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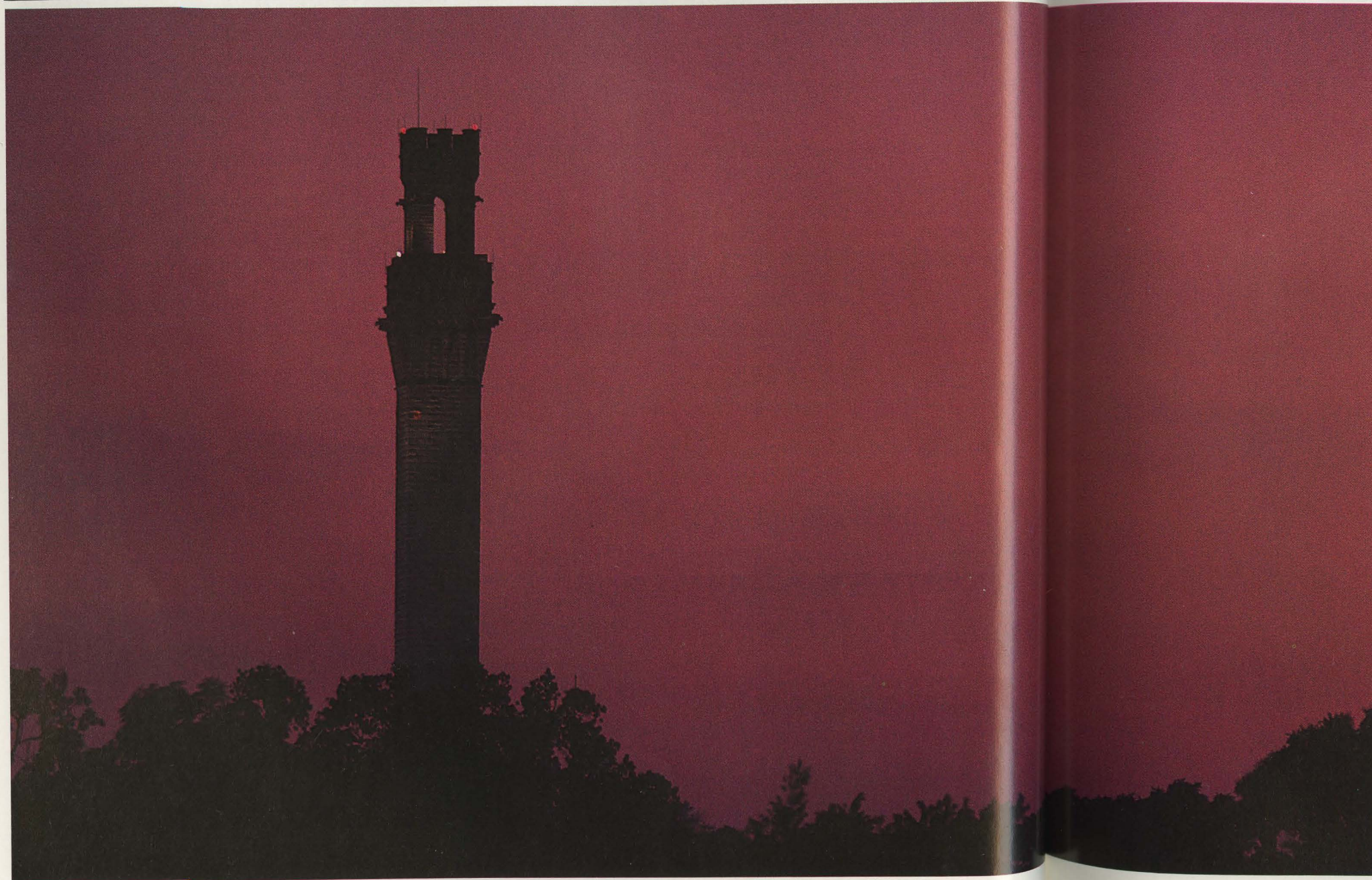


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PROVINCETOWN



You've seen it in an old movie: husband and wife come tumbling out of a tavern, drunk, brawling in the gutter. A crowd gathers; a few laugh. When the fighting turns ugly, there is one from the crowd who steps bravely forward to hold the two apart. Wham! The Good Samaritan goes down quick-as-a-wink from the suddenly united effort of the feuding couple.

Provincetown needs a Good Samaritan to help the town pull itself together, but you can bet no person, state agency nor organization will stick its neck out for a beating.

The town at the end of the Cape is always feuding. It is a time-honored preoccupation recognized—and indeed practiced—by other Cape communities.

