 1903.

Albemarle Sound

North Atlantic Ocean

Continental Shelf

Fort Raleigh National Historic Site marks the first English settlement in the New World, on Roanoke Island in 1585-86. Other settlers came in 1587. Three years later they had disappeared, leaving only the word "Croatoan" carved on a stockade post.

Pamlico Sound

Cape Hatteras National Seashore (shown in green) extends from Bodie Island to Ocracoke Inlet. From there, Cape Lookout National Seashore extends southward nearly to Morehead City.

CAPE HATTERAS NATIONAL SEASHORE

Tales of buried treasure abound along the Banks, a favorite haunt of pirate Edward Teach, known as Blackbeard. The buccaneer's career ended in 1718 when two British warships caught his sloop Adventure inside Ocracoke Inlet.

CAPE LOOKOUT NATIONAL SEASHORE (Authorized)

Brig. Gen. William (Billy) Mitchell proved the vulnerability of ships to aerial bombardment when his airmen sank the Virginia and New Jersey — battleships marked for scrapping — off Diamond Shoals in 1923.

Shipwreck data obtained from material compiled by Outer Banks historian David Stick, Kitty Hawk, North Carolina; The Mariners Museum, Newport News, Virginia; and U. S. Navy records. Nationality of foreign ships given when known.

Desperate men once clung in terror to the deck of the *Priscilla* (above), here lined with sightseers. Damaged in the great hurricane of 1899, the barkentine ran aground near Gull Shoal Lifesaving Station. After a mountainous wave swept the captain's wife, two sons, and the cabin boy overboard, the 10 men remaining awaited certain destruction. But Rasmus S. Midgett, on solitary beach patrol, heard their cries. Dashing repeatedly through the towering breakers, he dragged all to safety. Midgett's feat earned him the Gold Lifesaving Medal of Honor.

The *Nomis* (below) was wrecked in August 1935 with all aboard saved. Many a shipwreck survivor owed his life to the Lifesaving Service, which became part of the U. S. Coast Guard in 1915.

spider webs covers the openings in the letter-sorting case.

One of the best preserved structures on the island is the church, which Henry Pigott kept clean and tidy and in good repair. He even rang the church bell each Sunday morning—not so much as a call to worship (services were discontinued long ago), but as a pealing requiem for the island's better days.

Few outsiders visit Portsmouth, and that suited at least one of the five residents just fine. Fred Cannon, who lived alone at one end of the island, told me: "I haven't had a tie on since I came out of the service in 1946. Ain't that wonderful?"

One of the sisters died last January in a hospital on the mainland, and the others moved away. Mr. Pigott insists, however, that he will one day return to his little pink house down by a swash on the island.

For Fred Cannon, only death could take him from the island's solitude which he cherished. In April of this year, his 16-foot skiff was found swamped in Pamlico Sound. His personal belongings washed up on the beach. An investigation by the Coast Guard concluded that he fell overboard and perished.

Only 500 feet wide at some points and isolated from the mainland by broad, shallow sounds, the three major segments of

the Outer Banks—Bodie (pronounced body), Hatteras, and Ocracoke Islands—form a trinity of subservience to the whims of the Atlantic. The landscape undergoes never-ending change. One piece of beach erodes away, and another gains ground; drifting sands plug one inlet, and storm-driven waves pry open another; a section of bridge from which fishermen once dropped lines into 20 feet of water now spans a mud flat.

Arab Ancestor Came Ashore on an Oar

One thing that doesn't change, however, is the character of the Outer Banks and the people who inhabit them. Marinated in some of the richest juices of sea-oriented history, the Banks remain charged with a flavor unique in all the country. Only on these islands is one not overly surprised to find a descendant of a shipwrecked Arab selling homemade fig preserves.

"He was my great-great-great-great-grandfather, a full-blooded Arab," Harvey Wahab told me as we sat on the screened porch of his house, across the street from the Ocracoke Post Office. "He was shipwrecked here in the 1700's. Came ashore on an oar."

Harvey Wahab, 67, pronounces his name WAY-hab. "Away back, though, it was WAH-hab," he said. "Fellow from Arabia once told me it's WAH-hab over there."

