

THE BRUNSWICK BEACON

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Discover Brunswick's 'Other' Fragile Treasure

It always amazes me how much we take for granted in Brunswick County.

The Green Swamp is a good example.

Knowledgeable visitors from across the globe tramp through its savannahs and pocosins, oohing and aahing in excitement at the incredible diversity of plant and animal found within its borders. I know; I've had occasion to accompany several of them. Those who have studied the roles of wetlands bemoan the steady loss of the swamp.

But few of the people I know who live here or visit here on a regular basis, other than a few hunters and birdwatchers, have taken time out to visit the Green Swamp Nature Preserve, which is managed by the N.C. Nature Conservancy. Though it's been written about many, many times, some claim not to even know it exists, much less how to get there.

It is, one must admit, not featured prominently in tourist guides. The Conservancy is probably happy about that, since conserving the area is its main goal, and public education important, but essentially a side order.

While I appreciate its scientific value, that's not why I go to the Green Swamp Nature Preserve near Supply. And it's certainly not because of the ticks, red bugs, mosqui-

Susan Usher



ered water, entangling vines and thick briars of the pocosin.

You're sweating, starting to itch and your tennis shoes and pants legs got soaked when you stumbled into a pothole that no one else seemed to find.

That funny plant growing in the path that the tour guide made such a fuss over didn't really make much of an impression; it wasn't even blooming.

Without your reading glasses—on the table at home, you couldn't even see those you-know-what sundews everybody was talking about; they were entirely too small.

"Why," you ask yourself for the umpteenth time, "did I ever agree to come on this junket? I should be home playing bridge or maybe canning tomatoes. Anything but this."

After all, everybody knows the only thing swamps and wetlands are good for is to be drained and turned into farms and pine plantations, and then later, subdivisions and golf courses. Just look around!

An eager "birder" up ahead points upward at an old, longleaf pine with a small hole and sap running down the side: the home of the elegant and endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

Closer by it seems like you're suddenly surrounded by pitcher plants of all shapes and sizes, pok-

ing their lidded mouths up through the undergrowth.

And is that a gentian of some kind? Oh, and what kind of orchid is that? Where's that field guide when you need it most.

Then, you pause, breath catching in your throat and wondering if there's film in the camera.

Just ahead, sunlight filters through rows of leggy, green-topped pines in long swathes of gold, setting aglow a meadow of tall grasses burgeoning with more blooming wildflowers than you could have imagined.

The pine savannah, welcoming, teeming with life. Not Monet's flower garden, but then, Mother Nature wields her own distinct paintbrush.

In the distance, the indistinct hum of traffic rumbling up and down N.C. 211. Visitors scurrying to the seashore, or back home again. Deliverymen in their trucks.

Little do they realize they are rushing through and past Brunswick County's "other" and equally fragile treasure: the Green Swamp.

Check it out for yourself. The North Carolina Nature Conservancy will be conducting free field trips May 9 as part of its 15th anniversary celebration at Brunswick Community College.

Driving along N.C. 211 will never be the same. I promise.

Just Give Us The Facts, Ma'am

The ordeal Donna Baxter has survived points up some apparent injustices in our law enforcement system. This candidate for the Brunswick County Board of Education, and present chairperson of that board, was found guilty of improper passing in a March 16 traffic accident, in which she suffered minor injuries and was also charged with driving while impaired.

Here's the rub. Baxter's injuries prevented administration of the standard breathalyzer test, but because she admitted to a beer-and-a-half with dinner before the accident, she was charged with driving drunk, pending the outcome of a blood test.

Now the results of that test tell us she was nowhere near impaired by alcohol at the time of the accident. Relieved, she intends continuing her re-election campaign leading to the May 5 primary.

But what does John Q. Public really think about Candidate Baxter now? Can the stigma of a DWI charge be erased simply by facts?

Maybe not. Given our attraction for what is spectacular and what goes wrong around us, rather than the ordinary and the good, we tend to remember about someone their appearance of wrongdoing much longer than their concrete good deeds.

