

Bald Head

Island Paradise Deserted

By EUGENE FALLON

Four miles across the Cape Fear River and the bay from Southport lies Bald Head Island, one of the last unspoiled bodies of land bordering upon the Atlantic Ocean. And not only does this island with the unusual name hold the magic appeal of all bodies of land separated from the mainland by stretches of water, Bald Head is unique in that it is covered with tropical vegetation which includes towering palm trees—the northernmost point along the Atlantic seaboard where they can be found in natural abundance.

It is almost as though a portion of Florida had broken free and had drifted several hundred miles north, to come to rest here at the mouth of the Cape Fear River.

Reese Swan, Southport native presently is caretaker of the island and is the only human inhabitant, this despite the fact that once there was a village on the island; and as short time as 25-years ago Miss Bertha Reid of Winnabow was the head of a one-teacher public school for children of men who were in the Coast Guard and lighthouse service.

Once there was a large human population on the island. A citizen of Southport, Captain Charlie Swan, retired lighthouse-keeper who tended a light at Bald Head for 30 years, beginning in April of 1903, settled back on a couch in his comfortable West Street home, and sent his memory back over the trail of years.

"I was born in Southport," he stated, "and I'll never see 80 again... Yes, there was a settlement on Bald Head. Call it a town, if you will. It was named Bald Head back in the 1880's there were at least 150 persons living over there. There were the lighthouse-keepers and their families and there were the Southport pilots, and their families."

"As you may know, piloting was a highly-competitive business back in those days. The first pilot-boat to reach a ship preparing to enter the harbor, get the job of taking them over the bar and up the river. For that reason many of the pilots moved over to Bald Head, to get a start on those who stayed on the mainland."

"The minute a ship was safely through the channel, friendly relations started again. The pilots all built houses close together. It was a community in the woods. There were perhaps 25 or 30 Negroes brought over. These also lived on the island and helped launch, and secure, the pilot-boats. A few of these were pretty big affairs—regular two-masted sloops."

There was a church—interdenominational—and a schoolhouse, to which went the children of the pilots. Insofar as Capt. Swan could recall, none of the island-dwellers was enterprising enough to stock a store and set up for trade, and one of the bigger boats would sail for Southport each week, rain or shine, to purchase provisions for all inhabitants.

Although Southport was only across the harbor, the islanders lived a lonely existence. In the evenings books were read aloud. Occasionally an old salt would take a fiddle from its case, and the birds in the forest would be treated to the strains of "Listen to the Mockingbird," while inside the housewives and children alike wept a little over "Hallie, Sweet Hallie, lying in her grave..."

How did the island receive its odd name, a name which is found today on all official charts of the area? Well, as stated above, there were two hills on the island, one called Thompson's Hill, the other—and larger—referred to as Bald Head. Here, trees grew up the slopes almost to the top, but not quite. At the top, where the winds had full play, the soil would not stay together long enough to suffer a twig to flourish. The hill, in its commanding position, resembled nothing on earth more than a man with a bald head.

The soil in the valleys, however, was of extreme fertility. Capt. Swan set out a small orchard consisting of some 25 peach trees during his long tenure. And the fruit flourished mightily. Red-cheeked, they were, according to the ancient keeper-of-the-lights, and sweeter than any from Georgia.

"I never saw a bug or a worm in my orchard," declared Capt. Swan warmly. "Never had to spray a single time."

But the good captain became somewhat discouraged with his market in Southport. Bringing over a few bushels on his visits to the mainland, he could realize only a dollar or two for them.

Another small source of income for Swan was the fur-bearing crop supplied by nature. The light-keeper trapped coon, foxes, and an occasional mink, and sold the hides.

The island originally belonged to the Sprunt brothers, James and Alexander, of Wilmington. The tallest palmettos in that city, those located at Front and Dock streets, were removed by the Sprunts from Bald Head Island, to decorate the Sprunt property. A lighter was used to transport the tall, tropical trees, and they are said to have sorely resisted the change—dying by the dozens—to be replaced, again and again, by the persevering brothers.

Sometime prior to World War I, T. H. Boyd bought the island from the James Walker estate. Walker had acquired the island from the Sprunts.

Boyd, a Hamlet native, built a house and a dock on the island, and lived there himself for a couple of years. It was Boyd who first dreamed of turning this Eastern Catalina into a pleasure resort. He even began a hotel building, but for some reason or another abandoned that project less than half-completed. The Hamlet promoter did throw up a pavilion however; a building spreading 40x40 feet. Time has destroyed this structure dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure. The jungle hides the pitiful remnants—a few rotted timbers, some brick pilings.

