

A4
Payne
George

George Payne and one of his "whatizzit" birds which he makes out of odd bits of wood, cork, shells, crabs, and the like that he picks up while combing Cape Cod beaches in winter. This bird, put together with plastic wood and painted, is a—well, whatizzit?

JETSAM

UP to 1931 George Payne had been a successful sign painter and had built up a flourishing business in Springfield, Massachusetts. He was no ordinary sign painter but a real artist who put individuality and distinction into each of his signs. But when the general pinch came, some firms that had been his patrons for years folded up, and those that managed to struggle through were making the old signs serve for another year. Lack of business forced him to let out his assistants one by one, until he was alone in his idle shop. The rent was long overdue and the telephone and electric light had been cut off for non-payment of bills.

Salvaging what he could out of the wreckage, Payne packed up and left for Provincetown, Massachusetts. Perhaps he could find work in this well known summer resort. At any rate he loved the sea and all that went with it, so if he starved he could at least do it in pleasant surroundings.

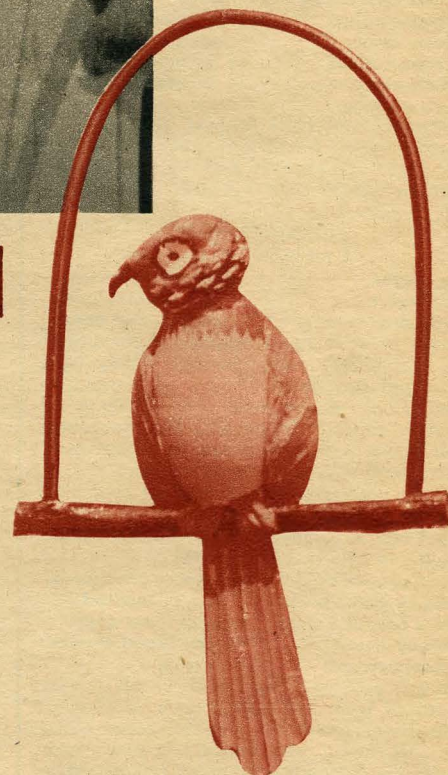
Despite depression, Provincetown had a good season in 1931, and Payne earned a comfortable living with his sign painting. But when the summer visitors and tourists had come and gone, the town as usual folded up for the winter. Only the few permanent residents—business people, struggling artists and writers, and fishermen—remained. The narrow streets that had been congested for three months were quiet and deserted. Shop fronts and restaurants were boarded up. No one would want any signs painted until the next spring.

But George Payne had learned to love Cape Cod as well as he had always loved the sea. He had made many friends among the rugged, hard-working, religious fisherfolk. He had no desire to return to the drab, humdrum life of the city. Besides, the depression was still on and gaining in severity. Food and lodging are cheap in Provincetown in the winter. One can always get fish to eat and driftwood to burn. Payne decided to stick it out.

One afternoon in October he walked into what had been the information bureau of the *Advocate*, the local newspaper, and asked, "Can you tell me what to do with myself in Provincetown all winter?"

The man behind the counter hedged. "We're not officially open for information," he smiled. "I'm afraid I can't tell you. Unless you resort to beachcombing."

Beachcombing! Why not? There were vast stretches of the Cape he had never seen. Over on the "back shore," where the Atlantic had resumed its winter habit of pounding the sands with heavy beat and thundering with eerie noises, there might be adventure in large measure. The summer visitor who bathes from the Cape's smooth inside beaches, while gentle waves lap the shore, never sees there the true wonder of the ocean and never finds anything to indicate that beaches are worth combing. But in the wintertime it is another world. Then terrific storms toss up the wrecks of fishing schooners; angry waves undermine summer cottages and hurl them into



the roiling surf, tear them to pieces, and strew the wreckage along the beach. The Coast Guards and fishermen have stories aplenty to tell of small fortunes being picked up by beachcombers—valuable cargoes being washed ashore from wrecked vessels, found, and sold.

PAYNE set out early almost every morning and tramped miles along the beaches. He became absorbed in searching for strange and rare objects. Gnarled pieces of sea-washed wood, transported to the Cape shores from no one knows where, first caught his fancy. Then he concentrated on odd-shaped bottles, bottles beautifully tinted by the action of salt water, beautifully etched by the wash of sea

and sand. He developed a keen eye for shark vertebrae, horseshoe crabs, rare shells, goosefish bones, cork and wood bobs of fishermen's nets.

One winter evening, sitting by an open fire of driftwood, he experimented with an idea. With a jackknife, a paintbrush, and a bit of plastic wood he went to work. In a short time he produced a bizarre little bird in a comical pose. The plump body was the wood bob of a fisherman's net; the wings and tail were bits of goosefish bones; the scrawny neck was the pipelike stem from a horseshoe crab; and the ridiculously long beak was a curved codfish bone. It was the first of the birds that have made him widely known.

That was a tough winter for beachcomber Payne. Many times he felt the pinch of hunger. He says he ate fish until his body began to grow scales, but he worked hard. He combed the beach in daylight hours, and at night he carved, stuck together, and painted his creations—peacocks, storks, flamingos, penguins, pelicans, gulls, and a great number of species that the artist puts under the general heading of "whatizzit" birds.

The following summer he opened a shop that was unusual even in a town noted for its quaint shops. It was crowded with a large assortment of bright-colored birds. The walls were decorated with fish nets, harpoons, anchors, shark vertebrae, and other things characteristic of Cape Cod.

He continued painting his signs, but soon his bird creations were bringing in more money, and gradually he gave up his former occupation, although as a special favor he will still paint a sign for a friend who is looking for something out of the ordinary. Like his signs, Payne's birds are all original and distinctive.



