

CURRENTS

Preserving a Monument: Stafford Supports Shack

By MICHAEL MOLINARO

For many, it is a welcoming monument as they traverse their way onto Long Beach Island; for others, it is a symbol of an era long since past, recalling the origins of Barnegat Bay; and for some, it is simply a shack they drive by each day, slowly disappearing with the passage of time.

Though it has become what many consider to be the second most recognizable symbol of Long Beach Island behind Old Barney, it is technically part of Stafford Township, and it is that township that is now getting closer to adopting a plan to restore and preserve it.

"The mayor has met with the owners of the property about the possibility of them donating the land to Stafford Township for historic preservation or granting a historic preservation easement. We would then be able to utilize the effort of volunteers that are interested in preserving or restoring the shack," said Stafford Township Administrator Jim Moran.

The current owner is Chet Atkins, whose company, Jersey Outdoor Media, out of Moorestown, owns the billboard next to the shack. Up until this point there have been liability and insurance issues in regards to who can be on the property working to restore and preserve it.

Moran explained that if the township gained ownership of the shack property it would eventually do away with those issues and free up the possibility for various organizations that may be interested in either raising money to pay for its restoration and/or completing some of the restoration work, to do so.

Atkins remained hesitant to comment until the process of ownership confirmation is complete and a deal with the town is finalized. "We're almost there," he said. "I don't want to jinx it."

Upon completion, the shack would not be useable, inhabitable or able to be visited in any way, but instead become more of a monument that tourists might take photographs of.

When Atkins purchased the billboard company in 2009 from Ann Bell, widow of former Stafford Township Mayor Wesley K. Bell, he

believed the sale included the property on which the shack lies. The issue was whether Bell technically had ownership of the land on which the shack sits upon its pilings, which would concurrently be passed on to Atkins.

Stafford officials, in the past, have said there is no clear title to the property, and Atkins is working with lawyers to prove ownership of the dilapidated structure. The research for determining so dated back to the 18th if not 17th century. Knowing that Atkins was in the midst of this process and that subsequent ownership of the shack by Jersey Shore Media might soon be proven, Stafford officials inquired as to whether the company would be interested in working with the township toward a restoration project.

Of course none of these talks would have happened had the structure collapsed over the winter. "If the thing goes down, all bets are off," said Jim Yuhas, a 61-year-old resident of Barnegat who continues to work as a painter on Victorian houses in Beach Haven. He has lived in the Southern Ocean County area since 1960.

Yuhas is part of what he calls "the Shack Pack," a group of friends all interested in preserving the shack that made efforts to do so by bracing the walls with supports during the annual Chowderfest on Oct. 4 of last year. "We figured everybody would be preoccupied ..."

Unfortunately for Yuhas, the Stafford Township police were not, and as he was approached by them, he "took one step and went right through the floor into the bay mud." Although Atkins knew what they were doing, the group agreed to deny that he did, signing a release saying he was not responsible beforehand. The ambiguity of ownership is what saved him from possible arrest, said Yuhas. Still, he remained stalwart in his effort to sustain the walls of the shack.

"I wasn't going to sit around and wait for all the red tape and everybody fighting over whose it is or whose it isn't. We wanted to brace up the walls so they would have more time to fight about it. It definitely wouldn't be there anymore," he said, citing the harsh winter of



Jack Reynolds

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TOWER OF FLOWER: Jessica Barlow, 12, is a mere sprout when compared to the 14-foot sunflowers growing in the front yard of her Surf City home. The plants have seemingly found this summer's copious sunshine highly inspirational. And save those seeds.

wind and snowstorms that he believes would have collapsed the structure completely.

Yuhas also claims to have placed the "No Trespassing" signs that can be seen on the shack presently. While putting up the supports that are in place now, Yuhas said he found an

original window shutter that had been sealed up in the sheetrock, with a one-quarter-moon shape cut out of it.

For Yuhas, the symbolism of the shack represents a scene from the origins of Long

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The Shack

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Beach Island, including the hunters, clammers and baymen who first utilized the area. "One picture is worth 1,000 words... it's the perfect illustration."

He would like the possible restoration effort to keep that image in mind, collecting and incorporating original pieces like the shutters he found, as well as clamming tongs, rakes and baskets on the outside, and possibly eventually rebuilding a dock that used to be nearby in the bay to represent the invention of the garvey, a type of boat that was developed in the area to deal with the shallow waters of the bay. First and foremost, however, he realizes the most important task is stabilizing the structure of the shack.

