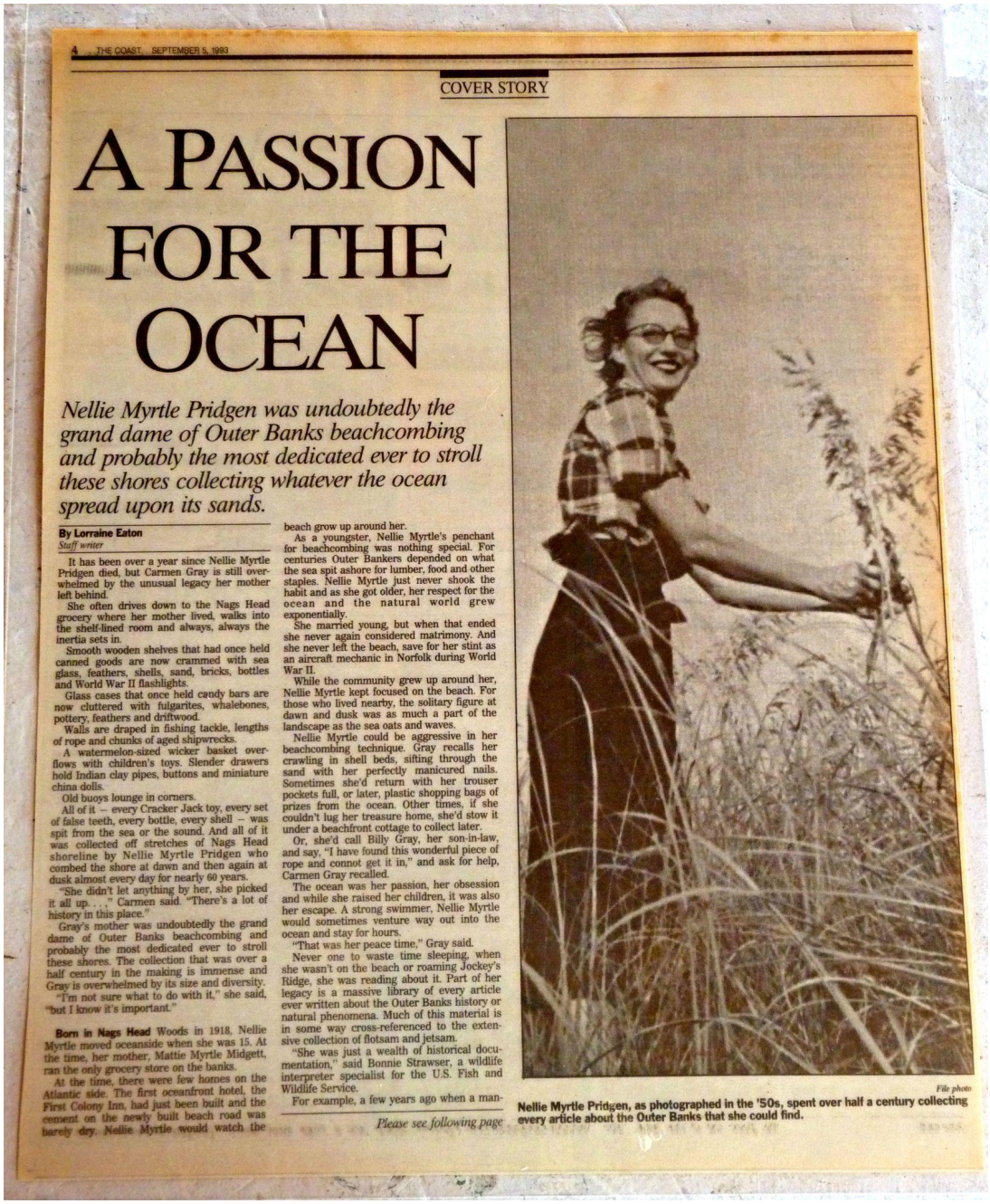

COVER STORY

A PASSION FOR THE OCEAN

Nellie Myrtle Pridgen was undoubtedly the grand dame of Outer Banks beachcombing and probably the most dedicated ever to stroll these shores collecting whatever the ocean spread upon its sands.

By Lorraine Eaton
Staff writer

It has been over a year since Nellie Myrtle Pridgen died, but Carmen Gray is still overwhelmed by the unusual legacy her mother left behind.

She often drives down to the Nags Head grocery where her mother lived, walks into the shelf-lined room and always, always the inertia sets in.

Smooth wooden shelves that had once held canned goods are now crammed with sea glass, feathers, shells, sand, bricks, bottles and World War II flashlights.