Continued

BY GORDON SMITH

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The trouble is, there hasn't been a day in memory when the village of Provincetown has remained free of at least a half-dozen ongoing disputes. More often than not, tourists are an unwitting link in the chronological chain of the feuds.

Strife in any town is not new, but Provincetown has a bickering which is unique. Stringing the disputes together would make the longest running comic opera on or off Broadway. Were Eugene Gladstone O'Neill alive today! He passed this way, but he would have surely gathered yearly Nobel Prizes simply by transforming town politics into multi-act plays for his Provincetown Players.

The tradition was set almost 300 years ago, when the earliest settlers wasted little time destroying the forests of their Cape tip, using the wood for houses and ships, and grass to graze their livestock. As early as

1714 laws were passed to protect the town from the giant dunes of sand which, free of stabilizing vegetation, had begun a steady march with the wind toward the town proper.

The settlers paid little heed to the Commonwealth's rules. They continued to raze outlying trees for the fires which boiled sea water for salt, and melted whale blubber. By 1825 the tiny village was surrounded by 100-foot-high mounds of sand. Facing sure extinction of their town at the hands of the dunes, the frantic villagers finally agreed to re-plant trees and grass, eventually halting the sand's onslaught.

From then to now, the tradition has continued. "People out here go back a long way," says resident Gerald McKevey. "As

soon as someone prospers, people get resentful. They've been here just as long, and feel they are owed some good fortune too. Especially if the fortune comes from natural resources, like land or sea."

It's enough to make some people pack up and head for the wild west, but not in Provincetown. Talk to the people of the town, whether they be late-comers or those with roots from Day One, 1727, and you will find amid the cursing a genuine reverence for the old place. Take a good long visit and you might see why.

Provincetown to the casual visitor is busy confusion, a juxtaposition of trades and professions, of salt spray and candy floss. When you call the place "P-town" you get into alliteration. "P," they say, stands for playwrights, painters, and poets.

Harry Kemp, "the tramp poet," passed this way. So did Jackson Pollock the painter.



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"P" stands for Pilgrims and Puritans, settlers who landed on the bay shore. "P" stands for Portuguese fishermen who emigrated from Lisbon, the Azores, the Cape Verde Islands. They built, and have maintained well, what is still and probably will always be the town's major year-round industry.

"P" stands for population and for people. They come each year to what was possibly the first summer resort in the nation. "P," mostly, is for playground.

Charles Mayo, former selectman, says the year-round population is about 3500, which is about where it was in the 1890's when the fishing industry was the town. Now the tourist industry takes the limelight, swelling the summer population past 25,000.

Provincetown is a town in the province, a village standing remote from the capital, the remoteness an essential part of what Provincetown is.

It is a 70 mile drive from Sagamore Bridge, which spans the Cape Cod Canal, to Provincetown. The last few miles through Wellfleet and Truro are bucolic: pitch pine and scrub oak cover most of the terrain. The woodlands open and you are on an escarpment with a panoramic view of the Province Lands and Pilgrim Lake on the right. To the left, and still in Truro, are the hundreds of beach cottages facing Cape Cod Bay in neat long rows. You drop fast; the view changes.

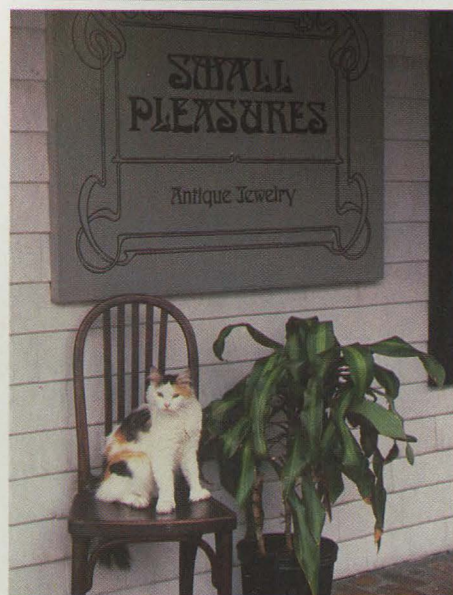
You wonder whether you had seen a mirage until you smell the fish, the tar, get a whiff of marine diesel, see hawser coiled, nets hanging, hear sounds of gulls arguing on MacMillan wharf, see the characters, the sandals, the beards, the flowing of braided or knotted hair. Characters! You look at them. They look at you. Impasse.

In the early 1900's writers, painters and free thinkers found Provincetown. Some visited, many stayed. This was the first link in the chain and nearly a century of time has shown the two groups, the fishermen and the artists, able to coexist.