Boyd appears to have been a bit of an agronomist, stocking the island with sheep, hogs and some 80 cows. These animals received at first the best of care, but after Boyd departed the island they were more or less forced to shift for themselves. Like the passenger pigeon, the sheep and cows of Bald Head Island are now extinct. But the hogs hung on. Even today there are reports of wild razorback hogs seen on the island. A few have been shot—only to display a telltale "ring" about their bodies which prove they are, indeed, no razorbacks at all but of a known domestic strain. One suspects that hunters helped greatly in decimating the Boyd herds of cows and sheep.

Frank O. Sherrill of Charlotte, owner of the S&W Restaurant chain, now owns the island. Boyd it seems either lost interest in his island, or lost his money. At all events unpaid taxes mounted and mounted, finally resulting in foreclosing by the county.

Sherrill owns all the island with the exception of some 20 acres retained by the U. S. Government and leased to him. This plot is not all in our piece, but comprises two small plots whereon stands Bald Head lighthouse once stood.

Always there has clung to Bald Head an air of mystery and romance. Rumor has it that Stede Bonnet, an old time gentleman of practical instincts, frequented the island long ago. The fact that Bonnet was taken just off Bald Head and sent thereafter to a gallows lends credence to these rumors. There is (and was) a creek providing anchorage and cover at the same time. And several streams of sweet water once trickled across the wooded island. A perfect hideaway, not only for pirates, but for their purloined doubloons and jewels stolen. Is there any more concrete evidence to support these hopeful assumptions? One. Let Capt. Swan tell it in his own words.

"I spent many an hour hunting for Bonnet's buried treasures," he admits frankly enough. "One day, about dark, while I was making my trap-run deep in the woods, I picked up a discolored old coin. It is a large coin and, I think, a copper one. I have it yet. I burnished it up some—enough to make out the design of a palm tree. Couldn't read any of the writing. It was all worn off. There was no date or anything to tell the nationality."

"Next day I went back with a shovel and pick. Dug a big hole in the woods. But I never found another thing."

Since the old coin was uncovered in the deep forest, it is exceedingly doubtful that it fell from the pocket of a hunter or one of the pilots. Who can swear that, somewhere buried on Bald Head is not a King's ransom?

There are rumors flying again of new treasure to be opened. It is said that Frank Sherrill means to do something with his beautiful, tropic isle, that a city will be developed here on the lovely breast of the ocean.

In the meanwhile there lives on Bald Head one lone, young man. Reese Swan dwells, in solitary splendor, in the very house in which his father and mother were married in April of 1917. It was a war year. The very month when Wilson, tired of the Hun's barbarities and insolences, de-

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Bathing Beauties



BEACH PARTY—Bald Head Island has through the years been one of the most popular places in Brunswick county for visitors, as witness the above photo of unidentified bathing beauties whose modest attire dates them somewhere about the early twenties. The box instrument mounted on tripod and shown in the right background was a camera the girls carried along to get a snapshot of their outing. This scene was mounted upon a cardboard background which called it "View On Palmetto Island." That was the name used when T. H. Boyd was attempting his resort promotion.



Waterfront

How would you like to see hundreds of wild ducks swimming about in the water, right before your eyes—and here in Brunswick County?

Well, that's what happened to us Monday morning. We had gone up to Orton Plantation on another matter, and in walking through the garden looking for Alex Bogie, we passed along the edge of the old rice field. One of the most thrilling sights we ever saw in connection with wildlife were the hundreds of ducks swimming about and feeding almost within gunshot.

That latter reference is entirely a figure of speech, for the very fact that there has been no gunfire in that area in many years is what accounts for the presence of the large waterfowl population. That and the bountiful supply of feed that was raised there during the past season under the direction of employees of the Federal Wildlife Service, Orton is a Wildlife Sanctuary, and as such is under rigid protection.

It is a little early for a very great show of color in the gardens at Orton, although camellias are beginning to bloom and the plants are heavily budded; but for

the husband who wants the thrill of hunting—even vicariously—an invitation to his wife for a visit to the gardens sometime this month probably will bring about more all-around family pleasure than any other trip he has made to that fabulous place.

Hundreds of ducks!

The present visit of the USE Dredge Gerig has had us confused by a succession of events. The first came when the big hopper dredge arrived for maintenance work on the Cape Fear River bar and we did not know anything about it. Our first knowledge was when we started to see several strange automobiles parked overnight at the foot of Howe street. Next came the query from a visiting Long Beach resident as to why a big ship had been anchored off the bar late Sunday afternoon. We knew the water was rough—we had that on the word of Pilot Robert Thompson, who boarded a ship out there late that day. But it was much later that we determined the big ship was actually a big dredge, and that instead of being anchored it actually was working.

Then Monday we had another visitor ask why a big ship had

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