Glass cases that once held candy bars are now cluttered with fulgarites, whalebones, pottery, feathers and driftwood.

Walls are draped in fishing tackle, lengths of rope and chunks of aged shipwrecks.

A watermelon-sized wicker basket overflows with children's toys. Slender drawers hold Indian clay pipes, buttons and miniature china dolls.

Old buoys lounge in corners.

All of it -- every Cracker Jack toy, every set of false teeth, every bottle, every shell -- was spit from the sea or the sound. And all of it was collected off stretches of Nags Head shoreline by Nellie Myrtle Pridgen who combed the shore at dawn and then again at dusk almost every day for nearly 60 years.

"She didn't let anything by her, she picked it all up. . . ." Carmen said. "There's a lot of history in this place."

Gray's mother was undoubtedly the grand dame of Outer Banks beachcombing and probably the most dedicated ever to stroll these shores. The collection that was over a half century in the making is immense and Gray is overwhelmed by its size and diversity.

"I'm not sure what to do with it," she said, "but I know it's important."

Born in Nags Head Woods in 1918, Nellie Myrtle moved oceanside when she was 15. At the time, her mother, Mattie Myrtle Midgett, ran the only grocery store on the banks.

At the time, there were few homes on the Atlantic side. The first oceanfront hotel, the First Colony Inn, had just been built and the cement on the newly built beach road was barely dry. Nellie Myrtle would watch the beach grow up around her.

As a youngster, Nellie Myrtle's penchant for beachcombing was nothing special. For centuries Outer Bankers depended on what the sea spit ashore for lumber, food and other staples. Nellie Myrtle just never shook the habit and as she got older, her respect for the ocean and the natural world grew exponentially.

She married young, but when that ended she never again considered matrimony. And she never left the beach, save for her stint as an aircraft mechanic in Norfolk during World War II.

While the community grew up around her, Nellie Myrtle kept focused on the beach. For those who lived nearby, the solitary figure at dawn and dusk was as much a part of the landscape as the sea oats and waves.

Nellie Myrtle could be aggressive in her beachcombing technique. Gray recalls her crawling in shell beds, sifting through the sand with her perfectly manicured nails. Sometimes she'd return with her trouser pockets full, or later, plastic shopping bags of prizes from the ocean. Other times, if she couldn't lug her treasure home, she'd stow it under a beachfront cottage to collect later.

Or, she'd call Billy Gray, her son-in-law, and say, "I have found this wonderful piece of rope and cannot get it in," and ask for help, Carmen Gray recalled.

The ocean was her passion, her obsession and while she raised her children, it was also her escape. A strong swimmer, Nellie Myrtle would sometimes venture way out into the ocean and stay for hours.

"That was her peace time," Gray said.

Never one to waste time sleeping, when she wasn't on the beach or roaming Jockey's Ridge, she was reading about it. Part of her legacy is a massive library of every article ever written about the Outer Banks history or natural phenomena. Much of this material is in some way cross-referenced to the extensive collection of flotsam and jetsam.

"She was just a wealth of historical documentation," said Bonnie Strawser, a wildlife interpreter specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

For example, a few years ago when a man-

Please see following page

File photo

Nellie Myrtle Pridgen, as photographed in the '50s, spent over half a century collecting every article about the Outer Banks that she could find.

Beachcomber: The lady of the sand

The register at the grocery fell silent 40 years ago.

Worn wooden shelves that once showcased canned peas and collards are now crammed with sea glass, feathers, shells, sand, bricks and bottles.

Glass cases that once tempted children with peppermint sticks and licorice whips are now littered with whalebones, peace pipes and driftwood.

Walls are draped in fishing tackle. Frayed lengths of rope coil like cobras under chairs. Chunks of old shipwrecks lie stranded on shelves. A watermelon-sized wicker basket overflows with children's toys. A slender cash drawer cradles miniature china dolls. A row of tumblers overflows with feathers. A fat orange buoy lounges contentedly in a corner. *

All of it - every Cracker Jack toy, every set of false teeth, every spyglass, every shell, every brick, every World War II flashlight - was spit from the sea.

And all of it was gathered off a mile-long stretch of Outer Banks beach by Nellie Myrtle Pridgen, a Nags Head native who combed the shore at dawn and then again at dusk nearly every day for 60 years. *

"She didn't let anything by her, she picked it all up," Nell's daughter, Carmen Gray, recalled one summer afternoon while peering into a bleached blue coffee cup, its interior encrusted with barnacles. "There's a lot of history in this place. I'm not sure what to do with it, but I do know it's important."