Hazel Hawthorn Werner, 83, book author who wrote short stories for *The New Yorker* in the 1930's, now lives in a vine-covered converted garage central, as is much of Provincetown, to everything. She started

coming to the end of the Cape in the summer of 1918, and recalls walking into town for an evening of parties, sleeping overnight on a wharf or in a sail loft, rising with the sun and walking home to her shack in the dunes. When asked what the town now means to her she crisply replies, "Having the ocean on three sides."

Her original shack disintegrated under storm winds, pelting rain and blasting sand. She owns a couple still among the dozen or so remaining on the backside of the town, a permission given by nature and the author-



ities of the National Seashore. To stay at her shack "Euphoria" and catch the fall sunset over Peaked Hill Bars or Provincetown Harbor is to see a view at which any world traveler would marvel.

Writing about or from Provincetown never seems to go out of fashion. Norman Mailer passed this way. He too took to the dunes to hone his craft, and he continues to stop by on occasion for a public talk or dinner.

John Dos Passos passed this way. So did Edna Millay. So did Susan Glaspell and her husband George Cram Cook. E.E. Cummings passed this way.

Charles Mayo remembers many of these people as neighborhood friends, although his early sailing life took him away from the

east coast to the northern islands of the Caribbean. Sloops, ketches, yawls and schooners were floating homes for his family.

His son "Stormy" spent the first three years of his life afloat. Now Stormy oversees whale sightseeing trips out of Provincetown. He and his wife, both biologists, and Graham Giese, an oceanographer, founded the town's growing Center for Coastal Studies.

Charles Mayo also talks about the Provincetown he sees today that is so foreign to him. In the summer, his lifelong small-town home becomes a city. Some people speak to each other; most, out of Boston or New York habit, don't. There is crime, traffic, and the half-dozen or so continuing public disputes. But to Charles Mayo it's more than that. It's the little things.

He remembers a narrow parcel of land he owned alongside his home. It was "special," he says, fertile land with rich soil and view. He sold it to a fellow who owned a sand heap on the edge of town.

Soon after the papers were passed, the fellow picked up his pile and dumped all that sand on Mayo's strip of land.

Mayo owns other property along the front. He won't sell. Not after that experience. He does not wish to see condominiums there. There isn't enough fresh water. "And we don't want the sewage going into the harbor. The intertidal zone from one end of town to the other is like a garden to us here. It must not be disturbed."

From fishermen to artists to tourists. That is the way of Provincetown.

Let us not forget the gay way. Of course! Charles Mayo picks up a book. "It's nothing new here. Look. This is in Governor Bradford's time. In September, 1642. It concerns elicit unions. A youth of about 17 was indicted on this score. He was tried and condemned. Executed."

That was a long time ago.

One of Provincetown's biggest ongoing feuds concerns the subject of harbor development. The fight has dragged on a long time now, resurfacing every time someone proposes a new dock or renovation of an existing pier. Some people don't want any of it. Not at all.



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Charles Mayo learned this early on, when he was selectman. The tempest centered around the planned construction of a 3.5 acre marina in the harbor. Drawing the battle lines was simple. Those who might use or profit from the marina were in favor. Everyone else was opposed.

The infighting was deadly. Friends turned on friends, relatives never spoke to one another again. At least one screaming match was recorded on Commercial Street. An organization called the Outer Cape Environmental Association forced a recall election of the town officials. Charles Mayo was one, but he won back his seat with more votes than in his first election.

Involvement? Everybody got into the act to prevent or allow the marina's construction. Actress and environmentalist Beverly Bentley Mailer spearheaded the drive to raise funds to stop the marina. Her group eventually won. Actress Mailer has moved away, but her followers wait in the wings, ready to take up challenges of other monumental proportions; say, a proposed condominium development or two. The lesser feudings go slinking into dark corners.

Some other bits of local color from the not-too-distant past:

◆ The fresh-water feud, sparked when the town fathers finally admitted to what private engineers were telling them for years: that you can pump clean water for only so long out of what is little more than a giant sand bar surrounded by salt water. That fact was complicated by a gas spill of five or so years ago (that's another feud altogether) which contaminated the town's major well field. For five years now the questions have brewed. "What to do about it?" "Who will pay?" Everybody has ideas. No one agrees. Meanwhile, many residents are driving to friend's homes in Wellfleet and Truro to get drinking water.

◆ The "AIDS Scare," when national and regional media descended upon the town in droves. Many townspeople were outraged at the media blitz, feeling that the problem was being blown out of proportion right before the tourist season, and charging the media with portraying Provincetown as a den of evil. The most damaging story reported that the local police force had

requested the town to issue plastic gloves for use on duty, drawing protest from merchant and gay factions alike.

