

KNOTTS ISLAND—It took courage to build this little rise in the marshland between Back Bay and Currituck Sound into what it is today.

Plenty of tears, happy moments and sore backs have been put into Knotts Island. And it takes a certain fortitude for the island people to hang on to remnants of a day gone by.

This knoll in a seemingly never-ending plain of marsh grasses is only seven miles long. At its widest point the island is three miles and it shrinks to a mile at its neck on the northern end.

There are only two ways to come onto the island.

A winding causeway slips over the Back Bay marshland on the northern end—the Virginia route—and a small ferry chugs in from the south across the Currituck, the North Carolina water trail.

About a mile of the northern end is in Virginia Beach. The remainder is in the Tar Heel State.

It is estimated that only 10 per cent of the people here make their living without going elsewhere. That hasn't always been the case.

For this island is in the center of a once-productive fowl hunting area.

Many of the locals could make their keep by fishing, hunting and other natural industries a few years back.

But now most them journey to Virginia Beach, Norfolk, Portsmouth and Chesapeake to work.

There is an independent quality about these people.

Up until the late 1930s, the only ways to get on and off Knotts Island were via an oyster shell-covered cattle trail

that ran through the marshland or by boat.

The isolation produced a Knotts Island dialect. It sounds sort of British.

It brought people together to shift for themselves.

People here once held a special day, called "Road Day," when the community would turn out to work on the road.

That was before the state took over the chore.

Being off to themselves, Knotts Island people intermarried at one time.

But those are days gone by. Today, Knotts Island is entangled in land speculation which has run across Virginia Beach in the last decade.

A Knoll in the Plain

Text and Photos by Rodger Provo

City people are coming down and building weekend retreats. Waterfowl shooting hasn't been what it once was. This year locals are calling for a banner year. The duck grass is the best it has been in quite a while.

And the island's young people, in many cases, are leaving their long-time home. There is nothing to keep them here.

But life is still quaint and, by modern-day standards is still hard.

Knotts Island Elementary School is the only place of learning here. High school students travel on the ferry over to Churrituck.

Virginia elementary school children catch a 7 a.m. bus for Creeds Elementary School. Virginia Beach high school students attend Kellam.

There are two churches on the island—Knotts Island Methodist Church and Knotts Island Baptist Church.

The Post Office has a small rural station here which picks

up mail at the Back Bay Station of the Virginia Beach Post Office.

First Colony Telephone Company has a small office.

The Knotts Island Volunteer Fire Department is in the center of the island.

Businesses include Jenk's Tavern, Southern Grill, Pearl's Place, Island Grocery and Jones Grocery and Supply.

Mrs. Francis Barners and Mrs. Grace Williams run private "gunning" clubs. There are also three private clubs.

And Mrs. Susie Litchfield runs a private home for the aged in a section on the island call Blackfoot.

Ask old timers on Knotts Island about their history and most of them don't seem to recall how the place got started.

Some ancestors of the families here lived on the mainland or the Outer Banks and migrated over.

M. E. "Casey" Munden's family came over here in the early part of this century from Wash Woods. Casey's father was attached to the Coast Guard station there.

Mrs. Munden, who grew up in Creeds, has high praise for people of Knotts Island.

About nine years ago, the Munden home burned to the ground.

"People turned out willingly to help," said the 56-year-old.

Island people helped the Munden's rebuild there place and a shower was given in their honor at the Methodist church social hall.

"We got everything except furniture to start housekeeping with," she recalled.

Munden, who was born here, farms 200 acres, 55 of which he owns.

He is active in the Creeds Ruritan Club, a member of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation county committee and he lists taxes for Currituck County.

The 60-year-old said in the early 1900's island people maintained the cattle path across the marsh, which was the only land route to the outside world.

Munden said much of this island, which now has a population of about 500, is being bought by the U.S. Wildlife Service to be brought in a refuge program.



Knotts Island Residents—Hardy, Friendly

From Left, Preston Jones, Mrs. Halstead, Herman Jones

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Out of the Marsh Emerged Homes

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"I would like to see a road from here to the beach," Munden said.

In recent years, there has been discussion about building a causeway from Knotts Island to the Outer Banks of North Carolina, which would open miles and miles of beach.

Munden feels that it will not be long, for the island is going to be built up and he thinks the road to the beach would create more jobs down this way.

William Jennings Ansell, 49, owner of Jenk's Place, was also brought up here. Except for a short hitch with the military, he has always lived on Knotts Island.

He recalls before the road came to Knotts Island there was plenty of inter-marriage. His mother came from Roanoke Island, down on the other end of Currituck Sound.

"Most people live here today for what it is," Ansell said.

He feels the island would lose most of its charm if it lost the country life.

Mrs. Grace Williams was born on the island and has been operating a "gunning

club" here for 30 years. The old timers here call hunting clubs, gunning clubs.

"We're looking forward to a good year because of the good grass we have," said Mrs. Williams, 65. She has a small place that can only accommodate 10 people. Her sons, along with some other islanders, act as guides.

"Some of my customers have seen the children grow up," she said. One party from Pennsylvania has been at the Williams place at the beginning and end of the season for 30 years running.

No one here seems to think there is a Knotts Island recipe for fixing duck.

Mrs. Williams has been serving the fowl this way:

Salt and pepper it and then put a thin coating of flour on it. Bake well for an hour at 400 degrees until the bird is brown to a crisp.