Born on Ocracoke Island and retired from

Full fury of Gladys, the hurricane of October 1968, lashes the shore at Nags Head. Surprisingly, the dread floods brought by these storms come not so much from the ocean as from the sounds on the inland side. As the hurricanes move north from the Caribbean, long swells push water through the inlets. Then as the eye passes and the wind shifts, the waters spill out again, sweeping furiously over the low Outer Banks.

Lonely sentinel of the sea, Diamond Shoals Light Station stands guard 14 miles from shore, warning of malevolent shoals in places only three feet below the surface. Four Coast Guardsmen man the station at all times, maintaining radio beacons and the light. Every two weeks a helicopter brings supplies and rotates half the crew. When storms threaten, the men take refuge ashore; dual generators run the automatic navigation devices.

EKTACHROME AND KODACHROME (BELOW) BY EMORY KRISTOF © N.G.S.

the Coast Guard after 25 years of service, Mr. Wahab has seldom been very far from the Atlantic. I asked him if he didn't sometimes long for a place out of earshot of surf noises, a place where wheat ripens in the sun. He shifted position in the old wooden porch chair and said:

"When I was in the Coast Guard, a friend asked me what I was going to do when I retired. I told him I was going to put an oar on my shoulder and start walking to the northwest. As soon as somebody asked me what I was carrying, I'd stop and settle there. But I'm still here, and reckon I always will be."

Many of the islands' native-born are descendants of English seamen who settled here long before America won its independence. Visitors to the Outer Banks often detect what they think to be a dialect and idiom of old England in the speech of the islanders.

Tide is "toide;" and when it's high, it's "hoigh." Water that bubbles over a fire "biles." I once stopped to talk with a life-long resident of the Hatteras Island village of Salvo who was just back from a fishing trip. When I asked him how he made out, he replied, "Oh, I caught a slew, but they were all teetoncey," meaning he caught many but they were all tiny.

But this is a tongue shaped by years of isolation, a dialect decidedly more Southern than 17th- or 18th-century English.

Unlike those of Harvey Wahab's youth, summers at Ocracoke now draw vacationists, but not so many as to rouse the island from its drowsiness. They come to see the 146-year-old Ocracoke Lighthouse, one of the oldest on the East Coast still in service, and the dozen or so ponies, formerly wild but now penned and fed by the Park Service. Supposedly these ponies descend from Arabian horses shipwrecked more than a century ago.

Another attraction is Springers Point, on the southerly end of the island; there, legend says, Edward Teach had his hideout.

Teach's ferocious appearance—facial hair twisted into pigtails and fashioned with small ribbons, lighted tapers sticking out from under his hat—brought fear to those who encountered him. They called him Blackbeard.

For much of a year Teach terrorized shipping along the coasts of the Carolinas and Virginia. Death came to him in 1718 in Pamlico Sound near Ocracoke when, in a fight with a young British Navy lieutenant, he "received above 20 wounds," a contemporary account relates, "before he fell down dead."

Later that century, in the same vicinity, the British had less success in stopping the flow of supplies to American revolutionary forces. Unfavorable weather and shoal waters stymied attempts by British warships to blockade the inlet between Ocracoke and Portsmouth Islands. Smaller, more maneuverable vessels supplying the colonists continued to slip through the waterway.

"The contemptible port of Ocracock . . . has become a great channel of supply to the rebels," wrote the colonial governor of North Carolina. Indeed, when General Washington's troops were at Valley Forge, one supply plan called for passage through the inlet at Ocracoke.

Following the Revolution, Ocracoke continued to grow in importance as a port. In 1787 nearly 700 vessels reached the North Carolina mainland through the inlet. Changes in currents and failure of dredging to keep pace with sands drifting into the inlet, however, did much to end the trade.

Most of the summer visitors to Ocracoke are campers down from Hatteras Island. They arrive on the free state-operated ferries that push back and forth across Hatteras Inlet. Of the seven campgrounds in the 28,500-acre national seashore, four are on Hatteras. Two of those stand on the ocean, although one wasn't planned that way. It was 1,300 feet from the water when the beach was first opened in 1958, but erosion has chewed off most of that distance.

