

Wellfleet Postcard: The Off-Season

by Philip Hamburger December 8, 2003

Ever wonder what goes on up on the Cape when all the summer people are long gone, settled for the winter back in their metropolis? Nothing world-shaking, but the world is shaking enough, wouldn't you say? I'll start with blackbirds: Just before I packed up myself, in late September, I looked out the window and hundreds (and I mean hundreds) were settled on the lawn, turning it into a mass of darkness against a gray sky and fallen leaves. And then, just as suddenly, they all flew off somewhere (Paris? Las Vegas?), leaving the lawn empty except for a lone tortoise, an ancient creature who was present at the inauguration of John Adams. That tortoise has been making his way across my lawn for years now, one millimetre at a time.

Come fall, we are a village again—just a couple of thousand folks, down to the hard core from the sixfold or sevenfold swelling of the summer months. Of course, the ocean (Atlantic) is still there, pounding away, and soon after everyone left, with the hurricane season acting up, that mighty sea was a sight to behold: churning waves, a monumental roar, and a sense that what is left (not much) of the famed Wellfleet dunes would be washing away, perhaps taking the entire Cape along with it.

Main Street is dreary. The drugstore has departed the town for good. So has the newspaper store. You can get the Times at the local grocery or delivered in waterproof blue plastic bags. Restaurants: everything closed but a few year-round joints. The big, popular Moby Dick's on Route 6 is shut tight. Finest fried oyster on the Cape. Fresh seafood every day, including small, succulent Wellfleet oysters by the dozen. (Queen Victoria is said to have had Wellfleets shipped to her, wrapped in seaweed, in barrels.) During peak season, the lines stretch around Moby Dick's like those anticipating the return of Broderick and Lane. The owners, Todd and Mignon Barry, are hands-on: they watch every dish served up. His big sliced onion has become a Cape celebrity, perhaps the only onion celebrity on the Cape, or anywhere, except Hollywood, which is overrun with onion celebrities.

Some parents have gone into homeschooling, setting up strict regimens for their kids and teaching them without having had formal training. This is privatization on a fascinating (if slippery) slope, and we'll just have to see how it works out. And then there are the artists—painters and sculptors, the most prominent being Penelope Jencks, who sculpted the peaceful, beautiful eight-foot-high statue of Eleanor Roosevelt that stands in Riverside Park at Seventy-second Street. Well, Jencks is working on a statue of Robert Frost, commissioned by the Amherst College Class of 1957. He will be seated, on some rocks (Jencks's people sit on rocks), holding a book in his hand and facing the Frost Library. Jencks is a perfectionist—a month on a thigh or an ankle. She plans for the statue to be in granite. "He has a granite face," she says. "At first when I was asked to do this I said no—I was all burned out from Eleanor. I preferred Eliot

to Frost when I was at Swarthmore—Eliot was my boy. But I finally said I would do it. I won't do the carving myself—that will be done by wizard artisans from my model. People tell me he had a mean streak. I don't give a damn about that. I'm interested in the face and the thoughts behind it.”

Getting back to Main Street: The true center of town is the library. Nothing but activity there—readings, art exhibitions, concerts, and every new book you would want to read. One of the major fish stores has closed, and the best fresh-vegetable stand is closed, too. The owners (brother and sister) are probably hiking somewhere in the far West. The feverish red poison-ivy clumps have faded to an ominous brown. The sand roads are still treacherous. On a clear, crisp night, the moon is a neighbor.