

Bidens on the Beach

Ready or not, coastal Delaware will play host to the first family's resort getaways

BY BILL NEWCOTT | ILLUSTRATION BY ROB WATERS

Hey, neighbors, meet Joe.

Like a lot of us, Joe works in Washington, D.C., and has a little getaway place here near the beach. His wife, Jill, is a teacher and they have a lot of kids and grandkids who ramble around the six-bedroom place they bought about four years ago.

Joe's kind of an unassuming guy, so you might not even notice him if not for the concrete barriers at the end of his street whenever he's around, the enormous helicopter that will be flying him into town for the next four years, the fleet of black Suburbans that accompany him everywhere he goes, and the Men in Black who surround him when he ducks into Lori's Oy Vey Cafe on Baltimore Avenue for takeout.

Chances are you'll especially notice Joe when you try to drive to Gordons Pond this summer and find yourself part of not only the usual caravan of cars heading for the state park — but also an untold number of gawkers slowing down, craning their necks, and hoping to catch a glimpse of Joe Biden, president of these United States of America.

"Throughout our careers, Jill and I have dreamed of being able to buy a place at the beach ... where we can bring the whole family," Biden said in 2017 when the couple bought the beach house on Farview Road in North Shores.

"We feel very lucky that we're now able to make that happen."

Initial reports were that Joe and Jill were looking for a place at the (horrors!) *Jersey Shore*. But apparently even former vice presidents can be lured by favorable tax rates. After 44 years of the Washington rat race — including Biden's 36 years as a senator and eight as Barack Obama's veep — it looked like those crazy kids were about to finally settle down.

But history had something else in mind. Barely three months after the Bidens bought their dream getaway, the city of Charlottesville, Va., erupted amid something called the Unite the Right Rally. White supremacists marched with torches. A counterprotester was killed. Joe Biden cast his eyes to North Shore's private beach down the street, then back to the nation's capital, and decided his country needed him one more time.

During Biden's vice presidential years, until he and Jill bought their new house, the couple frequently stayed with friends in North Shores. Even for the first six months after he left Washington — with Secret Service protection still in tow — beach trips remained low-key.

Fresh from his 2020 election victory, the president-elect spent Thanksgiving here, and the family was back in town for New Year's Eve. But as of this writing, Joe and Jill have yet to pay a presidential visit to their beach home.

In the old days, Vice President Biden most often would arrive by small aircraft at Eagle Crest Aerodrome along Route 1 north of Nassau, and a mini-motorcade would whisk him to the beach. Aside from the presence of a few hulking black SUVs, the neighbors barely noticed he was there. After the departure of his Secret Service detail in early summer of 2017, the Bidens virtually blended into the community — to the degree that one of the most famous faces in the country could pull that off.

"You'd see them out walking their dogs," recalls Gillian Daniels, a North Shores neighbor. "My daughter was out there one day petting [the one named] Major."

"It wasn't unusual to see Joe at GreenMan juice bar on Wilm-





"It's an honor, but it won't be convenient!" says Gillian Daniels, enjoying a quiet moment on the private beach in the North Shores neighborhood she shares with the Bidens.

ington Avenue, just sitting there, drinking a strawberry smoothie. Often there'd be nobody there with him. It was like he was a relative who suddenly got a whole lot more famous.

"A lot of times you'd see him out riding his bike. Without a helmet, I might add. I'd think, 'You know, you're a former vice president. You really ought to be wearing a helmet!'"

"I guess he'll be wearing a helmet from now on."

That's not all that's about to change at the new home of the Summer White House. At a recent briefing with the Secret Service, one message prevailed: If you thought security was tight around Joe Biden before, get ready for security on steroids.

Interviewing Secret Service officials is a frustrating business. On the record they're happy to tell you all about themselves: How long they've been with the Treasury Department, where they grew up, where they've been stationed. But the minute they get to the stuff you really want to know — How will the president travel to coastal Delaware? How big a security perimeter will there be around the house? Will the commander in chief still be able to go biking along the Gordons Pond trail? — everything is suddenly off the record.

That's not to say the Men in Black aren't friendly enough. Jim Henry is the special agent in charge of the Secret Service office in Philadelphia, responsible for protecting the Bidens when they're at the beach. For one thing, he can't seem to say enough nice things about our state and local police, who will have a surprisingly large role in protecting the nation's leader.

"You often hear that the Secret Service is in charge of protection of the president," Henry says. "Well, that's true by statute. But the reality is it's a partnership. We really relied on our partners in Delaware while President Biden was vice president, so we already have good relationships with them. Since March, when we started providing protection for then-candidate Biden, the process has been seamless."

There are all kinds of security considerations for presidents when they wander off the White House grounds, and each situation is unique. The Bidens' vacation home is far from the biggest house in North Shores, nor is it as modest as the low-lying bungalows that stubbornly resist being torn down in favor of new, opulently beachy pleasure palaces. There are, however, lots of sheltering trees everywhere you look. Expect to see Secret Service agents patrolling behind them. The Lewes-and-Rehoboth Canal passes less than two blocks from the house, and a marsh-shrouded channel leads from behind the property to Gordons Pond. Anyone who visited Kennebunkport, Maine, during the Bush presidencies or Palm Beach, Fla., during the Trump years will tell you the waters in and around those sites often hosted flotillas of armed speed boats, and there's every reason to expect the waterways around North Shores will see similar escalation, especially when the Bidens are in residence.

Full-time residents already know they should plan extra time when driving somewhere in the summer, and if the first family is in town, they may want to double down. Streets are often completely closed — nobody allowed in or out — for up to a half-hour before the president's motorcade passes through, even if he's just heading for a hot dog at Gus & Gus Place.

Luckily for area beachgoers, North Shores has its own private beach. You'll know if the Bidens are planning to catch some rays on the sand if you see Secret Service agents in what North Shores resi-

dent Daniels described as their "not-so-Secret-Service" beach attire: khakis and Hawaiian shirts.

Even if you're a couple of miles down the shoreline, there'll be one sure-fire way of knowing if the president is in town: Those ever-present banner-towing airplanes will be missing (the Secret Service is super-strict about the air space above presidential residences).

Otherwise, it appears the day-to-day impact of the Bidens' residency will be minimal: A recent drive-by on a rainy Friday morning revealed nothing more than two mid-size SUVs blocking the driveway.

Most people want to take it in stride," says North Shores resident Daniels. "Others say, 'Ah, it's too much!' The last time the Bidens were here, the Secret Service set up a roadblock that went halfway up a friend's circular driveway.

"I think some people would rather the security moved out of the neighborhood and out to Ocean Drive [the road that leads to North Shores and Gordons Pond] — but, really, when the summer comes, how could you hope to handle all the people driving to the state park?"

One thing is nearly certain to change. The drive from Eagle Crest Aerodrome, even though it's relatively short, nevertheless involves many local twists and turns. From now on the presidential helicopter almost certainly will use the parking lot at Gordons Pond for shuttling Biden to and from the area.

Understand, Marine One is no whirly-bird traffic copter. The Sikorsky VH-class helicopters that have flown presidents since the 1970s are absolute monsters — 72 feet long, 21,500 pounds, loud and disruptive. Last summer, Daniels happened to be in Palm Beach at the same time then-President Trump's Marine One was on the lawn at his Mar-a-Lago estate, 3 miles down the beach.

"You could hear it all the way up in Palm Beach, and it was just idling," says Daniels. "I'm not going to love it when it's a couple of blocks away from my house!"

The decades-old aircraft — the president always travels with an identical decoy helicopter, and sometimes more — are due to be replaced with an even bigger version this summer. Despite its 21st-century gadgetry, no one is expecting the new Marine One to have a "whisper mode." >

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“They feel like part of the community,” says Lori Kline, who got a requisite selfie during one of the future First Couple’s visits to her Rehoboth Beach cafe.

So far, local businesses have been generally slow in jumping on the Biden Bandwagon. Maybe things will change as the summer crowds arrive, but on a recent walk down Rehoboth Avenue I was a little disappointed by the absence of even “Biden Town” T-shirts in the windows.

The truth is, before we see a cascade of Biden Burgers, Cup o’ Joes or even Jill-O shots at local bars, there are those who suspect the local restaurant establishment may need some time to warm up to the new first couple.

“Actually,” one restaurant industry figure told me, as COVID restrictions remain in place, “I believe our local restaurants are more concerned with simply staying open and paying their bills.”

There’s also the undeniable, deeply conservative history of coastal Delaware to consider. The Bidens are, in essence, part of the relatively recent influx of moderate-to-liberal city folk to descend on this area. If you’re a longtime business owner here, I was told more than once, in the recent election you were more likely to be traveling the Trump Train than Ridin’ with Biden.

Still, I knew I could count on The Ice Cream Store, the place near the boardwalk that features hundreds of flavors, including Better Than Sex and Boogers.

“We’ll be having a special flavor to celebrate the president,” says owner Chip Hearn. “Biden Whitehouse Cherry has a sweet, luscious African vanilla base with sweet maraschino cherries.” Plus, there’s a dog bowl on the sidewalk in case Major gets thirsty.

And Lori’s Cafe on Baltimore Avenue is introducing a Joe and Jill sandwich called “The Biden” (half tuna salad for him; half chicken salad for her). “Jill is so sweet; such a real person,” says

cafe owner Lori Kline. “I happen to have her e-mail address, because she orders from here at the cafe, and I would never, ever use it inappropriately. But the day they won the election I shot her an email, just saying, ‘Hey, Lori’s Cafe wishes you all the best; you guys are really gonna rock the White House.’”

“Well, she sent me a message back that very day: ‘Loved hearing from you — pure joy!’ That was so amazing, and it shows how they feel like part of the community.”

