

Tradition guides the lights in Oak Bluffs

By Meg Pier

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

OAK BLUFFS — The spotlight often shines on the Vineyard because of its visiting luminaries. But residents of the Camp Meeting Association here have long basked in the glow of bright lights. Since 1869, for at least one night a year, these campers take center stage.

The association first celebrated Illumination Night 141 years ago to welcome the governor of Massachusetts. Residents have continued the tradition every summer since, with owners adorning their pastel-painted cottages with Chinese and Japanese lanterns, many of them family heirlooms.

The camp, a collection of concentric circles of tiny Victorian gingerbread houses, is a National Historic Landmark. Still, one can forgive a visitor's perception of the campground as a movie set, an open-air museum, or a seasonal dollhouse display.

Peter Jones, a lifelong summer resident, says he is often asked, "Do you put the houses away in the winter and set them back up in the summer?"

Sally Dagnall, the campground's unofficial historian, says she is routinely asked, "Do real people live here?" Her stock answer is "No, I'm a Disney animation."

Visiting this summer enclave last August to behold its annual festival of light, I disembarked from the ferry in midafternoon under suffocating humidity. My companion and I opted to trudge the few blocks to our digs at the three-story Pequot Hotel, where there wasn't an empty rocking chair on its shady veranda.

After freshening up, we took in honky-tonk Circuit Avenue, Oak Bluffs' main drag. In the magical light of late afternoon, we ventured down a lane and into the campground, where its 315 miniature "painted ladies" featured Gothic archways, pointy steeples, tiny turrets, and cut-out designs in the shape of everything from tulips to geese. The closely spaced cottages were painted in sherbet shades of lemon, pistachio, tangerine, and raspberry, the lanterns strung from the near-touching rooflines resembling dripping icing.

Homeowners were perched on porches, proud to tell visitors the history of their houses and the lanterns bejeweling them. It was hard to tell who enjoyed the people-watching more, the residents or the visitors strolling the grounds at this hour.

Ernie Mallory enjoyed a rum and Coke on his front porch. Floating from the rafters was a platoon of miniature hot air balloons, each one a memento of balloon festivals around the world in which Ernie has participated. He saw his first hot air balloon on Martha's Vineyard 25 years ago. Ernie, in his 80s, was celebrating Illumination Night with four generations of family and a mac and cheese dinner.

Danielle Kish, on her porch, with daughter Robin, and grandsons Will and John, reminisced that she first came to the camp in 1965 with her husband, a Methodist minister, as guests of another minister. She was so taken with the community that the



PHOTOS BY MEG PIER/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

On Illumination Night, Camp Meeting Association houses are aglow. Residents start hanging the lanterns in the afternoon.

next day she marched over to the campground office and made a "low-ball offer" for a cottage. The official responded, "You couldn't build a garage for that." Danielle said she could increase her offer by only \$500 and left thinking that was the end of it. Days later, she came home and was told by her husband, "Well, you got yourself a house. Now we have to come up with the money."

Robin said she was 11 when she arrived at the cottage for the first time, playing with a doll in the car as the family pulled up. Suddenly, three boys from next-door leaped over their porch railing to help the Kishes unload the car. "I put that doll away in a hurry!" laughed Robin. Those Harris "boys" are still her neighbors today.

The wife and daughter of Jim Harris — Cheryl and Heather — were hard at work next door hanging lanterns on the tiny upstairs porch. Jim's mother, of West Hartford, Conn., came to the campground in 1962 after her husband died. She bought a cottage furnished for \$3,600 with the insurance money. Cheryl said, "Jim's mother knew the boys had just lost their father, and she wanted them to have a special place to go every summer."

She said the Illumination Night tradition is to hang the lanterns during the day, have friends for drinks during the "stroll" hours, and then take the decorations down around 11 p.m. Because many of the lanterns are handmade and irreplaceable, she stores them away once the admiring crowds have thinned out.

