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A Disappearing Pile of Sand

By [Molly McArdle](#) | June 13, 2017

Today, tourists shape the geography of the Outer Banks as much as wind and water do. How the balance sheet adds up depends on who you ask. I like the new Harris Teeter grocery store; I also miss the empty space. I'm reflexively critical of tourism's impact; yet I'm loath to give up my own visits. Vying for space, resources, and attention, too, are the Outer Banks' many historic places: the Fort Raleigh National Historic Site (former home of the "lost" Roanoke colony), the Wright Brothers National Memorial, the Cape Hatteras Light Station (a pet project of Alexander Hamilton), the Chicamacomico Life-Saving Station, and—small but not to be ignored—a modest century-old building on Route 12 in Nags Head known as the Outer Banks Beachcomber Museum. (History, after all, is a fine thing to search for on a rainy day on the Outer Banks, but preserving it is considerably less lucrative than building a beach house.) The Beachcomber Museum's unwitting founder, the irascible and unbending Nellie Myrtle, hated the forces that reshaped the islands before her eyes. I think she might have hated me, a visitor, too. "It's all gone, all gone," she told *National Geographic* in 1986. Of what tourism was doing to the islands, her language was blunt: "Some call it progress. I call it rape."

Nellie Myrtle was born a Midgett in 1918. Though two brief marriages left her with a new last name—Pridgen—hardly anyone used it. In pictures, there's a kind of hard glamour to her: high cheekbones and cat-eye glasses, overcoats and pearls, scarf wrapped around her head, her curly hair caught in the wind. Her son, Woody Pridgen, called her a "mean sonovabitch." In their book, *Legendary Locals of the Northern Outer Banks*, R. Wayne Gray (who himself has Midgetts in the family) and Nancy Beach Gray more diplomatically describe Nellie Myrtle as "preferring beaches to people." Nags Head, when Nellie was born, was a sleepy town of eighteen hundred located in the sheltered pocket between Jockey's Ridge—the East Coast's largest natural sand dune—and the Pamlico Sound. Her father, Jethro, was a

commercial fisherman and her mother, Mattie, the proprietor of Nags Head's only general store. (It offered, for many years, the area's sole telephone aside from the life-saving station.) No one lived full time by the ocean in those days; it wasn't worth dealing with the weather. But Nags Head even then was home to one of the oldest beach destinations in the country, with large shingled cottages—a row of houses now called the “Unpainted Aristocracy”—that date back to the 1850s. In 1918, only a handful of them dotted the oceanfront. That changed in the 1920s, when the first bridge was built connecting the northern Banks (Nags Head included) to the mainland, and again in 1931 when the first beach road, what would become Route 12, unfurled along the ocean. Nellie's parents followed the new influx of beach-oriented tourists and, in 1932, rolled the store across the island, sound to shore.

Nellie Myrtle spent her life on the beach. In the morning and at dusk she walked, in trousers and lipstick, carrying her own hand-sewn plastic bags long before the advent of the mass-produced kind. Even during the only period she lived away—throughout World War II she worked at the Naval Station Norfolk, the only woman in hydraulics—she'd return every weekend to walk the shore. Ever since Nellie Myrtle was a little girl, she had collected Scotch bonnets and beach glass and fulgurite (sand that's been struck, and fused together, by lightning), but during those years the ocean sometimes offered up a grimmer bounty: the bodies of the dead. Carmen Gray, Nellie's daughter, remembered seeing as many as thirteen ships on fire offshore at the same time. “They'd burn for days,” her friend Dorothy Hope told me. Though war—and the U-boats that haunted the Banks just offshore—temporarily slowed tourism, it did not end it. Over the course of her life, as Nellie Myrtle walked up and down the beach, Dare County's population rose from just over five thousand in 1920 to over twenty-two thousand in 1990—not to mention the millions that wash in every summer. Later in life she'd hang up a hand-painted KEEP OUT sign on the now-closed general store and line the boundary of her property with cinder blocks. Once, when a tourist parked, unthinking, on her land, she had a friend move the car to the middle of the road and leave it there. Then she spray-painted its windshield.