They say that life has its origins in the oceans; that 500 million years ago the first fish-like creatures swam in the sea. About 300,000 years ago man migrated to the shores of the Mediterranean; around 130,000 years ago he began cracking open shellfish. Thirty thousand years ago man first went fishing.

Ninety-four years ago, Nellie Myrtle Midgett was born in a cottage deep in the Nags Head Woods. Her lineage was Outer Banks proper - full of Hollo-wells and Tillets, Twifords, Austins and Odens - proud, strong, self-sufficient people who negotiated with the land for a living.

It was 1918, a time when the sound side south of the immense sand dune called

Jockey's Ridge was, to outsiders, the whole of Nags Head.

Lured by salt air, wealthy families had summered on the shore since the 1800s to escape malaria-carrying mosquitoes and deadly vapors that they believed wafted from the steamy, inland marshes. The "resort" sported a hotel or two, a wharf and a few cottages scattered along the sound and sea.

Nell's daddy was a fisherman, but when Nell was 14, the Midgetts announced that they would leave the sound side and migrate to the sea. It must have caused considerable talk when the family's cedar-shingled, two-story store bumped eastward atop timbers and then stopped a few feet from the newly built Beach Road.

There, Mattie Midgett sold chickens that she raised herself, plucking the carcasses clean and washing them inside and out with Ivory soap before offering the birds to the tourists. She stocked the shelves with the basics - flour, baking soda, bread.

The Midgetts were gambling on tourism.

Two years before the Midgetts' migration, the last nails had been hammered into wooden bridges connecting the isolated Outer Banks to Currituck County to the north and Roanoke Island to the south. By 1931, a new stretch of sand and asphalt road connected Kitty Hawk to Whalebone Junction.

At the time, the Nags Head roadside was desolate, the stretches of sand and grass seeded only by lifesaving stations and a string of rambling, brown, cedar-shake summer cottages on stilts. The beach was open range and livestock roamed at will, chomping whatever shoots grew out of the sand.

"Lunacy in the extreme," that's what most people thought of this new road and talk of tourism," said Wynne C. Dough, the first curator of the Outer Banks History Center. "People here were of a conservative stripe and thought that building a causeway was ludicrous."

But Jethro and Mattie Midgett sensed what was brewing like seagulls sense a hurricane.

The 1930s was a decade of unprecedented change on the Outer Banks. The Beach Road was just the catalyst.

Two years after the Midgetts moved, the state outlawed open grazing when the legislature ratified the Livestock Act of 1934. The first man-made tourist attraction, the Wright Brothers Memorial, went up on land donated by some New Jersey residents.

Hundreds of down-and-out men with the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps and the U.S. Transient Service crossed the bridges in the 1930s and built 115 miles of

oceanfront dunes with 600 miles of sand fences stabilized by 141 million square feet of American beachgrass.

The idea behind the dunes was protection of the slender barrier islands from erosion; the idea of the 1934 law was to keep livestock from eating and trampling the newly planted beach grass.

The result of the bridges and roads, the fences, the dunes, and the monument to man's first flight was an era of head-spinning growth.

This was the stage for Nellie Myrtle's life. It would be her fate to witness the day-by-day transformation of the seaside wilderness that she loved into a multimillion-dollar tourist resort that she came to loathe.

Her youthful beachcombing was nothing special, nothing out of the ordinary.

"I do not think that there was a child who grew up on this beach who wasn't a beachcomber," Carmen said. "You picked up what the beach threw out."

The lanky, curly-haired Nell just never shook the habit. With age, her respect for the ocean and her knowledge of the natural world swelled.

Each day, Nell would wait for the first light of day, perhaps smoking a Lucky Strike. At dawn, she put on her lipstick, pulled on her trousers (she wore only trousers for the last 30 years of her life and had no use for pants without pockets), banged through the screen door, and headed due east at a brisk clip.

Hers would be the first footprints in the sand each day. Her style was aggressive, her stride long and sure. Squinting, her head moving from side to side, she scanned the shore.

"She knew what winds would bring in what things," said Carmen, who as a child was often left on the beach in her mother's wake, knowing better than to whine.

Nell came prepared for the best. In the days of paper bags, Nell purchased bolts of plastic from the hardware store and sewed pouches for her growing collection of Scotch bonnets, coral and rare shells from distant seas. Later, she switched to plastic shopping bags, one modern innovation she saluted.

Lots of things slowed Nell's pace - a timber, a tire, a patch of black sand. But shell beds brought her to a halt.

She would drop to her knees if something caught her eye. Crawling on all fours, Nell raked the coarse debris with perfectly manicured nails, sifting and searching for bits of buffed sea glass or a slim olive shell or perhaps a child's toy.

