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The Outer Banks



Six decades of combing Outer Banks shores yields a colorful and insightful assortment of ocean-washed artifacts.





what Nellie Myrtle found

Nellie Myrtle Midgett Pridgen loved her native Nags Head so much she resisted sharing it or seeing it change. After decades of patrolling and guarding her beloved shore, she left behind a lifetime of treasures.

Written by Molly Harrison • Photography by Stacey Haines

The first footsteps in the new-day sand were always Nellie Myrtle's. As sure as the sun's rising over the Atlantic, her slim figure rose over the Nags Head dune at daybreak and purposefully strode down to the clean slate of beach. She walked the same stretch of beach every day for 60 years, but each day new and alive with possibility.

Nellie Myrtle Midgett Pridgen was a beachcomber, not a fair-weather lollygagger with time to kill, but an obsessive collector and intense observer undeterred

by even the prickliest of nor'easters. She walked in the morning and usually again in the evening, pedal-pusher pants rising just above her ankles, Lucky Strikes for company, confidently toting a bag to hold the whelks, polished glass, fishing lures, bricks, bones, and yet-to-be-imagined treasures she found.

Although only a memory now, the image of Nellie Myrtle's lone form on the beach in front of historic Cottage Row at Milepost 13 in Nags Head is indelible

Above: Nellie Myrtle Midgett Pridgen on the front porch of her home behind her mother's store, getting ready to go fishing. She opened her home to tourists and operated it as the "The Last Resort" in the late 40's to the mid 50's.



In June 2003, the Mattie Midgett Store and Nellie Myrtle's collection received recognition by a Nags Head Board of Commissioners' resolution that declared, "The site, the store, and the artifacts are an irreplaceable part of Nags Head history." Two years later, Pridgen was honored with the town's first annual Nags Header Award.

in the minds of many longtime Outer Bankers. She was a fixture here throughout her 74-year lifetime, a cantankerous, controversial character both loathed and loved; the original Outer Banks environmentalist and an impassioned woman bent on preserving her Nags Head heritage.

"She loved where she was born more than anyone else I've ever known," says Outer Banks historian David Stick. "The best part of her life was her love for the ocean."

A passion is born

Nellie Myrtle was born to Mattie and Jethro Midgett in Nags Head Woods in 1918. Mattie ran a store that catered to visitors of Nags Head's soundside resort, selling vegetables, canned goods, chickens, and the fish that Jethro harvested as a commercial fisherman.

In Nellie Myrtle's youth, Nags Head was a vast expanse of sand dunes, maritime forest, marsh, and beach, dotted with the homes of a few residents and "summer people."



A lifetime of roaming Nags Head's fruitful sands sifts down to an intriguing concentration of odds and ends on display at the Mattie Midgett Store on South Virginia Dare Trail, home of the Nellie Myrtle Pridgen Beachcomber Collection.

When she wasn't helping in the store, Nellie Myrtle was outdoors in all that open space — soft-crabbing in the sound with only her pink toes for bait or scouring the soundside of the island for washed-up treasure. People say it was Nellie Myrtle's curse to have memories of the time when the island belonged to her and just a few others.

In the early 1930s, two bridges and a new paved oceanfront highway opened up Nags Head as a vacation destination. The summer people moved to the ocean side of the island, and the Midgetts followed, rolling their store on log timbers to a spot along the new road. At age 15, slim, curly-haired Nellie

Myrtle began to scavenge the ocean beach for treasures — the skate egg cases, scotch bonnets, and all manner of jetsam — that would hold her interest for life.

She married young, to a man who had come to Nags Head to work on the Beach Road. She moved away with him to Virginia, then Mississippi, had two children, Elwood and Carmen, by the time she was 19, and came back soon thereafter with the children but without the husband.

Nellie Myrtle needed to be near the sea.

She helped her mother in the store, and her mother helped her with the children, which gave Nellie Myrtle time alone on



the beach to gather things like driftwood, jawbones, buoys, and corks. Except for a wartime job as the only female hydraulic mechanic on her crew at the Norfolk Naval Air Station, Nellie Myrtle spent the rest of her life right there at her childhood home. Not even a well-to-do suitor with a whopping diamond ring could lure her away from Nags Head.

Nellie Myrtle rented rooms to tourists, but she often escaped into nature. Her daughter, Carmen Gray, remembers being left in her mother's wake as she set off on her searches of the beach. She remembers her mother swimming so far into the ocean that she would become a speck in the waves. She remembers her mother gathering up the children with great excitement to take them out to the beach to see a waterspout, as others dashed to safety indoors.

