

# Euphoria on the Dunes

By William Oscar Johnson

THE SHACK is armored with gray shingles, rippled and rubbed smooth by the grinding sandy wind. It is only about 11 feet square, a stubborn little box set on posts on a sand dune. It shudders in the stiff summer winds blowing off the Atlantic, but it is sound and the roof does not leak. The inner walls are unfinished lumber, and there is a raw plank floor worn quite silky by sandy bare feet. There is no electricity, no running water; candles and a nickel-plated kerosene lamp light the nights. There is a hand pump at the bottom of a sand dune. The pump water is sweet beyond belief.

The shack is named Euphoria and it looks down in peace on the waters of the Peaked Hill Bars. It is located about a mile or so over the great sand dunes behind Provincetown, on a grand and desolate stretch of Cape Cod known as the Back Side.

All of this—the shack named Euphoria, the magnificent brooding dunes, the tossing green sea, the great swath of untrammeled beach—is now part of the Cape Cod National Seashore, a vast, splendid federal park which covers about 27,000 acres along 50 miles of the Cape Cod coast. This is a precious, fragile preserve, carefully protected from the ravages of commerce.

EUPHORIA is owned by a lovely grande dame of Provincetown named

Hazel Hawthorne Werner. She is in her 70s, a novelist who published books and New Yorker short stories in the '30s. She lives now in a vine-cloaked refurbished garage in town, surrounded by books and poetry and works of art by old friends. Hazel's hair is frosty white and her gait is uncertain, for she is afflicted with an illness that tilts her balance and distorts her vision. Yet, with a worn gray rucksack on her back and a sturdy stick in her hand, Hazel still often makes the long walk across the sand from Provincetown to Euphoria. It is more than 50 years now that she has been taking that hike, and she recalls her earliest days there with a beatific smile and a quavery happy voice:

"When I was a young girl I would walk into town for parties in the evenings and sometimes I would stay so late that I slept on the wharf by the old sail loft. When the sun began to rise, I would walk home. There are always large pools of sweet water in the dunes, cool and no deeper than your hand. I remember many mornings, returning from town, when I would see such a pool and I would strip off my clothes and roll its full length. I felt that I had washed off the sins and foolishness of the town."

Hazel went seeking her first shack after she had dreamed in New York of a small hut perched on a cliff above the ocean; she convinced her first

husband to walk the coast of Cape Cod until they found something like it: "We carried a blanket and slept on the sand," she recalls. "We walked until we were near Provincetown. Then I saw Agnes O'Neill, Eugene O'Neill's second wife, walking into town from Peaked Hill. I had known her in New York in 1918 and when I told her of our search, Agnes said that we must go to the Coast Guard station above the beach and ask the skipper if there was a spare shack. You see, the men out there had a lot of extra time and would hammer together huts out of driftwood for their wives and families, or for a little extra income from renting them out. My shack was there, almost as I had dreamed it, of course. We rented it for \$12 a month."

That first shack was not Euphoria; it disintegrated years ago. Euphoria was actually built in the '30s; and Hazel also owns another shack half a mile up the beach. There are perhaps a dozen shacks remaining on the dunes now, and they will be extinct quite soon. The National Seashore authorities have an agreement with most owners that lets them use their shacks as long as they live. When the owners die, the park rangers will perhaps burn the shacks or bulldoze them down. "We do not know," said Hazel. "Maybe the rangers will merely board them up and leave them standing on the dunes like shrines."

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By Deri Barringer



# The People of the Dunes

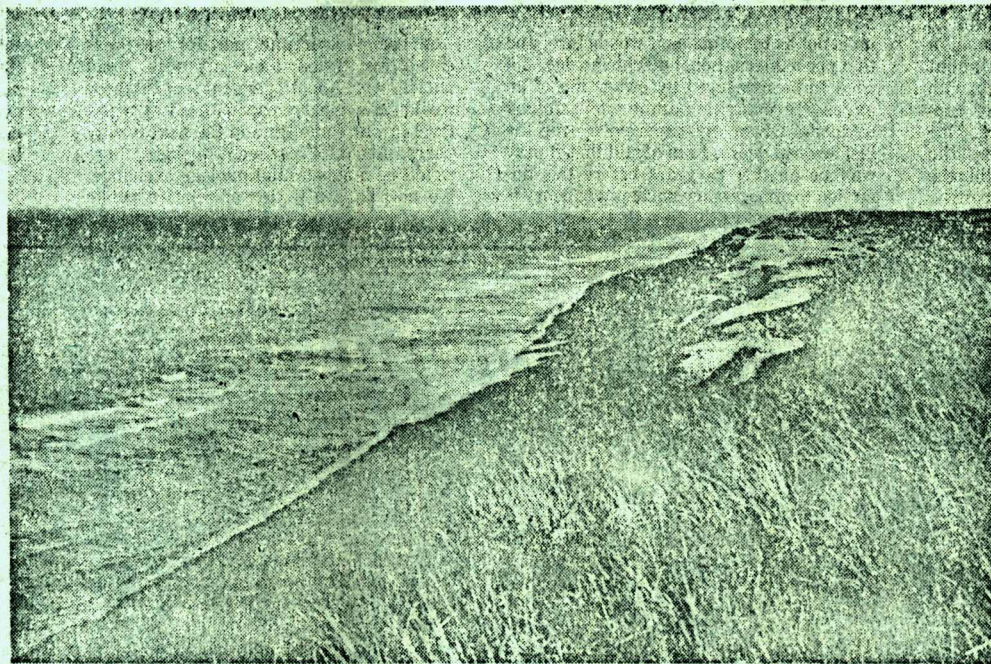
Nothing is still and nothing is permanent in the dunes. The sea and the wind and the sand are constantly moving. Some dunes "march" as much as 15 feet a year, and perhaps it is this eternal restlessness that gives the dunes the odd feeling of being someone instead of something. There is an almost animal energy in the shifting sand as it heaps itself into peaks or sifts out of scooped pits or merely stretches grandly.