Cape Hatteras National Seashore was established in 1953, the first of

KODACHROME © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Worn by sea and sand, a derelict schooner provides a sun screen for a lady on the beach. The *Laura A. Barnes* ended her last voyage on June 1, 1921, on the wave-wracked shore of Bodie Island. Dozens of once-proud ships lie entombed beneath the dunes. Sometimes storms bare the bones of one of these long-forgotten vessels, but the winds soon bury them again.

KODACHROME BY [illegible], NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC STAFF © N.G.S.

Waiting for the ferry, laughing gulls perch on the mooring at the Ocracoke landing. As the vessel leaves the dock, the flock follows, begging passengers for a handout. In addition to sea and shore birds, the Banks abound in winter-resident waterfowl, particularly greater snow geese, which come by the thousands to Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge.

its kind in the Nation.* From Whalebone on Bodie Island to the southern tip of Ocracoke, the sandy land, except for the village locations, was designated as belonging to all the people. Last year more than a million of them came for a visit.

Men and Sea Battle for the Shore

But the sea still contends for the land too. To combat erosion, the Park Service planted sea oats and American beach grass to catch the ever-moving sands and build them into the ridge of protective dunes now standing near the ocean. Someday groins, or jetties, may have to be built to seaward and an artificial beach created to protect a Navy facility near Buxton and the Cape Hatteras Light.

Many residents of the Outer Banks are wary of man-made defenses, especially dunes. They know that floodwaters come not so much from the sea as from the inland side. In earlier times the high waters escaped simply by washing over the flat islands, but now the newly developed sand dike stands in the way.

"The Park Service may know more than I do, but I still wonder what's going to happen when we have another bad hurricane," said Bernice Ballance, former surfman in the old Lifesaving Service. "I keep remembering the hurricane of 1899, before they put the dunes up, when there wasn't nothing to hold the water back.

"It was the worst storm I ever seen," Mr. Ballance said. "The water in our living room went over the Singer sewing machine. We had to move up to the attic until the storm was over, and when we did get the water out of the house, I'll bet there was a bushel or three pecks of snakes, eels, crabs, fish, and everything else under the staircase. You never seen such a mess."

Bernice Ballance also remembers a day in September 1944, when the wind velocity at Cape Hatteras reached 110 miles an hour, according to records at the cape's weather station. The entry contains this notation:

*There are now six other national seashores: Padre Island, Texas; Point Reyes, California; Cape Cod, Massachusetts; Assateague Island, Maryland-Virginia; Fire Island, New York; and Cape Lookout, North Carolina.

KODACHROMES BY GEORGE F. MOBLEY (ABOVE) AND EMORY KRISTOF © N.G.S.

One of a million who visited the national seashore last year, a pretty vacationist delights in the salt breeze and uncrowded sands.

"Estimated. All instruments carried away. . . ."

Other residents told me that the devastating northeast wind of March 7, 1962, was the worst of all. Remembered on the Outer Banks as the Ash Wednesday Storm, the blow stirred the Atlantic until, hurling great heads of water, it severed Hatteras Island, carving out a new 500-foot-wide inlet just north of Buxton village.* Workers succeeded in closing it months later with sand and a wide variety of junk metal, including many old cars.

Mr. Ballance has faced both hurricane and nor'easter in his time, as have most islanders who once were members of the Lifesaving Service. The service began operations on the North Carolina coast in 1874 and functioned until 1915, when it was merged with the old Revenue Cutter Service to form the U.S. Coast Guard. A chain of stations was opened, each staffed by a keeper, or officer in charge, and six surfmen. They patrolled the beach on foot, and sometimes on horseback, always on the alert for a vessel in distress. And when the call came, as it often did, the surfmen pushed their 2,600-pound lifeboats into a wall-like surf, aware that a single wrong move might mean a serious injury.

The logs of duty stations in the Lifesaving Service are filled with accounts of heroism by men with the Outer Banks clan names of Ballance and Meekins and the legendary Midgetts.

