

AN Earth TO Day Remember

Back in 1970, John Stenger and a band of students came to the defense of Cape Henlopen's imperiled dunes

In mid-April 1970, America was angry. The baby boomers had become cynical, mistrusting parents, business, industry and government. This generation was especially disdainful of the so-called military-industrial complex that President Dwight Eisenhower had warned about. The Vietnam War dragged on, filling the 6 o'clock news with death and destruction, and no end was in sight. The previous month, the Army had charged 14 officers with suppressing the truth about the horrific My Lai massacre in Vietnam, where as many as 500 essentially unarmed civilians had been murdered by U.S. troops. The hopeful Apollo 13 moon mission had suffered an oxygen tank explosion a few days before, forcing its hasty retreat to Earth. The Cold War with the communist USSR was tense and dispiriting, and Paul McCartney had just announced the breakup of the Beatles. To many Americans, the future seemed dismal and hundreds of thousands had taken to the streets and college campuses to protest the nation's various problems.

Among those concerns was the environment. Decades of hellbent-for-leather industrial development with little regard for the land, oceans and air was taking an ever-greater toll. To a growing number of people, this threat trumped all others: If you can't breathe the air, can't eat the food, and can't drink the water, little else mattered. Scientists and other concerned individuals were beginning to sound the alarm, and people were beginning to listen.

Lewes High School science teacher John Stenger was angry too. The West Virginia transplant had seen the environmental threat firsthand when he visited nearby Cape Henlopen State Park back in 1967. To his horror he found the Lewes town dump across the road from



BY GEORGE W. CONTANT | PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE STENGER FAMILY

Protesting the Army's action in 1970 were local high school students, from left, Susan Westover, Kathi McFadden, their science teacher John Stenger, Rob Gibbs, Cathy Stenger, Carol Schroeder (long blond hair) and Adrienne Bryan, far right, among others.



Soldiers gather at Cape Henlopen after dozens of student protesters halted work to bulldoze the Great Dune in April 1970.

today's Cape May-Lewes Ferry Terminal. Behind the dump, hundreds of tons of sand were being excavated and sold for construction projects. Then he found the source of all that sand: vast, life-filled mounds that the locals called the Great Dune.

Running essentially east to west, several thousand yards long and up to 70 feet high on its eastern slope, this gigantic dune (actually a series of conjoined dunes) had been the subject of study by biologists from all over the United States. Until it toppled into the ocean in 1926, the famous Cape Henlopen Lighthouse had stood atop this slope to light mariners' way. Stenger found that in 1965, St. Andrew's School professor William Amos published a feature story in *National Geographic* headlined "The Living Dune," telling the nation all about this wonderful home to many rare and exotic plant and animal species.

He showed the Great Dune to his family. "We West Virginia hillbillies," as his daughter

Nancy Stenger Joseph warmly describes her family, "were amazed at what we saw."

As John Stenger walked over the shifting sands and noted the vibrant life, he quickly fell in love. Always a doer, the World War II veteran and glassmaker-turned-teacher felt called to action and began a decades-long crusade to educate the public and protect the Great Dune. Deeply saddened by what he saw as neglect by the very governments that should have been protecting this treasure, he realized something else as he studied the area's history: Cape Henlopen, with its relatively new state park, was in fact protected by something called the Warner Grant Trust. To Stenger, that legal status had been forgotten — or was being ignored.

In January 1682, the Delaware courts had granted Edmond Warner "the land at the Cape, commonly called Cape Inlopen, on the north east side of the creek formerly called the Whorekill." Warner then legally

“We West Virginia hillbillies were amazed at what we saw.”

set aside the marshes and the ground for the use of the inhabitants of Lewes and Sussex County. Locals couldn't hunt, but they could fish, gather oysters, cockles, plums, cranberries and huckleberries, and enjoy its sandy beaches. As Stenger read it, this legal document was in force, and should have prevented the dump, the sand pits, and all other looming commercial exploitation of the area.

He immediately began a campaign to get Lewes to remove the dump and enforce the trust. He also became a volunteer naturalist for the then-Delaware Nature Education Center, which had an agreement with the state to conduct nature programming at Cape Henlopen State Park. He led nature walks and did all he could to educate the public about the Warner Grant. Ultimately, the dump was removed and the sand excavation ceased.