On a sunny morning in September, Chaz Winkler and Dorothy Hope invited me inside the wood-paneled living room of Nellie Myrtle's former home, Mattie's one-time store, where they live and maintain the infrequently open Outer Banks Beachcombers Museum. They are the stewards of Nellie Myrtle's legacy, though they are considerably nicer to strangers: they

thoughtfully cranked up the air-conditioning as soon as I walked through the door. Chaz and Dorothy inherited the historic buildings and their contents from Nellie Myrtle's daughter, Carmen. "We were best friends," Dorothy said. She gave me a copy of the cookbook they wrote together, *Love That Tuna, and Other Game Fish: A Complete Outer Banks Cookbook*. (One mustachioed and another eyelashed tuna look out, side-eyed, from the cover—my favorite recipe is "The Poach Approach.") In 1993, the year Nellie Myrtle died, Carmen invited Dorothy to move into the old Midgett store. Carmen had wanted someone to take care of it; her own husband had been itching to turn the plot of land into a Jiffy Lube. Instead Dorothy, joined by her partner Chaz in 1994, became the caretaker of an unwieldy bequest: not only the buildings—the store dates back to 1914—but also about eight decades' and several tons' worth of Nellie Myrtle's beachcombing collection.

Prettily arranged like merchandise in the store's former retail space, itself marooned in time, Nellie's haul is a veritable horde. Dorothy showed me what Nellie Myrtle found: a fifty-million-year-old crab fossil, a Civil War cannonball, a Hershey's sugar bag from Cuba, a rum keg, petrified truffles, eight messages in bottles, the decorative jug handle from a piece of sixteenth-century German stoneware, an Argonaut shell, a \$5 bill that had been in the ocean so long it had barnacles on it, gallon jars full of sea glass, of shells, of plastic toys. Dorothy pointed out a table that washed up after the wreck of the U.S.S. *Huron* in 1877. "Ninety-eight men died in that wreck," she said. "How many of those men sat at that table?"

In truth, many old homes on the Outer Banks were constructed from wood salvaged from shipwrecks; more than five thousand ships have sunk off the coast of these barrier islands. The occasional windfalls of otherwise expensive imported commodities—salt pork, coffee, sugar, alcohol—were a lifeline to the once poor communities. Government largesse made up another big part of the Banks' economy until tourism took over: often the only regular source of cash was a job with the Life-Saving Service, later the Coast Guard, or post office. But Nellie Myrtle combed the beach long after it ceased to be an economic necessity—judging by the volume of her collection, I would call it an obsession—and what she gathered is a midden of twentieth-century history. (Archaeologists do, after all, learn the most from what we cast off.) David Stick, the region's best-known historian, told the *Virginian-Pilot* in 2004, that, "next to Jockey's Ridge and the Wright Brothers Memorial," the store and Nellie Myrtle's collection inside it "is the most historically significant place on the northern Outer Banks."

The centuries-old flotsam and jetsam, the century-old store, and the photos of Mattie at the counter or of Jethro bent over a fishing net are part of a rare look into an Outer Banks past that isn't often remembered: its residential life before tourism took over. Visitors will find no pirates here, no lost colony, and only a spindly connection to airplanes (Mattie's parents owned the plot of land used by the Wright Brothers during their test flights). But the Beachcomber Museum represents the sinew that links the big-ticket historical sites, bringing the Banks themselves into the foreground. "This house, this history, it's too important to lose," Dorothy said. "If we don't save it, who's going to?"

Dorothy, Chaz, and Carmen first invited the public to see the store and collection during four Preservation North Carolina tours of shore cottages in the late 1990s. In 2003, they officially opened the museum and, in 2004, added the store to the National Register of Historic Places. Yet Dorothy and Chaz have struggled to keep it open on a regular basis for the last decade—mostly due to zoning and parking issues—a struggle they pin on the Nags Head town government. Chaz speaks disparagingly about the town's \$36 million beach nourishment program, which was paid for with local, rather than federal or state, dollars. (Residents had voted against the program in a 2007 referendum, but the town went ahead with it anyway.) "The town of Nags Head is more interested in beach nourishment than preserving the town's history," he said.

The couple, for their part, joined with other property owners in the Nags Head Beach Cottage Row Historic District this past April to purchase an acre of undeveloped land just a few hundred yards away from the museum, farther back from the encroaching beach and behind a protective stand of trees. They've also begun to raise money to move the store there. The additional space would solve their parking, and thus zoning, problems. Though they'd have to reapply to the National Register, Dorothy believes the relocation is in keeping with the history of the building. "Miss Mattie already moved it once."

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