On a winter's day, I sat on the abandoned beach where one of the first stations once stood and thought about Rasmus S. Midgett and the barkentine *Priscilla* (page 401). I had heard the story many times during my stay on the Outer Banks—how the vessel was stranded and breaking up as surfman Midgett happened by on his horse. He dismounted and ran through the crashing surf to the ship. He carried one crewman to safety on the beach and went back for another. Ten times he did this, somehow managing to survive a strain on his body that few men have known.

The official report of the incident, as logged by the station keeper, cuts through the drama to produce an epic of understatement: "R. S. Midgett, Surfman No. 1 on South patrol from 3 a.m. to Sunrise. He found a wreck Broken to Pieces 3 miles South of Station and on the Stern was ten men. He managed to save them all without coming to Station to report."

Rasmus Midgett was expected to do what he did, for in putting out to a sea that somersaults to shore, men of the service took guidance in the pithy departing benediction of their superiors: "The rules say you gotta go, not that you gotta come back."

The Lifesaving Service functioned along the coast of the Outer Banks as basically a winter operation. Now, with fleets of pleasure craft moving over the waters, summer is the season for rescue work. Oftentimes the mission involves nothing more than restoring a sense of direction.

"We stopped one pleasure boat that was 15

*See "Our Changing Atlantic Coastline," by Nathaniel T. Kenney, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, December 1962.

Pioneer beach resort of North Carolina, Nags Head sprouted cottages and a hotel in the 1830's, when wealthy planters sought to escape the miasmas of inland swamps and marshes. The first development was on the side away from the ocean; not until the late 1800's did cottages begin to rise here on the Atlantic side. In those days most summer residents came to Nags Head on Memorial Day weekend and stayed until school reopened. Today, with good highways, vacationists come and go in a steady stream.

miles out to sea," a Coast Guardsman on Hatteras told me, "and the skipper wanted to know if he was still in the inland waterway."

No longer are the old surfboats used in rescue work. Rather, personnel of the five Coast Guard stations along the Outer Banks rely on helicopters and a fleet of high-powered vessels, both large and small.

Hatteras is still the killer it always was, of course, but with swift communications, advances in safety-at-sea techniques, and sophistication of tools for rescue, tragic incidents along the coast occur only rarely now.

Fishermen Cast Into Crashing Surf

Bernice Ballance went with the Coast Guard when it absorbed the Lifesaving Service in 1915. He retired in 1946, and now, at the age of 85 and with a box full of medals in his dresser drawer, he spends most of his time fishing in the Cape Hatteras surf. He likes to get there at what he calls the "peep of day," especially during the fall months when the channel bass are biting best.

Day had peeped hours earlier when I drove a beach buggy along the Hatteras shoreline. Fishermen were out in great numbers, some stretched out on the sand and dozing in the warm noon sun while their heavy surf-casting rods rested upright in sand spikes.

Hatteras waters drew fishermen long before there were roads on the islands, when it could take 24 hours to drive 50 miles through the sand. They came, and still come, not only for the channel bass but for the blues, black drum, croaker, flounder, whiting, striped bass, king mackerel, spot, bonito, swordfish, and sailfish.

Most of all, though, deep-sea fishermen come for the blue marlin. Stopping my beach buggy on the broad sandy elbow of the cape, I could see at least a dozen charter boats heading out to deep water in search of marlin. On June 11, 1962, a New Jersey fisherman hooked

Where Americans first took to the skies in powered flight, a granite pylon rises in memory. Lightning streaks the sky behind Kill Devil Hill and the monument to Orville and Wilbur Wright. Attracted by level sands and constant winds, the brothers came to the area in 1900, originally to experiment with gliders. On December 17, 1903, they succeeded in launching a mechanically driven heavier-than-air craft on a 12-second flight. The National Park Service Visitor Center, near the site of the first flight, houses a reproduction of the original plane (lower).

KODACHROME BY EMORY KRISTOF © N.G.S.

a blue marlin off Cape Hatteras; it measured 13 feet 1 inch and weighed 810 pounds, a world's record (since then eclipsed by an 845-pounder caught off St. Thomas in the U. S. Virgin Islands).

