

GETTING LOST

BY BILL NEWCOTT | ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROB WATERS

A day of deliberate wrong turns makes everything right

For the seasoned traveler, there's nothing better than getting lost. If you never get lost, you never discover anything.

Alas, getting lost isn't as easy as it sounds — particularly if you're determined to get lost in the place where you live. There are street signs everywhere. Familiar landmarks keep popping up. And you have to resist the urgent temptation to switch on your GPS, "just to see."

Despite the challenges, I was determined to get lost in coastal Delaware for a whole day; to explore unfamiliar back roads; to meet people who didn't know anybody I knew. And so one recent morning I kissed my wife farewell, hopped into my car, and set out to get utterly disoriented.

Of course, even getting lost requires ground rules. I decided on a specific starting

point and a final destination, to reduce the chances of just driving around in circles all day. Point A would be the Fenwick Island Lighthouse, hard up against the Delaware/Maryland border. Point Z would be Cape Henlopen, site of the Fenwick light's long-lost sister, the beacon that fell from its sand dune pulpit in 1926.

As for my random route, from Fenwick I would improvise a wide westward loop around the area's inland waterways.

Most importantly, I brought up the GPS function on my iPhone and swiped it away. Gone. No familiar voice telling me where to turn. No scrolling dashboard map.

I smiled smugly.

"This is how Daniel Boone must have felt," I thought, sipping hazelnut coffee from my travel mug. ▶



"It's not as easy to get lost as you might think," says writer Bill Newcott — especially when area landmarks like Jayne's Reliable in Dagsboro keep popping up. Happily, it's still possible to discover the delights of disorientation.



I start at the lighthouse

I am standing at the foot of the whitewashed Fenwick Island light, craning to see the black lantern room, eight stories above.

Actually, I'm standing in Maryland. The Delaware state line, inches north of the sidewalk, is defined by a low white monument, placed here on April 16, 1751. The Maryland side of the monument bears the familiar diamond-and-cross design of the Calvert family coat of arms. The Penn family crest on the Delaware side recalls when the state was still part of Pennsylvania. Happily, in 1776 nascent

Delawareans simultaneously declared their independence from both King George III and Pennsylvania — lest they someday refer to submarine sandwiches as hoagies and say things like "Yinz go'n to the Steelers game, yah?"

This monument tells me exactly where I am. That will not do.

There's only one route west out of Fenwick Island: Lighthouse Road, also called Route 54. I cross the bridge over The Ditch, a canal that separates Little Assawoman Bay from her sister, Big Assawoman Bay.

I live up near Lewes, where a favorite parlor

game is to come up with creative profane names for the developers who'll tear down a forest, evict all the animals and rechristen the place "The Preserve." We tend to think enviously of less-developed Fenwick and its environs, but my neighbors would be shocked at the amount of building going on down here. Everywhere I look, communities are springing up; field after field of "stick-built" homes (a term that makes me imagine Little Pig construction crews).

Nevertheless, I've never been along this stretch of road before. I'm not quite lost yet, but I'm at least exploring the unknown.

I try to get lost

Not far up the road, even at 35 mph, I am aware of eyes watching me. I glance to the left and stare back at the faces peering from the windows of Sound United Methodist Church.

It's a century-old building in the style of so many country churches around here, but Sound Church has one distinctive feature: an array of gloriously colorful stained-glass windows, each combining the Old World art of colored glass with a decidedly folk-art-inspired design. Angels cavort, Jesus extends his hands over the faithful. The colors are bold, the figures flat, like subjects of a Grandma Moses painting.

I'm barely five miles out of Fenwick and already my wanderings are rewarding me.



A bit farther along, I hang a random left on Williamsville Road. It's winding and grows narrower by the half-mile. I pass an abandoned chicken house with three turkey vultures on the roof, waiting for the welcome whiff of a rotting carcass. In an empty field I spot a miniature concrete lighthouse, maybe 15 feet tall, seemingly awaiting someone to build a miniature golf course around it. Today I'll spot dozens of lawn lighthouses, persistent reminders that although I'm surrounded by farmland, the sea is never far away.

The pavement becomes rougher. I'll later learn this is the point where Williamsville Road dips briefly into Maryland — its name changing ironically to Delaware Road — before looping back into the First State. I seem to be pushing deeper and deeper into a bay-side wilderness. I couldn't be happier.

Then I make a turn, and my illusions of remote wild lands are shattered. Spreading before me, like a stick-built Oz, stands the sprawling Bayside development, home of the Freeman Stage.

A bit deflated, I drive to the end of the property, where a poolside restaurant overlooks Big Assawoman Bay. Across the water, seemingly close enough to touch, are the towering condos of Ocean City.

I'm not lost at all.

I find the Land of Lost RVs

You don't pass up a street called Bearhole Road. So I turn onto it, keeping a hopeful lookout for bears, or the holes that contain them.

A mile or so in I find something almost as good: a lineup of life-size plywood cartoon figures atop a low hill. ▶



WATCH Ride along with writer Bill Newcott as he gets lost roaming around coastal Delaware, where he discovers that his journey is actually full of "right" turns: delawarebeachlife.com/videos

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There's a smiling guy in what may be blue bathing trunks carrying what looks like a hatchet. He's running away from an angry blond woman wielding a roller pin, and she's followed by several other amused characters, including a child pulling a dog.

Behind this odd crew stretches a long red chicken barn — a “chicken house,” in local parlance — surrounded by lots of RV campers. And on the roof, in letters large enough to be seen by passing aircraft, are the words: “Lost Lands RV Park — Where Country Meets the Beach.”

I pull into the gravel drive and park at the near end of the building. The structure is enormous, stretching toward a vanishing point like the work of a young artist just getting the hang of depicting perspective.

“It's 500 feet long,” says David Simpson, the friendly owner of Lost Lands and the closest thing to a mayor for this collection of 179 motor homes. He's been running the place for 19 years.

“It was an abandoned chicken farm,” says Simpson, a bearded, ball-capped native of the area. “No one was looking after it. We had to clear off the hog pens and the tractors and the old cars.”

Simpson is especially proud of his renovation of the chicken house, nearly long enough to contain a horizontal Washington Monument. Aside from an international airport terminal or cathedral, you don't often step into a long, unobstructed enclosed space like this. There are picnic tables for its entire length — a place for the RV park residents to dine and, perhaps, create a small sense of community. The interior is decorated with old road signs and other whimsical touches, including an array of mounted bedpans.

Simpson tells me he didn't expect to become an RV park impresario; he stumbled upon this place completely by accident.

“I'm just one of those guys who likes to go out on the back roads and see what's there,” he says. “I like to not just see things, but look *through* things, and envision what they could be.”

Then he smiles.

“Like you,” he says.

Bearhole Road has been good to me, so I continue on it straight to the end.

I flip a coin, make a few random turns, and end up on the wonderfully named Gum Road.

That's when I see the horse. I think it's a Clydesdale, but who am I kidding? I know horses like I know quantum physics. Maybe less. But I have to pull over to admire his striking coat and four white “socks.” His long blond mane is a torrent of hair spilling over his shoulders, nearly to his knees.

I pull over to take a picture of him grazing. But the moment I raise my camera, he lifts his head to stare at me.

“I don't want a portrait — I want a candid!” I mutter. But he stares me down until I leave.



I meet the Redmen

I head west on Gum Road, named for the family of 17th century farmer Roger Gum, whose genetic line nearly 250 years later yielded a Minnesota girl named Frances Gumm — better known to you and me as Judy Garland.

I pass farmhouses with cars parked on the grass and solitary houses built on lots that were covered with corn not long ago.

