

Perspectives on Provincetown

Out on the Cape, an avant-garde Grover's Corners

By LEWIS BERGMAN

The best way to get a sense of the geography of Outer Cape Cod and its Hook, a sandpile in which Provincetown nestles, is from a satellite at a height of 570 miles. All the Cape is seen in a Landsat image as a continental



afterthought, sand and soil tossed out in some fit of absentmindedness. This is terminal moraine, debris left by the melting glacier 10,000 years or so ago, at the end of the last Ice Age. (Provincetown's Hook itself is younger; it was built up by the drifting of sand after the Cape took its present form.)

The next best way to see the Cape tip whole is to take a plane from Boston. About 20 minutes out, the Hook appears, improbably. It looks as if the ocean might wash over it, as indeed it will, inevitably, in geological time. There it is: Long Point, at the very tip, the lovely harbor, the beginning of Thoreau's great beach on the ocean side and, very close by, the postage-stamp landing strip.

Stepping out of the plane you feel, always with familiar surprise, that you are breathing pure oxygen. For my wife and me, New York air, which smells like an old sock, is instantly forgotten. Yes, well, say friends who are puzzled by our attachment to the Cape end, but lots of other places have good air, never mind the famous light, and besides, Provincetown has that dense-packed, honky-tonk, tacky downtown strip.

Provincetown is three miles long. It has a winter population of 3,500 and, in the summer, 10,000 countable residents. Commercial Street, running along the harbor, is bounded in summer at the west end of town by the poet Stanley Kunitz; on the east end by the artist Robert Motherwell. Naturally, this fact is not known to the usual summer visitors, who tend to think of Provincetown as a cute fishing village where you can buy jewelry and leather goods and foot-long hot dogs and have your portrait done by sidewalk artists. The fact is set out merely to suggest that the town remains a magnet for artists and writers.

The magnet has pulled in all types. Provincetown's own culture hero was Harry Kemp (1883-1960), the "poet of the dunes," who, sadly, could hardly aspire to be a Salieri of poets. However, starting with 25 cents, he had made a trip around the world and wrote "Tramping on Life," which, according to some critics, made him a Beat before the Beats. The town named a road Harry Kemp Way, in much the same manner as Paris named a street for Honoré de Balzac.

Performing artists who later made it on a national scale showed their developing talents in Provincetown. Names that come readily to mind include Wally Cox, Marlon Brando, Eartha Kitt, Wayland Flowers, Craig Russell, who starred as a female impersonator in the movie "Outrageous" a few years ago. Oh yes, and Tennessee Williams. My wife, brought up in Provincetown, sort of, was busted with him and other celebrants at

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a party that was too raucous for some townsfolk. Fame.

Among the stars of the early cultural scene were John Reed and Louise Bryant (they of the movie "Reds"), who decided in the spring of 1916 to come to this refuge for Manhattan's avant-garde. It was then a quiet fishing town with a history of whaling, populated mostly by descendants of its original Yankee and Portuguese settlers. Reed knew people who had started a theater there. A young friend of theirs, Eugene O'Neill, followed them, lured by Louise.

The play that launched O'Neill's career, "Bound East for Cardiff," was put on that summer by the Provincetown Players at the Wharf Theater, owned by Mary Heaton Vorse, a leading "discoverer" of the town. At first O'Neill stayed in the adjoining town of Truro, living in a shipwrecked boat. Fat chance, trying that now. After "Bound East for Cardiff," O'Neill did move into Provincetown. A shack he lived in is now condominiums.

It is always show time on that harbor. Now it is joyous and snappy, evoking for me, honestly, Monet's "Terrace at Saint-Adresse." In the late afternoon at a low tide, the show becomes almost embarrassingly pretty. Pink hulls of sailboats reflecting the dying sun . . . it is all too *representational*. You almost expect a Keane child to come running in from the flats. But the scene is rescued by the seeping in of a typical chilling fog. On Long Point, just across the harbor, the foghorn sounds, E-flat.