Warm-water fish such as the marlin follow the Gulf Stream to Hatteras. The stream comes within 12 miles of shore at the cape—its closest approach to land at any point north of Cape Kennedy, in Florida. Moving with the flow of a thousand Mississippis, it meets the cold currents coming down from the north, and the result is a volcanic rising of the sea until it seems to stand on end. Even now, as I watched the fishing boats, I could see the waters churning and heaving as if in fury.

"If We Could Roll Back the Ocean"

The spectacle is best observed on a stormy day from 208-foot-high Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, the tallest in the Nation. I climbed the spiral staircase to the crown of the tower and looked out on a far-ranging view of the Banks. The Atlantic was gray as mold.

The only other person at the top was a middle-aged man with a pair of binoculars. He watched the water for a long time and then said, more to himself than to me, "Ah, if we could roll back this part of the ocean, you'd see something then."

Diamond Shoals—I'd see that. Extending out to sea for about ten miles, the dreaded reef comes to within three feet of the surface at some points. In the days before depth finders and other modern navigational aids, the sands of Diamond Shoals trapped uncounted vessels and held them until they fell apart under floggings by the Atlantic.

With the ocean rolled back, I'd also see the remains of some of the hundreds of other ships wrecked in Hatteras waters during the past 400 years. One was the famed Federal ironclad *Monitor*.

Following its historic engagement in Hampton Roads with the *Merrimac*, which the

Largest sand dune on the U. S. Atlantic Coast, Jockey Ridge west of Nags Head rises more than 130 feet. Visitors hike to its summit for a broad view of the ocean. As with most of the area's place names, the origin of Jockey Ridge is obscure. One legend relates it to the wild ponies that used to roam the Banks. Supposedly carrying an Arabian strain, they were often caught by the Bankers and raced on the stretch of level sand in front of the mammoth dune. The ridge made an ideal grandstand for the meets.

Confederates had armored and renamed the *Virginia,* the "cheesebox on a raft" was en route to South Carolina. As it rounded Cape Hatteras under tow, the wind shifted to the southwest and freshened to gale force. As *Monitor* helmsman Francis B. Butts later recalled, "The sea rolled high and pitched together in the peculiar manner only seen at Hatteras. . . . The sea rolled over us as if our vessel were a rock in the ocean only a few inches above the water. . . ."

Cut loose from the steamer and shipping water, the 172-foot vessel went to the bottom. The crew aboard the *Monitor* at the time of her loss totaled 65 officers and men. Forty-nine were rescued and taken aboard the side-wheel steamer. Legend has it that the bodies of several of the remaining 16 crewmen later drifted to shore on Hatteras Island and were buried in a woodland-covered expanse of sand dunes and ridges called Buxton Woods.

Divers Still Search for the *Monitor*

Walking through that swampy, green place, where wild rice grows next to leathery-leafed oak trees, I came across the site where the bodies are said to rest. But Buxton Woods is cottonmouth country, so I didn't tarry long enough to observe much more than a slight depression in the ground.

As for the *Monitor* herself, the search goes on. A professional diver claimed to have located the ironclad in 1955, but nothing came of a plan to raise her for exhibition in a museum. Another serious effort to locate and salvage the prize is now under way, but Hatteras has a way of thwarting attempts to plunder its graveyard (map, pages 398-400).

Its long roster of wrecks includes:

- The steamboat *Home,* a packet of rich elegance and record-setting speed. Bound from New York to Charleston, the 550-ton *Home* arrived off Cape Hatteras in October 1837, to meet a hurricane moving up from the Gulf States. Pitching so violently that on the uprise her paddlewheels churned air, the *Home* grounded off Ocracoke and broke up. At least 90 lives were lost.
- The *Carroll A. Deering.* With sails set on her five masts, the Maine-built schooner was sighted on a stormy winter morning in 1921, fast on Diamond Shoals. Surfmen from four Coast Guard stations on the Outer Banks went to the vessel, but except for two cats they found no sign of life. The galley stove held recently prepared food. The fate of the *Deering*'s crew remains a mystery to this day.
- *Diamond Shoals Lightship No. 71.* A German submarine shelled and sank the lightship in World War I. One of those who survived the attack was Guy Quidley of Buxton.