Then there’s Browseabout Books, a frequent outing destination for the new first couple over the past few years. The shop already has a nice Biden section, complete with books by Joe (“Promise Me, Dad”) and Jill (“Don’t Forget, God Bless Our Troops”), a Joe Biden action figure and, curiously but irresistibly, a Joe Biden scented candle. My favorite item: “Hot Cup of Joe,” a Joe Biden beefcake coloring book featuring “America’s Sexiest Moderate.”

“We’ve always had this section,” a staffer tells me. “He’s our biggest celebrity.”

Summer White House” has a nice ring to it, conjuring up images of Harry Truman in Key West and FDR in Warm Springs, Ga. It also sounds good to Biden’s friend and Senate successor, Chris Coons.

“Presidents need a place that grounds them,” says Coons, himself a frequent Rehoboth Beach visitor. “It’s a place where their family gathers; a place of respite from the challenges of Washington, D.C. Presidents as far back as Thomas Jefferson had vacation spots where they could get away from it all.



“I also think it’s going to be terrific for Delaware and Rehoboth Beach. It’s going to highlight the ways in which the beach is not just a key for the Delaware shore, but also for the whole region. I’m excited for the awareness it’ll bring to the whole country — not to mention the international press — what a jewel the Delaware beaches are.”

Despite the inevitable limitations being president will impose on Biden’s freedom to wander Rehoboth like he used to, Coons is confident we’ll still see a lot of our most famous local.

“He did a remarkably good job as vice president of managing the challenge of having a 24/7 detail yet getting out and getting to Grotto and getting to Dolle’s and Double Dippers.

“Yes, his security is of national concern, but I’m pretty sure

Browseabout Books patron Jessica Jones bides her time at the store’s Biden section, which has been fully stocked with all things Biden for several years.

he’ll find a way. He loves to get out of the car and dive into the crowd. I don’t expect that to change.”

During a 2019 campaign fundraiser here, Joe himself hinted that we’ll be seeing a lot of him — and the inevitable hassle that goes with it.

“I think you’re going to open the paper in spring or summer 2021 and say, ‘My God, what are those helicopters doing here? My God, where are all of those Secret Service agents?’

“Why the hell did we support this guy? Holy mackerel!”

“So, just in case, I apologize ahead of time.”

The Secret Service’s Henry says he sympathizes.

“We’re very sensitive to the concerns,” he insists. “We try to minimize the impact that a presidential visit will have. But our priority is still the protection of the president.”

In other words, to paraphrase Humphrey Bogart trying to reason with Ingrid Bergman in “Casablanca”: The problems of us coastal Delawareans might not amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world, but at least someone is thinking about the beans’ feelings.

Here’s looking at you, Joe. ■

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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Some area cemeteries are barely recognizable after decades — or longer — of neglect.

A few self-appointed caretakers are trying to change that, one headstone at a time.

By Bill Newcott

GRAVE RESPONSIBILITY

The public record shows that Caleb Byrd was 14 when he died of appendicitis in 1939; the enduring record of his family's grief is this rough-hewn, home made concrete grave marker, now disappearing into the woods at Coastal Club, near Lewes.





Darkened by centuries of assault by nature and humans, a headstone at Coolspring Presbyterian Church is renewed thanks to Dinah Handy-Hall, who is using state-of-the-art restoration techniques as she works her way through the historic graveyard.

“It makes me feel a little sad that they’re out here like this. If you look around us, you can see these aren’t the only graves out here.”

For the most part, the drivers tooling along Log Cabin Hill Road near Harbeson don’t notice the lady in the cemetery, but if they were to think about it, they’d realize she’s out there nearly every morning.

Weather permitting, Dinah Handy-Hall will be puttering around the tombstones of Coolspring Presbyterian Church, daintily applying cleansing solutions to the headstones of worn granite and brittle slate, lovingly placing flowers at some of the older gravesites. Sometimes her husband, Larry, will show up to help lift and reset a 200-pound monument that has tumbled due to wind or settling soil.

The rustic, rectangular church building was built in 1854, but it’s the third sanctuary to stand on this site. (See “A Church for the Ages” on page 42.) The cemetery dates back to the 1730s — and people who lived in the same century as William Shakespeare are among those buried there.

“I can stand at the gravesites of the McIlvaines or the Torberts,” Handy-Hall says, sounding as if she’s talking about the neighbors down the street, “and I know that 270 years ago their family stood at that very spot and said their farewells to their loved ones.

“Plus, the very same headstone has stood there all that time. With very minimal effort, I can extend the life of that stone by 20 years with just some water, a soft brush, and a biological cleaner.”

That cleaner is a product called D-2, and it’s the same stuff they use to keep the White House white.

“It’s quite expensive,” says Handy-Hall. “Sometimes there are stones that I have to clean as many as six times. But it works, and it doesn’t damage the stone.”

You would think this guardian of the cemetery must be a longtime member of Coolspring, or at least a descendant of its occupants. But no, Handy-Hall, a retired horticulturalist and landscape designer and recent transplant from Virginia, happened to be riding her bike along Log Cabin Hill Road about 14 months ago when she noticed the place and decided it could use some attention.

“I was heartbroken, because there was so much that needed repair,” she recalls. David Wall, clerk of the church board, was more than happy to let Handy-Hall — who is a member of multiple cemetery preservation groups — get to work.

“There are about 675 stones out there,” she says. “I would say I’ve cleaned, preserved, reset or mended a third of them.

“There’s lichen, algae, mold, rust — sometimes all of those things. Over time the stone can become sugary, in which case my motto is ‘Do no harm.’ If cleaning is going to do more harm than good, I leave it be.”

Sometimes the birth and death dates carved into stones are obscured — and church lore has it that passing Civil War soldiers mischievously altered some, changing “ones” to “fours” and “sevens.”

“But you can often tell the rough age of someone even if you can’t find the date,” says Handy-Hall. “If there’s a tree [engraved] with a limb cut short, that means they died young.”

The volunteer conservator can’t explain her fascination with cemeteries, but it appears she was born with it.

“When I was little, I told my mother, ‘When I buy a house, it’s going to be next to a cemetery because I’ll never have noisy neighbors.’”

The dead are underfoot all over coastal Delaware — there are some 700 identified cemeteries in Sussex County alone, according to Find a Grave, a leading web database. For every lovingly tended church yard like Coolspring’s, there are, perhaps, dozens of small, irregularly shaped scatterings of tombstones sprouting like stone mushrooms from fields and yards, even erupting unexpectedly in dense woodlands.

Rebecca Scheck is leading me through a tight collection of trees on the outskirts of the Coastal Club development, off Beaver Dam Road near Lewes. Within sight of some handsome two-story homes, we find ourselves facing a headstone, remarkably preserved, considering our surroundings.

A small tree is growing directly in front of the stone, so you need to stand off to the side to get a good look at it. Elihu Sparrow lies under this leaf-strewn patch of woods, “At Rest” since 1928. Nearby, a rough-hewn stone, seemingly carved freehand, marks the grave of Caleb Byrd, just 14 when he died of appendicitis, I later learn, in 1939. (See photograph on pages 48-49.)

“It makes me feel a little sad that they’re out here like this,” says Scheck, who moved here from Pennsylvania in 2018. “If you look around us, you can see these aren’t the only graves out here.”

Chillingly, she’s right. I cast my eyes on the forest floor around me and turn 360 degrees. All around us, like indentations on a lumpy bed of leaves, shallow elongated bowls are visible in all directions. Later I’ll do some cursory research online. This little patch of sacred ground is officially dubbed the Hevalow Cemetery, but also known as the Sparrow Cemetery. There are at least 37 people buried under our feet, African Americans whose birth dates reach all the way back to 1831.

The leaves and “winterfall” crunch beneath our feet as we head back out to the nearby street. We cross a wooden bridge, over a tributary of Goslee Creek. Then we’re on Coastal Club’s paved Eagle View trail, heading up an incline — toward a fenced-in, cleaned-up small cemetery in a wooded area just behind where new multi-family housing is being built.

“The hiking path used to run right through here,” Scheck says, indicating the northeast side of the burial ground. “Then they realized there were bodies under there, so they moved it over.”

It appears the builder has surrounded the burial site with the kind of fencing you’d use to enclose a swimming pool. The gate latch lifts easily, and we head inside. ▶

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This is the Lank Family Cemetery, the place where the longtime farmers of that name became one with the land they tilled for a century or so. Because we are almost directly across the creek from the African American Sparrow Cemetery, I can't help but wonder what the relationship was between the two families.

At first glance, the Lank graveyard seems infinitely better cared-for than the Sparrow. But Scheck, who stops by periodically to tidy things up and straighten falling stones, points out a large animal burrow excavated into the sinking grave of "Mary, Wife of William Lank," who died in 1887 (see photograph below).

"There are foxes here," she says matter-of-factly. "Sometimes things get dug up. They once had some trouble with grave robbers. I found the heel of a shoe over there, by the fence, a week or so ago. And then, there's this ..."

Scheck squats down and moves three red bricks from a small hole.

Beneath them, pitted by the elements and a shade redder than the dead leaves surrounding it, lies a long, thick, intact bone.

"I think it's human," she says. "I think it's a

humerus bone, the one that goes from your shoulder to your elbow."

We stare at the thing. I can't help but wonder who among the people we're 6 feet above is missing that bone — and how many more parts of them are scattered in the woods around us. The *beep-beep-beep* of a backing forklift floats across the narrow field separating us from the construction.