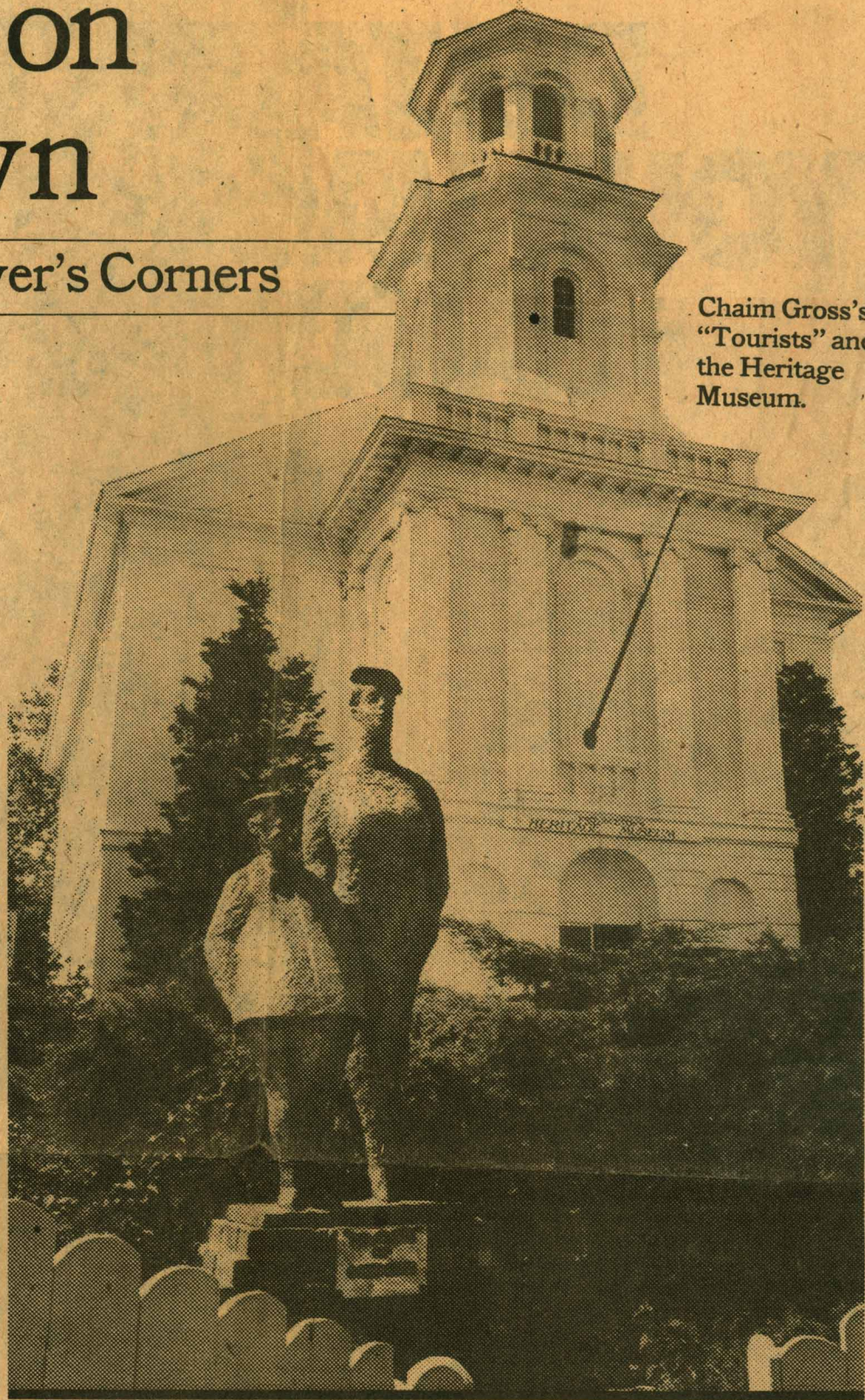
The dune lands, on the oceanside, beyond the town itself, beyond the town dump, beyond the Beech Forest, are a different show. At first, scuffing heavily through the hot sands, I note as always the sensuous formations of the exhibitionist dunes, the patches of brave beach grass. As I begin to hear the ocean, the vision becomes almost abstract — a simple composition of sand, sky and a glimpse of the sea, in flat colors. It's an imitation of a Milton Avery painting, I think, realizing this is hardly a thrilling insight. Avery painted these dune scenes.