"She was five miles from us when she started shelling," he recalled for me. "I went out a porthole and into a lifeboat wearing nothing but B.V.D.'s and a pair of pants. It took us from 2:30 in the afternoon to 9:30 that night to row and sail 18 miles to shore."

Lightships no longer are positioned off Diamond Shoals; rather, a $2,000,000 Texas Tower, installed in 1966 and rising 120 feet, now helps to guide ships safely around the cape with a light visible for 20 miles (page 403).

Ablaze in a dying sun, surfers head homeward after a day of riding the long Atlantic swells that wash the Outer Banks. With April's first hint of warmth, hearty young people push their boards into the frigid surf. At the end of school, the devotees come in increasing numbers for longer stays. Occasionally a surfer will be caught by the tricky currents and swept out to sea, adding a new responsibility to the Coast Guard's lifesaving duties.

I went to the tower by helicopter, landing on the roof of the ballroom-size enclosure, which is partitioned into working and living spaces for the four Coast Guardsmen there at all times. They pull month-long tours of duty, followed by two weeks of leave.

Unlike the old lightships, the tower cannot raise anchor and run from a storm. Thus the structure, although supported by four steel pilings buried more than 200 feet into the

ocean floor, has taken terrible abuse. In 1967, for example, a waterspout ripped into it, taking away radio and television antennas and shattering nearly all the windows.

"This tower was built to last 75 years," a member of the crew told me, "but to tell you the truth, I wouldn't want to be on it ten years from now."

Cape Becomes "Torpedo Junction"

Of the wide span of time represented by the wrecks at Hatteras, 1942 stands out as the most tragic year. Sinkings totaled more than 40 vessels, many of them tankers, as German subs operating within sight of the Outer Banks turned the area into "Torpedo Junction."

"I've seen five ships burning at one time off the coast here," a resident of the village of Rodanthe told me. "When the toide came in, it painted the beach black with oil."

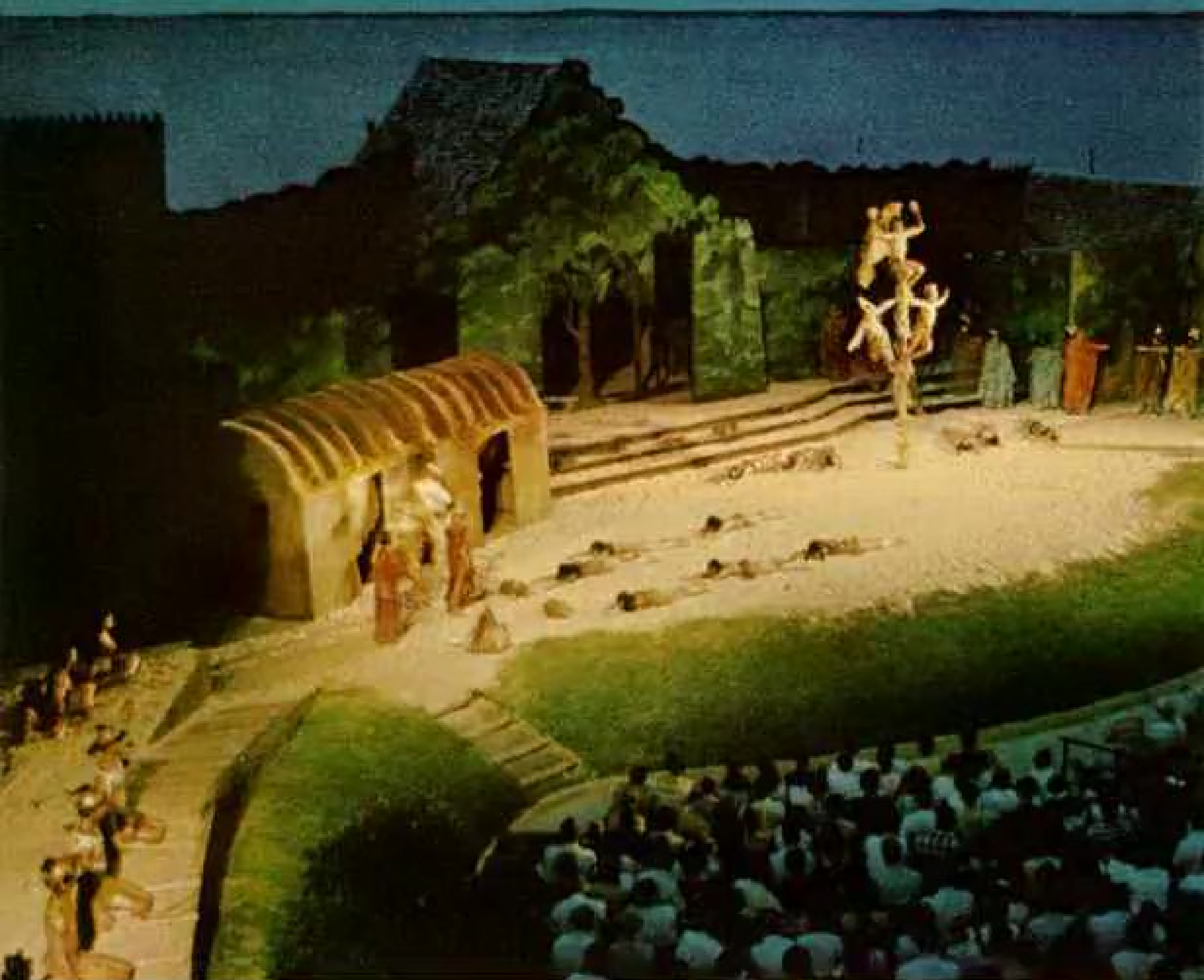
The U-boats attacked at night, always at night. During the day they surfaced, and crewmen sun-bathed off the Banks. This incredible boldness continued well into the year—until, finally, coastal defenses took on some semblance of order. In May, 2,635 mines were placed in the waters; blimps and other aircraft searched out the subs from the air; Coast Guardsmen patrolled the beaches, some on horseback, others leading lean attack dogs.