"You should serve collards and sweet potatoes with it," Mrs. Williams said.

As in most rural communities, the local fire department, churches and school are the center of much community activity.

George A. Sauer, 53, is chief

of the Knotts Island Volunteer Fire Department.

Thirty men belong to the department. It has three pieces of equipment.

It is a social center for the island. Bingo parties, birthday parties and showers are held in its social hall regularly.

"We are working for a bigger social hall now," the chief said. He is a retired Navy veteran from Pennsylvania.

"Bass fishing brought me here," Sauer said.

He added that the department answers about two fire calls a month.

Knotts Island Elementary School has only 94 students. Mrs. Preston Jones is the principal and a member of the five-man staff.

The traditional country school is the scene of an annual Halloween party and other events for the islanders.

The late Joseph P. Knapp, a wealthy hunter from New York who spent much of his time in the area during the 1920's, gave the money to build the brick school. Before that, the island had a wooden school house.

He left a trust fund that provides money for a small Christmas gift for each student at the school at an annual Yule party.

Knapp's picture hangs in the school's auditorium.

Mrs. Gladys V. Stevens has been driving the school bus down in these parts for 27 years. Her No. 21 orange bus makes two trips in the morning and the afternoon.

"I'm taking children now whose parents have ridden with me," said the 54-year-old. In her years of service, she has missed only five days from the job.

Of the two churches on the island, the Methodist is the older, having been founded in 1811.

The Rev. W. Fred Bonney is the pastor. He is also a native of the island.

The church has a congregation of 230 and many of the

members travel from Virginia Beach Borough to attend services. Most of them are islanders who have moved away.

"One thing which is so wonderful is that people here are so willing to do things," the Rev. Mr. Bonney said. He left the island when he was a small child and returned recently from a church in Charlotte, N.C.

"It is a joy to be here and serve people who want to be served," the minister concluded.

Mary Ellen Lewark, 18, now works in Norfolk. The 1967 Knapp High School graduate said life is different here.

"You have to ride a ferry to go to school," she commented.

The life-time resident of the island hopes to build a home here when she marries.

Joseph T. Crosswhite of Virginia Beach is just one of many city people who has bought property on the island.

"It is the last type of that land around," he said. Crosswhite owns about 14 acres. He plans to sell off the land in smaller parcels and retain a couple of lots for himself.

"There is frankly more opportunity for recreation down there," Crosswhite said.

Herman G. Jones Sr., 71, operates what one resident calls "the island's shopping center."

Jones' grandfather and father were reared on Knotts Island.

He says the biggest change he has noticed on the island has been in the farming. People here once utilized oxen, mules and steers to do their heavy work.

Preston L. Jones works in the store with him.

Mrs. Roland O. Halstead is typical of the young mothers here.

The 31-year-old has three children. They include Cindy, 11; Dusty "Little Roland," 10; and Mark, 3.

She lived in Tennessee before moving here.

Mrs. Halstead's husband lived in Back Bay as a youth.

"There was some readjustment," she said. "The children are more satisfied and there is more to do."

She likes for the youngsters to be able to get out next to nature.

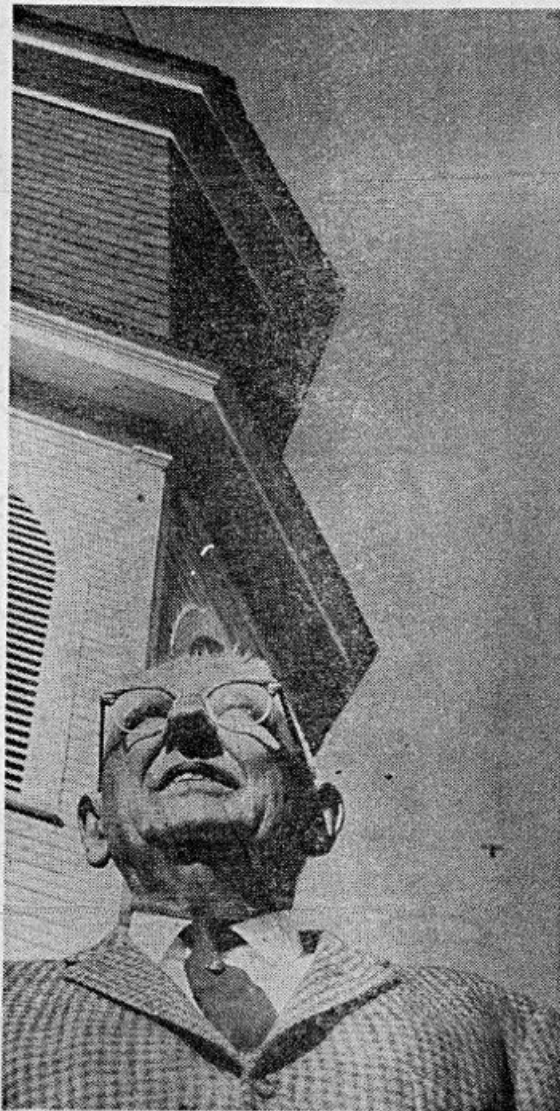
A major problem for the children is that they live on the Virginia side of the island

and have to travel to Creeds Elementary School.

That means rising at 6 a.m. to catch a bus at 7 in order to be in school around 8:20.

But as Mrs. Halstead said, "I'm satisfied."

Contrary to many people who live in this busy world that seems to be dominant feeling among residents on Knotts Island.



Bonney and His Church