◆ A favorite among some of the "small" Provincetown feuds: last fall's story of the angry Portuguese fisherman. According to published reports, a warrant was sought for the fisherman who, in a scene reminiscent of a television serial, allegedly used his truck at high speed to run the harbor master's vehicle off the road. It appears that the fisherman was irked that the harbor master had written him too many tickets for illegal parking on MacMillan Wharf. Just minutes before the incident, the two had heatedly confronted each other during a hearing before selectmen.

Despite all this, people of letters still write, people in the finer arts still paint, sketch and sculpt, and composers still score music about brass buttons and elephants. They do it amidst the feuding, or else they would never get anything done. Besides, there is something about the flavor of the town that gives them the beat. The flavor! It's been there a long time. Some 70 years ago a visiting Chicago newspaper reporter wrote:

"Fish are bartered for all commodities of life. The main business street is paved with rock cod. The women use the hind fin of the great halibut for brooms. Awnings are made from porpoise skins and the bell rope of the church is eels, knotted by a sailor. The picture over the altar is of a whale. The collection plate is the top shell of a tortoise. The choir sang "Pull for the Shore." Women's hats were trimmed with the gills of the mackerel. At low tide the dogfish lie around the shore and howl."

Mary Heaton Vorse passed this way. She lived in Provincetown from 1907 until her death in 1966, and was known for her strong stand during what many call Provincetown's biggest feud: the takeover of land by the National Seashore some 20 years ago.

She loved Provincetown. "This town," she said, "through the last 50 years has become the acknowledged art center of the East. No one planned it that way. It developed spontaneously, drawing its creative force from the spirit of the town."

The town is rooted in fishing and the arts. Every square inch seems to be occupied, was occupied, or is about to be re-occupied. The two main streets run parallel with each other and with the shore. Between them are dory-wide lanes and alleys, each with its own history of feuds and feuding.

Consider the case of the man who wished a garage constructed on his land this past summer. He was certain the building wouldn't block any of his neighbors' views. Yet one gentleman down the street, obviously keenly aware of Provincetown's feuding tradition, vehemently objected to the planned garage and threatened to obtain a court order to stop construction.

The eventual conclusion was not of peaceful negotiation and settlement. It was of a massive workcrew, arriving at 5 a.m. with a truckload of lumber and a 9 a.m. deadline, when the town offices opened. The deadline was met.

That's the way garages get built in Provincetown.

Commercial Street, the portside road nearest Provincetown's busy bay shore, is one-way, although you would hardly believe it at one time had been two. The route is so narrow it would serve better as a mall, and that is not an original suggestion. Motorists who insist on driving through town between June and September soon learn they would be better served by bike or shanks' mare. Parking on the outskirts is not the ideal, but it is the best way in Provincetown, usually costing \$3 and a brisk walk into town.

But only by walking can the slitted views of the harbor between houses and shops be appreciated. You automatically pause and look and point out to your companion the interest of the moment.

Rear Admiral MacMillan passed this way. Tom Conklin, assistant town manager, says that today's Provincetown is politically much calmer than the Provincetown of four or five years ago, when town management,

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he says, "was chaos." A succession of town managers came and, exasperated, soon left. "Credit (town manager for the past several years) Bill McNulty with bringing some order to this place," Conklin contends. Unfortunately, McNulty as well is leaving town now, so the future of Provincetown's grip on internal tranquility can again be questioned.

Conklin admits that he "gets plenty of vocal feedback" from local residents on just about anything his office does or proposes to do. The loudest are the natives, he says. "But the wash-ashores (residents not native born) let themselves be heard here, too."

Edmund Wilson passed this way.

You walk through town, searching for a view of Long Point, the Cape's very tip. You pass the new Coast Guard station in the jog of the road and wonder why the solar panels face north. You scratch your head, and if it is noon and the sun is shining you get that odd feeling that a strange force is disorientating you. Sunset is even worse. The full significance of the slow curving shoreline takes time to conceptualize, and many people who visit Provincetown year after

year never feel quite comfortable with it. That curve of the Cape, extending all 70 miles to the canal, has been described in many ways, but to one person it is the shape of a scorpion tail, with the Cape end the sting.

Should you go far enough you might finish your tour at the Red Inn. The dining rooms have a view to whence you came, back along the scorpion's tail. You can see the perfectly shaped harbor, and the timeless front of the town. You soliloquize over lunch. There is no harm done in visualizing how things might have been in 1805 when this building was originally constructed.

Should you wonder how the present proprietor is making out you'll learn that he is Commodore, no less, of the Provincetown Yacht Club, founded in 1867. And you'll notice that in October latecomers for lunch must wait 20 minutes for a table with a shore view.

The proprietor, Ted Barker, greets you.

"How is the world of Provincetown with you?" you ask.

"Hopelessly optimistic," he answers diplomatically. □