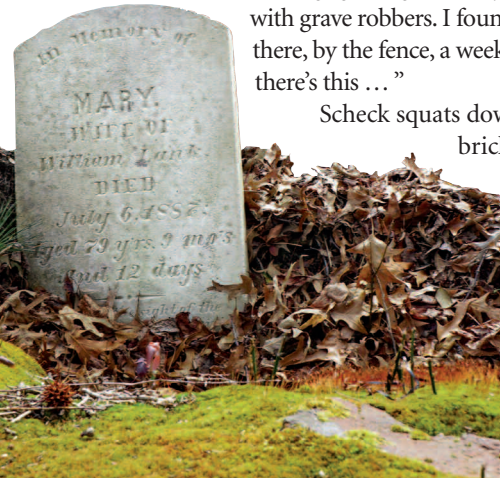
Scheck, a former art student who ended up working for the phone company her whole life, is philosophical.

"It's just a reminder," she says, carefully placing the bricks back on top of the bone. "Our body is just a suit of clothes to hold on to your soul.

"Or your innards, depending on how you want to look at it."

One thing I discovered: Property developers like to talk about cemeteries the way restaurant chefs like to talk about E. coli. Curious about how they handle the discovery of burial grounds right where, for instance, the clubhouse is supposed to go, I contacted five major local companies. The result: I was ghosted like the AV nerd trying to score a prom date with the homecoming queen.

"That does not surprise me," says Edward Otter, a Salisbury, Md.-based archaeologist/anthropologist who is the go-to guy when it comes to excavating cemeteries on the Delmarva Peninsula.



The Lank Family cemetery was here long before developers turned the first shovel of dirt at Coastal Club, and along with other residents Rebecca Scheck is making sure the plot — fenced off by the builders — remains undisturbed. The site has been violated by grave robbers, but the biggest threat seems to be animals digging up human remains.

"What they do is they call me. They hire me to go out and delineate the cemetery, mark its boundaries so they won't dig up any bodies when they start moving dirt.

"I've done dozens of cemeteries over the years where the developers know they've got one, but they don't know how big it is. There's always more graves than there are tombstones.

"Overall, developers are pretty good at checking things out."

I am surprised — though I suppose I shouldn't be — that he knows all about the Sparrow Cemetery.

"African American cemeteries are very often unmarked," he says. "If you look closely there, you'll find little pieces of building materials and conch shells that were used to mark graves."

Otter is one of those lucky people who get to make a career doing precisely what they love to do: He says he's been digging up bones ever since he was a kid. But a shocking number of folks are out there right now picking through gravesites for decidedly non-historical purposes, and it appears grave robbing is not a crime high on law enforcement's priority list.

"Take the Lank Cemetery, for instance," he says. "A couple of guys from Wilmington were actually grave robbing that, thinking they might come up with some Civil War relics. They got caught, but they only got something

like a \$50 fine. Another family just bulldozed a cemetery, and the cop who arrested them really wanted to prosecute them. But the state Attorney General's Office just said, 'Eh, we're not interested.'"

I tell Otter about my startling experience with that big bone in the Lank Cemetery.

"More than likely, it's a deer bone," he says. "But if you send me a picture, I could tell for sure."

Immediately after our phone chat, I e-mail Otter a photo I took of Scheck, the bricks, and the bone.

"That looks like a human humerus," he responds almost immediately. "I know the Coastal Club people and will call them now."

The oldest marked grave in this area is well-known and lovingly cared for: that of Margaret Huling ("In ye 76th year of her age 1707") in the churchyard of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in downtown Lewes. In general, though, much of the problem with knowing where all the bodies are buried appears to be our forebears' relative comfort with the proximity of death. Whereas for the past century or so Americans have tended to segregate the dead into their own necropolises, prior to that our dearly departed seldom ventured more than a few yards from the front door. >

“African American cemeteries are very often unmarked. If you look closely there, you'll find little pieces of building materials and conch shells that were used to mark graves.”



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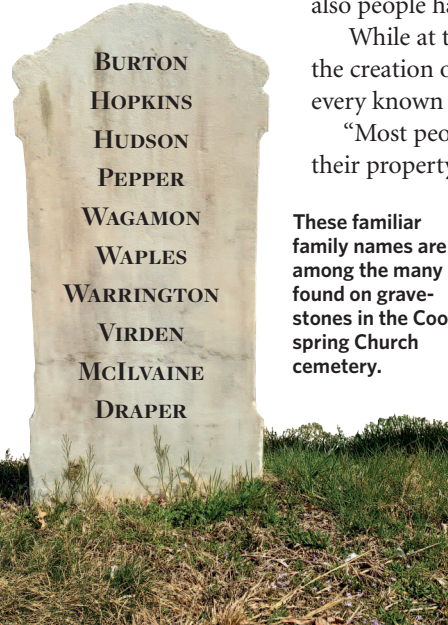
“Cemeteries have a way of showing up when you least expect them to,” says Mike DiPaolo, former longtime executive director of the Lewes Historical Society. Now he’s the Delaware Community Foundation’s area vice president.

“Unlike, say, up in the Northeast, there are nearly no public cemeteries here; they’re mostly churchyard or family cemeteries. For one thing, the population size didn’t warrant public cemeteries — and also people had their own land.”

While at the historical society, DiPaolo oversaw the creation of a cemetery database, documenting every known burial ground in the area.

“Most people are respectful of the cemeteries on their property,” he says. “They realize the cemetery predates them, that they’re stewards of land that was occupied and tended to before their time.”

These familiar family names are among the many found on grave-stones in the Cool-spring Church cemetery.



I am bouncing in a golf cart across a farm field outside Georgetown, headed in the direction of a small clump of trees a hundred yards or so away. My driver is Kate Bowski, a third-grade teacher at Milton Elementary School who owns a horse farm across the street.

“I was thinking of buying this land,” she explains, “and I learned that whoever bought it would be responsible for this little cemetery.”

Bowski didn’t buy the land. But she did adopt the cemetery.

“I blame COVID,” she says. “I was stuck in the house, bored out of my mind. One day I looked across the field and saw the sun just catching the gravestones. I said to myself, ‘I’ve got to get over there.’”

Bowski has always been a history and genealogy buff. She’s traced her own family, both sides, back to the 1700s. And now she saw the names etched on those nearly forgotten tombstones as another project. She copied the names that were still legible, reached out to local history buffs, and did her own online research.

We pull up to the edge of the gnarly grove. Bowski unfolds the printout of a family tree, based on her research. It traces the lineage of Noble and Betsy Conaway, both buried on this tract, both born in the early 1800s. Other names include the Wingates and the Manships and the Lawless (or possibly Wallace) clans.

At the grove’s center, marked by a telltale mound of fresh dirt, is the Lincoln Tunnel-like entrance to a fox hole. Instinctively, at this point, I begin watching my step lest I trample someone’s femur. As in every cemetery I’ve visited, there are

large stones for adults and small ones for children — far too many of those. I can’t help but contemplate the inordinate amount of grief that accompanied the placing of those modest, tiny, often blank markers.

Some stones seem to be sandblasted by a century or so of prevailing winds; others are surprisingly well-preserved, possibly because they spent time lying flat against the ground before being re-erected.

Intriguingly, Bowski says, this cemetery is not yet included in the database of Find a Grave.

“I’m going to see to it that changes,” she says. “I’ve found some descendants who died as recently as 1977, so there must still be some family around, but I can’t find them. That would be really cool if I could.”

I catch her gazing at the family tree she’s created, and I sense there’s more to this project than mere boredom.

“I do feel an attachment to things that are beyond me,” she says. “I’ve always been fascinated with historical architecture, for instance. But this is a way to get up-close and personal.

“My family teases me. They ask me if I didn’t do what I do for a living, what kind of job would I like. I tell them I’d like to work in a morgue!”

We are bounding back across the field, and I turn to take one last look at this mysterious little cemetery.

If you’re driving around southern Delaware and see a grove like this one surrounded by a cleared area, it’s a pretty good bet there’s a cemetery in there someplace. You can close your eyes and imagine the pageant of the years: A long-ago family begins burying its dead in a field, or perhaps a clearing in the woods. Then they move on, or simply dwindle until there’s no one left to bury.

With passing years, the untilled land gives rise to weeds, then trees, until nature itself begins to reclaim it all. At last, those trees reach into the ground and sky, absorbing elements of the very people sheltered in their shade.

I do not find it an unpleasant thought. ■

Bill Newcott, an award-winning film critic and a 2020 Writer of the Year for the International Regional Magazine Association, lives near Lewes.



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Coastal Creativity

Form meets function in the gifted hands of local artisans

BY BILL NEWCOTT | PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLYN WATSON

Rob Fullerton owns every guitar he's ever made, which is to say he owns seven guitars, ranging from a little parlor model made of Nicaraguan rosewood to a big, impressively resonant mahogany masterpiece that would look (and sound) at home in the arms of dreadnought aficionado Neil Young.

"There they are," he says, gazing with obvious pride on his wasp-waisted children,

arranged neatly on stands against a wall of his basement.

An awkward silence follows, because we both know I'm about to ask him what he's going to do next, and we also both know what the answer is going to be: "Build another guitar."

There have always been those fortunate few among us who seem capable of taking a few sticks of wood, or a pile of cloth, or a pen and

paper and creating from those elements not just serviceable objects, but actual works of functional art. Such folks personify the difference between a craftsman and an artisan, and while there's no reason why coastal Delaware should have more than its fair share of the latter, the evidence seems to suggest that yes, yes we do.

And we're not making any apologies. ►

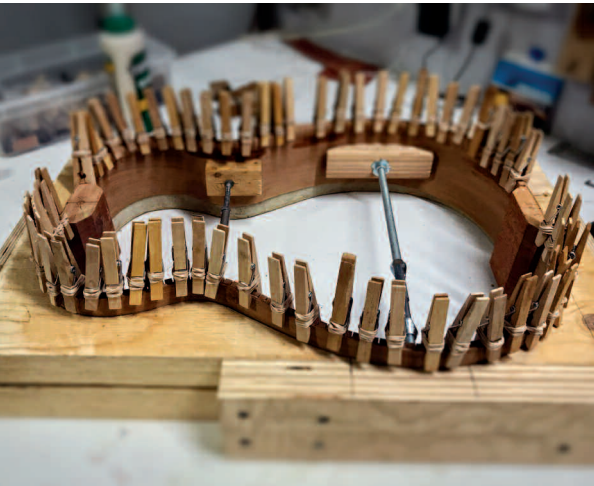
Minding the gap, Rob Fullerton measures the distance between the strings and neck frets of his latest creation.