Just outside of downtown Selbyville I spot a sign for Cemetery Road.

It probably says a lot about me when I say my idea of a good time is exploring an old cemetery. In Selbyville Redmen's Cemetery I spot the final resting place of John Townsend Jr., who was governor of Delaware until 1921 (and later a U.S. senator).

The cemetery is named for the Red Men, a fraternal group still in existence but much in decline — and what fraternal group isn't? — that traces its origins back to the Boston Tea Party (in which white Colonists disguised themselves as “red men” to protest British tea taxes). There are Red Men cemeteries like this one — and Redmen's, as spellings vary — across the country.

For some time Selbyville's chief claim to fame was the old Mumford Sheet Metal Works, which in 1950 produced the world's largest frying pan. And Doyle's Restaurant, circa 1930s, is said to be the oldest operating diner in Delaware. These days the town's biggest employer has to be Mountaire Farms. It is lunchtime, and I can easily spot workers from the chicken processing plant, still wearing their gauzy hairnets. One such couple is walking across Church Street. She is clearly trying to stay one step ahead of him; he's trying to keep up without looking like he's actually chasing her.

“You want some of this ice cream cone?” he's yelling, and I can see he's waving a vanilla cone in the air. “You want a bite of this?”

She picks up her pace. “I don't want none of that ice cream

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cone now!” she shrieks without turning her head. “Not now I don’t!”

“Here!” he bellows, desperation rising in his voice. “Take a bite! Take the whole thing! The whole thing!”

She stops and spins in his direction. “You idiot!” she sobs. “This is *not* about the ice cream cone!”

Even I knew that.

It’s clearly going to be a long afternoon at the Mountaire Farms chicken processing plant on this day.

I traverse the Great Plains

Pepper Road out of Selbyville heads north. Along this stretch of farmland, more than a few families seem to be having yard sales of the most unorganized kind: items from toasters to encyclopedias strewn about on blankets and dropcloths.

It’s about 5 miles from Selbyville to Frankford, and unlike the shore communities, which all seem to blend into each other, the gaps between towns make the landscape here feel positively Midwestern.

That Great Plains vibe only grows more vivid as I turn onto Main Street in Frankford. At one end of the thoroughfare stands the spire of the 167-year-old Frankford United Methodist Church — its slender silhouette seemingly entangled in the towering grain elevators of yet another Mountaire facility. The Cathedrals of the Midwest, they call grain elevators out there, and at this moment I could just as easily be sitting outside Lincoln, Neb., as in Slower Lower Delaware.

I leave town, heading northeast on Murray Road, and suddenly I am in horse country. Beyond the low houses



The rocket, like just about everything else inside and out at Jayne’s Reliable in Dagsboro, is for sale.

on my left I can see oval tracks with red-coated thoroughbreds grazing at their centers.

Seemingly in a flash, I’ve traveled from America’s breadbasket to the bluegrass of Kentucky.

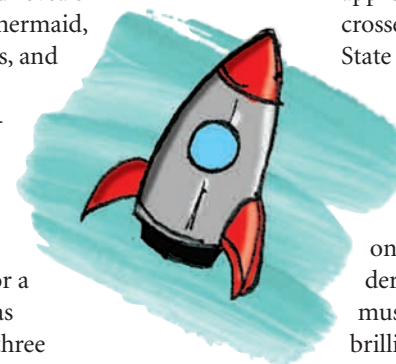
I encounter a rocket ship

It’s one thing to get lost; it’s quite another to shift space/time. One moment I’m trying to find my way through Dagsboro — the next I’m blinded by the afternoon sun glinting off a sleek silver rocket ship. Squinting into the light, I see the craft is sailing across the front lawn of a large century-old house.

The rocket is a piece of art, it’s for sale, and that goes for everything inside and outside the fanciful jumble that is Jayne’s Reliable, where a quick glance around reveals choice offerings including a bronze mermaid, some rusting vintage gas station signs, and an ancient doctor’s office scale.

“Yeah, the rocket gets a lot of people in,” says Karen Jayne, who came to Dagsboro with her husband, David, to start the business about eight years ago.

“We’d always done other things for a living, but our idea of a good date was always going to a yard sale. We have three grown sons, and we always preached to them, ‘Do what you love.’ Finally, we decided to follow our own advice.”



The Jaynes are purebred collectors — they leave the curating to their customers. So you can find that church pew, 8mm film projector, or Coastal Highway street sign you’ve been looking for. Why you want it, and what you do with it, is nobody’s business but yours.

I find New England

I’m threading the needle between Dupont Boulevard, also known as Route 113 — as far west as I’m willing to go — and the upper reaches of the Indian River on Iron Branch Road, which becomes State Street. There’s no way to be lost here, but as I approach Main Street in downtown Millsboro, I realize I’ve never crossed it and continued north. So I head that way, staying on State Street — and am almost immediately rewarded with one of the loveliest stretches of road in all of coastal Delaware.

It begins where State Street becomes Betts Pond Road, a point announced by the presence of a stately yet crumbling wood house and the equally mature small barn behind it. The road enters a tunnel of trees, the pines on the left standing between the pavement and a long, meandering pond. I open my window at the start and soon hear the music of water spilling over a low dam. Even on this, the most brilliant of sunlit days, Betts Pond Road is a shrouded oasis of dense trees, sparkling water, and cool breezes.

If there is any disappointment in Betts Pond Road, it’s that this



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magical length stretches for less than a quarter mile. I turn around and drive it again, and then again, soaking in its gentle curves and shadowy mysteries, reminded of much-longer childhood drives along twisting, narrow roads hugging the shores of New Hampshire lakes.

Delaware returns presently, and now I'm heading north on Patriots Way. I know I need to head east if I'm ever going to find Cape Henlopen.

An ascending plane warns me that I'm getting perilously close to the Georgetown Airport — which makes me as un-lost as I can imagine. Suddenly, crossing Gravel Hill Road, I notice something I've never seen before: a little road peeling off to the left. It's Anderson Corner Road.

The way is pleasingly shaded by forest, inhabited by the occasional ranch house homestead. Pretty soon I spot the delightfully narrow Doddtown Road. It's the best kind of Delaware road: the kind that doesn't even have a center line.

I turn left onto Doddtown, lost again at last.

I'm enjoying this new landscape so much I nearly miss a startling sight to my left: a vast field of trees growing under an equally sprawling series of plastic canopies and arcing PVC frames. I veer off the road and roll past a sign that reads "Shady Oak Farm: Est. 1985."

Each section of the canopied forest is populated by a different kind of small tree or shrub. I can't name any of them, of course,



If you've got ornamental trees, chances are they started out as saplings under the canopies of Shady Oak Farm.

but I recognize them from virtually every yard in front of every house within 20 miles of here.

As I pull up to the office, a friendly guy named Mike hops off a tractor.

"We've got about 22 acres under cover," he says. "It's mostly nuts and bolts shrubbery. Nothing fancy."

"Let me show you something," he says, leading me to a low building at the rear of the property. We push through the door — and before me spread countless tiny plants on tables, shelves, and the floor. This is the cutting room, where baby plants are nurtured year round.

"We've got about 25,000 cuttings in here," says Mike.

In other words, if you own a house in coastal Delaware, chances are your crepe myrtle, holly bush, or English yew started as a sprig in this room.

I am lost no more

I head east and find myself on Harbeson Road. Try as I might, I cannot get lost again. The closer I get to the beaches, the more that familiar traffic arteries course through the sprouting communities.