And subchaser No. 1355 picked up a signal on its sonar.

"We were off the Outer Banks when we got the signal, and thinking it was a German sub, we put down a pattern of depth charges," recalled Bob Frazier of Nags Head, who was a crewman on the subchaser. "A short time later this big whale floated to the surface. That rascal had taken four depth charges and was still alive. It was embarrassing, mistaking a whale for a sub, but we didn't have very good sonar in those days."

Few men were more closely involved with the coastal warfare than Aycock Brown, a genial former newspaperman who now does public relations work on the Outer Banks. As a special agent in Naval Intelligence during the war, he helped identify some of the many bodies that washed ashore from torpedoed ships. Of all his experiences, none so impressed me as the grimly ironical *Bedfordshire* incident.

KODACHROME BY NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER GEORGE F. MOBLEY © N.G.S.



Dreams of glory end in an enigma: Weekday evenings during the summer the Waterside Theatre on Roanoke Island plays *The Lost Colony*, an outdoor symphonic drama of the first English settlement in America. Indians offer prayers to their corn god in this opening scene. To Roanoke in 1587 came soldiers, farmers, artisans, women, and children. Waiting desperately for promised supply

Having determined that four bodies on the beach were British seamen from a torpedoed tanker, Mr. Brown set out to find some British flags for use in the burial service.

"A British ship, the *Bedfordshire*, was docked at Morehead City, so I went aboard and asked if they had any extra flags. A crewman pointed to an officer on the bridge and said, 'See him, the one with the beard.' His name was Lt. Thomas Cunningham, and he gave me six Union Jacks."

Two weeks later, Aycock Brown was again asked to identify four victims of a submarine sinking. "I looked at the first body," he said, "and knew right away who he was. Lieutenant Cunningham.

"When we buried him, his casket was draped in one of the Union Jacks he'd given me."

Today on the island of Ocracoke there is a small parcel of ground, fenced and half-hidden by yaupon bushes and loblolly pine. It is called the British Cemetery, and there rest the bodies of Lt. Thomas Cunningham and three other crewmen of H.M.S. *Bedfordshire*. No flags fly there, no taps sound at nightfall. But on the cemetery fence are inscribed these lines from Rupert Brooke:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.