Guitar man

Guitar maker Fullerton, who has also built several pieces of furniture in his home near Lewes, is a relatively recent convert to wood-working of any kind. In fact, he's a retired Philadelphia pipefitter, which for some reason sounds like the exact opposite of a wood artisan. He still employs his old skills, though, as he forms the metal brackets required to bend unthinkably thin slices of wood into the curved contours of a guitar.

He shows me the body of his latest project, not yet glued to its neck: a graceful piece made of Bastogne wood from the north of France. (See photo on page 2.)

"I started with some wood," he says. "And look at it now!" He seems as mystified by the transition as I am.



"Back in 2015, when I made my first guitar, it took me about 225 hours to build it," he recalls. "I can get there, probably, in 85 by now. But I don't sit down here and work on it straight through. I started this one about three months ago."

He cradles this nearly completed work. Bastogne walnut is known for its intricate grain patterns, and this one lives up to that reputation. The halves of the guitar back are mirror images, having been sliced from the same length of wood, then glued tightly together along a long, straight edge. From top to bottom, virtually the only thing holding a guitar together is good wood glue.

Fullerton likes to mix things up when it comes to wood. Also in his lumber library is Mexican Chechen wood, East Indian rosewood, Sitka spruce from the Pacific Northwest, Nicaraguan rosewood, and "sinker" mahogany that gained unusual grain and tonal characteristics from being underwater in the Belize River for many years.

The heart and soul of any guitar, Fullerton tells me, is the soundboard, where the vibrating strings pass over a large hole that leads to the

instrument's interior. The guitar's resonance is determined by the placement of spruce braces on the soundboard's underside, and because each thin soundboard has its own peculiarities, the only way to correctly place those braces is through trial and error.

Fullerton lifts a guitar soundboard, still in a rectangular shape, by one corner. Placing his ear to the wood, he gently thumps at various spots on its surface, listening for just the right amount of resonance, what he calls the wood's "tap tone." When the wood "sings" to him, he knows where to put his next brace.

"It's the difference between having a guitar that sounds good and one that doesn't sound good at all," he says. "It's why my first guitar doesn't really sound good, because I didn't know what I was doing yet."

Beneath a work bench I spot some metal forms resembling guitar-shaped spring-form cake pans. For my money, this is where the magic of guitar making happens: Strips of wood not more than a 16th of an inch thick are soaked thoroughly, then pressed against the outside of these forms and shaped while heated to 350

degrees. (Fullerton used to heat the wood with a pipe he'd welded with a hot light bulb inside; now a heat blanket does the job.) Finally, the wood is clamped into place on the form until it is permanent-ly guitar-shaped. I imag-

ined this process must take, at the least, a week or so.

"Actually," Fullerton tells me, "in about an hour it's ready to go."

He likes to let local musicians play his guitars during their sets, and it's not unusual for them to offer to buy one.

"This one singer offered me \$1,000 for a guitar," he recalls. "I said, 'Well, it took me 100 hours to build and the materials cost \$500.'"

So, Fullerton won't be hanging a "We Build Guitars" shingle out any time soon. Besides, he says, these guitars are something more than mere commodities. He grew up listening to the Ventures and the Doors, lying on the floor in front of his parents' stereo, "just to hear the guitar solos." Now he can build his own guitars, fiddle around on them himself, and hand them over to other musicians who really put them through their paces.

"When I'm working down here," he says, "people are always asking me, 'How's that guitar going to sound?' And I tell them, 'I don't know. That's the last thing you find out.'"



"I never use computer fonts — what fun would that be?" says Katy Ackerman, getting to the point at her Lewes shop.

It takes barely a minute for Ackerman to create a mini gold ink masterpiece, below right.

Working to the letter

Katy Ackerman is a woman of letters: the ingeniously curvy, impossibly ornate, yet uncannily legible kind.

You might not think of calligraphy as a full-time occupation, but Ackerman not only makes a living at it, she's got a thriving storefront business dedicated to the art on Front Street in downtown Lewes.

Wedding and event planners pay Ackerman handsome fees for her creations, which is a little ironic seeing as she got into the calligraphy biz largely because she couldn't afford to pay someone to do it for her.

"When I got engaged in 2015, I went onto Pinterest to look at all the lovely invitations — and I said to myself, 'That's really expensive!'"

So Ackerman bought herself a calligraphy kit and some nice stationery and, learning the necessary skills from scratch, prepared all the invitations

for her big day. As a long-ago father of a bride, it's a story I can relate to, as I did much the same thing — with clearly less stellar results.

"Yeah, a lot of people try to do that," she smiles with the look of a businesswoman/artisan who is, no doubt, envisioning my bundle of parchment envelopes scrawled with addresses that resembled those you'd find on a mass-mailing of ransom notes.

Unlike me, Ackerman discovered she had the talent and temperament for calligraphy, and began following fellow artisans on Instagram. "I just watched their tutorials online — I never took any formal classes," she says. "Eventually I started posting a little of my own work, and then all of a sudden random people were asking, 'Hey, would you do this poem for me?' or 'Would you do the place cards for my wedding?' >



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It took 45 years, but Marshall Witt finally felt he had the right project — and sufficient skill — to build this dresser from a cache of wormy chestnut wood.

“It got to a point that a year after I’d started, when I was finally getting married, I was doing my own invitations at midnight because I had so many paying jobs.

“It became an obsession. Every day I was practicing, playing around with new fonts. It was incredible!”

Not that she was satisfied with her early products. “It took about two years for me to like my own work,” she confesses. “I was charging people — charging them almost nothing, in retrospect — and I would hand it over thinking, ‘This is so bad, they’re gonna hate it!’

“Finally, after about two years, I could

tell myself, ‘This is good! I deserve to get paid for this!’”

About four years ago, the calligraphy business was so demanding that Ackerman quit her day job at Dogfish Inn and took up her pen full time, not only addressing envelopes and writing invitations, but also designing and producing a complete line of stationery. She opened the Lewes shop in June 2020 — in the depths of the COVID-19 shutdown.

Now, Ackerman sits on the other side of that Pinterest interaction that spurred her into do-it-yourself calligraphy six years ago. She calls my attention to a beautifully rendered wedding invitation

on a shelf behind me: an exquisitely lettered light-blue invite-and-response set with ribbon and a lined envelope.

“That came out to \$35 an invitation,” she says, a little embarrassed.

I can’t help but let out a breathless response: “No!”

She shrugs. “It’s the going rate! I have to make money on it!”

And, perhaps most importantly, there are mothers and fathers and brides and grooms out there who have apparently done enough homework to know what a good invitation should cost.

The true test of a calligrapher’s skill may be in whether or not the U.S. Postal Service can process those fancily written envelopes easily. As you’d expect, Ackerman passes that challenge weekly.

“However, they give me a hard time when I turn the envelopes sideways or use sealing wax. That can be a nightmare.”

Woodworker extraordinaire

Here’s the difference between Marshall Witt and me: If I need, say, a new drop-leaf table, I will head directly to Creative Concepts. Witt, on the other hand, will simply roll up his sleeves and get to work on one.

A tour of Witt’s house near Lewes is something of a greatest hits countdown. Standing in the middle of his living room, he points out one creation after another: the richly textured coffee table made of lovingly sanded ambrosia maple; the cushioned bench; the wall-length book case; the floating shelf that fills a space between two doors; the end table that consists of a masterfully finished piece of box elder floating in epoxy; a corner cabinet for

wife Sharon’s cookbooks. And, yes, there’s the drop-leaf table with legs that swing out to support the hinged extensions. “We needed a card table,” he shrugs. “So I said, ‘OK, I’ll build it.’” (I shudder to think about the fold-up Costco card table in my garage.)

Witt’s do-it-yourself projects even extend to the kitchen: On the counter sits a striking cutting board, glued together from a brilliant array of birdseye maple, walnut, yellowheart and redheart wood. He’s made more than 100 of those as gifts, plus countless companion coasters.

Projects like those happen relatively quickly. Witt sees a need, envisions the type of wood he’ll require, buys it and gets going in his well-appointed basement workshop. Other creations take a bit longer. Like, nearly a lifetime longer.

“I must have been 18 or so when I heard about a sawmill out in western Maryland that was being demolished for a new highway,” he says. “You could have all the wood you wanted; you just had to go out there and pick it up. So, I drove 200 miles to the sawmill and picked up all the wormy chestnut I could find.”

Even as a kid, Witt knew wormy chestnut was something special. It’s actually American chestnut that bears the distinctive marks of the wood-boring insects that rendered the tree nearly extinct a century ago. He piled the boards into a pickup truck, trundled the load back home — and waited for just the right project.

Forty-five years later, it came along.

“And here it is,” he says, showing me into his bedroom. There, lovingly crafted and finished, complete with dovetailed drawers, is the wormy chestnut bedroom set Witt completed just three years ago. >

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Riding a local bike trail, Sarah Pavlik was inspired to create quilts that feature bicycle tread designs. Just about any size tire works, she says, but "Fat tires don't seem to hold the dye as well."

"I finally felt I had the skill set," he says, running his fingers across the textured surface of the dresser. "I finally felt I had the tools and the time."

Not anywhere to be seen is the project Witt considers his most ambitious: a writing desk with Queen Anne legs he crafted several years ago.