Still, I've set out to go from lighthouse to lighthouse, so I maneuver through Five Points, traffic along Savannah Road, and wind my way through Cape Henlopen State Park.

Not even the sand outcropping that so inefficiently supported the Cape Henlopen beacon remains today. It's a reminder that, if you wait long enough, even the sturdiest of landmarks can fade away in a single lifetime. A rotting barn, a fallen oak tree, a vanished field or an extinct strip mall, all are agents of change by subtraction.

So there's hope yet — hope that after years of living with the constant change that defines coastal Delaware, we may still be able to roam those meandering back roads, and get lost. ■

Bill Newcott, an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic Magazine, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives near Lewes.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROLYN WATSON

A State of Bee-ing

Local beekeepers wax enthusiastic about their beloved hobby

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL NEWCOTT



Tending to his backyard hive in Ocean View, Chris Dominic hunts for the queen in the churning, buzzing throng. The Adirondack chair is for evening reveries.

“You’re dressed like a bear.”

I am at this moment being addressed by a man wearing a thick, white, long-sleeved fabric top, his face obscured by the netting in a piece of headgear that resembles a CDC containment outfit. In the yard just beyond him, I catch sight of a cloud of bees darting around a wooden hive, tiny rebel X-wing fighters harassing a Death Star. Their buzzing sounds like the whine of a thousand distant drones.

I glance down at my clothing. I’m wearing dark jeans and a black windbreaker.

“Bees hate it when you wear black,” he clarifies. “They think you’re a bear.”

“Well, should I take this off?” I ask.

“I would,” he says. “Bees hate bears. They’ll go right for your eyes. To blind you.”

Now I am tearing off my windbreaker like it’s on fire. Of course, underneath I’m wearing a long-sleeved black T-shirt. I now look like a slightly smaller bear.

But my host, Chris Dominic, doesn’t panic. He’s been raising bees here behind his house in Ocean View for four years, and he knows what to do. He hands me a white protective top similar to his. As I pull it on I’m impressed by its weight and thickness. Two cords tie it closed to prevent bees from crawling up underneath. Finally, I am issued a pair of rubber gloves.

“Now you’re safe!” he says excitedly. We approach the hive, where the bees all seem to be humming the same note (roughly B below middle C, musical experts have determined).

Dominic starts pumping smoke from a metal canister containing smoldering pine needles. It’s a bee-soothing technique that dates back to ancient Egypt.

“It’s best not to get stung,” he says, and I wonder who in the world would contest that opinion.

“.....”

When you wear black bees think you’re a bear and bees hate bears. They’ll go right for your eyes. To blind you.”

.....

The buzzing intensifies when Dominic lifts the metal lid off the hive’s top box. Standing inside, like thick filing cabinet folders, are eight wooden frames crawling with bees. Teeming with bees. Absolutely covered with jostling, gyrating thoroughly agitated bees.

“They’re not happy,” mutters Dominic. I take a step back.

With a metal tool that resembles a small, shiny crowbar, Dominic pries out one of the frames.

Dominic, a retired data technician from Washington, D.C., has roughly 30,000 bees, all descended from a single queen he had delivered — along with three pounds of drones and females — by UPS. They are Italian bees, which are thought to be more laid-back than many other types. But this bunch is acting like they have been deprived of their afternoon cappuccino.

“Let’s see if I can find the queen,” he says, and I’m thinking good luck with that — it would be like locating your mother at a sold-out Yankee Stadium.

“There she is!” he says almost instantly. “With the red dot.”

Pushing her way through the mob, like the pope in St. Peter’s Square, is a bee generally indistinguishable from the rest except for a red dot of model paint placed there by the seller specifically to raise the chances of picking her out from the crowd. ▶

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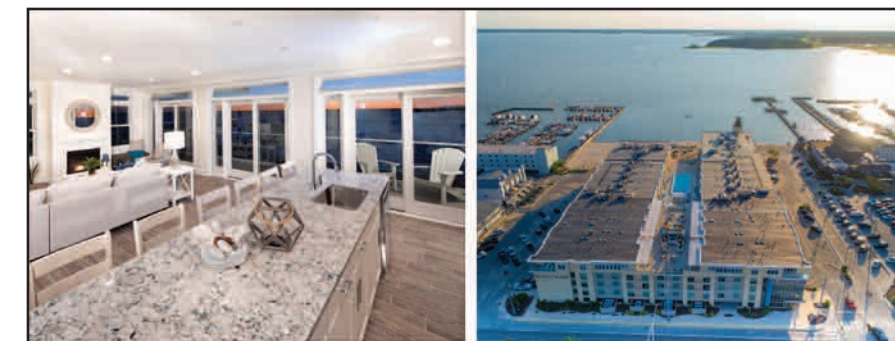


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Treasure Hunting



Combing the neighborhood, Julie Ellis-Hall's bees bring back nectar from flowers up to 3 miles away. "I've always thought bees were cool," she says.

"She's been a great queen," says Dominic. I'm touched by the affection in his voice.

At the bottom of the hive, the entrance resembles the doors to Grand Central Station, with little hairy commuters coming and going, pushing past each other without so much as an "excuse me." Many of those arriving have yellow clumps on their feet, like bright booties: pollen from the many flowers they've visited today, up to 3 miles distant. They wear those booties from flower to flower, shaking them off each time as they provide essential pollination services to the local flora.

The incoming bees also have abdomens swollen with nectar, sucked from various blossoms. Inside the hive they'll share mouthfuls of the stuff with their fellow worker bees, who'll chew the gummy substance for a half-hour or so before passing it on to another. Eventually this shared gunk becomes honey, which the bees will store in wax honeycomb cells for future hive consumption.

It takes eight bees a lifetime of flying, sucking, and chewing to make just one teaspoon of honey. So it takes a lot of bees to feed a hive — and a lot more than that to make enough honey for us to steal for our morning bagels.

Dominic heads into the kitchen of his bright farmhouse and offers me a taste of homemade honey from a half-empty jar. It's delicious, of course.

His wife, Barb, joins us.

"This is Bill," says Dominic. "He came dressed as a bear."

Barb looks at me sadly. "Ohhhh," she says.

On the back porch of her house, Julie Ellis-Hall hands me a set of head-to-toe white beekeeper duds: a screened hood, a heavy top, a pair of fingerless gloves, and a pair of thick white pants.