Fierce protector

Her parents gone and her children grown, by the mid-1970s Nellie Myrtle lived alone and kept to herself. The more the tourists flooded into Nags Head, the more it disturbed Nellie Myrtle. The ocean was the only thing that stayed the same, and her daily walks beside it were therapy.

Off the beach, she butted heads with tourists and lawmakers. Surfers who parked at the old Midgett store were her nemeses, but she also loathed beach drivers, beachgoers who cut through the yards of her neighbors, and people who took the shell "gravel" off the beach to make cement. "I don't care who they were or what they tried to sneak by, she'd catch them and read them the riot act," says Mike Williams, a former neighbor.

Nellie Myrtle policed her neighborhood, attended town meetings, wrote letters to editors, and called public officials to voice her opposition to anything that hurt the environment. People thought she was just kooky, but they now say she was right about a lot of things. "She was a very bright lady who could have gotten an awful lot done if she'd had any finesse whatsoever," Gray wrote about her mother. "But she didn't have any."

Many of the people who vacationed on Nags Head's Cottage Row liked her. Nellie Myrtle looked after their cottages in the off-season, as her mother had done before her. The cottage families regarded Nellie Myrtle as an odd, intriguing character, as essential to the Nags Head experience as seafood suppers.

"One morning she knocked on the door about five o'clock," says Katherine Kittrell, who grew up vacationing across from Midgett's store. "All she said was 'Fish!' It was a blues blitz. Everyone was catching bluefish. She made us bluefish cakes that day. She gave me the recipe, but I have

Glimpses of the sea's offerings — from bottled messages to whelk egg cases — are worth a special trip to one of the occasional Mattie Midgett Store open houses held each year.



Dorothy Winkler keeps an eye on Mattie Midgett Store, which provided staples and incidentals to locals and "summer people" for decades before becoming home to Pridgen's legacy.

never been able to make mine taste like hers. She knew how to do anything and everything, and she was great in sharing her information."

Betty Crawford, a summertime neighbor and friend, liked her, too: "Nellie Myrtle would take me places shelling and looking for stuff and beachcombing. She was a wonderful friend but a terrible enemy."

Her "propensity to express strong opinions," as Stick once said, meant people kept Nellie Myrtle at arm's length, but probably she preferred it that way. She spent her time collecting, observing, studying, reading scientific journals, and clipping articles about the weather and the environment. "Although he wouldn't have much to do with her, my husband said she was one of the best-educated women to have not had any formal education," says Crawford.

In her later years, Nellie Myrtle was obsessive about her massive collection of beach finds, which she was storing on the shelves of her parents' former store. She spent her time categorizing sea glass by color, shells by size. She split whelk egg cases open and sorted the tiny whelks in jars by size. On rainy days, she'd sit and untangle rusty fishing tackle she'd found on the beach.

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For the fish cake recipe Nellie Myrtle Pridgen gave Katherine Kittrell, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on "May Web Exclusives."

Nellie Myrtle didn't get to the beach much in her last year, but when she died in 1992 her ashes went to their rightful place — the ocean, accompanied by a

sudden tempestuous northeast wind, a swoop of pelicans, and a sighting of dolphins.

What's left of Nellie Myrtle is both haunting and heartening. In the dark, old Mattie Midgett store, now on the National Register of Historic Places, is the astounding collection of artifacts gathered from "Nellie Myrtle's beach" and the dunes and woods of Nags Head — hundreds of old bottles, dozens of jars of sea glass, driftwood, corks, buoys, messages, letters in bottles (she once won a case of potato salad for responding to a message that floated all the way from Block Island), whale bones, Indian artifacts, war paraphernalia, dolls, toys, and all sorts of curiosities.

Some are more valuable than others — an enormous

fulgurite (a tube of lightning-blasted sand) from Jockey's Ridge, a German stoneware bottle top that exactly matches a 16th-century shipwreck artifact, a mahogany carving from Haiti, a fragile Argonaut shell.

All of it is the legacy of a lifetime spent loving the sea.

Molly Harrison makes her home by the sea in Nags Head.

if you're going

Nellie Myrtle Pridgen Beachcomber Collection in Mattie Midgett Store

4008 South Virginia Dare Trail, Nags Head, N.C. 27959

Email beach@oldnagshead.org for information on open houses.

For a link to the Mattie Midgett Store website, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on "This Month's Issue."



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