"That burned up in a fire at my nephew's house," he says with a rueful laugh. But no matter; if Witt really wants to replace it, he can just build another one.

Reaping what she sews

You can be forgiven if you think of a quilter as a furrow-browed grandma with her hair in a bun and a shawl around her shoulders, her back permanently humped from bending over a king-size bed covering that's been pieced together from every Sunday-go-to-meeting dress she's ever owned.

At least, I'd forgive you. I can't speak for Sarah Pavlik, who is at this moment energetically sprinting around the work

space behind her Lewes home, enthusing about the inspiration for the abstract theme that repeats itself in much of her most recent, brilliantly colored, quilt work.

"You can see a ladder pattern in these quilts," she says. "I find I've been coming back to that recently. I call it my 'Childhood' series. It's about growth, and maturity, and sliding backwards and moving forward."

Most of the quilts that enliven the walls, work tables, and shelves of Pavlik's home will never keep anyone warm when the winter winds blow in from Delaware Bay. These are showpieces — works of art to be hung on walls or draped over furniture (she's made one quilt that fits over her TV when it's not in use). Besides exhibitions at the Rehoboth Art League and Peninsula Gallery in Lewes, Pavlik's quilts have been displayed at shows in Maryland and upstate New York.

Pavlik made her career as a school counselor, but she's been quilting since 2000. She started out crafting traditional quilts like the ones your grandma made, but soon the artist in her took over. She still stitches together pieces of material, but in place of square patches are complex patterns she incorporates in whatever shapes strike her fancy. ▶

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROLYN WATSON

Other times, Pavlik will make "whole cloth" quilts: single large swaths of fabric on which she prints patterns using dyes. Next, she'll layer that cloth on top of some fluffy wool or cotton batting and a bottom cloth, then create the quilting effect by stitching patterns onto the colorful surface. On those works, the stitching patterns — which can swirl, radiate from a center point, or take seemingly random paths across the field of colors — become an integral part of the artistic design.

"I was riding my bike along the trail and I noticed the pattern of all the bicycle tires in the gravel and thought, 'That might make a nice quilt.'"

Pavlik unrolls a large whole cloth quilt and holds it up — disappearing behind it except for her hands. The multicolored patterns that sweep across it resemble bicycle treads. And, in fact, that's exactly what they are: She created them by dipping different-size bike tires in thickened dye and rolling them across the fabric. "I was riding my bike along the trail and I noticed the pattern of all the bicycle tires in the gravel," she says. "I thought, 'That might make a nice quilt.'" She was, of course, absolutely right.

I leave Pavlik's home — feeling just a little guilty that she has to re-roll all the quilts she pulled out for me — and I realize I'm just a short walk from Katy Ackerman's Lewes calligraphy shop. Then it occurs to me that guitar maker Rob Fullerton lives, literally, just a few houses away from furniture maker Marshall Witt. I cast my gaze down the tree-shaded street, and I wonder just how many other artisans are quietly honing their crafts, creating beauty and functionality, beyond those front porches. Are artisans a lot more common than I once imagined? Or, as so often seems to be the case, do the welcoming arms of coastal Delaware just attract the thoughtful, the resourceful, and the creative? A little bit of both, I guess. ■

Bill Newcott, an award-winning film critic and 2020 Writer of the Year for the International Regional Magazine Association, lives near Lewes.

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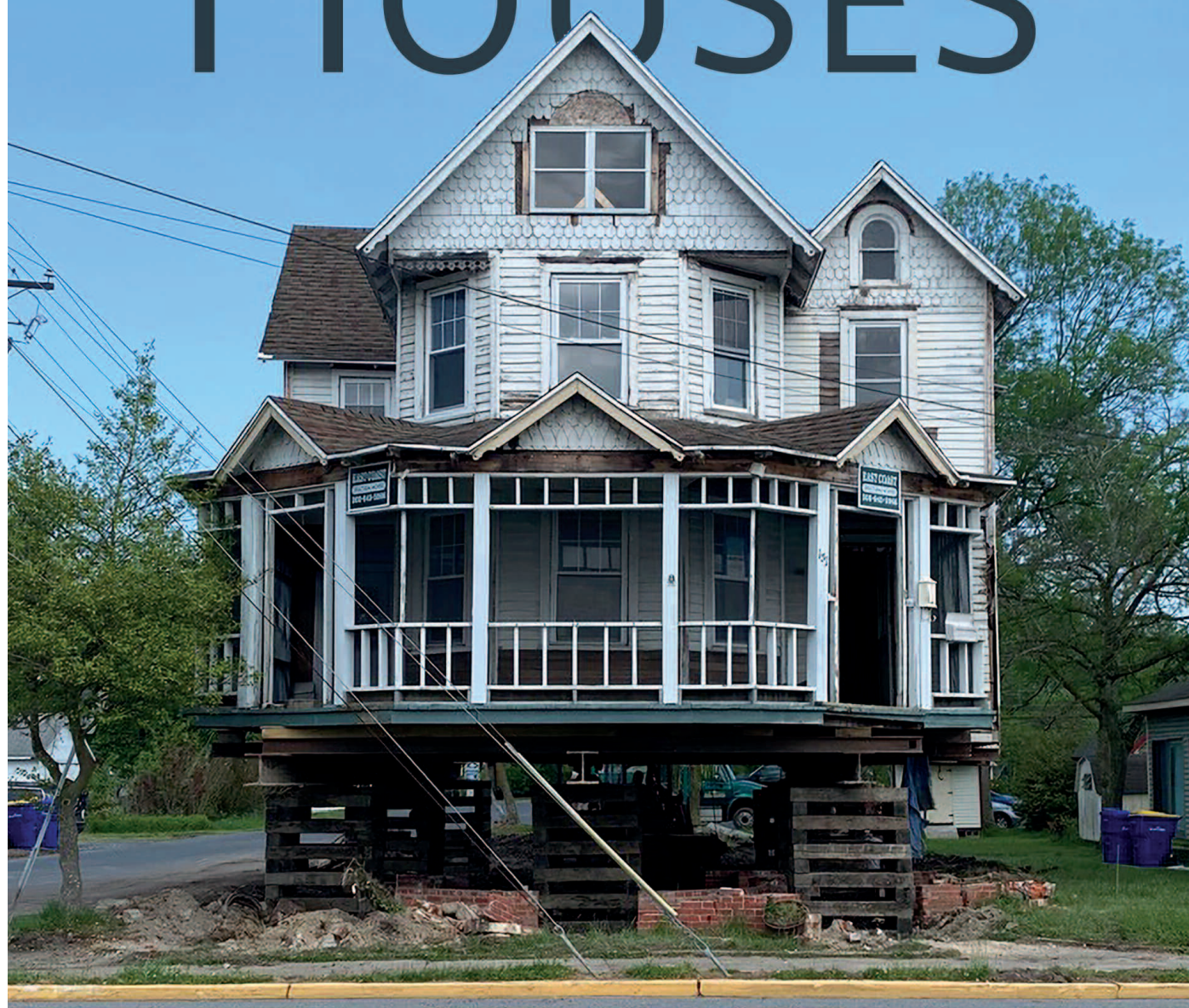


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ROAD HOUSES



Moving houses and other buildings is a feat of ingenuity, but these folks make it look easy. (Well, almost.)

BY BILL NEWCOTT

IT'S about 10:30 p.m., and 413 Rehoboth Ave. is on the move. Sort of.

In fact, the 100-year-old bungalow has barely traveled 20 feet or so. Now John Davidson is standing on the curb, hands on hips, tilting his head to one side, doing a unique brand of calculus that involves figuring the height of the rolling house, its proximity to an overhanging branch, and the direction in which he'll need to push said house to avoid snapping any limbs.

Now he's clambering back into the cab of the tractor-trailer truck that's hitched to the house. The diesel engine rattles to life as he throws the truck into reverse. The house begins to budge. He cuts the steering wheel to the right. The house slowly veers to the left, still pretty close to those branches, but just far enough that it can slip by.

I'm watching this slow-motion spectacle from across the street, accompanied by a few dozen die-hard house moving fans who've been waiting hours for this moment. Police lights flash red and blue, blocking traffic in both directions.

"Break it to the left!" one guy yells, and I'm reminded of a childhood camping trip when my father, trying to orchestrate our departure from



a Cape Cod camp site, stood behind our rented pop-up trailer shouting frantic instructions to my poor mother, who'd only been driving for a year or two.

But Davidson doesn't need any coaching from the peanut gallery. His company, East Coast Structural Movers, has been extricating houses from tighter spots than this in and around Rehoboth since 1994. A few pushes, a couple of gentle bumps over the curb, and surprisingly soon both the house and the truck are in the road, facing west.

Davidson throws the truck into first gear, and just like that, 413 Rehoboth Ave. is a literal road house. >

A century-old Victorian lady in Milton gets a lift — a vertical move to avoid water in a flood plain — from East Coast Structural Movers. John Davidson, above, orchestrates the decapitation of 413 Rehoboth Ave.



Some inconvenient rows of corn take a hit from a wide load as Expert House Movers relocates a one-story house. Rural buildings will often be moved during daylight, but in towns and along highways, the threat of traffic snarls generally makes large-scale structural projects a late-night activity.

HISTORICALLY, structures have long been shuttling around coastal Delaware, like buildings on a Monopoly board. Virtually every building on the grounds of the Lewes Historical Society was brought there on wheels as new development evicted each one from its original site. Lewes's historic lifesaving station started out on the beach in 1884, was moved to Fort Miles for use as an officers club and ended up in Rehoboth Beach, where it stands today as a VFW hall.