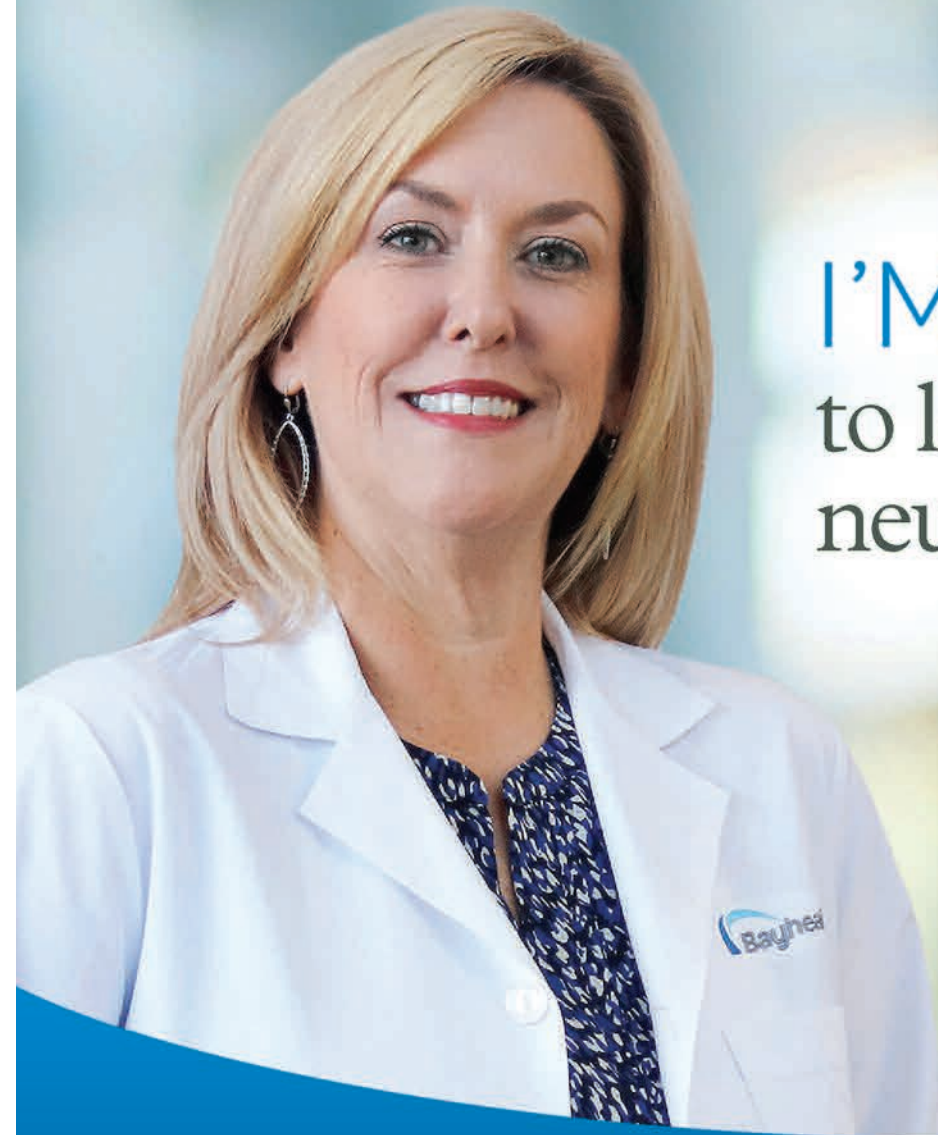
"It's really best if the bees don't crawl up your leg," she says. More timeless wisdom.

Ellis-Hall, a Lewes real estate agent, is a little bummed out. Just yesterday she found one of her hives had died over the winter. It appears the little guys starved to death — but mysteriously, the hive was full of honey.

"It appears they clustered together during a cold snap and stayed that way — they didn't just walk next door to get their honey," she says, a tinge of remorse in her voice.

"Couldn't the cold have killed them?" I ask as we bounce across her Lewes area lot in a golf cart, heading for two hives she keeps at the far end.

"Nope," she says. "Bees can tolerate down to 20 degrees. No matter how cold it gets outside, all their dancing and wing-beating keeps the hive's inside temperature at a steady 90 degrees. >



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“Even in the dead of winter, the top of a beehive is warm to the touch.”

An eighth-generation Delawarean, Ellis-Hall has been an avid hunter and fisher her whole life. And then she discovered beekeeping.

“I’ve always thought bees were cool,” she says. “Then my sister-in-law in Maryland got them — and I knew I just had to have bees.”

She’s not alone: The Sussex County Beekeepers, part of a statewide organization, meet every first Tuesday in Georgetown. That’s where Ellis-Hall met experienced beekeepers who were more than happy to help her get started.

“Some of these people have 900 hives!” she says.

Now she’s in her seventh year keeping bees on her six-acre property along Conley’s Chapel Road.

We pull up to two humming hives. She removes the top of one and, using a tool similar to Dominic’s, separates the frames, breaking the wax seal created by her bees.

She yanks a frame out — and it’s as if she has summoned forth a vast apiary army. There are bees everywhere. I can feel and hear them throwing themselves against my protective gear.

I’m vaguely freaked out, but Ellis-Hall couldn’t be happier. Even through the combined two layers of netting on both of our hoods, I can see the smile on her face and the happy glint in her eyes as she roots through her bustling hive.

The bees are visibly restless. Ellis-Hall tries to calm them with puffs of smoke, but the pine needles she’s using don’t seem to be producing much.

Then I feel it: A pinprick on the second finger of my left hand. I look down and see nothing, but the spreading pain is unmistakable.

“I’ve been stung!” I say in the manner that 1940s war movie soldiers used to say, “I’ve been hit!”

Ellis-Hall looks at me. Her blue eyes are expressionless, and her words come out flat.

“You need to get away from here,” she says. “They’re all over you.”

I turn and try to hustle toward the house, which is just a few hundred feet

away but seems to be dipping beyond the horizon. It’s not exactly like the scene in “The Swarm” where Henry Fonda gets smothered by a cloud of killer bees, but I do see two or three hurling themselves against my face netting — which I now notice has a bee-sized hole down around my mouth.

What’s wrong with my feet? I can’t seem to get beyond a shuffle. It’s literally like that dream where you’re trying to escape the monster but your feet won’t move.

I look down. The protective white pants Ellis-Hall gave me have fallen down around my ankles. Yes, I have my jeans on, but I still look like a guy lurching around the house looking for toilet paper.

It’s horrible. And hilarious. And I’m laughing hysterically, because I know this is probably the funniest thing that Ellis-Hall has ever seen.

“Jump in!” It’s Ellis-Hall on her golf cart. And yes, she’s laughing out loud. I manage to tumble onto the passenger seat. We roll off to safety.

The bees have lost interest. My finger has already stopped hurting. Ellis-Hall presents me with a little plastic bear filled with honey from her hives, and I feel like a child presented with a lollipop after getting a boo-boo.

I actually think I may have the temperament for beekeeping. But my community doesn’t allow beehives, so I’ll never know the quiet pleasures (and occasional panics) of this hobby. I keep thinking of Chris Dominic’s hives, pressed close up against the back of his house, and the large Adirondack chair that he’s positioned just 10 feet or so away from them.

He sits there often.

“How can you not love it?” he asks with a faint smile. “All those little bodies flying around, and that hum.”

“Hummmmmmmmmmm...”

He’s nailed it. B below middle C. ■

Bill Newcott, an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic Magazine, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives near Lewes.

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Zoltar's Good Fortune

The boardwalk attraction has proved its creator's knack for turning a buck

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL NEWCOTT



Rehoboth Beach's boardwalk had the bad fortune of being shut down by COVID-19 — but Zoltar sees luckier days ahead.

"I see you over dere!"

The booming, vaguely Eastern European voice stops me as I'm walking past Zelky's Beach Arcade Central on the Rehoboth Beach boardwalk.

I'm startled. Is someone talking to me? It's the end of the summer season. The boardwalk is crowded, and the source of that voice is obscured behind the late-season crowd.

"Yes, you!" I turn my head toward Zelky's, aglow from inside with strobing colored lights from its banks of video games.

"Come on over," the voice commands, "and let Zoltar be sharing with you your fortune!"

Of course. It's Zoltar.

Like everyone else who lives around here, I've been accosted by the turbaned mechanical fortuneteller in the glass case countless times. Yet

there's something about that voice — the cranked up bass, the push-it-to-11 volume. Every time Zoltar calls to me, I have to at least glance in his direction.

Also like almost everyone else who lives here, I'm way too cool to actually stop and put actual cash into Zoltar's money slot. It's way more "local" to stand by nonchalantly and witness the tourists as they donate their hard-earned vacation funds to the swami's cause.

"Your small payment will reap great benefits if you listen to these words of wisdom from the all-knowing Zoltar!" the Gypsy advises three giggling girls who have taken the bait.