English-speaking man came early to these islands—22 years before Jamestown—and it was here that Anglo-American civilization

ships, the colonists fought Indians, disease, and hunger. The ships returned in 1590 to find the settlement deserted, and the mysterious word "Croatoan" carved on a post.

"I hope it will be a boy," says a pioneer woman of the imminent birth of the first English child born in the New World. Eleanor Dare's infant, a girl, was baptized Virginia in honor of the new land. She vanished with the colony.

began. In August 1585, a group of 108 men, organized by Sir Walter Raleigh, reached Roanoke Island, between the mainland and the Outer Banks. There they established the first English colony in North America. Faced by famine and hostile Indians, all returned to England the following year.

The second colony, also dispatched by Raleigh, arrived in July 1587. A few weeks later, the colony increased by one when Eleanor Dare gave birth to a daughter. They named her Virginia, and she was the first child born of English parents in America.

The governor of the colony and the grandfather of Virginia Dare, John White, returned to England for supplies, where he was detained until 1590. Upon returning to Roanoke Island, he found no trace of the colonists other than a single cryptic clue. Carved on a stockade post was the word "Croatoan," a reference apparently to a nearby island. To this day the fate of the Lost Colony stands as one of the great mysteries of American history.

For many years after the disappearance of the colony, the Banks remained in the sole possession of the native Indians. Then, in 1663, the first proprietary charter was issued. Settlers moved in to raise cattle and extract oil from the many dead whales that washed ashore. By the turn of the century, the stockmen and the whalers were sharing the islands with pirates and runaway servants.

Each summer more than 50,000 persons attend performances of *The Lost Colony,* a

pageant on Roanoke Island in which the tragic early attempts to colonize the Outer Banks area are portrayed in an amphitheater set against a backdrop of the waters of the sound (pages 414-15).

I watched the pageant on a warm August evening, when rain threatened and thunder punctuated the exchanges between Queen Elizabeth and Walter Raleigh. Some in the audience looked up in annoyance as a single-engine plane buzzed overhead.

Air Age Launched Near Kill Devil Hill

Another plane buzzed in these same skies 65 years ago, and the entire world now honors its builders. But for some residents of the Outer Banks, the activities of those two brothers from Ohio, Wilbur and Orville Wright, amounted to nothing more than pure folly.

On December 17, 1903, with winds blowing at 22 to 27 miles an hour, Orville piloted a mechanically driven machine 120 feet through the air over a level stretch of sand near Kitty Hawk. Aviation was born with that 12-second flight, the first in which a heavier-than-air craft successfully flew under its own power.*

Today a 60-foot-high pylon of gray granite rises from the top of Kill Devil Hill in honor of the achievements of the brothers. Nearby is a museum housing a reproduction of the plane. Both are parts of the Wright Brothers National Memorial, administered by the National Park Service (pages 408-9).

Mrs. Rennie Williamson, who lives on Roanoke Island on land granted to her family by the British Crown, was 10 years old at the time of the first flight.

"People around here said those Wrights were crazy," she told me. "Even after they got the machine in the air, the kindest thing I heard was a man saying, 'Well, they done it. Dang if they didn't.' "

Mrs. Williamson worked for many years as an accountant for one of the hotels in the resort area of the Outer Banks, the section of Bodie Island centered around Nags Head. There cottages stand on stilts, one

*See "Aviation Looks Ahead on Its 50th Birthday," by Vice Adm. Emory S. Land, "Fifty Years of Flight" (a photographic record), and "Fact Finding for Tomorrow's Planes," by Hugh L. Dryden, all NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, December 1953.

Space-eye view of the Outer Banks: This dramatic photograph from 130 miles up was made by the crew of Apollo 9—James A. McDivitt, David R. Scott, and Russell L. Schweickart—while orbiting the earth to test the LM moon-landing craft last March. The bright sands sweep from Virginia's Cape Henry on the north, southeast to Cape Hatteras, then southwest to the V-shaped pendant of Cape Lookout (maps, pages 398-400). Beneath the water, Diamond Shoals off Hatteras and Cape Lookout Shoals to the south extend ominously into the Atlantic. Sand also protrudes from Hatteras and Ocracoke Inlets. Fleece of clouds rides above the warm Gulf Stream.

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