The light in the dunes is mystical in its clarity. Beams of the sun set up an infinity of refractions and reflections within the tiny bright casts and dazzling facets of a trillion grains of sand. Sunlight plays on the shimmering blades of grass, on the spray of the salt water, on the tossing surface of the sea.

Always there is the wind, sometimes merely a breeze that flutters the petals of the salt-spray roses; sometimes brisk gusts that bend the tips of beach grass to the sand where they make perfect arcs; sometimes black gales which pound the walls of Euphoria as if the great fist of Cape Cod itself had twisted about to hammer the shack.

John Alexander is a small, hard-muscled fellow with a bronze sun-burned face and long black hair worn in a ponytail. He has a gray-black goatee. Seeing John Alexander, you might think of D'Artagnan of the Musketeers but he is, in fact, a former Provincetown fisherman, a carpenter, a landscaper, a member in good standing of the volunteer fire department as well as the local men's club, The Sons of the Beach. Stricken by a massive heart attack a few years ago, John Alexander now makes his living as a scrimshaw engraver, etching peace symbols and fish sketches on the ribs of whales to make trinkets which he sells in his own shop. John Alexander is the great-great-grandson of a Portuguese who migrated to Cape Cod from the Azores. His wife is a direct descendant of a signer of the Mayflower Compact.

Like Hazel Werner, John Alexander adores the dunes of the Province Lands as if they were a lovely unspoiled child. "I shake when I think what might have happened out here," says John. "Gawd, gawddam! The National Seashore saved this from an awful fate. This could've been full of hamburger stands and drugstores,



you know. This could be what Provincetown is."

What Provincetown is now is a meandering lovely old town, quaint and unselfconscious, full of its own gossip and its own character—at any time of the year but summer, that is. In summer, Provincetown is a struggling clot of tourists, blocked by snail-slow cars and snarled with mobs of people wearing cheap new sneakers. It is rife with garish shops which sell rubber lizards, dark glasses and foot-long hot dogs. To escape such madding knotted congestion is to find the purest freedom. When John Alexander, aged 57, is in the dunes, far away from the summer swarms of Provincetown, he is like an exuberant joyful boy. He flings out one hand which is grasping a lovely lethal *Amanita muscaria*—a soft golden-orange mushroom, and he cries, "Gawd, don't eat this! You'll be dead by dawn." He holds out his other hand in which he has a scrap of driftwood. "Look at that! Just look! Gawddam! It's a whale! See the tail? See the mouth?"

It has been years now, decades,

since any ship ran aground on the Peaked Hill Bars. Yet there is still evidence of disaster on the beach below Euphoria—here and there a wooden keel, bleached now and smooth, or the dark brown rusted boiler plates of some lost ship, lying stark as some bit of modern sculpture on a smooth floor of sand.

There is also an abandoned boathouse there with yawning, haunted doors and windows. This is all that is left of the heroes and heroics which once were common on the beach off the Peaked Hill Bars. Indeed, as steam-powered ships replaced sailing vessels, the fearsome bars lost their reputation as the Ocean Graveyard. The Life-Saving Station on Peaked Hill was abandoned and, in the 1920s, the dunes of the Province Lands came to be inhabited mainly by a different breed of men—esthetes and escapists.

At one point Eugene O'Neill moved into the station and wrote some of his finest dramas there, including "Anna Christie." Hazel Werner recalled: "Eugene was a swimmer and I

saw him many days stroking off the beach. I would wave sometimes and he would wave back. He had a smile that was brilliant, so happy, when he was swimming. It was a smile you never saw when he was on land."

