

## CAROVA AREA HISTORY

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THE OUTER BANKS was built on legend; that, and the shifting sands. Where the two converge was Seagull. Once a thriving town of fishermen and hunters, Seagull had two churches, a one-room school, a post office and about 35 houses. That was almost 80 years ago. Today, the resident fox leaves tracks on Lewark's Hill, a desolate dune skirted with stubborn grass. Climb to the top and the wind blows grit against your ankles and your shoes sink in, as Seagull did, when the second largest sand dune on the East Coast crept up, and over, and around it.

"Everybody talks about it, but finding people who have actually been there is tough." Scott Trabue jounced his extended Suburban through deep ruts on the beach. Highway 12 ends just past his business office in Corolla, but the shore will do for those with four-wheel drive. His job is taking tourists up the Currituck shore with Wild Horse Safari and Corolla Outback Adventures. When the truck bogs down in loose sand, he knows how to coax it out and still avoid the stumps of ancient cypress trees. "There's a whole forest of them in here," Trabue said. "When the sand gets washed out in nor'easters, there are thousands of them." The trees once grew on the western side of the Outer Banks, in the lee of the sand dunes. But sand dunes don't stand still. "The whole island moved," Trabue said. "You've got a forest that's almost one mile moved in 800 years. That's why you see all those homes falling into the sea. This whole place is on the march."

The constant wind across the Outer Banks piles sand grains into dunes. Then the wind scours the dunes, carrying loose grains over the top and tipping them down the other side. Scrape from the side facing the sea, drop on the side facing the sound. Scrape, drop. Scrape, drop. Whole sand dunes roll southwest in this manner.

Jockey's Ridge at Nags Head is the largest dune on the East Coast. It eased itself over top of the first hotel on the Outer Banks, built around 1838. In later years, clerks offered discounts to visitors who didn't mind digging their way into the two-story structure. Currently, a castle turret protrudes from the dune's flank, all that is left of a miniature golf course swallowed more recently by migrating sand.

Such, too, was the fate of Seagull. Lewark's Hill ate up Seagull. That's what it amounts to." Tomi Bowden was born on the Outer Banks. His father attended a private school in Seagull. His mother was born in 1908, the year that the post office opened there. "There were a couple of deep creeks in there. I think that's why the village of Seagull was established: to ship goods in packet boats," Bowden said. "Of course, the New Currituck Inlet opened up in the early 1800s, so that was another deepwater access. Anything that had deep water that went to the sound became a center of commerce." The village clustered around the creeks, so folks wouldn't have to walk far from the boats they relied on. The circuit preacher came by boat as well, and nobody wanted to slog a long way through swarms of mosquitoes to reach a covered dish dinner, Bowden said.

His brother Ernie, a Currituck County commissioner, said Seagull was once a center of fishing and commercial duck hunting. Then came federal legislation in 1918 that stifled the hunting, and later the fishing. The post office closed in 1924. "Some few people

converted to a private duck hunting business, where they entertained sportsmen who would pay for the services of a good guide," Ernie Bowden said. "My father commercial fished until he enlisted in the Coast Guard in 1923. Lots of residents did. That contributed to the demise of the community." Some moved to Hampton Roads to work in the defense industry. By the late '20s, there was no point in leaving, because there was no work elsewhere. The residents of Seagull turned to bartering for survival. Farmers from the mainland would trade corn for salted fish, and the residents of Seagull raised livestock. The beginning of World War II prompted more families to move for work. During the war, perhaps three families remained, he said. And somewhere along the way, people started calling the Seagull area Old Inlet. Ernie Bowden's birth certificate says he was born in Old Inlet.

His brother remembers seeing perhaps the last house engulfed by the dune. "I was on a horse, driving the cattle, and we were up on the hill looking down at the house," he said. It was a two-story house, owned by friends of the family. "I suppose in the early '50s it would have been completely taken by the hill." Many people speak of Penny's Hill as the dune that swallowed Seagull. The giant mound of sand lay a little to the north of town, just past New Currituck Inlet. At some point it split in two, and Penny's Hill was largely decimated by the Ash Wednesday storm of 1962, which used the sand to finish filling in New Currituck Inlet. Lewark's Hill lay farther south, named for the family of one of Seagull's last residents.

John Lewark put his house on rollers in an attempt to outrace the dune. "They moved that house twice, to my knowledge," said Ernie Bowden, "and each time the dune continued to move down on it and inundate it. "A cousin of the Bowdens, Joe Lewark, has a keyring medallion owned by his grandfather. On the oblong of metal is stamped: "If found, return to L.L. Lewark, Seagull, N.C." "It's the only physical evidence that I know of that absolutely points to Seagull as existing," Ernie Bowden said.

Until now. The scouring wind recently uncovered part of a graveyard, and the chimney of a buried house emerged as the dune crept past it. But the town remains hard to find. Low, scrubby sea oaks, briars and sea oats stand between the dune line and Currituck Sound. They conceal wild horses, wild boars, red foxes, deer, raccoon, bobcats and the occasional reputed black panther.

Ernie Bowden said he saw the chimney. Another long-time resident said he knows where the graveyard is. Trabue, despite hours of searching, couldn't find either. From the top of Lewark's Hill, he pointed out the fox tracks, the wildlife refuge and the sharp drop-off where windblown sand skitters over the top of the dune and plunges into the pond below. He pointed to bare branches that reached knee-high up his leg. "Those are the tops of trees," he said. "The dune is migrating over them. The whole thing here is just cascading over itself and moving on into this pond. "To his left stood three luxury houses, newly built near the edge of the sea. Farther up the beach were two more, standing in the dune break that used to be the inlet. SUVs scurried up and down the beach, ferrying new residents to and from their homes. One new subdivision is even named Seagull. Its namesake is gone.

"There is a town up here that was buried," Trabue said. "It's a non-urban legend, but it's out here."