The solitary silhouette of the willowy woman rising up from the sand at dawn, her hands full of nature, was to her neighbors as natural as the sunrise.

Nell married twice and two children followed, Carmen and her brother, Elwood. Neither marriage lasted long. But with two children to raise, Nell had to work.

This was the dawn of the 1940s, and tourism had gained a toehold on the Outer Banks. Motels such as the Croatan Inn and the Carolinian were doing brisk business along the Beach Road. There were several restaurants, and real estate agents could make a living selling sandy lots to visitors from up north.

Tourism seemed unstoppable. Then came World War II.

Like hundreds of Outer Bankers, Nell joined the war machine. But forget knitting socks or joining the USO. Looking fit and self-assured in her coveralls, she worked at the naval air station in Norfolk, the only woman in a crew of hydraulic mechanics.

Nell's father worked at Norfolk Naval Shipyard, and her brother, Jethro Jr., at Smithfield Packing. The trio spent weekends in Nags Head, then on Sunday night boarded a bus for Norfolk, where Nell rented a room in a Ghent boardinghouse.

Nell continued combing the beach, but the flotsam and jetsam had changed.

Sea rations of jam and chocolate washed in with the tide, as did German military helmets and, occasionally, the bloated body of a soldier thrown from torpedoed cargo ships or submarines. The collection swelled.

Coffee cups with the names of ships and sailors painted on the sides and military-issue flashlights were placed alongside the thousands of shells and sand dollars and chips of buffed glass.

After the war, Nell returned to the Outer Banks, and so did the growth.

To make a living, Nell had to turn to tourism, to the enemy, full time. She took charge of the family's cedar-shake-shingled home behind the store, named the place The Last Resort and charged $2 for a night's stay and a home-cooked breakfast that became near legendary. Her operation catered mostly to band leaders and musicians who played at the beach dance halls.

"They just loved her," Carmen said. "They were like the surfers today, and they'd even stay on hammocks on the porch if there wasn't room inside."

Still, Nell combed the beaches. A delicate nautilus shell was added to the collection, a prize not only because of its rarity but also because of the paper-thin membrane

covering a hole in its side. The nautilus had tried to heal itself.

By 1960, the U.S. 158 Bypass was complete, an express route running parallel to the Beach Road, which by now sported several businesses. Nell became bolder and less tolerant with people she considered outsiders.

Karen Griffin came to the Outer Banks from Germany in 1962 on the arm of her new husband, Charles Griffin Jr., son of the mayor of Kill Devil Hills. The vivacious blonde quickly became one of the area's finest anglers and a popular subject of photographers for the new tourist guides and fish wrappers.

Griffin had never met Nell, but Nell knew her number.

"I'm sick and tired of seeing your picture in the newspaper," Nell crackled into the phone one summer afternoon. Then she hung up. Decades later, it still made Griffin laugh.

Nell was becoming a regular at town and county meetings. She was a hard-liner, opposing anything that she thought hurt the environment. She was particularly critical of building the bypass.

"Boy, she could really give it to them," said Betty Crawford of Hertford, a friend of Nell's since childhood, when her family spent summers in Nags Head. "She'd tell them exactly what she thought of their plans."

It seemed that only the ocean itself remained unchanged. It became Nell's escape from the concrete and the crowds. A strong swimmer, she sometimes slipped into the sea and ventured so far east that her head was almost invisible to her daughter. She'd stay there floating on her back and treading water for hours.

"That," Carmen said, "was her peace time."

Still, Nell kept walking the beaches. A corked glass bottle from the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey was added to the collection. Inside, a letter dated Oct. 24, 1960, explains that it was part of a study of currents and offers the finder $1 for its return.

In the mid-'70s, after her parents had passed, Nell moved into the grocery. It was now stuck in one of the busiest stretches of Nags Head, flanked by shopping centers and restaurants.

The Beach Road was in her front yard, the bypass at her back. The North Carolina Department of Transportation counted more than 3,000 cars a day driving past the nearby Kill Devil Hills ABC store.

When Nell's family moved to the Beach Road in 1932, about 5,000 people lived on the Outer Banks. By 1986, an estimated 6.6 million tourists were coming to town.

No one remembers quite when it started, but at some point Nell began collecting rocks and cinder blocks.

Bent into a comma, Nell hauled them home and spaced them around her perimeter and across the drive. Then she got a bucket of red paint and a paintbrush and wrote two words on planks out front of the grocery.

"Keep out!"

That hand-lettered message greeted National Geographic reporter Charles E. Cobb Jr., when he ventured near Nell's abode in 1986.

