

Hard Times In Bivalve

By JONATHAN PHILLIPS

What's three hours from New York, an hour and a half from Philadelphia, and half a century away from the rest of civilization?

If you answered Bivalve, New Jersey, you win this week's grand prize, which is an autographed copy of my new album "Phillips Sings the Best of Slim Whitman." Call the *Highlights* for details.

Despite being centrally located with respect to the nation's major urban centers and the east coast urban corridor, nature has blessed (or cursed) Bivalve with an environment and geographic setting that still make it the back side of nowhere; the jumping-off place to infinity.

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To get there you drive into South Jersey, and every time you come to an intersection, you take whichever route looks like it heads into the most desolate, deserted area. When you finally get to the point where there are no more obscure roads to turn onto, and nowhere else to drive the car without sinking up to your door-handles in muck and reed grass, you are in Bivalve.

When I go to collect little bags of dirt from the South Jersey marsh shores, I hang my hat at the Rutgers University Shellfish Laboratory. Built in 1981 with modern architecture and latest in whatever equipment shellfish labs need, it sits amid the marsh grass and giant piles of oyster shells that mainly comprise Bivalve.

Looking out the window of this modern facility over the ramshackle village and the wilderness beyond makes you feel as though you are looking out of a spaceship from an advanced civilization that has set down on a backward planet where the natives spend their days piling oyster shells and worship rusted-out 1973 maroon-colored Chevrolet Monte Carlos.

I'm being a bit harsh, of course. I actually kind of like it, and the people there seem very nice and very intelligent, at least compared to the prime ministers and Grand Poo-bahs of most Middle Eastern nations.

It's just that besides being a bit off the beaten track

(to state it mildly), Bivalve is on some hard times.

Last week I compared rural Cumberland County, N.J. to parts of eastern North Carolina. While similarities are undeniable, I neglected to mention that while y'all are livin' it up down east, the you-know-what is hitting the fan as far as Cumberland's economy goes.

There are three major industries: agriculture, oysters, and glass-making.

This is a hard year for the farmers, because an excruciatingly cold, wet spring, followed by a summer drought made for crummy yields.

"I was in the field planting my peppers two weeks before I usually be harvestin' peppers," one farmer told me. "You just can't be doin' that."

Glass factories are also on the skids. A protracted strike at Millville, eight miles from Bivalve, has strained many families and permanently scarred industry-community relations. Meanwhile, Owens-Illinois is shutting down their plant in Bridgeton, 19 miles away, throwing 600 folks out of work.

Bivalve is the capital of what is left of the oyster industry. That began dying in the 1950s, thanks to pollution and disease, and never has come close to its former glory again. Crumbling, rotting fish houses dotting the marsh bear mute but effective testament to that.

The shellfish lab is helping a lot, but a lot just isn't near enough for a hard-luck town like Bivalve.

For once, I had a perfectly legitimate excuse for hanging around a bar.

Bivalve's Marina Bar is the only establishment open at night for miles around, and a man has gotta eat.

After lengthy discussion about the relative merits of various sizes of oyster tongs, two oystermen turned to a discussion of how the government will pay farmers not to produce wheat or milk, but refuses to pay fishermen not to catch fish.

"I sure wish they'd do something for us here," said Bobby, a burly, blond oysterman who described himself as being "34 years old, but I gotta lot of miles on me."

Christmas 1983

By LELA BARROW

The message of the Angels to the Shepherds: "Peace on earth good will to men" has probably appeared on many of the Christmas cards you've received this Christmas season. The message of the Christmas season is one of peace, the peace of God to his people. We hear it in the scriptures, and we sing it in the hymns. God comes to us in big ways and in small ways. Open your eyes to the way in which God has touched you. How does a beautiful sunset touch you? Do you feel the greatness of God? Think of Him as a loving Father.

It's Christmas, Oh, It's Christmas! How does it make you feel? The whole world is rejoicing—it is the birth of our Saviour. Let us be up rejoicing. Once again that same warm feeling fills our hearts with peace and love; we rejoice in song and prayer for God's gift from heaven above.

Let us hope we never lose that strange inward glow that comes at Christmas time. Remember the open fireplaces that would hold a log so big it would burn all night—the sweet smelling candles on the table—all seem to have a mystic meaning—a touch of glamor that we don't recognize at other times of the year. It is easy to become a child again—seeing a rebirth of idealism, a reawakening that puts starshine in the eyes of little children. When I was a child we had no electric lights flashing on and off—we had to be very careful when candles were lighted on the trees. The trees and ornaments look entirely different today than they did eighty-five years ago. Corn was popped and strung to hang on the tree—some white—some pink. It might not look so pretty today, but back yonder it was beautiful. We had no Christmas paper to wrap a gift for each person that came—the gifts were hung on the tree with

a string or ribbon bow. And the children were just as happy as they are today with all the glamor.

There is the inner meaning to Christmas when we don't have the selfish meaning uppermost in our hearts. Here we come to think of goodwill among men in the traditional exchange of greetings, respect and love. The spiritual note that sounds the real meaning of Christmas, a radiant star bringing glow in the heavenly peace from on high. And we dream of the long ago: of the angelic host who sang in the night, "Glory to God in the highest, Peace on earth, Goodwill to men"—Everyone answered Amen.

We can't close this message—now—as I looked in the distance, something caused me to pause... the scene, to my surprise, I saw Santa Claus. Christmas time comes round again to cheer the million girls and boys. Old Santa rides through rain and snow, and hastens here with Christmas toys. Now who is Santa Claus? Dear Old Santa won't be seen; But Christmas Eve He sends his elves to peep, and he will not arrive at all till children are asleep! Each year the patient mothers teach their children of this jolly man, and then on Christmas Eve they want to know. "It's time for bed, my little dears, for Santa comes so very late. Now off to bed and dream of toys, of candy, dolls, and 'lectric trains; Sleep well my pretty girls and boys... Tonight Old Santa comes again. To bring Christmas gladness to you."

"May the spirit that is Christmas, Remain in every heart all year; so we may love our fellow man, In peace and lasting cheer". (LaVerne P. Larson)

O yes! It's Christmas again, Alleluiah: The Christ Child has arrived.

"Shoot. Boy, this here's the armpit of the world," replied an older black oysterman, nursing a vodka-and-orange-juice as Bobby ordered up another Budweiser. "I mean the armpit of the world. They ain't gonna do nothing for us here. We got to go out and scrape up those same old beds, and hope they'll let us sell what little we got."

Bobby nodded in agreement. "We have to do something, though. We have to try. I just wish I could get back what these phone calls to Trenton (state capital) are costing me."

A silent woman at the end of the bar punched up Conway Twitty on the juke box as a group of teenagers huddled around a video game. The barmaid looked out and saw a car parked by one the ubiquitous shell piles. Immediately recognizing it as of non-native origin, she asked one of the video-youths to check it out.

"Somebody got to get out front and take a few punches, make it better for the rest of us," the older oysterman was saying. "Somebody's got to take the punishment."

Back in room six of the Shellfish lab, I watched the oyster boats through the window, rocking gently at the tumbledown docks. I felt again like I was in a spaceship from another civilization, set down on some desolated planet.

Like the man said, somebody's got to get out front and take some punishment. It looks as though Bivalve, at the far end of the last road in Jersey, will be taking theirs for some time to come.

DRIVERS! TAKE IT SLOW!

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