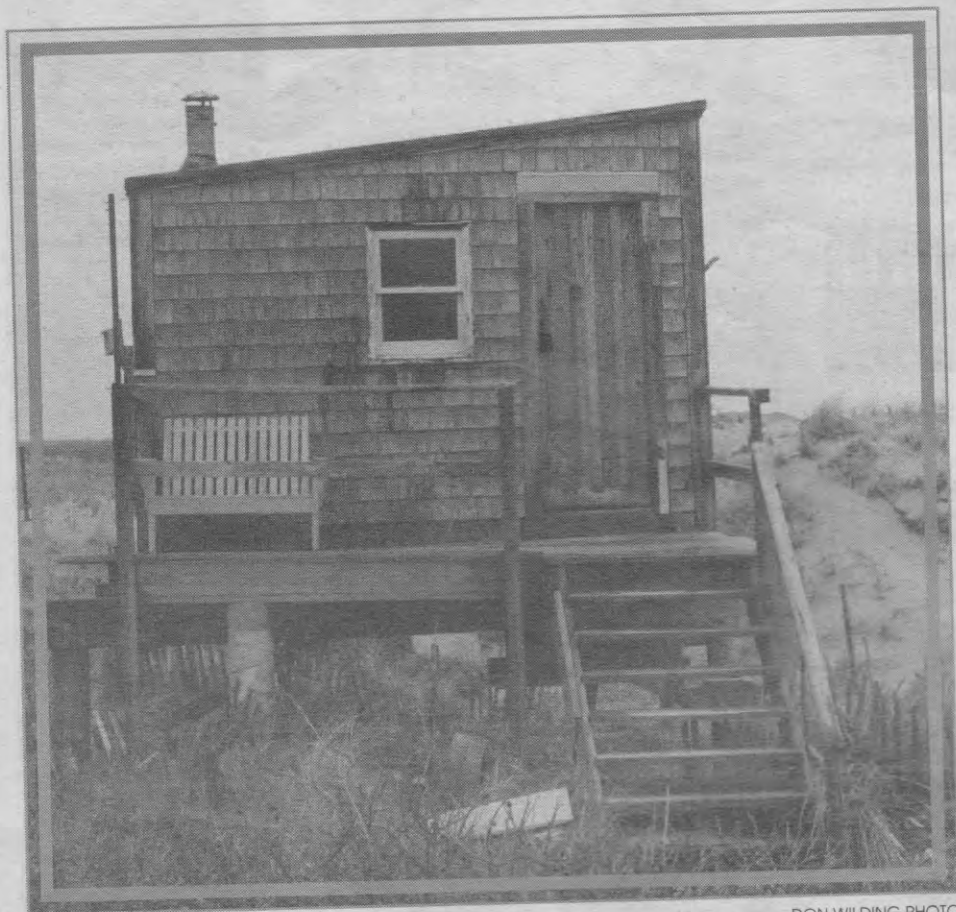


Summerscape



*D*une shacks: The temples rise on the dunes

Equal parts cultural icons and rustic throwbacks, these shacks are part of Cape Cod



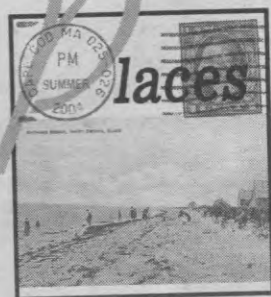
DON WILDING PHOTO

ODDLY GLORIOUS—The Euphoria dune shack, one of two shacks previously owned by Hazel Hawthorne Werner, near Snail Road in Provincetown.

By Don Wilding

Summerscape 2004

Henry Beston's Outermost House is long gone, but the spirit of what he was trying to convey lives on the dunes of Provincetown, where the 18 dune shacks at Peaked Hill still stand.



Like Beston in the 1920s, the residents of these "temples of the dunes," located on the area known as "The Back Shore" east of Race Point in Provincetown to High Head in Truro, are in the solitary confines of nature, looking for that "survivalist relationship" to the natural world. "Nature," Beston wrote in his Cape Cod literary classic, *The Outermost House*, "is part of our humanity, and without some aware-

ness and experience of that divine mystery, man ceases to be man."

Dune shack inhabitants such as Hazel Hawthorne Werner, Jack Kerouac, Eugene O'Neill, and Harry Kemp all realized this over the years, as they lived on the dunes without electricity or running water. It was their observations (and many others) that led to these one-room Spartan dwellings, many built out of wood planks

that were gifts of the sea, to be included in the National Register of Historic Places.