The connection to the shack for Yuhas dates back to the days when it was still a two-story house called Happy Days fishing and gunning club where he and his friends would have parties. "Since its inception it was like that. Guys would go out hunting and women would stay in and play cards and drink." In 1987 Yuhas' brother Frank, a Vietnam veteran with two Bronze Stars and two Purple Hearts, died near the shack in what remains an open case to this day, according to the longtime area resident.

The shack has seen plenty of inhabitants throughout its history, usually staying for indefinite periods of time. Moran recalled the structure having a water tank in 1974 when a couple that he met, the last remaining members of the Parlin Gun Club, was occupying it.

Calling himself "the squeaky wheel that gets the grease," Yuhas remains thankful that once ownership is proven and paperwork is completed, Atkins may sell the title to the town for "\$1 or \$2" despite the annoyance Yuhas feels he has been.

"That may very well be what happens. The mayor has been talking to him (Atkins) and that very well may be what we wind up doing," said Moran.

That part of the process may be complete as early as sometime this August.

Yuhas also has spoken several times to Timothy Hart, division director of the Cultural and Heritage Office at the Ocean County Historical Society, about the urgent need for repair. He credits Hart for playing an integral part in a process that has taken about a year considering how long Atkins has been working on proving his ownership.

Hart says he was waiting for the right time to talk to the township, as the title issues got closer to being worked out, and he eventually spoke with Moran. Hart was also inspired by the work of Dominic Bates, a fourth-grader from

the McKinley Elementary School who recently wrote a story called "The Shack" that helped him become one of 30 finalists in the Celebrate NJ essay contest this year. He presented a copy of the story and a drawing Bates made during talks with the township.

Hart said a yet unidentified local builder has offered to restore the exterior of the shack, but that person wishes to remain anonymous for now.

Moran explained that although there are various organizations that have all expressed an interest in the project, he has "never heard anybody say that I'm going to be the guy fixing this." He added that even after the town takes ownership there will technical and liability issues that will still have to be resolved though he is sure none will be that cumbersome.

Though Hart called the shack restoration a "terrific thing," he remains amazed at how many people are unaware of how commonplace such shacks were. "There were three shacks, two on the north side of the old Causeway Bridge, and one on the south side of the new Causeway." He said one of the northern shacks has completely disappeared after collapsing and being torn down, but the other remains there.

The two northern shacks began as small stores, one of which, he said, is where Hance and Smythe boatyard of Manahawkin got its start. He referenced a character from an old Monty Python "Flying Circus" skit named Arthur "Two Sheds" Jackson and joked, "This is a two-shack story, which is better than a one-shack story!"

What is interesting about the nostalgia and mystique placed on the shack, according to Hart, is that local residents are not as strongly interested in it as are tourists.

Take, for example, Mary Buck of Barnegat, who thinks the town should "let it be ... let it continue to slowly return to the marsh as we observe its measure of time, fighting the decay and still half standing."

Amy Smith of Tuckerton more bluntly called any kind of restoration effort "a waste of time and money."

Hart claims that Yuhas has already been accumulating donations for the preservation of the shack, and is confident local supply houses would donate to the cause. Many years ago, he said, a local lumberyard mentioned it would be interested in donating some materials, for example.

"I got conservatively 20 or 30 phone calls from people who said, 'What can you do to solve it.' They were all tourists ... mostly people that have come down for a long time," said Hart.

That effect of tourists transferring their good feelings of Long Beach Island into the shack is due to it being a symbol of entry for them, explained Hart. "People know that once they reach that point, they're here ... even though they may arrive in a two-hour traffic jam."

to the borough of Tuckerton on the Heron Road situation in which a man died.

In a related matter, Eggert, his son, Uhl and EMT Keith Sheridan are currently suing Squad 85 and the trustees of the three other towns: Betha, Little Egg Harbor Mayor Ray Gormley, former Trustee Gene Kobryn, Eagleswood Mayor James Pine, and Bass River Township Mayor Deborah Buzby-Cope, plus members of the Great Bay Regional EMS: Patricia Gentless, Lauren Meglino Runza and Hannah Johnson.

The lawsuit claims the plaintiffs were defamed and wrongfully suspended from Great Bay without legal or factual basis. The lawsuit also states that defendants had also denied Tuckerton representation in the ambulance service it had contracted for.

On Tuesday, Eggert said he had given fair warning to the parties he is suing. "The night we four were suspended we told them they were making a big mistake." Eggert said he had tried to have a county Municipal Excess Liability Joint Insurance Fund executive mediate the issue without success. "We didn't want it to get this far."