Perhaps most impressive, the tall, wide and windowed Landmark Baptist Tabernacle church in Milton was moved to its present site in 1967, all the way from Sycamore, near Laurel, about 20 miles distant. "It's a good, solid church," the congregation's late pastor, Leslie Freeman, told me a few years ago. And it must be: Built in 1800, the building survived the move with just a few cracks in its plaster ceiling.

For his part, Davidson moves or raises some 30 houses a year. "Every house is

different," he tells me. "And there's a lot of satisfaction in getting it done right."

I have spent weeks trying to get a minute with Davidson, who crisscrosses the county helping people usher their houses from one place to another. On this day I've caught him on the phone as he heads from Rehoboth to Bethany. Right now he's driving over the Indian River Inlet Bridge.

"I think the biggest house we ever moved was a 2½-story one, out of Dewey down to Bethany," he says. "We rolled it across the old bridge. And we've moved a few over the new one a couple of times."

If you're wondering why you seldom see houses being moved around coastal Delaware, that's because the exciting part always happens in the middle of the night. "We used to do it in the daytime," says Davidson. "But now, with all the traffic, we have to do it late."

Still, there's plenty of house moving-related activity in broad daylight if you know where — and when — to look.

“EVERY HOUSE IS DIFFERENT. AND THERE'S A LOT OF SATISFACTION IN GETTING IT DONE RIGHT.”

I AM pulling myself up onto the porch of 413 Rehoboth Ave., which has been raised a few feet higher than its original elevation. The big move is scheduled for tonight, and the last-minute preparations are underway. To prepare for the main event, Davidson and his team have removed portions from both sides of the foundation and fed steel beams all the way through. Hydraulic jacks were placed under each beam, then the whole assembly was carefully raised, lifting the house off the foundation, which was then dismantled.

Finally, a 12-wheel steel frame was assembled beneath the house, and the whole building was lowered onto it.

Over the years, for sundry reasons, I've found myself in a few houses about to be moved, and the weird, funhouse-like vibe is always the same. An unsettling sense of impermanence follows as you wander from one bare room to another. The floor, now floating above the ground, makes a hollow echo with each footstep. Because the house has already been turned slightly on the lot, the light enters from unusual angles, and the surrounding buildings, seen through the windows, don't seem to line up the way they should.

I climb the dark, narrow stairway to the bungalow's attic, following the sound of an electric saw. There, I find two men on ladders, cutting through the roof.

413 Rehoboth Ave. is being decapitated.

It's not as if 413 is going through any tunnels on its way to its new home on the other side of Coastal Highway. But there are traffic lights to consider as well as low-hanging power and telephone lines. Davidson could arrange to have utility workers come out to lift those obstacles out of the way, but he has long since realized it's cheaper just to remove the top of a house at the start and reattach it at the finish.

An hour or so later, Davidson is scrambling around the roof of 413, supervising the removal of the severed top. Thick ropes are fed through holes in the gable, then hooked to a long steel I-beam that's been lowered into place by an enormous forklift.

Directing the lift operator with a rapid series of hand gestures, Davidson resembles an airport worker bringing a 747 to the gate. The machine grinds into action. With a crack of wood, the roof

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A worker lifts telephone lines, allowing this house-on-wheels to clear them during a daytime move. The curved pipe extending from the roof peak safely slides loose-hanging wires up to the roofline.

rises from the house like a doffed hat, then rides gently to the ground. It will follow 413 to its new home tonight.

Later, Davidson gingerly drives that tractor-trailer truck into position, hitching the truck to a steel tongue located outside 413's front porch — on which someone has whimsically placed a life-size cutout of Sen. Bernie Sanders.

All will now be still until late tonight. 413 is ready to roll.

DAVIDSON ran a masonry company for decades before he got into the house moving business. In fact, there's enough business in this area to support another local company, Bob Davidson House Movers, owned by John's brother.

But the Davidsons' businesses aren't the oldest such operation in this area. That distinction belongs to Expert House Movers, a Sharptown, Md., company that's been lifting, moving, and repositioning buildings since the 1950s. Last December, EHM trundled a one-story house from Rehoboth Beach to Maryland's Wicomico County, some 50 miles away.

"It might seem strange to move a house from one place to another rather than just build a new one — but think about the cost of building supplies," says Gabriel Matyiko, the company's third-generation owner. "And from a conservation viewpoint, it's a whole lot better than basically throwing a whole house into a landfill.

"There are some pretty neat houses out there that just need to be moved."

(House movers are hesitant to say how much it costs to relocate a building, which depends on the size of the structure, distance traveled, permitting requirements, and an assortment of other factors. But according to realtor.com, the labor cost typically starts at \$14 a square foot, with the total price tag ranging from \$15,000 to \$200,000.)

Matyiko is calling me from his car in New Jersey, where he's about to move a 300-ton building for Princeton University. Structural movers, it appears, don't spend a lot of days in the office.

Most often, rather than move a house, he'll be asked to simply lift it, especially in coastal Delaware.

"There's a lot of remodeling going on there," he tells me, "and a lot of municipal building codes state that, if your remodeling project costs 50 percent more than the value of the house, you have to bring the whole house up to code. Well, recent codes require a house to be a certain height above the floodplain. And the only way to fix that problem is to lift the house."

EMH is definitely in the big-move business: The company has relocated seven historic East Coast lighthouses, ranging from Cape Cod to Cape Hatteras. In each case, the light was moved away from an eroding seashore. If EHM had been in business in 1926, it might have been able to save the Cape Henlopen light, which crashed into the ocean that year. Now, as sea levels rise, Matyiko warns that the same fate might await the iconic twin World War II towers on the beach at Gordons Pond.

"I'd sure like to get a chance to move those things away from the shoreline," he says. "They are just one big storm away from coming down."

WHEN I heard that 413 Rehoboth Ave. was going to be towed nearly 2 miles to an empty lot on Lincoln Street, near the Rehoboth Beach water tower, I figured the transport phase would take most of the night. After all, how fast can you pull a century-old house through residential streets?

Well, pretty fast, it turns out. Once he is straightened out on Rehoboth Avenue, Davidson is almost immediately moving off at a pretty fair clip — about the pace of a brisk walk. He does slow down as he rounds the lighthouse traffic circle, but before long the house is rolling



Temporary support beams bristle under the porch roof of a house being raised by Expert House Movers on River Road in Oak Orchard, which is a hot spot for flooding in Sussex County.

across the Rehoboth drawbridge, 413 catching its last glimpse of the canal that was completed just a few years before it was built.

Despite that radical roof surgery, 413 is still a bit too tall to fit under the thick array of power and communication lines stretching across the intersection of Rehoboth Avenue and Church Street, where the house is making a left turn. Two workers, standing in the scoop of a bulldozer, are lifted aloft toward the wires. Each holds a thick wooden fork with which they push the wires a few inches higher, just enough to let 413 through. The wood, I'm told, will insulate the workers from any possible electrical shock. They're laughing and chatting, as if they've done this before. I am terrified for them.

Still, 413 glides easily by, and the workers return to earth unscorched. The house is now moving so fast I have trouble keeping up, so I return to my car, drive to the destination, and wait. From where I stand, on the south bank of the Lewes-and-Rehoboth Canal, I can see 413 crawling south up the steep grade of the Route 1 bridge, over the crest, and down the far side.

It's a sharp turn onto Washington Street, the first exit to the right after the bridge, and Davidson has to pull 413 all the way across Route 1 so he can make a wide, arcing turn.

I become aware of a growing crowd around me. It's the residents of 413's new neighborhood, come to welcome

“THERE ARE SOME PRETTY NEAT HOUSES OUT THERE THAT JUST NEED TO BE MOVED.”



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Rounding the traffic circle, 413 Rehoboth Ave. takes a final late-night ride through its hometown. The city's ornamental lighthouse is a replica of the departed Cape Henlopen light, which fell into the Atlantic in 1926. Had it managed to stand just a few decades longer, 20th century structural moving technology might have been able to slide it to safety inland.

their new addition. They're lining both sides of Jefferson Street, and as 413 rolls by they fall in behind, wielding glowing cellphone cameras. Now they're no longer observers, but participants in an impromptu midnight parade, laughing and whistling, children who should be in bed and parents who have most likely not been out on the street this late in years.

The right side of 413 extends over the right sidewalk, and two workers realize an approaching stop sign is in the way. They run ahead and manhandle it from the ground, twisting and rocking it furiously. Because the workers are blocked from view by the crowd, it appears the sign is being buffeted by a powerful, silent wind. Once 413 is in the clear, the sign rises again.

One more turn, left on Lincoln. Then 100 yards or so, and 413's new home comes into view on the left. Flashlights, headlights, a floodlight, and ambient streetlights illuminate the scene, casting

harsh shadows on the ground and a stake fence marking the back of the lot. It's a pretty tight fit, requiring a lot of back-and-forth for Davidson and his truck plus several climbs down from the cab to assess the situation, before 413 is wriggled into its final position.

And then, everyone leaves. The lights go out, the street goes silent, and 413 spends its first night alone at its new home, like a puppy left on a porch.

A FEW weeks later, I drop by to see how 413 is settling in. A foundation — considerably higher than the old one — has been built beneath. A dumpster sits out front, evidence of renovations unfolding inside. And the point of the roof has been restored — a dark line below marking an old wound that has not yet been healed.

For the moment, the front porch post still bears this old house's former name. But in a year or so, as the grass grows in and the shrubbery takes root, it will be as if 413 entered some sort of structural witness protection program.

"What's the address of that old house at the far end of Lincoln Avenue?" someone will ask. 20499 Lincoln? Yeah, that old place looks like it's been there forever. ■

Bill Newcott, an award-winning film critic and a 2020 Writer of the Year for the International Regional Magazine Association, lives near Lewes.