"The best place to find a helping hand is at the end of your arm!"

Creases of puzzlement flicker across their faces.

"Yes," Zoltar continues, his mechanical mouth not even trying to sync up with his words, "you must work for happiness! So go on! Take your two hands, get some money out of your pocket, and let Zoltar tell you more!"

Savvy salesman, that Zoltar. Promise the secrets of the universe, deliver almost nothing, and then suggest the *real* truth is just another dollar away.

The kids do that thing adolescent girls do, glancing at each other with their mouths hanging open, half laughing and half hooting, crouching slightly. Then they scoot off, slowing only to *ooh and aah* over a little girl riding a mechanical horsey.

“People seek him out year after year. We had no idea how much people love him.”

They also forget to pick up the little fortune card Zoltar has thoughtfully dropped into a rectangular frame near the money slot. They're clearly not coming back, so I help myself.

"Sometimes it is better," it reads, "to say too little than to say too much and regret it later." I nod and make unexpected eye contact with Zoltar the Wise.

There he sits, silently stoic in his glass cubicle (or seems to sit; his legs are invisible beneath a cut-out card table). Zoltar's mechanical eyes dart intently to and fro, his right hand passes mystically above a frosted glass ball. He is patience mechanically personified.

Until 90 seconds pass.

"I AM ZOLTAR THE GREAT GYPSY!" he suddenly booms in an eruption of self-validation. "I can see your fortune! Come see it too, no?"

Despite his know-it-all air, Zoltar has no idea how close he came to losing his spot on the boardwalk in 2017 when the Weiner family, owners of two other Rehoboth Beach arcades, bought the former Playland arcade. Zoltar had been there since at least the early 2000s. >



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#13 The Circle



“We weren’t going to keep him,” says Matt Weiner, whose father, Chuck, opened his first boardwalk location in 1985. “We thought Zoltar was this old-fashioned thing nobody would be interested in.”

But then Weiner noticed small groups gathering around the soothsayer. On days when the Central Beach Arcade was closed, visitors went to the family’s other locations and asked where Zoltar was.

“People seek him out year after year,” says Weiner. “We had no idea how much people love him.”

Zoltar may look lonely in his solitary glass booth, but he’s not alone. He’s got between 2,500 and 3,000 identical brothers across the U.S. from Coney Island to the Santa Monica Pier, all speaking in the same thunderous voice, all dispensing the same universal wisdom.

And they all have the same father: a pleasant-natured man named Olaf Stanton. He owns Characters Unlimited, just outside Las Vegas, and for his entire adult life he’s been cranking out animated figures for businesses, theme parks, and boardwalk attractions.

On the day I catch Stanton by phone, he’s just left his warehouse/assembly plant in Boulder City, on his way to check on some Zoltar machines he’s got plying their trade along Fremont Street in downtown Vegas.

Stanton’s first generation of characters weren’t interactive at all — they served simply as come-ons for businesses trying to draw patrons inside.

“I had a bunch of animated characters,” he says. “Sea captains, cowboys, Indians, pirates — whatever someone wanted to have as an attraction in front of their businesses.”

“But then some people said to me, ‘Well, I don’t see how this figure is going to make me any money.’ So I got the idea to put my character in a box, put a quarter slot on it and charge to hear it talk and tell a little story — or tell a fortune.”

First Stanton introduced Old Pappy, a grizzled miner who doubled as a fortuneteller. Next came Old Pirate, who also probed the future. Then, as Zoltar might put it, good fortune smiled upon him.

“In the late 1990s I made a character I called Swami — my version of a Gypsy fortuneteller,” he says.

Everyone who saw Swami recognized him immediately. With his turban, stern face and piercing eyes, Swami bore an unmistakable resemblance to another Gypsy fortuneteller-in-a-glass-box: Zoltar, the mechanical figure who grants the wish of Tom Hanks’ younger self to grow up overnight in the 1988 fantasy comedy “Big.” The similarity was no accident, but Stanton stopped short of adopting Zoltar’s name for fear Twentieth Century Fox, or its lawyers, would come pounding on his door.

Of course, given that Swami was virtually identical to Zoltar in every way, and since he was selling quite a few of these guys, there was still the nagging possibility that someone might accuse Stanton of copyright infringement.

But no one ever complained, and Stanton began to wonder why. On a hunch, in 2006 he looked into the status of



Zoltar — and was stunned to discover that, despite the character’s near-universal familiarity, no one had ever filed for a trademark on him.

Stanton quickly corrected that oversight, and today the Zoltar trademark is owned by Characters Unlimited.

Most people who revisit “Big” are surprised to discover that the movie’s Zoltar doesn’t speak at all. Giving voice to him was Stanton’s own stroke of genius — although the voice itself belongs to an actor named Josh Harrison, who works out of Nashville. Harrison voices not only the boardwalk version of the seer, but also a Zoltar slot machine and a miniature tabletop Zoltar you can have in your home (full-size models run from \$5,800 to \$10,500).

Stanton’s one regret is that although his company licensed Zoltar for a recent Liberty Mutual Insurance commercial, somehow Harrison did not get the voice acting gig.

“That slipped through our fingers,” he says sadly. “We didn’t know what they were doing.”

Zoltar is far from being the only character in Stanton’s stable. You can still buy Pappy and Old Pirate from him — along with the white-bearded Oracle, Wyatt Earp, and Confucius. Stanton’s crew of artists also makes animated animals, Santas, and dinosaurs — and they’ll even whip up a custom animated figure of anyone you ask for.

“I had this one fellow who asked me to make an animated figure of his deceased mother,” he says. “One day this box turned up from him containing her clothes, her jewelry, and even her teeth.”

“That’s a strange story.”

“We weren’t going to keep him,” admits Zelky’s manager Matt Weiner, whose family bought the location a few years ago. But there’s a reason why Zoltar has more than 2,500 identical brothers nationwide.

Dusk is falling over the Rehoboth Beach boardwalk. The servers at Kohr Bros. are leaning on the counter, pooped after a long day. The arcade attendants are propped lazily against the doors, catching the evening’s first off-shore breeze.

Only Zoltar remains vigilant, sitting ramrod straight at his post.

“Come closer and listen to what Zoltar has to tell you!” he enthuses. “Dream as if you’ll live forever. Live as if you’ll die today!”

“So go on, have fun!”

“And surrender more cash for more wisdom from the Great Zoltar!” ■

Bill Newcott, an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic Magazine, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives near Lewes.

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The Telescope in the Cemetery

251 years ago, the sun shone on Lewes as astronomical history was made

BY BILL NEWCOTT | PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLYN NEWCOTT

A quarter of a millennium and one year later, the author re-enacts Lewes's shining moment in astronomical history at Bethel Methodist Cemetery.



It is 2 p.m. on June 3 and people are looking at me. Or, rather, they are looking at my reflecting telescope, set on its tripod just beyond the low brick wall of Bethel Methodist Cemetery along Savannah Road in Lewes.

No one stops to ask me what I'm doing with this primarily nocturnal instrument, surrounded by headstones and pointed directly at the sun. I wish someone would, because it's a fascinating story.

At least I think so.

The fact is, I'm engaged in a re-enactment of sorts: At this specific location, at this precise second, on this exact date 251 years ago, a team of astronomers dispatched to Lewes by none other than Benjamin Franklin himself observed the small black disk of the planet Venus traverse the face of the sun.

In so doing — in concert with astronomers taking similar measurements at that moment from locales around the globe —

they helped define the size of the solar system to a level of precision that rivals the most exacting modern calculations.