In time, Stenger was hired part time as the park's first naturalist. With no real budget to support his efforts, this teacher (who was also an amateur artist) created brochures, slide shows and signs, mostly at his own expense. The whole family got involved, running mimeographs (he bought the machine, an early predecessor of today's printer/copiers) and helping to develop trails (including the Seaside Nature Trail). Often his son Bob was brought along on nature walks and other park projects to appear in photographs "for scale." Bob grew up helping his father with his work. "I thought this was what everyone did," he recalls.

In 1969, Stenger helped the Boy Scouts conduct a huge weekend "camporee" at the park for hundreds of scouts and their parents, an education event that centered on the cape's animals and plants. He even got "oceanographers" from the U.S. Navy's Naval Facility Lewes to teach the scouts about the Navy's ongoing ocean studies, as the Navy purportedly maintained a special "oceanographic research facility" at the cape's Herring Point. (Stenger and the scouts had no idea that what the Navy was actually studying at the secret facility were the movements of the Soviet Union's Atlantic Ocean nuclear submarine fleet. This information would not come to light for many years.) The weekend's activities resulted in participating scouts receiving the Oceanography Merit Badge.

A Movement is Born

Stenger also was doing all he could to make anyone who would listen aware of the Great Dune and Cape Henlopen's amazing natural legacy. By April 1970, the fledgling ecology movement had drawn enough attention that April 22 was declared a special national day of education and call to action — the first Earth Day. The April 16 *Delaware Coast Press* printed a proclamation by Gov. Russell W. Peterson calling upon all Delawareans to educate themselves about the dangers to the environment, and to observe April 22 as Earth Day. He also

declared April 25 as Cleanup Day to gather trash "from the state's highways, woodlands, streams, cities and towns," a designation that is still in effect.

John Stenger was hopeful of the potential for this first Earth Day to help change things, but he had no idea of how much he was about to become involved and how far his actions would go.



John Stenger leads an educational program at Cape Henlopen State Park in 1971.

On April 15, civil defense radio operator Charles Horn was manning Sussex County's new Emergency Operations Center, which had been established in Fort Miles' World War II-era mine casemate (an armored enclosure). He noticed a contingent of soldiers and 26 pieces of heavy construction equipment roll into the park. Apparently, he didn't think much of it at first. After all, the Army and the Navy still owned and operated in various parts of the cape, including the recreation area located between Battery 519 (the old World War II 12-inch gun installation) and the former Fire Control Tower 7. This area was owned by the First Army, headquartered at Fort Meade, Md., and consisted of several World War II concrete barracks that the Army was converting into small "apartments" for soldiers and their families to use for rest and relaxation. It also sat squarely on the Great Dune.

What Horn didn't realize was that he had actually seen Fort Meade's 75th Engineering Battalion Company C — 40 men led by Lt. Laurence Sadoff — whose mission was to turn an open, sandy part of the Fort Miles Recreation Area into a trailer park of sorts so many more soldiers and their families could stay at the cape. That sandy ground *was* the Great Dune. >

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The young lieutenant's mission was to clear and level about five acres of this area as a first step in the project. It was Army-held land, and the Army felt no need to tell anyone about its plans.

After several days, curiosity apparently got the best of Charles Horn. He had been at the cape in World War I as a Navy radio operator. He knew the land's history and ecology, and was familiar with the Warner Grant. "He was interested in environmental problems before it became a household word," Stenger explained in a recent telephone interview from his home in Florida.

In the late afternoon of April 21, the eve of the first Earth Day, Horn drove out to the recreation area for a look. To his shock, what he estimated to be about 30 feet of the dune had been leveled off by the engineers, and they were still at it. The stunned veteran raced to a phone and called Stenger, who was at home eating his supper.

"Horn was horrified," Stenger recalls.

The teacher-naturalist stopped eating and drove out to the site, and what he saw made his heart sink too. There on the south side of the Battery 519 barracks complex was a huge hole in the dune, filled with trucks and bulldozers. Stenger had already stopped an industrial park, relocated the Lewes dump, was helping to develop a new state park and was instituting some of the state park system's first environmental education programs — but now this.

"I'm thinking that we've made a little bit of progress and here's the goddamn Army bulldozing the dunes to build some homes for vacationing Army personnel," Stenger says in recalling his dismay.

He raced home and called the governor's office, but was told Peterson, who had visited Cape Henlopen with his wife in August and expressed great interest in the site, was unavailable. Stenger yelled, "The Army is out there bulldozing the Great Dune! ... They should be stopped!"