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Horse Country

By BILL NEWCOTT

PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLYN WATSON



There's more sand than bluegrass here, but breeders and trainers still love coastal Delaware

It's Wednesday night at Harrington Raceway, and a contingent of the Marsh family is watching their 2-year-old filly, Babe Ruthie, trot around the half-mile oval. She is seconds from the biggest moment of her young life.

Head up, feet moving in classic trotting cadence, Ruthie's distinctive gait lies somewhere between that of a toe dancer and wind-up toy. Wearing a blue sash, she pulls a flimsy-looking cart manned by a driver in gold and red silks.

She focuses straight ahead, as if she understands the stakes. Not only will this be Babe Ruthie's first race, it's an elimination event for the Delaware Standardbred Breeders' Fund competition, with a \$20,000 purse.

It's also a big night for Ruthie's trainer, Harry Marsh — although, as a long-established horseman in these parts, he's certainly been here before.

Earlier this afternoon, I dropped by the Marsh family's horse farm near Ellendale. More than 20 horses live at the facility — all of them family-owned — but on this day everyone's eyes were on Ruthie, who was getting a power-wash hosing from Harry. As he watered down her flanks, Marsh smiled broadly. He's been doing this since he was a kid in the early 1950s on the family farm just outside Rehoboth Beach. With her mane sudsing up, Ruthie seemed to be enjoying it, too. >

She's not a winner yet, but Babe Ruthie still gets the blue-ribbon treatment from longtime horse trainer Harry Marsh.



The swaying back of Christmas Photo gives away her advancing age, but to Rhonda Owens-Whitehouse, old horses need love, too. "If I didn't have them here they'd be heading for a meat truck," she says. "And I'm not going to let that happen."

But now, a few hours later, it's showtime. There are only four horses in the race, all 2-year-olds: Just Pump It, Larimar, Lady Bluestone and Babe Ruthie. I've got \$10 on Ruthie — the first bet I've made on a horse since an ill-fated visit to the Atlantic City track about three decades ago. (Long story — it was my boss's horse, and a year later neither I nor the horse were still working for him.) Each horse, focused and sprightly, is pulling one of those spindly carts, their drivers leaning back and holding the reins.

Unlike thoroughbred racing, where jockeys sit up top and the horses explode into action from a standstill, harness races feature a running start, with the horses lined up, already moving, behind a mobile, folding starting gate mounted on the back of a small truck.

The horses are in full trot. They pass the starting line. No one yells, "And they're off!" But they are.

While most of us here in coastal Delaware like to say we live at the beach, we could just as easily tell everyone we're in horse country. Due to its proximity to Route 1 on busy Route 24, the poster child for local horse culture is probably Winswept Stables, a picturesque spread near Long Neck with a massive red barn and sweeping expanses of green bordered by a white fence. But that's just the tip of the horse's nose in these parts: A bit farther inland, from Frankford to Milton, you'll find horses galloping and grazing on dozens of properties, private and commercial.

In fact, drive far enough on any coastal Delaware backroad and you'll most likely spot a horse, looking right back at you.

"It might just take a little time" for Babe Ruthie to become a champion trotter, says trainer Harry Marsh — but for race horses, time is at a premium.



“There are breeders like me and there are trainers. And there are just people who love their horses.”

I am bouncing along in a pickup truck with Rhonda Owens-Whitehouse, who with her brother, George Owens, owns Safe Haven Farms near Milton. We're dropping in on just a few of the other equine facilities in her neighborhood — low-lying operations that could easily go unnoticed by someone passing through.

Owens-Whitehouse is a little frustrated with me. There are just too many facets to the horse business to try to explain to a city kid who, for a brief moment in his childhood, thought Mr. Ed could really talk.

"I don't know where to begin," she says, glancing at me in the passenger seat of her pickup. "For one thing, there are so many kinds of horses around here. There's standardbred, quarter horses, gypsies, Bashkir curly, miniatures, Chincoteague — more than I can name.

"There are breeders like me and there are trainers. And there are just people who love their horses."

Owens-Whitehouse grew up not far from where she lives now and has been a horse lover all her life. "My parents ruined me," she says. "When I was little, I wanted a minibike for Christmas, but instead they got me a horse to share with my sister. If I'd gotten what I wanted, I'd be a biker today."

"That would have been something," chimes in Chip Warner, sitting in the back seat. A registered nurse, Warner became hooked on horses while a kid in Delmar. "No one in my family was into them," he says, "but the family across the street had racehorses, and I just became this crazy kid who loved horses."

With Owens-Whitehouse, he's part-owner of a few standardbreds, the classic harness-racing horse.

We're pulling off Cedar Creek Road onto Winners Circle, the long driveway that leads to the sprawling horse farm owned by the Marsh family. Behind the long barn, a horse trots lazily around a 5/8ths-of-a-mile stone-dust track, pulling

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Taking her show horse Cypriot out for therapeutic exercise, Janice Ferneyhough reflects on the unique human-equine relationship: "You're both trusting each other with your lives."

a driver and cart. Under the barn's eaves, hay and feed and upended carts sit in the shadows.

Outside, the view is bucolic; inside, there's a whirl of activity as a collection of Marsh family members tend to the daily feeding and grooming needs of their horses — and Harry Marsh concentrates on Babe Ruthie, who is running at Harrington tonight.

Like all the horses here — and all harness racers — Babe Ruthie is a standardbred. Smaller than a thoroughbred, but a bit heartier, most standardbred horses are direct descendants of a single horse, Hambletonian, one of the fastest trotting horses of the 1800s.

In a sport that thrives on tradition, the Marshes have one of the longest histories of any Delaware family. They've been tending to horses and other livestock in coastal Delaware since Paul Marsh, a well-traveled English gentleman, settled here in the late 1670s.

"Our family cemetery is the second-oldest private one in Delaware," Marilyn Marsh says as she shows me around the barn. Developers have long since absorbed all that remained of the Marsh family estate (the cemetery lies between the 10th and 11th tees at Kings Creek Country Club). In 2000 they moved their

horse farm out here, far enough to escape the reach of builders seemingly intent on swallowing whole any open acre of land. At least they hope it's far enough. The biggest threat to coastal Delaware's horse culture is not the decline of race tracks — with online betting, harness racing is making more money than ever — but the boom in real estate values.

"I've had two offers from developers," says Owens-Whitehouse, whose 25-acre Safe Haven Farms is smack in the middle of the busy Milton-Georgetown corridor. "I could sure make a lot more money than I do now if I sold it. 'Maybe I'm an idiot!'"

She smiles, because she knows she's not. Let those webs of stick-built homes flourish elsewhere, she says. "This place is for horses."

It's a sentiment echoed by Janice Ferneyhough, who owns Pinewood Stables, a 13-acre horse farm near Milton. The stables' entrance off Neptune Road is a picturesque, shaded, white fence-lined driveway that winds past grazing horses. On the bare dirt of a fenced-in jumping course, an 8-year-old riding student is putting her pony through its paces.

"I wanted to get away from the crowds," Ferneyhough tells me, explaining why she bought this place, more

Hot to Trot in the Stud Barn

One horse catches my eye at Safe Haven Farms: a handsome black mare that Rhonda Owens-Whitehouse, who owns this stable near Milton, tells me is named Christmas Photo. She's 24 years old, and for reasons I can't quite put my finger on, she seems to act like she owns the place.

And, in a way, she does.

"Christmas Photo is always in heat," says Owens-Whitehouse. "She's a nympho."

That's unusual, because left to their own biological devices, mares don't generally start getting ideas about mating until early spring. No one is quite sure why Christmas Photo is always ready to rumble, but Owens-Whitehouse is not about to send her off somewhere to find out. That's because a horse that's always in heat is like a baseball player who never loses his home run swing: No coach in his right mind will take him out of the lineup.

"Well," I ask with the naivete of a dyed-in-the-wool city slicker. "What good is a 24-year-old horse who's always in heat? You're not breeding her, are you?"

Owens-Whitehouse gives me a crooked little smile.

"No, but she's the perfect tease mare."

Now I'm staring at Owens-Whitehouse, beginning to understand yet unwilling to venture the explanation that's formulating in my mind.

"Come with me," she says. "I'll show you what pays the bills around here."

I follow her into the breeding barn. As my eyes grow accustomed to the relative darkness, I notice the hay-covered floor is dominated by what looks like a gymnast's pommel horse, only without the handles an athlete would use to perform his routine.

The ancient Romans invented the pommel horse as a training device soldiers used to practice mounting and dismounting their steeds. This particular item, called a dummy or a phantom, is designed for mounting of a very different sort: At the near end is a large hole. There's no delicate way to put this: That hole — called the artificial vagina, or AV — is where desirable stallions, at thousands of dollars a pop, deposit semen for purposes of breeding.

Well, wait a minute, I can hear you saying. Why in the world would a self-respecting stallion be willing to mate with a piece of gym equipment?

That's where Christmas Photo comes in.

"You see that little stall over there, right next to the dummy?" Owens-Whitehouse says. "That's called the tease chute. That's where Christmas Photo goes. She stands there and does her thing and gets the stallion all excited.

"When she does her work, he's ready to do his thing."

It's the equine version of a lap dance, and because Christmas Photo is always ready to perform, the logistics of horse semen collection are greatly simplified. Everybody, it appears, is happy — even Christmas Photo, despite her role as perpetual bridesmaid.

The stallions probably don't know it, but the process is also safer for them.

"A mare can kill a stallion trying to mate with it," explains Owens-Whitehouse. "I know of one that got kicked in the face and ended up with a broken jaw. It eventually had to be put down. They can also get kicked in the testicles, and I don't think I need to explain how bad that would be."

Nor do I want her to.

The market for primo horse semen is enormous, and coastal Delaware is home to numerous desirable stallions.