And, dear reader, if that does not get your juices flowing, I'd suggest you flip right now to the restaurant guide in the back of this issue. Because we're about to wander, starry-eyed, into the realm of monumental historical nerdishness — and the personal passion of a modern Rehoboth Beach resident whose obsession with stars, time and historical instruments enabled me to stand confidently on the spot where 18th century scientific history was made.

It was on May 26, 1769, that three gentlemen arrived in Lewes by boat from Philadelphia. Owen Biddle was a prominent Philadelphia clock maker; Joel Bailey was an experienced surveyor who had helped define the Mason-Dixon Line; Richard Thomas — no known relation to the actor who played John Boy on "The Waltons" — was a prominent Philadelphia surveyor. We can only

imagine how strange they looked unloading their exotic cargo, including three reflecting telescopes, a surveyor's theodolite, and a full-sized pendulum clock.

It was odd enough when the trio immediately rented an empty house on South Street (now known as Savannah Road). But when they approached two local schoolboys for a mysterious task, the weirdness of these visitors must have seemed positively flummoxing.

Most likely, it helped that they had been dispatched here by the great Ben Franklin, who even then was a living legend. As a leading light of the Philadelphia Philosophical Society, Franklin had aligned himself with London's Royal Astronomical Society (remember, the Revolutionary War was not to erupt for another six years) in its quest to determine the vast distances of outer space.

In 1769, every astronomer worth his salt knew the planet Venus was scheduled to pass before the sun around 2 p.m.

Colonial time on June 3 — and that the phenomenon would not occur again until 1874. Through separate observations of the event from enough spots across the face of the Earth, scientists would be able to accurately measure not only the distance to the sun, but by extension the size of the entire known solar system.

Franklin enthusiastically joined the project. Three locations, widely separated to mitigate the chance of weather problems, were chosen for observations: Philadelphia's State House Square (now known as Independence Square); the Pennsylvania farm of David Rittenhouse, America's leading astronomer; and Lewes.

A backwater town at the mouth of Delaware Bay may seem like a strange choice for participation in a global scientific study, but Franklin had a double mission in mind. In order to precisely measure the transit of Venus, the Lewes team would first need to conduct an extensive survey to determine their exact

latitude and longitude — information that could also be used to pinpoint the location of the brand-new Cape Henlopen lighthouse, an important navigational aid for Philadelphia-bound ships.

The guys had just eight days to prepare. A land survey requires a known starting point, and the only relatively handy one was the recently surveyed Transpeninsular Line in Fenwick — the very same one Mason and Dixon used to determine the starting point of their famous line separating Maryland and Pennsylvania. Working feverishly with a small crew of local workers, in less than four days Bailey and Thomas surveyed a distance of some 20 miles across farms, forests, and ponds from Fenwick to Lewes, following Colonial-era roads and trails whenever possible.

Combining these ground measurements with several nights of astronomical observations (including the positions of Jupiter's moons), Bailey determined the precise location of the rented house in

Lewes. However, using his coordinates today would put the house roughly at the intersection of Pilottown Road and Shipcarpenter Street, not far from the Lewes Historical Society campus.

So, why am I standing with my telescope in a cemetery nearly a half-mile from there? Allow me to introduce you to Jim

Morrison, a now-deceased Oklahoma-born engineer who worked briefly for the U.S. space program in California before settling in for a long career at IBM. He retired to the Rehoboth area and became fascinated with Lewes's connection to the 1769 transit of Venus.

"I'm not sure when his fascination with astronomical measurements started," says his son, Chris Morrison, a photographer for a Kansas City, Mo., TV station. "But sometime when I was a kid, he became fascinated with sundials: how they worked, why they worked, the angles involved, all of that."

Then came an infinitely more exotic

“Sometime when I was a kid, my father became fascinated with sundials: how they worked, why they worked, the angles involved, all of that.”

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pursuit: astrolabes, the baroque devices sailors used for centuries to steer by the stars.

“He actually found a way to simulate a physical astrolabe on a computer,” says Morrison.

Museums often publish lushly illustrated books of astrolabes from their collections, treating them more like works of art than scientific instruments. In 2007, Jim Morrison tried to fill that gap with a painstakingly researched book on all things astrolabe. Titled “The Astrolabe,” it’s out of print now, but if you go on Amazon you can pick up a paperback copy for \$499, shipping included.

Naturally, as a resident of the Lewes-Rehoboth Beach area, an astronomical enthusiast like Morrison could not ignore the 1769 transit of Venus. Reading Biddle’s account, he couldn’t help but think there was something wrong about the reported location of the observatory near what is today the historical complex. For one thing, Biddle clearly stated that he had rented a house on South Street (now Savannah Road) about .02 miles southwest of Fourth Street. That would put it a lot closer to today’s Beebe Healthcare than to the Lewes Historical Society.

It was, then, in the spirit of Ben Franklin’s alliance with London’s Royal Astronomical Society that Morrison teamed up with Geoff Thurston, a member of the British Astronomical Society. Together they drafted a scholarly paper recalculating every measurement Biddle and his team made. They considered how Biddle presumed a spherical shape of the Earth when it is now known



The late Jim Morrison of Rehoboth Beach, seen here observing the 2012 transit of Venus from Cape Henlopen, was instrumental in having a historical marker erected along Savannah Road in Lewes.

to be more of an ellipsoid. They found occasional cases of transposed numbers in Biddle’s calculations. Superimposing the reported route of Bailey and Thomas on a Google Maps grid, they found a consistent degree of shift from known roads.

In the end, Morrison and Thurston painted a digital bull’s-eye on this spot where I’m standing in the Bethel Methodist Cemetery:

close to Savannah Road, right where the front yard of a 17th-century house would have been, the main street ensuring there would be few trees to block the view of the early afternoon sky.

Aside from some clouds, the sky I now stand under matches perfectly the one Biddle, Bailey and Thomas beheld, the sun nearly straight above my head. My telescope is aimed sunward, just as theirs were — but of course I’m not going to look directly into that eyepiece. I don’t want to incinerate my retina. The 18th-century stargazers placed heavily smoked glass in front of their telescopes, but even then it was dangerous to gaze at the sun too long. So they glanced through the glass periodically, waiting for the moment, hoping they’d be looking just when the dark circle of Venus began to appear.

Biddle did not know the exact time when Venus would pierce the sun’s horizon — around 2 p.m. was the best anyone could figure. But he was not depending on a pocket watch to alert him. In order to establish the precise local time, the pendulum clock he’d floated in from Philadelphia had been set at the exact moment the sun was at its zenith.

It is 2 p.m. I stand back from my telescope. From there, I’m able to see through the eyepiece that intense, focused solar light.

A few blocks from here, in the 355-year-old Ryves Holt House on Second Street, I know the shadows on the floor match perfectly those that were cast the day Biddle and Bailey looked hopefully into their eyepieces.

The echoes of that time sound around me.

The moment arrives. Biddle momentarily averts his view through the telescope. Bailey lets out a shout. Biddle peers again — and lets out a gasp. There it is: A tiny, nibble-size crescent has already been bitten out of the sun.

“Now!” he yells.

Immediately, those two schoolboys Biddle hired begin chanting out the seconds — taking turns minute by minute — following the beats of the swinging clock pendulum. For the scientists looking through their telescopes, it’s an 18th-century version of a digital countdown

clock superimposed on the image of the sun. The scientists look away from their eyepieces only long enough to write down the times Venus initially touches the sun’s disk (first contact) and when it is fully inside it (second contact).