The secretary restated that the governor was busy, but Stenger had had it. He shouted, "What the hell do you want me to do — go back and lay down in front of the bulldozers *myself*?" The rattled staffer said he would tell Peterson immediately.

Stenger's oldest daughter, Cathy, had been nearby listening and challenged him: "Well, are you going to do it?"

"I don't know what to do," her frustrated father replied. >



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“Lay down in front of the bulldozers,” Cathy urged.

John Stenger had never pulled back from a fight, and had taught his kids the same; nevertheless, he hesitated to answer. He admitted to Cathy that he feared he could lose his job; after all, “I had four kids to feed.” All of the teachers and kids should be there, he stated. Cathy, who admits in a recent interview that as a teenager she was a “little stinker and a bit of a know-it-all,” retorted that he needed to “have the courage of his convictions” and should take a class to the site the next morning to stop the Army. Her father replied that he could not get involved in organizing that and someone else would have to do it. He would, however, take a sick day and go along to monitor any students who might show up, and try to prevent trouble.

“I got right on the phone and started calling classmates,” specifically “people that I thought would understand the issue and support us,” Cathy remembers. “I was trying to get as many people as I could.”

One of those calls was to Janet Maull, who today is Cape Henlopen High School’s recently retired assistant principal. Maull (now Maull-Martin) recalls that she and a few others went over to the Stengers’ house that night to make signs and discuss strategy.

“This was the first time I had ever done anything like this and I was kinda nervous,” she says. “But, Mr. Stenger was such a wonderful man and teacher, and we all believed in what he said about the dunes.”

That same evening, Stenger was scheduled to talk to a group of college students from what was then Kutztown State College about the Cape Henlopen dunes and the environment. He told them what was happening and that Cape Henlopen kids were going to protest there the next day. “Maybe you would like to come over,” Stenger suggested to the students. The group’s leader, Professor Robert Seewald, promised to bring them.

The stage was thus set for an earthquake that would have the Great Dune as its epicenter, but with shockwaves that would radiate all the way to the halls of Dover, the Pentagon, Congress and even the president’s Cabinet.

The Children’s Brigade

At about 5:30 the next morning, Janet Maull and several others again gathered at the Stenger residence on Gills Neck Road in Lewes to make last-minute plans. One thing that concerned their teacher was that he believed they were going to get arrested. He warned, “If the press isn’t there, you’re going to jail for nothing.” No one can recall who alerted him, but reporter Alan Poland of what was then the Wilmington *Morning News* was called.

“If you feel so strongly about this, then that’s your prerogative, but you must be ready to accept the consequences.”

The small band arrived at the Fort Miles Recreation Area just before 7 a.m. Though parental permission and a pass was required to be out of school, Stenger says he was surprised to later learn that the school secretaries were only requiring that students *tell* them that they had authorization. He also remembers that at least two Rehoboth Junior High School students actually hired a taxi to drive them to the dunes. (“I tip my hat to them,” he says now.)



John Stenger, center, accompanies a group of students who fought to preserve the Great Dune from development. A half-dozen students showed up before 7 a.m. on April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day, to halt the work there. Eventually, carloads of student-protesters arrived.

Lt. Sadoff and his engineers were about to start working when the surprised officer was confronted by about half a dozen students and Stenger, who argued that he was destroying the Great Dune. Sadoff told them that they were trespassing and could be arrested. “If you feel so strongly about this, then that’s your prerogative, but you must be ready to accept the consequences,” he declared. After Stenger stated that he would try to not disrupt things any more than necessary, the officer walked off to direct the operations.

When Poland arrived, the protest signs went up. He snapped a photo of student A.C. Milford, who had gotten right in Sadoff’s face. The lieutenant remained calm but sternly ordered the growing crowd to stay out of the roadway, which they mostly did. Meanwhile, carloads of additional students were arriving. “I was overwhelmed by the showing,” Stenger said proudly in retrospect.

Things were tense at times, but both sides ultimately kept their cool. The day’s most serious incident occurred about mid-morning when Rob Perciful’s mother arrived,

worried that her son might be arrested. Stenger saw her car approaching the crowd; “I thought she would hit one of the kids,” he recalls. As she approached, Stenger stepped in front of the oncoming vehicle, then leaped into the air, landing on her windshield and breaking one of the wipers. Poland snapped a photo of Stenger hanging off of the hood of her Chevrolet Impala. Both that photo and the one of Milford confronting Sadoff made the front page of the April 25 *Morning News*.