Although, like all ocean beaches, this one is constantly walking, Henry David Thoreau would recognize it as a place he knew when he first came to the Cape in 1849. It is true that an O.R.V. — Off-Road Vehicle — burbles past me, close. If the O.R.V. were in New York it would run a red light. Yet the great beach is forever saved from condominiums and McDonald's. Happily, we have here the National Seashore, established 22 years ago.

Let the poet say it. Here are lines by Stanley Kunitz from his "Route Six" (the highway that leads to Provincetown from the Cape Cod Canal 65 miles away):

*The city squats on my back.
I am heart-sore, stiff-necked,
exasperated. That's why
I slammed the door,
that's why I tell you now,
in every house of marriage
there's room for an interpreter.
Let's jump into the car, honey,
and head straight for the Cape,
where the cock on our housetop crows
that the weather's fair,
and my garden waits for me
to coax it into bloom.*

That's a verse for summertime. Provincetown, some say, is at its best way off-season, in winter. My wife says they're lying. I've been in the town during winter only once. The houses had a mysterious Edward Hopper-like stillness about them. (Hopper painted in Truro, but let me borrow him.) The relentless wind inhabited Commercial Street, keening for Provincetown fishermen lost at sea or perhaps for souls lost in the year-round bars. In the off-season Provincetown only seems



Chaim Gross's "Tourists" and the Heritage Museum.

R.S. MacKenzie

practically shut down. Culture survives. For example, 10 visual fellows and 10 writing fellows are in residence at the Fine Arts Work Center. One Fine Arts alumna, Maria Flook, a young poet, wrote these lines in "Freeze":

*In winter, romance breaks
like a cold pipe.
Don't be alarmed
when plumbers tear up the floor
to get to the problem,
or if a face drops out of reach
suddenly with the absurdity
of a record temperature.*

I have no idea if a winter here inspired that verse.

Some Provincetown witnesses:

¶ Robert Motherwell. He tells me, "The quality of light reflected by the harbor waters reminds me of the Greek islands." The quality of life reminds him "of the Greenwich Village I knew, with SoHo now thrown in. In contrast, East Hampton is more Upper East Side — like 57th Street and Madison Avenue transported for a summer by the sea. It's relaxed here. People are not on the make. There's nothing to make."

Q. Norman Mailer once told me he had to rent a dull room in town to work in, to avoid the harbor. Does the harbor distract you?

A. I paint at night.

¶ Dr. Bernard C. Meyer, author of "Joseph Conrad, a Psychoanalytic Biography."

Q. Why do so many psychiatrists herd here and other places on the Cape?

A. I guess we're afraid to be alone.

¶ Bernard Roderick, owner of the fishing boat Shirley and Roland, whose family came from the Azores, as did so many of the Portuguese townsfolk. His father and grandfathers were fishermen here. He tells me, "I like the freedom and independence of fishing. I couldn't stand being cooped up in the nine-to-five. Every day is a challenge and if I find fish I

get a great sense of accomplishment. We're hunters, you know."

Q. What about the danger? George Bryant [a selectman, preservationist and sort of unofficial historian of the town] says the records show that as many as 5,000 Provincetown people have died at sea.

A. It's not so dangerous now, with the navigation aids. Also, use your common sense; don't go out when the winds are 50 miles an hour.

¶ Gordon Gaskill, from Philadelphia, and Gary Morgan, from Pontiac, Mich., who describe themselves as, "friends, gay," run a gardening business. They like the "freedom to live your own life style." On the whole, they say, it's a tolerant place, and we feel at ease.

While it is a summer resort, Provincetown is a real town. This fishing industry, a year-round operation, gives it an anchor. Among other amenities, Provincetown has its own public radio station, WOMR, a volunteer fire department of brave men in a matchbox town, two fortunetellers, two weekly newspapers: The Advocate and its new rival, Provincetown News, a redundancy of real estate agents, aerobic dance classes, a neighborhood health center (a recent ad: "This week's health hint: Three Thoughts on Herpes, Drinking and Jogging"), a senior center, which has shown the movie "On Golden Pond," a chimney sweep, meeting places for Alcoholics Anonymous — everything that could possibly be needed in Grover's Corners.