Biddle is cursing himself for having missed first contact, but Bailey got a good look and logs Venus’ first appearance 2:11:53 p.m. Importantly, both men get the same time for second contact: 2:29:53. Eighteen minutes in all, to the second.

Of 171 field observations made that day across the hemisphere, the Lewes data was considered to be among the most meticulously collected. Mathematicians in London pored over the numbers and calculated that the distance from Earth to the sun — a value known as an astronomical unit — was about 95.37 million miles.

Our best number today: Some 93 million. That’s about a 2 percent error. Not bad for a bunch of guys rolling telescopes around in wooden wagons.

There is a photo of Rehoboth’s Jim Morrison, bent over a reflecting telescope in a spot that looks to be Cape Henlopen State Park. He is observing a transit of Venus — only the fourth since Bailey, Biddle and Thomas lugged their paraphernalia to Philadelphia to Lewes. His excitement seems to reach out through the camera. This is the sort of thing he lived for.

I look at the photo and I’m glad Jim Morrison lived long enough to have that moment. He died on April 8, 2016, which in one of those cosmic coincidences happens to be the 280th anniversary of the birth of David Rittenhouse — the Philadelphia astronomer Ben Franklin had handpicked to head the transit-of-Venus project.

After planning for a year and dispatching Biddle’s team to Lewes, on June 3, 1769, Rittenhouse finally sat down on his Pennsylvania farm to observe the event he’d anticipated for so long.

But Rittenhouse didn’t see first contact. He had fainted. ■

Bill Newcott, an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic Magazine, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives near Lewes.

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BY BILL NEWCOTT | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLYN WATSON



When is a garage not a garage? When it's a curated personal passion.

“Let’s go visit my motorcycle,” says my brother-in-law Paul Yeager, rising from a comfy chair in his living room.

I jump to my feet excitedly, because Paul Yeager’s garage, attached to his house just off Minos Conaway Road near Lewes, is one of my favorite places in coastal Delaware.

Even before Yeager opens the door, I can hear music filtering from beyond it — a 24-hour symphony of sound specially selected to serenade the countless motorcycle-and-classic-car ephemera that

line the shelves, walls, floor and, yes, ceiling of his positively spotless two-car garage.

On the far wall hangs a shrine to Steve McQueen — including a poster of the star preparing to make that iconic cycle jump in “The Great Escape.” The steering wheel of a Triumph is mounted nearby. The industrial-grade metal cabinets above the uber-organized workbench are peppered with photos of vintage cars.

“I have a talent,” he tells me, “for taking a wall and covering it with stuff.” >

“It’s my little home away from home ... in my home,” says Paul Yeager, whose garage provides plush quarters for his pampered Ural motorcycle.



Vintage vehicles big and small populate the Lewes garage of Barry Sipple and Anita Naylor. Along the walls rolls a parade of metal cars and trucks dating back to the 1950s — on the floor stands a 1971 Volkswagen Beetle in the early stages of restoration. The pair still drive around in the 1972 VW van they keep parked outside.



And there in a place of honor, preening like a show dog in front of a curtain of vintage leather jackets, is Yeager's motorcycle. Not a Harley, not a Yamaha, but a Russian Ural cycle. He bought the thing new 12 years ago and has ever since been obsessively retrofitting it to resemble a standard-issue 1941 Soviet Army cycle. You might have seen a photo of him on this cycle last year in the local paper, taken during a military reenactment held at Fort Miles on Cape Henlopen. There he was, proudly astride the Ural in full Russian military regalia, seemingly just returned to Leningrad from a tour in the Balkans. The bike has a fully functional side car on which Yeager has mounted a genuine Russian machine gun. The barrel is filled with lead to render it inoperable, but that doesn't stop the occasional cop from pulling him over to check it out. My sister-in-law Emily, Paul's wife, looks adorable in the side car, but it is really meant to be occupied by a beady-eyed, square-jawed Soviet-era conscript, squinting through the sights and keeping watch for snipers.

I've known lots of people who love their motorcycles, but Yeager is the only guy I know whose motorcycle probably loves him back. After all, with custom lighting, a separate HVAC system — set to 69 degrees year-round — and constant mood music punc-

tuated by the occasional sounds of revving Alfa Romeos and Ferraris, the Ural enjoys the kind of pampered suburban luxury most of our parents could only have dreamed of providing for us.

It was after a recent visit to the Yeager place that I began paying attention to the occasional open garages that yawn upon the streets and back roads of coastal Delaware. Most of them, of course, are like mine — utilitarian homes for one or two cars. Either that, or the space has been commandeered by all the stuff that couldn't fit into the new house when the owner moved here. Mine is an unpainted space with one bare bulb and heavy-duty wood shelving, a parking area my wife Carolyn's orange 30th anniversary Mazda Miata hardtop convertible reluctantly shares with my 2016 Honda Civic.

But the more I looked, the more I caught glimpses of garages that hold more than vehicles, tools and half-empty paint cans. I discovered a subculture of semi-sacred spaces; sanctuaries where — away from the requisite matched couches and ottomans, "Life's a Beach" wall hangings and TVs mounted atop fireplaces — life's true passions can be pursued within the confines of three walls and an overhead door.

A time/space vortex has been whirling just north of the railroad tracks in Lewes ever since Barry Sipple and Anita Naylor bought their place three years ago. The chronological slip begins right there on the sidewalk outside the couple's garage, where an ancient Texaco gas pump seems poised to dispense fuel for an advertised 15½ cents per gallon — and at any second you expect the old-timey red ECO Tireflator air pump to start hissing and dinging. For good measure, there's a 1972 Volkswagen "Bay Window" van parked parallel to the garage door — which Sipple rolls up to reveal a green, somewhat worn, 1971 Volkswagen Beetle he and Naylor are restoring. I can't help but notice it's a twin to the one once owned by my big brother, Ed — a car we once drove through the streets of Manhattan with a snapped clutch cable.

It's easy to collect a lot of that stuff when you're in the car business. And this garage seemed like a really good place for it all to live."

"Make sure you get a picture of the back window," Sipple tells me. In the accumulating dust someone has used a finger to etch a peace symbol.

"People stop all the time to look at the bus," says Sipple, who's retired after running a used-car business in Laurel for most of his life. Climbing in, he closes the door. Instead of the substantial "thud" that is now engineered into even small cars, I hear the familiar, tinny VW van door sound — oddly reminiscent of a loosely hung screen door slapping shut.

"One guy came back with a picture of himself sitting on top of his VW bus at Woodstock," he says. "Pretty cool. This is probably my seventh VW bus. I used to be able to buy one for \$2,500, put \$2,500 into it, drive it for five years and then sell it for five grand. But now they're really expensive." >



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Sipple and Naylor — who both grew up in Smyrna and went to high school together — recently finished renovating the house. They have now turned their attention to the garage. Already, the peg-board walls are lined with shelves of cast metal model cars dating back to the 1940s. On the highest shelf is the oldest: a heavy-looking pressed-steel tow truck made by Wyandotte, a beloved toy company that specialized in metal toys and went bankrupt when plastic became the rage. A collection of antique oil cans sits atop a tool cabinet.

Sipple started collecting car paraphernalia when he was working in the accounting department of a car dealership. When the business would throw away, say, a fine old metal windshield wiper supply box, he'd rescue it from the trash and bring it home.

"It's easy to collect a lot of that stuff when you're in the car business," says Naylor, who's retired after a career at Lockheed Martin. "And this garage seemed like a really good place for it all to live."