Enough to make any ornithologist rub his eyes is this group of Payne creations. The fan-tailed stork (upper right) stands on a cork float. The legs, head, and neck are driftwood; tail, a tuna gill; body, a fisherman's bob; wings, mussel shells; beak, a horseshoe crab tail. The saucy little parrot that you see on the opposite page is made from a fisherman's bob, a pine cone, crab claw, mussel shells, and driftwood

NETS HIM PROFITS

ALL WASHED UP AND ON THE BEACH, GEORGE PAYNE FOUND HE COULD MAKE A GOOD LIVING OUT OF ALL WASHED UP ON THE BEACH

BY GEORGE WITTEN

Many of them are similar, but no two are alike. Most of them look like something conjured up out of a wild dream. Yet they are really beautiful in color and design.

On invitation he has exhibited his unique handicraft in New York, Boston, and other cities. His brain birds travel far because a large percentage of Provincetown's visitors each take at least one home. Among Payne's patrons are Irvin Cobb, Gloria Swanson, Rudy Vallee, and Paul Whiteman.

PAINT, plastic wood, glue, and pine cones are all that Payne uses that isn't salvaged from the sea. But he does not always wait for the tide to bring him in what he
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Provincetown, at the tip of Cape Cod, where the Pilgrims first landed in America, has long been famous as a summer artists' colony. Its main street is long and narrow, and the shops lining it are both quaint and colorful. But none is more picturesque than this one of George Payne's. (Of course he painted his own sign)

BEACHCOMBER

(Continued from page 17)

needs. Often he goes out to sea and brings in what he wants himself. He is always welcome on the fishing boats. He goes out on the trawlers and helps pull in the nets, in which there is a lot of debris the fishermen have no use for. After Payne has helped the crew sort out the good fish and throw them into the hold, he goes through the debris with a practiced eye and sorts out what he knows he can use.

Of one of these trips he tells this story:

"I left my house at four in the morning. It was winter, and I stumbled down to the pier in the dark and under the ice-coated boat. The skipper and crew, making four besides myself, arrived soon after. We built a fire in the cabin stove and the cook rustled up a big breakfast, after which we got started.

"The weather was hovering around zero. As I was little use on deck, I hung around the cabin stove, alternately roasting and freezing my back and front, for there was no door to the cabin, and the icy winds blew in at will.

"About opposite Highland Light on the inside of the Cape we started to drag. We had two huge drags made of interwoven rings—something like a chain handbag—that opened at the bottom when they were ready to be dumped. We were out for scallops that morning and were dragging where the scallop beds were known to be. After each drag had been dumped on deck and the scallops taken out, there'd be a huge pile of junk left. Before it was shoveled back into the ocean, I would claw through it and pick out pieces of twisted wood, empty shells, old bottles, and lots of miscellaneous objects that no one but I would ever find a use for.

"After the first drag our mittens were soaking wet and soon began to freeze on our hands. Between drags—which were about half an hour apart—we'd get as close to the stove as we could. We could thaw our mittens out but never get them dry. The exercise kept our blood circulating, however, and we didn't have time to get really cold.

"By seven o'clock I had stuff enough to keep me busy for about three weeks and was more than ready to go home. But your Cape Cod fisherman does not believe in turning back until he has a full catch. At the rate the hold was filling up it would be another 10 or 12 hours before we headed in. I was thoroughly miserable, but never let on, and just froze it out with the others. The deck was slippery with ice, the sea rolling, and the wind biting. The Cape Codders are used to this sort of thing, but I'm not.

"Throughout the day we kept a pot of hot cocoa going on the stove, and between drags we downed big enamel mugs of it. Around noon the cook produced the finest roast beef, potatoes, onions, and garlic I have ever eaten. He had to do his cooking between drags, too, as that was only part of his work.

"When the sun went down, I rejoiced. Now it would be too dark to work and we'd have to go in. But the fishermen lighted lanterns and kept on dragging until the hold was filled with shucked scallops. It was seven o'clock at night when we headed in to shore, just 15 hours after we'd sailed. Three times during the last two hours I'd fallen fast asleep—once sitting bolt upright, once leaning against a pile of scallops, and once actually standing up.

PAYNE doesn't spend any time beachcombing for things of value, but if he happens on to them, he salvages and sells them. He has

found a few barrels of oil. Once, after a bad storm, he found part of a motor launch with a good engine in it and sold the engine for \$150. He often picks up good oars and twice he has found dinghies that were in serviceable condition.

"I'd heard many stories about the wreck of the British man-of-war Somerset near Peaked Hill in 1778," Payne told me. "The crew were taken prisoners, 480 of them, and marched on foot from here to Boston. In 150-odd years the sea had beaten the ship to pieces and buried the wreckage deep in the sands. An old Cape Codder showed me where the wreck had lain for years, but all trace of it had long since disappeared.

"With pick and shovel I set in and dug. About 10 or 12 feet down I came onto a few spars and beams. These were wonderfully preserved by the salt water. With a saw I sliced them up into sections and used the sections as bases for my birds. I put a label on each base, telling its origin. They sold rapidly and now I've none left.

"Every tide brings in something new, but there are times when I have to do a lot of searching to find just what I want. Occasionally there's a gnarled piece of driftwood that makes a cockatoo. A scallop shell can be fashioned as a peacock's fantail; goosefish bones make excellent gull's wings; a pine cone touched lightly with white paint is a first-class tail for an ostrich."

Payne now has two shops in Provincetown in which he sells nothing but his own products during the short 10-week season. The rest of the year he creates his fantasies. He works alone, and each funny little bird is his own creation; yet he is able to keep stores in other cities supplied. He is not getting rich and never expects to, but he is making a comfortable living, and lives the way he likes. He licked the depression. Now he says he has no fear for any future, as long as his eyes and hands keep functioning.