When the Kutztown college group arrived, according to Stenger, an angry Professor Seewald declared that “this is a good example of how the Army can wreck a natural resource.” The 38 Kutztown students swelled the protesters’ ranks to around 150. Sadoff, realizing that matters had escalated beyond the capacity of someone at his pay grade to handle them, called Fort Meade for help. Three captains were dispatched to the cape, arriving in a few hours.

Nancy Stenger Joseph remembers a lot of “head-shaking” as the newly arrived officers huddled with Sadoff. Finally, they went to the students and stated that no further work would be done until they had heard from their headquarters. Sadoff suggested to the assembled crowd that their protest was in vain since so much of the work had already been done. He advised them to go home and talk to their congressmen about the problem.

With the work having been halted, the group dispersed, and the first environmental protest on a U.S. military installation, on the first Earth Day, came to a peaceful end. Given the violent protests that had occurred in the late 1960s around the nation, this was a relief. Instead, local citizens began holding meetings and writing letters. Now it was up to government to act, and act it did.

Gov. Peterson was embarrassed and furious. No one in Delaware had been consulted about the Army’s plans; it had acted without even considering the site’s ecological or historic importance (there were no environmental impact studies back then). Peterson then launched a multi-pronged counterattack: He firmly requested that Sadoff’s battalion commander, Lt. Col. Richard Lundquist, and Fort Meade’s post commander, Col. Arnold Alexander, come to Fort Miles and explain themselves. On April 27, they did, Peterson parading them

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through the damaged dunes before the media's cameras. The governor told the officers that he intended to enlist the assistance of Delaware's congressional delegation to have the whole area returned to the state. Soon after, Maj. Gen. E.H. Burba, head of the First Army, came to the cape. That September, the secretary of the interior visited. Nerves were obviously frayed inside the Beltway. Delaware's lawmakers did join the cause, introducing legislation to have the land returned, but that effort proved unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, the Army, stung by the bad press, not only denied causing great destruction to the dunes but actually claimed to have protected them. A 1971 article in the Army Corps of Engineers magazine, *The Engineer*, asserted that the site had been improved by "planting vegetation, erecting snow fences and emplacing a bulkhead on the shoreline. Minus these conservation measures, erosion's toll would have been far more detrimental."

It seems that the Army didn't grasp the environmental and public relations implications of its actions in the face of a nation growing more cynical with every news report. Neither did it want

The Army converted barracks into small "apartments" for soldiers and their families to use, creating the Fort Miles Recreation Area in Cape Henlopen State Park.



to give up one of the most beautiful vacation spots in the Mid-Atlantic states. But, the pressure mounted, and the Pentagon began to reassess its environmental policies and its responsibility to the states and localities that hosted armed services facilities and personnel. Nevertheless, it would take more than two decades for the Army and Navy to completely relinquish their hold on the cape.

"I had developers and state people alike mad at me, but I had to do what was right."

Perseverance and Plaudits

John Stenger was relieved back in April 1970 — he didn't get fired. In the coming years he would continue to press for what he knew was right by educating, writing letters, doing interviews, filing lawsuits related to the Warner Grant and other Cape Henlopen issues through his non-profit John Stenger Environmental Institute. The cause for which he fought would win, and Stenger himself would win too: He received awards from national organizations for his work, including General Motors' Conservation Award and the Delaware Wildlife Federation's Conservation Award — which said he had "awakened the conscience of Delaware."

In 2002, he ran for a seat in the state legislature, but lost. Nonetheless, in 2010 the *News Journal*, the successor to the *Morning News*, spotlighted his influence by naming him one of "25 Who Matter."

John Stenger did raise the ire of some locals who had the cape's irreplaceable lands in their development sights, and he held state officials' feet to the fire. "I had developers and state people alike mad at me," he remarks now, "but I had to do what was right. I guess I do march to a different drummer."

His daughter Nancy says, "He was never interested in publicity or notoriety. He would not want this story to be about him. It was always, 'This is fundamentally wrong and I must speak out to try to change it.'"

Indeed, Stenger would rather not single out that fractious though transformational time back in April 1970. For him, he insists, "every day of my life was Earth Day." ■

GEORGE W. CONTANT is a historian-researcher with Delaware State Parks' Cultural Resources Unit who has written several other historical features about military activities at Cape Henlopen for Delaware Beach Life. He was assisted by significant research done by parks volunteer Michael A. Hamilton.

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