In contrast, the neighboring town, Truro, is much more country. It is grander, with its labyrinths of mysterious, possibly haunted, woods. Some Truro residents have their own tennis courts! It has been called, not unkindly

ly, Scarsdale with the houses set much farther apart.

Things do happen in Provincetown, as these recent events, selected at random, suggest:

¶ Marvelous Marvin Hagler, the middle-weight champ, trained in a gym set up at the Provincetown Inn. (After punching the heavy bag and mirror-boxing in rhythm to rock music coming from a boom box, he told me that he liked "the isolation here. People respect my privacy.")

¶ A 17-year-old Provincetown High School senior completed the last step toward becoming an Eagle Scout.

¶ A 64-year-old volunteer fireman shockingly died in a restaurant blaze that turned out to be a torch job.

¶ After hearings about allegations that heterosexual men and women had been discriminated against at the Back Room, a disco, the Back Room was closed by the selectmen for a three-day period in December; however, it had already been shut for want of customers at that time.

¶ The salt content in drinking water was recorded at distressingly high levels.

The unemployment rate was reported by The Advocate as twice the national average. (Partial explanation: After the summer, seasonal employees, such as restaurant workers, draw unemployment benefits.)

¶ A fund-raiser was held to help research AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), naturally a matter of concern to Provincetown's considerable male homosexual population. (Not one case has been identified here so far, but the mental stress has been felt by some businessmen, who diagnose a Frightened Tourist Syndrome.)

Townpeople may kid about the countless tourists, but they know very well that they are absolutely vital to Provincetown's rickety economy. The only visitors who really get to us are not the occasional boors who heave beer bottles into my wife's failing rosebushes, but friends who hear that we've bought a summer house and turn up, out of context, eager to be entertained. They say things like: Well, we've been to your ocean beach and had a fine swim at the bay beach, Herring Cove, though it's awfully pebbly, like the beach at Cannes last summer. What is there to do?

What is there to do? Rent a bike and hit the trails. Hire a horse and ride to the dunes. Be a passenger on a whale-watching boat; there's a good chance you'll see humpback whales and possibly one will breach just for you. Be a big spender and charter a boat to fish for tuna; feel the good pull of the great fish as it bends the rod like a bow and almost wrenches you out of your fishing chair and you feel the clean fear in your belly and you think of the reward later of the good cold martini.

For me, a particular attraction is the breakwater, at the very western tip of town, where I have picked free meals of mussels at low tide. Lately I've noticed carnage. Empty shells and lots of starfish. I watch a starfish embracing a mussel. Just as the nature books say, the starfish patiently pulls with its tube feet to part the mussel's shells. Eventually the mussel yields and the starfish extrudes its stomach into the mussel and digests the flesh. A rotten trick from the mussel's point of view. But it's a marvelous example of adaptation; the starfish, with its encoded imperative for killing, is an evolutionary success. It doesn't have a choice. A starfish has to do what a starfish has to do.

I remember parts of a recent, disturbing talk by Dr. David Hamburg, a behavioral biologist, the new president of the Carnegie Corporation. Attachment to kin, to one's group, fear of strangers and hostility to them, aggressive behavior, particularly by males, behavior that may well be related to the androgens, the male sex hormones — all this, he said, contributed to reproductive success in the process of natural selection. But the ways that made evolutionary sense now "constitute the ultimate peril to our species." He was talking about nuclear extermination. However, as I understand him, he feels that humans probably have more free will than starfish.

Provincetown, with free will, has taken a position on civil defense. Under the Civil Defense Act, a plan was put out for Provincetown, as a low-risk area in an atomic war, to be host to people from high-risk areas, like Sandwich, across the bay. If the nuclear missiles hit in the summer season, the visitors in Provincetown would leave in an orderly fashion to provide space for the refugees! This year, town meeting — with comments of "cruel hoax," "absurd," "idiotic," turned the plan down. Applause. ■