"I guess I'm not in the car business anymore," adds her husband, "but the car business is sort of in me. I come out here and work on this VW, surrounded by this stuff, and I feel at home."

bid adieu to the 1950s idyll of Sipple and Naylor's garage and head back toward my car, parked on Railroad Avenue. Just a couple of houses down, I stop in my tracks. At the top of a short driveway, behind the proscenium of an open double garage door, is what appears to be a small Broadway stage complete with a rich velvet curtain. It's pulled back to reveal an enormous vintage theater poster for Walt Disney's "Cinderella." Hanging on the walls are scores of signed posters and programs for Broadway shows old and new, immortal and less-so.

As one who easily forgets the boundaries of polite society, I immediately venture up the drive and tentatively poke my head through the garage door. As my eyes adapt to the relative darkness inside, I am aware of the sound of a car pulling in behind me. It's a situation I find myself in quite often: The writer in me frequently adopts a trespass-first/answer-questions-later attitude. But as is usually the case, the driver of the car pops out smiling, clearly pleased that someone has taken notice of his personal passion.



The owner of this Broadway-on-the-Broadkill is Jim Ryan, a onetime child actor and lifelong theater lover who has semi-retired to Lewes after a career as a major event organizer. He's run inaugural balls for Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, organized conventions for thousands in Las Vegas — and now operates a scaled-back event business from a little office in his house.

"People come up here all the time," he says. "They ask about the stuff; they ask about the art." >

All the world's a stage — and that includes Jim Ryan's Lewes garage, where he has fashioned a shrine to Broadway theater. Signed posters and programs line the walls, and a plush red curtain frames a classic Disney movie poster. "Interestingly," he adds, "Unlike a lot of garages, I can still get my car in here."



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Ryan stands proudly in the middle of his theatrical garage, lingering under a full-size disco ball that's hung from the ceiling — along with a high school marching band uniform and an Uncle Sam suit — and gestures toward the array of posters on one wall.

"About half of these are mine, and the rest were given to me by a friend," he says. "Here's 'Hello, Dolly!,' signed by Pearl Bailey and Cab Calloway. Look at that one from 'How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying' — signed by Rudy Vallee and Robert Morse."

Above the garage door, the faces of Broadway immortals gaze down on us from an array of Playbill covers, as if occupying an all-star mezzanine.

"I've got about 150 more of those," he says. "I think I'll have to put them on the ceiling. I have to figure out how to do that. I'll be on my back, like Michelangelo."

Glancing at me, Ryan seems a tad embarrassed.

"It's not that I'm a hoarder," he says, "but I don't believe in putting stuff in drawers."

When Ryan entertains guests, the garage becomes a focus of post-dinner activity: cigars are broken out, packs of cards are opened.

"Some people say, 'Why do you have all this stuff out here in your garage? It's not even part of the house, really.' But you'd be surprised how much time you spend in your garage. I'm out here four or five times a day. Why shouldn't I enjoy it?"

Just one thing confuses me. Personal passions aside, garages still serve an essential household function: They are where we put all our ugly stuff, like paint cans and cleaning fluids.

"Ah!" says Ryan triumphantly. "That's the genius of the red velvet curtain." He pulls it back — and reveals shelves of unsightly household odds and ends.

He smiles. "You might say it's all backstage."

"I've got to warn you," says Linn Worrell. "The garage is a mess!"

And then he opens the door on the most pristine, utterly organized garage I have ever laid eyes on.

A retired operations supervisor for petroleum companies, Worrell now spends much of his spare time doing woodwork here in his garage. There are

two or three heavy-duty wood cutting and shaping machines lined along one wall, but Worrell uses them sparingly — just long enough to get his wood pieces whittled down to the right size for making intricate, delicate pieces of woodworker's art.

"It's the hand tools that I love," he says. "It's relaxing, and most of all it's nearly noiseless. And that's a nice escape in a noisy world."

He's especially fond of building wooden lap desks in the style of the Shakers, a project that generally takes about two weeks. But now he's making plans to embark on creating the lap desk lover's Holy Grail: a reproduction of Thomas Jefferson's portable writing desk, a painstakingly elaborate affair with drawers, inkwells, dovetailed pieces and adjustable levels.

"It might take me 10 years," he shrugs.



"It's a nice escape from a noisy world," says Linn Worrell, settling in behind his desk-like workbench — where he's got projects plotted out for the next decade.

If so, he'll spend that decade in style. The garage's patterned gray, black and blue floor is made of RaceDeck, a plastic tile with a Lego-like bottom that's durable, easily cleaned, and comfortable to stand on. Tools are hung — perfectly parallel or perpendicular to the floor — on white peg boards. To one side stands a lovingly built small pine cabinet with dainty drawers. Boards stand at attention, filed according to height and project, in neat groupings against the wall. Light pours in through two large windows that illuminate Worrell's work space — a sturdy wooden table made of knot-free European birch. Positioned as it is in the corner of the garage beneath the two windows, it more resembles an executive's office desk than a craftsman's workbench.

Most importantly, behind the bench is a comfy office chair, perfect for settling in for detailed wood work.

"He's so patient," says Worrell's wife of 51 years, Margie, a retired schoolteacher. "He just keeps working on those tiny little joints over and over until they're perfect. If it were me I'd be snapping the pieces of wood in frustration, but he just keeps at it."

"The irony is, he never was a really patient person when we got married. That's the weird part."

"It's the working on a project that I love," he explains. "I tend to give things away when I finish with them. I built a workbench before this one, then I gave it away. And when I finish the Thomas Jefferson writing desk, I'm giving that to our neighbor."

Worrell turns on the radio that accompanies his hours alone in his garage. Soon the space is filled with the sound of Lloyd Price singing the 1950s hit "Personality."

He pulls out the plans for the Jefferson desk and can't help but smile a little. This will be 10 years well spent.

Driving back home, I think about one particular corner of Paul Yeager's garage — a gallery of small black-and-white photos. They are of a dilapidated old garage in Pittsburgh, the one where he grew up working on cars and hanging out with his brothers.

"It had a dirt and cinder floor — we changed engines in there," recalled Yeager, who spent his career as an orientation and mobility specialist for the visually impaired. "When I was in graduate school I had an old garage that leaked rain on my Datsun. Later I had a garage that got so cold in the winter I had to put electric blankets over my two motorcycles to protect the oil."

"So I always had this dream that someday, when I retired, I would have a real comfortable garage with the things I want in it. And to be honest, this garage is one of the reasons we bought this house."

"It goes back to my father, and to my brothers and to the time we spent together working on cars. This place is so different from what we had, but it makes me feel close to them."

I pull into my driveway. The garage door rolls up and there's Carolyn's orange Miata, its downturned headlights frowning disapprovingly. Gingerly, I open the Civic's door, ever so careful not to let it touch the Miata's unblemished paint job.

Emerging from my car, I cast my gaze along the industrial-strength shelves we have built to hold all the things that would not fit in our house. There are the blow-up beach toys we pull down when the grandchildren visit. Tucked off to one side is a signed Robert Redford movie poster that's just too big for any of our walls. Up ahead is a neat lineup of Tupperware bins containing the photo albums, documents, and memorabilia each of us brought to our marriage nine years ago. On a shelf to my right sits a plush battery-operated figure of the least popular "Star Wars" character, Jar-Jar Binks, banished to the garage because he insists, with complete randomness, on occasionally shaking wildly and exclaiming, "Meesa Wuv You!!"

I must admit I've been a little jealous of the dedicated garage curators I've been meeting. Their garages are so thought-out ... so defined ... so *them*.

But standing here, trying not to smudge the Miata, I'm beginning to feel a little better. A lot better, in fact. This is my garage. And it's me. ■

Bill Newcott, an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives near Lewes.

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