"Celebration of the Cape's natural environmental qualities is eloquently embodied in Thoreau's "Cape Cod" and Henry Beston's "The Outermost House." This same attitude was perpetuated by the inhabitants of the dune shacks ...," according to a memorandum from the Chief of Registration for the National Register of Historic Places on May 12, 1989.

While the dwellings have been intended for peace and solitude, many of the dune shacks' owners have experienced anything but that since the Federal Government took over the land on the Outer Cape in 1961. This land, which came to be known as The Cape Cod National Seashore, is where these shacks have stood for years, and legal issues over the fate of the shacks once their owners are gone with the wind and whether the dune shack inhabitants should be considered "a cultural resource" have been just of the some of the battles that have been hotly contested ever since.

The "great ritual" of nature, as Beston put, has proven to be a great inspiration to artists and writers in the dune shacks, and many consider it to be a spiritual experience. Kemp, known as "The Poet of

the Dunes," wrote "My shack standing in the middle of all this ... Next door to heaven and close on the gates of sunset ... The opening doors of dawn ... I've got what few have, I've got the life that I want!" "There are thresholds you cross," according to longtime dune dweller Emily Beebe, and author Kathy Short told The Cape Cod Times several years ago that "I feel peace there in a way I have never found anywhere else."

The Temples Rise on the Dunes

According to the book "From the Peaked Hills: A Collection of Writing and Drawing," published by the Peaked Hill Trust in 1988, "the first beach hut, or dune shack, was built near the head of Stouts Creek in 1794, and by the turn of the 19th century, six similar shelters had been constructed between Race Point and Monomoy."

The Coast Guard erected a lifesaving station in the area in 1872, but the officers also built shacks on the dunes to be used as rescue stations, or for their family members to use. By the time the 1920s rolled around, artists and writers were beginning to stay in dune shacks, either those already standing or newly-built structures. One of the best-known playwrights to

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15



The Margo / Gelb shack, previously owned by artists Boris Margo and Jan Gelb, on the dunes of Provincetown overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

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The temples rise on the dunes...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

stay in the dunes was Eugene O'Neill, who penned many of his works while staying at the Peaked Hills Lifesaving Station. Among the O'Neill works written in the dunes were "Anna Christie," "The Emperor Jones," and "God's Chillun Got Wings."

Besides O'Neill, other writers and artists staying in the dunes during that time included Edmund Wilson, Niles Spencer, Mary Heaton Vorse, and Hazel Hawthorne Ufford (known later as Werner).

Werner, the champion of the dune shacks, first dreamt of a shack while living in New York, and set out with her husband to find this dream house by walking the coast and sleeping on the beach at night. Once they reached Provincetown, Werner ran into Agnes O'Neill,

Eugene O'Neill's second wife, who was an old friend from New York. Through an arrangement with the Coast Guard, they stayed in a vacant shack for \$12 a month.

Werner, who died in 2000 at the age of 98, wrote two books on the dunes. In 1936, she bought the "Thalassa" dune shack from a Coast Guard officer for \$50. Seven years later, she purchased the shack known as "Euphoria," which was the setting for Cynthia Huntington's book "The Salt Box."

More literary greatness emerged from the dunes over the years. Tennessee Williams was a frequent visitor to Provincetown and put the final touches on the play "A Streetcar Named Desire" in a dune shack. Rumor has it that Marlon Brando hitchhiked to Provincetown and made the trek over the dunes to audition for the role. In 1950, Jack Kerouac spent some time in a dune shack, where he later acknowledged that he wrote some of "On the Road." Norman Mailer was another well-known author who spent more than a few nights in a dune shack.

Before the establishment of the Cape Cod National Seashore, the dune area known as the Provincelands was owned by the state. While the arrival of the Sea-

shore saved the Outer Cape from development, it also created a new set of problems for those in the dune shacks. Many of the shacks had already been in families for generations, and the government was originally intending to demolish the structures following the passing of their owners. The National Historic District designation in 1989 was a victory for the dune shack owners, but questions over what happened to the shacks after the owners' passing was still up in the air. Dune shack owners are now battling the government over whether the dune shack district will be designated as "traditional cultural property."

Two non-profit groups have been established in recent years to preserve certain dune shacks and their way of life - The Peaked Hill Trust and the Provincetown Community Compact, which oversees the C-Scape Dune Shack.

"Cape Cod has been called the crown jewel of the national parks," said the late Grace Bessay, a longtime owner of the dune shack known as "The Grail." "Properly understood, and appreciated, it's the historic cottages that are the jewels in the crown."