For a couple of summers in the '20s, O'Neill rented the station to his friend Edmund Wilson. Brilliant though he was with a pen, Wilson was a bumbler at the less exalted pursuits of the dunes. Once, when the hand pump broke down, Wilson shaved himself with ginger ale for several days before someone came to fix it. On one memorable summer afternoon, Wilson sat up on his dune watching anxiously as three exhausted swimmers were pulled onto the beach by Coast Guardsmen. When the three half-dead forms at last lay wheezing on the beach, Wilson dashed down to do what he could to help. He brought with him the only things he could conceive of to cheer up the victims: a box of crackers and a jar of anchovy paste.

Another literary celebrity of the dunes was Harry Kemp, the tramp

poet who lived most of his life in Provincetown. There is a street there named for him. "Harry was a bore," says Hazel Werner. "He used to put down some bit of doggerel, and he would pound on people's doors at midnight, shouting his lines and crying out, 'Hear that? I've just written the greatest sonnet since Shakespeare.'"

HARRY KEMP was as renowned for his careless personal hygiene as he was for his drunken poetry. He once hung a fur coat high on a hook in his shack and left it there for the entire summer. In the fall when he wanted the coat, he was astonished to find that the fur had fallen out and only the skin remained. He was even more baffled trying to figure out where the fallen fur had gone—until he discovered that his sack of oatmeal was directly under the coat. He assumed, and gave no further thought to it, that he had probably eaten the fur with the oatmeal during the summer.

Harry Kemp's stew was infamous, too, for he kept a pot boiling constantly, replenishing it from time to time. One day, Harry finally got to the bottom of the pot, and, to the anguish of a visitor, he pulled a limp and bedraggled item out of the stew and cried out with delight that it was a glove—the very glove he had used to handle the kerosene for his lamps. "Thank God!" he said. "I never knew where I lost it."

Howard Mitcham is a flamboyant, shaggy fellow with a barrel torso that has grown a bit rounder than mere portliness. His ruddy puffed cheeks and his tangled halo of gray curls make him look a little like a children's book illustration of Old Mother West Wind. Howard Mitcham is 58, a sometime columnist for the Provincetown Advocate, once a painter, a locally celebrated chef, formerly a promising poet and novelist who recalls with pride that he once took a creative writing course at LSU in which his teacher was Robert Penn Warren and two classmates were Robert Lowell and Jean Stafford.

Mitcham appeared at the shack Euphoria one dazzling windy afternoon. He stood at the rim of the dune and glared across the sand toward town, toward the slim gray gingerbread chimney of the Pilgrim's Monument which juts above the hills.

Howard Mitcham began to bellow—an oddly flat and inflectionless sound. His words were

battered with a thick Southern accent. Howard Mitcham is deaf as a sea clam and he has heard no sound since he was a little boy. The last spoken words to register in his mind were uttered in the slow drawing syllables of little black children he played with in Louisiana. Thus, Howard Mitcham still draws, too.

So he was shouting across the dunes and he couldn't himself hear what he said. "They are shrinkin'," he roared. He shook his fist. "They are vanishin'. They are disappearin' as we watch 'em."

He hurried back into the shack to avoid the tragic sight of the diminishing dunes and gratefully consumed some vodka. He seemed momentarily calmed and he gazed briefly at the plain plank table.

Hazel Werner remembers a poignant scene with Howard. "We were walking slowly through the dunes late one afternoon and there was a beautiful sunset. We were identifying plants and blossoms as we strolled along. Then Mitcham stopped. He looked about and turned to me and shouted, 'I s'pose the birds must be singin' now, huh? The birds must be singin' all 'round us.' I nodded. Mitcham was silent for a moment, then he said, 'Must be mighty nice! Mighty nice! Birds singin' must be mighty nice!' Then he walked on. There was no bitterness or self-pity in his voice."

This time Howard Mitcham drank a little more vodka, then shook a finger and said, "Don't fohget! It's pronounced Peak-ed, not Peaked Hill Bahs!" He gazed out the windows, now rattling in the wind. Then he rushed out of the shack, up on a dune and stood facing the foaming shoals below. "I wrote this poem 24 years ago! Twenty-foah years ago when I was a young man! I named it Peaked Hill Bahs!" And in his drawing monotone he began to shout into the evening wind:

*On the full of the moon  
And the Spring tides rise,  
The ghosts of drowned mariners  
Play ring around the rosy  
With fearful clatter and groan  
On the foaming Peaked Hill Bars.  
On the wane of the moon  
And the neap tides ebb,  
They rest,  
At peace with their nervous bones.*

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William Johnson is on the staff of *Sports Illustrated*. This article is reprinted from *Smithsonian Magazine*.