

Sunday
May 23, 1971

Cape Lookout

At left, the setting sun shimmers across the bay, outlining a deserted fishing pier that's nearly hidden by grass-covered dunes.

Below, novice camper Ellen Scarborough of Charlotte emerges from the tent the morning after. Sleeping bags draped on the tent fly in the sun. (Color Photos by Pat Borden)



Rusting Cars Mar Paradise By The Sea

By PAT BORDEN

CAPE LOOKOUT— Clustered aboard the chartered boat, the Gayle Ann, the 25 people seemed an unlikely assortment for a camping trip to the beach.

That is to say, if a physicalist norm for the outing enthusiast has ever been established, it's doubtful that many of us would have met it.

Short, bulging campers in Bermuda shorts took their places among the tall, stringy ones in jeans, absorbing the salt spray and mid-April sun enjoying speculation on what lay ahead.

We knew from postcards that Cape Lookout, some five miles by boat from Harker's Island, had a black and white diamond-patterned lighthouse to the north and a Coast Guard station to the south. Otherwise, we hoped, it would prove to be uninhabited.

As we approached land, we heard someone say we'd probably have to wade waist-deep to reach shore.

Skeptically eyeing the mounds of equipment we'd have to carry, we nevertheless were bending over to remove shoes and socks when we pulled alongside the pier, with ladder attached to its side.

The pier, furthermore, led to a weather-beaten shack run by Les and Sally Moore, off-season residents of Beaufort, who stocked a varied selection of items from canned sardines and drinks to aspirin. The canteen hung about our middles suddenly sagged heavier as our thoughts turned to the money left in locked cars on the other side of the bay.

With mixed feelings about having found this bit of civilization, we unloaded our gear and readied ourselves for the anticipated hike to distant dunes.

It was the first experience for many of us to shoulder a pack, and the challenge of carrying it, along with tents, sleeping bags, cooking equipment and food, was looked forward to with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

It was a day that required being outside, a whitewashed day, with the temperature steady in the mid-comfort zone. Long stretches of white sand were made even brighter in contrast beside the brilliant blue-green water.

Ah, paradise is ours, we thought as we stepped gladly off with our bundles.

The glad stepping was short-lived. A few feet from the Moores' place, we saw the plague of Cape Lookout: junked cars, their rusting corpses sprawling across the sand in different stages of decay.

We learned later that the seasonal ferry charges \$15 each way per car. Evidently, the erstwhile owners had chosen to abandon the cars in their tracks rather than pay another \$15 to get them home again.

Putting a number of dunes between us and the car graveyard, we made camp just about in the middle of the island, halfway between the bay and the ocean.

That out of the way, we began the first of many lengthy, peaceful strolls along the beach, soaking in the feeling of the place and getting to know other members of the original group.

They had come, we learned, from Charlotte, Chapel Hill, Greenville, Raleigh, Winston-Salem and Camden, S.C. The common factor was either membership, or interest, in the Sierra Club.

As dusk settled in, the lure of cold drinks at the Moores' grew stronger, especially since the sunset across the bay could better be appreciated from the vantage point of the adjoining pier.

The sand still had a lavender-glow to it by the time we got back to camp where supper was being cooked.

The menu included chicken "bog," a mixture of rice, chicken and English peas eaten from tin cups, along with bread, hot tea and dried fruit.

Driftwood had been gathered for fire, which we kept going for some hours to ward off the dark and the cold while indulging in talk about hiking, climbing and general grisly happenings.

At one point, four fishermen stood on the outskirts of our circle and observed our set-up.

"We're staying in one of the cabins up at the pier," one remarked, "and we thought we were roughing it." We soon learned that they had been turned loose in a supermarket by their wives and had bought \$110 worth of groceries to do them for the two days at Cape Lookout.

"We've got plenty left over," another one said. "Please come over and help yourselves."

After they'd wandered back to their cabins, we continued our talk for some time, but as the flames began to flicker lower, so did our remaining strength.

Sleeping bags were unzipped and crept into, and soon we slept, under the blinking eye of

the lighthouse several hundred yards away and to the sound of the ocean and seagull cries.

Night passed, taking longer for some cold and fitful sleepers than others, and then dawn broke across the gray of the ocean. Perhaps three of us saw it before sliding in deeper for another hour or so of sleep.

Breakfast—powdered eggs, canned meat, bread, hot tea and dried fruit—was over in a hurry. The day not to be wasted, we resumed our explorations, averting our gaze as we passed more deserted cars along the beach.

Midday break back at the Moores' revealed more about the cape, as the friendly, talkative proprietor enlightened us from his experience of 10 seasons there.

Business was not brisk, and conversation drifted from topic to topic. Tidbits included the news that visitors to the island dump not only their cars, but also their unwanted cats, as well.

"Up," he said, "my wife must feed eight or nine of 'em."
"She buys big bags of bird food, too," he added, coming from behind the counter to point out the stock of seeds.

Our already-crumbling conception of this island wilderness completely collapsed when he wandered into the next subject—fishing season. "This place is just like Coney Island during the height of the season," he said. "Would you believe it? Long about October, November."

We considered this in light of the mounds of decaying autos and wished the nearest car-cruncher would come to mosh them into little, inoffensive cubes of metal. With this in mind, we took our leave of Les Moore and set off for one last walk.

It was odd, in a way, that although we had come over as a group of 25, we had dispersed into smaller groups ranging from a half-dozen to a single person to campsite. Because of this and the protective dunes, we were

unaware of the neighboring tents and seldom saw the others until we met back at the pier to leave Sunday afternoon.

The returning Gayle Ann met a quite different group from the one she had deposited some 24 hours earlier. Jaws were bristly, hair was wild and gritty and the group as a whole seemed more at ease and rested.

The trip back to Harker's Island near Beaufort was quieter than the trip out, but scattered conversation indicated a closer-knit group, rather than a collection of individual strangers.

We now knew that we included an art museum curator, several engineers, a college history professor, three newspaper people, a bank teller-trainer, a television ad salesman, a novelist, an East Carolina football player from Yugoslavia and a continuing variety of others.

Harker's Island neared as we made hurried, sketchy plans to meet again, some of us, for later outings. It was 2:30 p.m. before we finished unloading the boat and reloading our individual cars. The trip back home, for most of us, was long and wearisome.

Yet, there was much to talk about, and the miles melted away, leaving us, glazed of eye, back home around midnight.

In all, the trip cost \$4 apiece for the boat ride to and from Cape Lookout, the expense of getting there, our provisions and the lingering memory of the island blight, the expanse of decaying cars.



ISLAND PLAGUE is represented on Cape Lookout from one end to the other by scattered

clusters of cars, deserted by their mainland owners. (Photo by Ross Bryson)

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