This being true, it seems patently unjust for police officers to have the prerogative to charge something prior to documentation, putting on public record for media distribution the mere possibility that a violation has occurred. Any citizen so charged could lose stature in the eyes of friends and co-workers, could even lose his/her job; but a public official or candidate for office stands to lose even more. The newspaper headlines would be bigger; the alleged "crime" would loom larger in the public mind. Also, the stakes are higher.

There was nothing incorrect about the actions of Officer Timberlake, who made his DWI charge on the evidence of careless driving and Mrs. Baxter's admission of having consumed one-and-a-half beers. He did his job. The media did it's job, too, in reporting the charge, even giving it front page play. Baxter played her role with extreme propriety as well, promising to withdraw from office should her blood test reveal a state of drunkenness.

Of course, some will react with horror to the notion of ANY alcohol consumption, but let the stones be thrown only by those sufficiently pure to do so. Get real. How would we run our government, including school boards, if everyone who had a beer with dinner were excluded from office?

The problem occurs when such a "tentative" charge as this is made at all and consequently becomes part of public record. That record is open not only to the media but to the general public as well.

It seems we should consider tinkering with the laws, perhaps having officers delay filing a charge such as DWI—for which breathalyzer and/or lab test results are routinely a major element of the evidence—until that documentation is available. Another possibility might be taking a second look at whether tentative charges should be among the records so readily available. With either alternative, of course, there is a potential for abuse that must be addressed; however, we need to protect the dignity of our "innocent till proven guilty" neighbors, not flash across the sky every suspicion of their misbehavior.

Till that enlightened day arrives, it's up to each of us to curb our tendency to let sensationalism mold our attitudes. What should be remembered about Donna Baxter is not that erroneous charge, but the quality of leadership and service she has given to the school board.

Let's avoid attaching stigma by suggestion and stick to facts we know to be true.

We Set Some Higher Goals In Adulthood

A friend in Chapel Hill has set a high goal for himself this year. He's working on a private pilot's license. He says it's tough finding the time to practice, but we're all pulling for him.

He flies around the state in one of those two-seater airplanes with a flight instructor who knows where the airports are that are close to great restaurants. Last week he flew to Lynchburg, Va., and back, all in an afternoon. He has flown solo already, and as tradition would have it, his shirttail hangs in the clubhouse at Horace Williams Airport, along with others who have made that brave step into the wild, blue yonder.

Flying buddies talk about a place in western North Carolina where there is this terrific restaurant that sits right next to a runway. They fly there for lunch and then fly back home, to return to their jobs or families.

It all has the convenience of just taking a ride down the street to the local waffle house. But this story isn't just about flying or down home cooking, it's about goals and dreams.

Every time we see or call one an-

Terry Pope



other, our conversation eventually focuses on our goals. Me? I'm working on my college thesis, hoping to complete it this year, which is when Russell would also like to obtain his license. We both hold full-time jobs.

Goals seem harder to achieve when you become an adult. Maybe we just start setting higher goals for ourselves? Or can't seem to find the time to reach them.

We kid one another about how we'll be old men one day and we'll still be talking about getting that degree or pilot's license. It's funny, yet it's also scary. To me it is. We have been friends since the fifth grade.

When I do things, I want to do things right. Here's an example.

I took my camera to Chapel Hill on a visit recently and used the largest zoom lens I own, a 200 mm, to try to get shots of Russell landing the plane. He was practicing touch and go landings. I still don't know why pilots do that. Maybe it has something to do with what would happen if they are forced to pull out of a landing at the last second.

He wanted to do his best for the pictures, and I wanted to do my best work behind the camera. It was a bright, sunny day and the only location safe near the runway had me staring into the sun. The plane would come out blackened by shadows in the shots.

Even though I got as close to the runway as safety would allow, it wasn't close enough.