After collecting a specimen in what can only be described as a condom that would fit over a cannon muzzle, Owens-Whitehouse spins it down in a sterile on-site lab, runs it through a sperm analyzer, then places it in a foam box with cold packs and ships it off to a customer who may be thousands of miles away.

How profitable is the horse semen business? Owens, who has been at this since 1992, shows me a page from a catalog of eligible stallions. She opens it to the page detailing the personal history of a 15-year-old bay horse named Mr Wiggles, who lives in Harrington — along with the names and race records of his most illustrious offspring, including horses named Mr Wiggle Pants, I Bet You Can Wiggle ... and especially a fellow named Wiggle It Jigglet.

"Wiggle It Jigglet was born right here," says Owens-Whitehouse with obvious pride — and why not? The horse is a near-legendary pacer who has won nearly \$4 million. The price to have his father, Mr Wiggles, mount the phantom/dummy at Safe Haven Farms and ultimately father your mare's next prize-winning foal: \$3,000.

In season, Owens-Whitehouse will collect specimens from three or four stallions a day. The fees she charges are plowed back into running Safe Haven Farms — and feeding her menagerie of geriatric horses, which can live well into their late 20s and even beyond.

"I care about these horses," she says, gazing across the fence-lined landscape. "If I didn't have them here, they'd be heading for the meat truck. And I'm not going to let that happen." ■



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than two decades ago, where she now has about a dozen horses, including several on which she offers riding lessons.

At the time, Pinewood Stables was in the middle of nowhere. But then the advent of Waze and Google Maps reinvented quiet Neptune Road as a shortcut between Gravel Hill Road and Route 113. The cars came. And now, just a few hundred feet to the east of the stables, a housing development has already sprung up.

Still, on this day I imagine the setting is everything Ferneyhough ever hoped for. Aside from the clump-clump-clump of that little girl's horse, the only sounds are those of a light breeze rustling the leaves, some late-season cicadas, and the occasional fluttering sigh of a contented equine.



"My work with horses will make me a better nurse," says Rhonda Schneider, who balances nursing school with her job at Safe Haven Farms.

Petite and slim, I cannot imagine Ferneyhough weighs as much as a single leg of Cypriot, a handsome, 2-year-old German-born Holsteiner. For years Cypriot was Ferneyhough's show horse, but as of late he's been a bit hobbled by leg weakness. Ferneyhough is about to take him for his daily half-hour rehabilitation ride. I pat Cypriot on the white star just above his eyes, marveling at this gentle creature with a head the size of an ice chest.

"If you think of a horse as a big pizza," she says — and I somehow manage to do just that — "one slice is riding, and the rest is everything else."

As we're chatting, it occurs to me that I've never heard someone refer to their horse as their pet. "Yeah, it's different," she notes. "You can have a great relationship with a dog. But a horse carries you around. In some ways, you're both trusting each other with your lives."

Because Harrington is a half-mile course, Babe Ruthie's race will take her two times around the track. For most of the first half, she is sitting in third position, but the four horses remain closely clumped together. From where I'm standing along the rail at the halfway point — which will in one more circuit become the finish line — there seems to be no sense of urgency.

There's certainly little electricity from the crowd, which numbers perhaps 30 people, many of whom are more interested in their smartphones than what's going on down below. Harrington seems to have a complicated relationship to horses, which have been racing at the site since 1924. When I walked through the adjacent casino trying to find my way to the grandstand, two

staffers I approached seemed only vaguely aware that the track existed. I finally found a remote stairway to the second-story grandstand, down a virtually unmarked hallway. The escalator was not working.

Even the action on the track seems unexpectedly casual — perhaps because the harness drivers lean back in their seat, rather than forward, as thoroughbred jockeys do. But though they seem to be relaxing in little wiry La-Z-Boys, nothing could be further from the truth: A 120-pound person trying to rein in a thousand-pound horse is going to be using every muscle in his body.

In harness racing, the horses are either trotters — moving their diagonally opposite front and rear legs at the same time — or pacers, moving both legs on the same side of their bodies simultaneously. Horses are trained in their particular gait from birth. Pacers race against pacers and trotters race against trotters, but they both have one thing in common: When they get real excited, they all like to break into a good old-fashioned gallop.

For the driver, that's bad news. In the

race before Babe Ruthie's, one horse kept going into a gallop — they call that "breaking" — and the driver had to pull him off the track repeatedly until he settled down. Needless to say, he didn't win.

Now the Delaware Standardbred Breeders' Fund competitors are in their final lap. On the far side of the track, the pack is beginning to spread out. Babe Ruthie does not seem to be gaining. That \$10 wager stub is beginning to burn a hole in my pocket.

Rhonda Owens-Whitehouse is showing me around her Safe Haven Farms, home to about a dozen horses. Clearly, she has a soft spot for older ones: More than half the animals she points out to me are more than 20 years old, each of them with the tell-tale swayback that comes with equine age.

Still, they seem content in their corrals, the autumn sun giving their chestnut hair a youthful shimmer. As Owens-Whitehouse introduces me to each animal — Punky-MonkeyBaby; her father, SuperPunk; and others — I'm reminded of how much I love horse names. >

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Shoe business is a way of life for Keith Fleming, whose three gypsy drum horses have hooves that dwarf a normal-sized horseshoe. Below, the Flemings' collie, Buddy, runs circles around the horses, guiding them from one pasture to another.



Horses don't always race under their original given names; occasionally a new owner will bestow a *nom de la piste* (that is, "track name"). That initial name, though, is heavy with personal history. Babe Ruthie, for example, is the daughter of a sire named He's Spooky and a mother named Boston Ruth. Well, who's the most famous Ruth ever to come out of Boston? Former Red Sox pitcher Babe Ruth, of course. Hence the feminized version of the Bambino's name.

We head back into the paddocks of Safe Haven Farms, where I catch a friendly smile from a young woman who is pitchforking clumps of horse dung-clotted hay from a stall and dumping it into a wheelbarrow. The thought of smiling through such a task is as foreign to me as whistling through a root canal, so I stop to chat with her.

With chestnut hair that matches many of the horses outside, Rhonda Schneider has been riding and working at Safe Haven Farms ever since she took a summer job here 10 years ago. She learned how to take horses' temperatures, give them shots and run IVs — which may have played a considerable role in landing her in the nursing program at Delaware State University.

"Several years ago we started doing foaling here," she says. "It's a labor and delivery unit for horses. We have the mothers in here and we watch them 24/7.

"My work with horses will make me a better nurse, I think. It's taught me to be observant, and quicker to pick

up changes in human patients. Here, we have animal patients who can't talk to us, so we need to know everything by observation: signs of sickness, the way they hold their face, the look in their eyes, their general appearance.

"We have a saying in nursing: Get ahead of it, not behind it. That's true for horse patients, and it's true for human patients."

I am standing next to an animal that is — except for an elephant or two — the largest living creature I've ever been this close to. Big Man is a gypsy horse, also known as a drum horse, so-called because his ancestors' job over in Great Britain and Ireland was to carry the drums of the queen of England's military regiment.

Big Man's registered name is Magic Gypsy Warrior. His father was Galway Warrior, a legendary drum horse that, like Big Man, stood more than 17 hands high — that's about 5½ feet at the shoulders.

"Queen Elizabeth used to call Galway Warrior 'My Beauty,'" says Keith Fleming, who, along with wife, Linda, grazes Big Man and two other drum horses on a 10½-acre spread. Fleming's mother owned the late, lamented Norma's Restaurant in nearby Milton.

The Flemings' collie, a feisty little fellow named Buddy, is circling their three enormous horses, barking with fierce delight, coaxing them into a tight formation so I can get a good look at them.

"They are a sight to behold, aren't they?" Fleming marvels. A former horse-shoer by trade, he's now disabled with a bad back from all those years of bending over, holding horses by their legs and hammering on shoes.

"I still do all their feet," he says. "And even with my very bad back, they are gentle enough to just stand there while I work on them."

"Take a look at this," chimes in his wife. She's raised Big Man's front left hoof to show me just how big it is. "Like a dinner plate, right?" she asks. I'm thinking it's more like the top of a round end table.

"It's quite something to ride one of these horses," adds Fleming. "It gives you some idea of what it must have been like to be a knight, riding into battle. You could have carried a lance, a hatchet and an axe all across the top of his back."

I've lost \$10. Babe Ruthie failed to rally in the final stretch, and in fact finished last, in fourth place. It was a competitive race, however; the margin between the winner, Just Pump It, and Babe Ruthie was a mere 2.1 seconds.

Still, when I catch up with Harry Marsh a few days later, he's not very happy with her.

"She did run three seconds faster than her best time," he says, "but she was weak at the end. We had a vet come in — he's my second cousin — to see if he could find any physical reason for that, and she did have a gland that was a little filled up. But we didn't really find a major reason. It might just take a little time."

Time, however, is not a luxury in the harness racing business: After three years, horses have to retire from most competition. Besides, Marsh — whose horse Darth Raider set the world record as the fastest gelding ever in 1996 — is also currently training eight other horses and preparing three babies to get started.

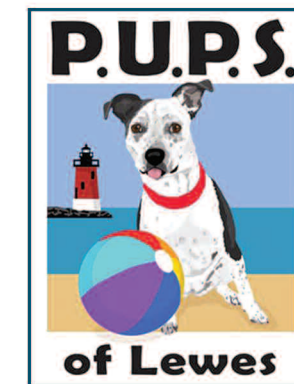
He loves his horses, he says, but hastens to add he can't lose sight of the fact that he is, in the end, in business.

"One thing I've learned," he observes with a tone of authority: "It costs just as much to feed the one that comes in last as it does to feed the one that comes in first." ■

Bill Newcott, an award-winning film critic and a 2020 Writer of the Year for the International Regional Magazine Association, lives near Lewes.



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