

RESIDENTS SINCE 1960

These 'Early Settlers' Made A Difference On Holden Beach

BY DOUG RUTTER

Few couples have meant more to the Holden Beach community over the past 30 years than Hugh and Mabel Dutton. You might even go so far as to say they are an institution.

Steady as a southwest breeze on a summer day, the Duttons have been permanent residents since 1960. They still live in the beach cottage they built in 1951.

"We've been coming here a long time, and we've enjoyed it a long time," Mabel said in a recent interview. "I wish I knew we had another 40 years here. We'd enjoy it just as much as the last 40."

Holden Beach has enjoyed having the Duttons. They were the first managers of the Holden Beach Fishing Pier, helped the town incorporate and have always been active in politics.

"The Duttons have been very reliable people over the years, both of them, very highly respected," said John F. Holden, the town's first mayor. He has known the Duttons longer than anyone on the island.

"They've been around the beach a right good while," he said. "I don't know anyone else who has been around longer than them...besides me."

The Duttons, who celebrated their 58th wedding anniversary last month, have experienced a lot in their 42 years as island homeowners. Not the least of which was Hurricane Hazel in 1954.

When Hazel flattened the beach, the Duttons were one of the lucky few. Out of about 300 homes on the island at that time, theirs was one of 12 that wasn't destroyed.

"There was a piece of wall left on each side and a chimney in the center. That's what held it up," Hugh recalled. "We were quite surprised that it stayed here."

The ground floor of the cottage was wiped out, but the top floor wasn't seriously damaged. "I had shells on the curtain rod there and not a one of them fell down," Mabel pointed out.

Every house west of their cottage at 260 Ocean Boulevard West was demolished. "If the houses stayed together they floated back into the woods across the waterway," Hugh said.

In 1960, the Duttons moved from High Point to Holden Beach on a permanent basis when they were invited to manage the newly-constructed Holden Beach Fishing Pier.

"We got the job because we had a place to stay," Mabel explained. "Just starting out they didn't have the money to pay salaries and house rent too."

Hugh gave up a 14-year career as a route supervisor for a dairy company to move his family to the beach. "It was a new experience," he said.

The pier was about the same size then as it is now—1,000 feet—but the building has been renovated several times. The game room was originally an open-air porch

where people used to dance to juke box music.

The Duttons ran the pier from April 1960 to April 1973 before retiring. "They used to catch a lot of fish out there in season," Hugh said. "It's not as good as it used to be."

In the late 1960s, Hugh became involved in the movement to incorporate Holden Beach as an official town. "People kept coming and building so we decided we needed some rules and regulations around here," he said.

Holden Beach became a town in March 1969, and Hugh was appointed as one of the commissioners. He was formally elected in May 1969 and re-elected in 1971 to a second term.

The board's first meeting was held in one of then-mayor John Holden's beach cottages. When rental season arrived, meetings were moved to a tiny room at the fishing pier.

Holden estimated the size of the room at 10 feet by 10 feet. "It was just big enough for the commissioners and mayor to get in there," he said.

Hugh says the pier room "got a little congested so we decided to build a town hall." The town bought a lot on Rothschild Street and board members went to work. The mayor and commissioners also picked up

trash in those early days.

"All of us pitched in and did some of the work," Hugh said. "We were just starting out. We didn't have a lot of money built up so we had to do with what we had."

While Hugh served on the board of commissioners, Mabel also did her part as a public servant. She recently resigned from the town board of elections after more than 15 years of service.

Mabel became involved in the elections process by accident. "We held the meetings at the pier and that was a logical place to come sign up for the elections," she said.

Gil Bass, one of the current town commissioners, said the Duttons have "always been a part of the political scene. Even today, they're still doing their part as public servants."

Bass, who manages the fishing pier, says the Duttons' early work at the pier is still paying off. "Every time I see them I thank them for the great foundation they laid here. They were the pier for years and years."

"Behind the scene they've always done what they thought was best for Holden Beach," Bass added. "If anybody's ever been an asset it has been the Duttons. They have given this community more than we could ever give back."

Mabel's shell collection, which dates back to the 1940s, has been admired for years at Holden Beach Town Hall. "It goes way back," she said. "Before I went to work at the pier I used to collect a lot of them."

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—Gil Bass



STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG RUTTER

HUGH AND MABEL DUTTON relax on the front porch of their Holden Beach home. The residence was one of a dozen that made it through Hurricane Hazel in 1954.

Members of Shallotte Presbyterian Church, the Duttons had two children. Son Kenneth died last October. Their daughter, Nanabeth, lives in High Point. The Duttons also have six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

From the dozen houses that were left standing after Hurricane Hazel, the Duttons have seen more than 1,500 homes spring up on Holden Beach in the past four decades.

"It's a nice beach and that's what a lot of the inland people are looking for, a clean place where they can get out and enjoy the water," Hugh said. "I never thought it would grow this fast, not in our lifetime."

Town To Honor Duttons

Holden Beach will honor long-time residents Hugh and Mabel Dutton with a reception this Friday, July 16, at 4 p.m. in town hall.

Commissioner Gay Atkins, who is coordinating the event, asks everyone to bring a covered dish. "Everyone who knows the Duttons are welcome at the reception," she said.

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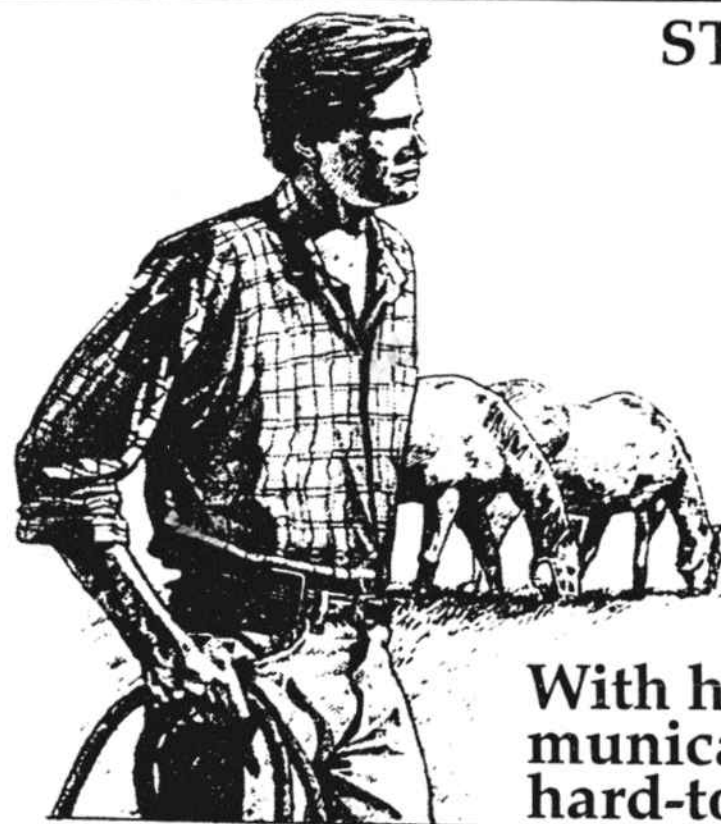
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