Years ago, when Eggert was kicked off the Tuckerton Volunteer Fire Co., he sued, saying his rights had been violated, and won that suit. The joint insurance fund had to pay his court costs. Eggert did not benefit monetarily but had his membership reinstated.

Calls to Betha and the Gentlesses were not returned by press time.

—Pat Johnson
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Moran talked about the irony that although the shack remains a symbol of Long Beach Island, it is Stafford that may be the township to preserve it. "Stafford Township has a richer history in the bay than LBI. More people from Stafford made their living out there as guides, fishermen, what have you."

Throughout its history, the shack has been inundated with groups or individuals who may have temporarily shown an interest in its preservation or offered solutions on how to deal with slow decay.

Hart recalls an article written in The SandPaper approximately 10 years ago in which Tagland Studio Architecture of Harvey Cedars, known for its unconventional style, offered to encase the entire shack in an acrylic shell, effectively turning it into a life-size snow globe. Other ideas included a "Viking funeral," which essentially would involve a local fire company burning it down, or just putting a permanent picture of the old shack on a billboard where the structure once stood.

Most recently, a nonprofit organization called the Duck Shack Replication Initiative, headed by Lisa Ball of Long Beach Island, is looking for support to build a replica at Bayview Park in Brant Beach. This would become an art gallery featuring the work of local artists and a museum of sorts featuring historical information and photos of the shack over the years.

"She knew what I was doing. She's responsible for slowing down what's going on," said Yuhas.

For Hart, the shack remains symbolic of the way the bay once looked up until the '40s and '50s, when the edge of most of the bay was trimmed with meadows of wetlands, and the bulkheads now so commonplace had yet to be put in.

At one point in 1957, the shack was moved from the area near the former Margo's Watercraft Rentals to where it sits now as it was in the way of the construction of the last Causeway.

A new bridge project is scheduled to begin in 2012, according to the New Jersey Department of Transportation, which will create a second bridge adjacent to the current one while maintaining the old bridge. Moran said it remains unclear how that project may affect the shack. "I don't think the DOT knows what they're doing with the bridge yet."

Ultimately, Hart credits Moran for what may lead to the rebuilding of the shack. "Jim and I are longtime friends and he likes to take on causes and solve problems so I presented it to him. He was the one who came up with the solution. It's really like dominoes. Jim Yuhas got me going and I got Jim Moran going. We're all in that row of dominoes together."

All in all, he said, "The real breakthrough is this new owner of the billboard and the fact that they're finally resolving the title issue. That's what has broken the logjam." Hart estimates that if all goes well, restoration could be completed by next summer. "It'd be a nice thing for the new people coming down next spring."

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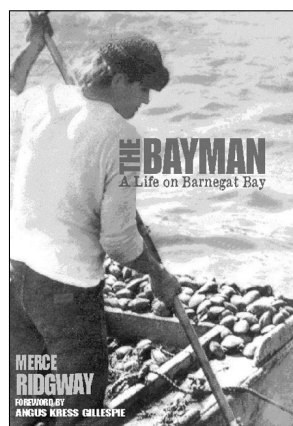
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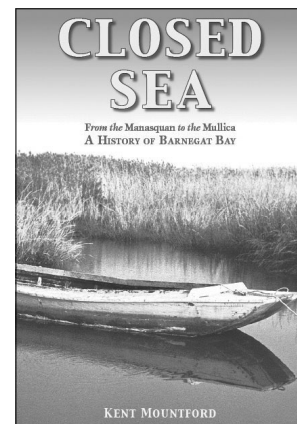
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First Aid

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Eggert said of the three EMTs who responded from the Tuckerton Volunteer Fire Co., two had been suspended back in December from Squad 85, former Capt. Chuck Uhl and Eggert's son Lee Eggert Jr.

"With the large membership Capt. (Albert) Gentless has boasted about, I'm surprised they can't get people to respond on a weekend," the mayor said.

Eggert said he knew many of the members of Squad 85 were at a party that day in Parkertown.

In a separate e-mail to the Borough Council, Eggert suggested that Gentless notify the county dispatcher when there is no full crew on duty so the backup Quality Ambulance, a paid service, could be dispatched. "According to Great Bay schedule, there are seven to ten shifts unfilled each week," wrote Eggert. "Back-up calls are hit and miss. This protocol would also have expedited the responses to Heron Road on July 25, and Bartlett Landing on July 26. The percentage of calls handled by Great Bay in Tuckerton seems to have dropped noticeably in the last month."

Eggert said Quality would put another ambulance in Tuckerton if needed.

Council President Buck Evans responded to the e-mail, saying he had requested Squad 85 Trustee President Richard Betha "to respond"