Cobb had learned about Nell from the locals. One graciously offered a bit of advice: Better get someone to call before you go over there.

He did, and the 68-year-old curmudgeon with sand in her pockets and no shoes on her feet agreed to an interview. When she answered the door that late summer day, decades of pent-up up resentment shot out.

So what do you think of this tourism, this robust economy? Cobb asked.

"Some call it progress. I call it rape," Nell snapped.

But something about Cobb appealed to Nell, and she invited him to walk along her beach. The unlikely pair strolled the shore for almost two hours, he lobbing questions and scribbling notes, she stopping every so often to harvest some treasure or to release a bit of wisdom.

"To know what this sea is doing, you must see it on every tide," she told Cobb.

"She was kind of sad on that walk," Cobb later recalled. "She kept saying, 'It's all gone, all gone.' "

Cobb's 1987 article became part of the collection, which by then draped the grocery's shelves like a kudzu vine and had crept upstairs and into the old beach cottage out back.

There were 5-gallon jars filled with buffed sea glass, culled by color. A modern-day beachcomber would be lucky to find just one piece of cobalt blue glass. Nell had gallons of it. And red and purple and all shades of green.

Sometimes, if she couldn't lug her treasure off the beach, she'd stow it under one of the beachfront cottages. Or she'd call Billy Gray, her son-in-law, and say, "I have found this wonderful piece of rope and cannot get it in," and demand that he use his four-wheel

drive to extract it from the grip of the shore.

Nell was clearly obsessed.

"She had no idols, except the ocean," Carmen said. "Even when the tide stood in her house three times, she had more respect for the ocean than for any living thing."

Some of those close to her believe that the growing collection was Nell's way of documenting the bewildering change she had witnessed - and a way to safeguard a piece of paradise lost.

By the spring of 1992, Nell was as slender as a sea oat with the same slight bend. A survivor of three heart attacks, she often kept her head down as she walked to the beach, as if to block out the cars, the stores, the bars, the rape.

Everything about tourism irked Nell. Once Carmen drove up to the grocery and saw her sitting on one of the cinder blocks in the yard, muttering and plucking sprouts of grass from the sand. Grass was a thing of tourists - a thing of those fancy, manicured developments and golf courses up the road. Grass had no place in her yard.

"Come on inside," Carmen coaxed.

Nell never even looked up.

In July 1992, at age 74, Nellie Myrtle Pridgen took her last breath of salt air.

Although she passed away in mid-summer, Nell's private, invitation-only sunrise service was held well after the million tourists had driven past the grocery for the last time and gone home.

The engraved invitations simply said: "Please join us for a Celebration of Life Memorial Service for Nellie Myrtle Pridgen at seven o'clock in the morning Sunday, September 20, 1992, on her beach."

Carmen, who passed away in 2007, spent the night of Sept. 19 in the old grocery, surrounded by her mother's obsession. Thunder cracked and lightning lit up the skies.

"She blew through here with the most violent thunderstorm I have ever seen," Carmen recalled.

The next day was Nell's kind of day, overcast and raw with a chopped-up sea. As the sun squinted over the horizon, 192 people moved softly over the dune to Nell's beach, leaving the first footprints in the sand.

Billy Gray cradled the box of ashes in the crook of his arm as he climbed over the sides

of a flat-bottomed dory. Carmen's childhood friend, Eddie Reber Jr., started the outboard and the men made their way through the swells toward the point where heaven meets the earth.

When Billy released the beachcomber's ashes, there was no sound, save the slapping of the dory against the sea and the breakers on the beach.

The memory of what happened next still brings chills to those who were there. A school of dolphin glided by, their glistening fins breaking the surface of the ocean. A line of pelicans swooped down, skimming the waves as if to salute a kindred spirit.

Suddenly, skirts blew up and the congregation shielded their eyes from the blowing sand. A stiff nor'easter rushed in, hurrying the end of the service.

"It was over," Carmen said, rubbing her arms. "She was tired. It was finished."

Nell was back in the sea.

Epilogue

Before Carmen Gray died in 2007, she began securing a future for her mother's unusual legacy.

In 2003, she opened the Nellie Myrtle Pridgen Beachcomber Museum, and in 2004 the grocery store and the house out back were added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Today, family friends Chaz Winkler and Dorothy Hope live atop the grocery and are caretakers of the collection. The museum is occasionally open to visitors, who are amazed at its depth and breadth.

"It's essentially as she left it," Winkler said. "We pretty much feel like she's still here."

Editor's note: A version of this story first appeared in Outer Banks Magazine.