Also, I forgot to set the film speed. I shot a roll of 100 speed film at 400 speed, which means the roll would come out underdeveloped with the pictures looking fuzzy. I didn't realize what I had done until I was taking the film out of the camera. Not only did the pictures have terrible shadows, but they were fuzzy shadows.

Oh well, I messed up. There will be another time. But I'm always thinking about things that I want to do today, not years from now. I'm already starting to think about things I should have done in college 10 years ago.

We assure one another that we'll reach our goals. That's what friends are for, reassurance. He asks, "When I get my license and fly down to Wilmington, will you fly back to Chapel Hill with me?"

I hesitate slightly, but then I say I will. It's something that will mean a lot to both of us, if we're not too old to enjoy it. I'll still have to work on getting over my fear of flying though.

And I add, "If the FAA says you are a pilot, then I'll hop in the plane with you."

"You'll trust my flying?" he asks. Well, reassurance is most important here.

It would thrill me if we both achieve those goals at once—he get his pilot's license and I finish my thesis right on time.

I'll take my camera—and get better shots the next time.

Here's To Outside Agitators In Every County And State

I visited the museum at Ocean Isle Beach the other day, for the first time since before it opened. It is, of course, a fascinating, stimulating reflection of coastal North Carolina. All the creativity and planning that went into it show clearly in every room.

What was even clearer to me as I talked with its founder, Stuart Ingram, was the inestimable value to any community of outsiders like him who come in and stir things up.

Wilmington, where I live, would not have classical music on the airwaves today, nor, in fact, would Brunswick County, if it were not for a handful of Yankees who migrated there. They couldn't imagine a place without good music and just waded in and started a public radio station. I understand the University of North Carolina at Wilmington originated in a similar fashion, the brainchild of someone passing through.

Now Stuart Ingram is no Yankee, but he is no Brunswick Countian either. Like a huge percentage of the beach population, he was lured from the big city into buying property on the beautiful island where now a

top-quality nature museum stands as his handiwork. Would insiders have ever built it?

"Insiders" are usually born, raised and die in the same place and cannot fathom why anyone would want to travel, visit or live anywhere else. In the tiny Texas town where I spent 18 years, a community leader proudly declared he would never go so far away he couldn't see his town's water tower. My own father-in-law, permanently settled in a little corner of Missouri, always had the same response when someone suggested he visit a particular city. "Why? I didn't lose anything there," he would say.

Now, "outsiders," on the other hand, are often gadabouts; otherwise they'd never become outsiders in



Marjorie Megivern

some new and strange environment. Unless uprooted by necessity of job changes, marriage or natural disaster, they probably have a curiosity about other places and people. Generally they have experienced a variety of communities and ways of doing things and they enjoy experimentation.

That's why they come up with good ideas for the "insiders" when they become acquainted with their new home town. They see the place with fresh eyes and if there's a problem or need, they have a background of solutions that have worked somewhere else. Whether it's school improvements, a new way to handle traffic, or schemes to fill the cultural gaps, these upstart "furriners" very often put new life in staid old societies.

This is not to denigrate "insiders." Many of them are willing to go along and when ideas begin to flow, they find they have some to contribute. If they are not stubbornly hidebound against the intervention of newcomers, they can be invaluable in helping the implementation of those innovative suggestions. In fact, their

knowledge of pitfalls and procedures can be vital, as long as they don't pull out the old chestnut, "But we've always done it THIS way!"

Every county, every town needs outsiders and should encourage their participation. Ocean Isle Beach was fortunate and smart enough to welcome the likes of Stuart Ingram into their community some time ago. He, in turn, was fortunate and smart enough to ally himself with local talent and brains in the birthing of his brainchild museum. Certainly he could not have accomplished it alone and the folks on his board of directors, he insists, rule the operation.

When everything that's best about a settled community is married to the best of the immigrant crowd flowing into it, some high-powered parenting takes place. Born of this merger are better schools, town government, artistic endeavors and social life.

And in the South Brunswick Islands, the "outsider" influence has brought us a museum in which every insider can take great pride.