

## Beachcombers Ball -- Part of Cape Cod

By Paul Koch

**"For the Beachcomber, when not a mere ruffian, is the poor relation of the Artist."**

—The Wrecker, by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Whenever the Beachcombers Costume Ball is recalled, old memories flit upon the mind like waterbugs on a calm pond, for this traditional gathering of artists and their guests has been an eagerly awaited event since the early years of the Beachcombers.

The name of this crew is The Beachcombers, and not the Beachcombers' Club, and it has no club house but is quartered in a building called the "Old Hulk" adjacent to what was once "The Ship" and is now known as "The Flagship".

### Early Days

The tap-roots of the organization are imbedded in the days when the Old Colony Railroad terminated in Wellfleet and the Cape Tip was inaccessible to tourists and here and there a steady influx of artists had come to Provincetown to find relief from city turmoil to settle down with their work. The Beachcombers note that the first automobile, a Stanley Steamer, appeared in town in 1901 and the second one did not arrive for several years. In 1915,

the old town had Eugene O'Neill, Harry Kemp, Mary Heaton Vorse, Susan Glaspell, Floyd Dell, John Reed, Jigg Cook and Wilbur Steele and others who wrote plays and produced them in an old fish house.

Then in 1916 the dramaturgists became the Provincetown Players.

It was this year that the Beachcombers came into being at the house Fred Marvin had turned over to Cesco as a restaurant where artists and guests might eat. Early in July of that year, the Beachcombers established their first tradition by not keeping any record of minutes and not recording the names of the officers elected during that first meeting, but the following were known to have been chosen: George Senseney, Skipper; George Elmer Browne, First Mate; Charles W. Hawthorne, Second Mate and Fred H. Marvin, Purser.

(Mr. Marvin resigned the office before the evening was over. Harry Campbell replaced him little suspecting what he had gotten into. He was in for a lifetime term.)

### Same Dues Remain

On The Hulk's stationery, dated June 1, 1917, George Senseney, Skipper and H. N. Campbell, Purser, requesting that dues be paid, relate: "In spite of the high cost of living, we must not forget the traditions and history of our organization but remember the immortality we guarantee to each and every a. b. the moment he signs articles carries a financial obligation in form of annual dues, namely 5 Dollars." The annual dues have not gone up a cent in 44 years. One reply to the letter placed in the archives of the club is signed by George W. Sturns, and is typical of the amicable feeling that has remained a part of the club these many years:

My dear friend and shipmate: I have received your communication and am aware of the fact that the pirates, buccaneers, free-booters, and other scum of hell are on the job again. God therefore help anyone with \$5. Enclosed find my check, please do not spend it for drink which I warn you will surely destroy what little brains the members of the Beachcombers have left. For one reason or another I may not be able to reach Provincetown this summer, at least not early in the summer as I had expected. While the flesh is disappointed I know that my soul will be benefited. Give my love to the old members of your unholy crew, spare the new members, they will have sorrow enough. You are a bad, bad lot, but oh how I wish I could be with you.

From one who helped to put the sin in

Sincerely yours,  
(Sgd.)

P.S.: God help you all, but I doubt it.

The rest of the summer of 1916 and into the Fall the membership held meetings in a house on Knowles Wharf that they had leased. During these early years, Winter meetings were not considered worthwhile. The club got a minstrel show together and cleared enough to continue the following year. Skipper Senseney had this to say upon his retirement in 1917:

"Able Beachcombers . . . The following pages comprise my first annual report as Skipper of the Beachcombers, written by hand while sober, clothed and in my right mind. The Beachcombers have justified their right to existence as a club. The interest in this fraternal and beneficial organization has not flagged in spite of a hard Summer, and my observation is that we, as individuals, have not lost interest in ourselves.

## Just Before The Beachcombers Ball 15 years Ago



Some are gone from this goodly company of 15 years ago. Front row, left to right, Dr. Frederic Hammett, Vollian B. Rann, and LaForce Bailey. Second row, Joe Golum, Nat Halper, Charlie Heinz, Frank "Bossy" McGady, (unidentified), Ed Corbridge, Reeves Euler, Harry Kemp, Sterling Ely, Mal Duncan and Ernest Perry. Top row, John Francis, Bruce McKain, (unidentified), Nick Padis and John Whorf.

"This F. & B.O.B." continued the Skipper, "was conceived in the cave I call my studio and later born and baptized at Cesco's Restaurant in the early Summer of 1916. It was started on faith and without visible means of support and now confidently shoulders a debt of \$2,000. It embraces members from two continents and embodies the strength and frailties of the human race. Since signing articles, I have striven with what little strength I possess and with the help of the members to make this an absolutely perfect organization. An organization that can masticate and digest the mysteries and miseries of our culinary experts is bound to survive the centuries; hence, this is an historic document. The Old Hulk is fairly launched for the coming voyage; may the new Skipper sail with as loyal a crew of artistic cutthroats as I have. I am going quietly below decks as a well

trained Beachcomber should, before being invited to walk the plank . . . all hail to the new Skipper, all hail and ahoy to the crew of 1917-18."

### Beachcombers' Methods

F. W. Coburn of the Boston Her-

ald once asked Skipper Senseney, what would happen if the crimp gang (Beachcombers crew nominating committee) got one who had long hair, a bow tie or any of the other earmarks of the artistic professions. The Skipper replied: "That depends, we have to size you up and find out how much side you put on. Although we are all sea-faring men, you understand, the discipline of seaboard is relaxed in our social organization. We stand for down and out democracy. Every one of us is just as bad as the worst. . . . At our dinners each new member is expected to leave his seat and face his shipmates. If they like the

way he does it he gets back to his mess without much comment. But if he appears to be one of the ultra-dignified stuck-up sort, we hold him there while we tell him a few things he will remember about his personal appearance. Nothing goes but good fellowship, take it from me, in the Beachcombers."

Coburn reports: "The clubhouse, to which with faltering footsteps you approach on a Wednesday evening while the sun is still up, is situated at the extreme end of Knowles Wharf. It is a long wharf with 15 feet of water around the piles at high tide. A dangerous place for roisterous bohemians one would think, what hour the matutinal cock first crows. Yet fear not for your faltering footsteps as you leave the festive board at 3 A.M. To guide you homeward a great white trail has been swept from the doorway around the end