Farther down the street, Anne and Chris Hurd's porch sported a handmade lantern proclaiming "Bunker House, established 1875." The three-bedroom cottage has been in Anne's family for 109 years. Her grandfather was born here, along with 10 siblings. The Hurds come every year from California.

"I love it here. It's like a fairy



tale: the quaintness, the magic that surrounds it, the unique situation of so many different people and their backgrounds," Anne said.

The first camp meeting at the site was organized in 1835 by Jeremiah Pease, who had converted to Methodism after hearing "Reformation John" Adams, a fiery preacher. Longtime resident Peter Jones said that in the 1830s, people would come for a week-long revival meeting from Methodist congregations in Southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island. They stayed in huge canvas "society" tents, each of which housed members of a particular congregation.

According to Dagnall, attendees were awakened by a ringing bell at sunrise for the first in a daylong series of prayer meetings. These meetings were emotional gatherings, with exhortations, confessed sins, conversions, healings, and what were called "love feasts," in which participants passionately shared their stories and experiences. The bell didn't toll again until 10 p.m., signaling it was time to retire.

Campgrounders began to build platform flooring to avoid

sleeping on the damp ground. The platforms soon began sprouting walls, and the first house, consisting of just one room, was built in 1851.

"The early houses didn't have porches, or the gingerbread filigree, and were really just boxes. They were actually the first modular homes, and could be slapped together in two or three days," said Jones.

Close quarters have been a consistent community feature since the initial huddled tents; the cottages snuggle together, most only inches apart. The result is an atmosphere of trust and consideration.

"The proximity fostered a civility, a golden rule, good neighbor policy that exists today," said Marion Burke, a resident since 1972. "In its early days, the tent flaps were left open so the air could circulate, and there wasn't a lot of privacy. In the '40s and '50s, Barney the Shusher made the rounds each night at 10 to enforce a lights-out policy. Today, one of the houses features a sign proclaiming 'Take It to the Beach,' stern instructions for any resident inclined to have an argument."

While the structures are wide-

ly regarded as unique to the site's Christian camp culture, gingerbread is a main ingredient, one that came with the advent of new technology of the times. The vibrant colors as a means of self-expression didn't occur until relatively recently. Historically, paint was used only as a preservative, and the houses were mostly white, gray, brown, or olive drab. Then, in 1944, an artist painted her home pink, and the community became a canvas.

Now ecumenical, the campground hosts a summer concert series in its 19th-century wrought-iron tabernacle. The 2010 program features local folk singer Livingston Taylor, comedian Marty Nadler, political satirists The Capitol Steps, and the swing music of the Artie Shaw Orchestra. Grand Illumination is the highlight of the summer season, with a community singalong and band concert, followed by the lighting of the thousands of lanterns. This year's festivities will be held Aug. 18.

Last year, after a seafood dinner on Circuit Avenue, we headed back to the campground to catch the end of the concert and see the lights go on. The wisdom of our decision to conduct most of our sightseeing during daylight hours was affirmed immediately. What had been a peaceful scene was now a throng of thousands. The park surrounding the tabernacle was packed with families pulsing to a soundtrack of rousing American standards.

Then the band leader gave the signal. Lights began to flicker and a golden glow started to spread from porch to porch, across the ringed neighborhoods of the campground. The crowd was still for just an instant, drawing in its collective breath. Then the masses surged forward, snapping cellphone pictures of this fantastical theater in the round.

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If you go . . .

Where to stay

Pequot Hotel
19 Pequot Ave.
508-693-5087
www.pequothotel.com
Nestled among the "gingerbread" cottages. Doubles \$125-\$295.

Isabelle's Beach House
83 Seaview Ave.
508-693-3955
www.isabellesbeachhouse.com

Overlooking Nantucket Sound and a five-minute stroll from downtown, \$150-\$300.

Where to eat

The Sweet Life Café

63 Circuit Ave.
508-696-0200
A contemporary American-French menu; the signature dish is sautéed halibut, served with a bright sweet pea risotto and marjoram beurre blanc. Entrees \$32-\$42.

Deon's Restaurant

53 Circuit Ave.
508-696-0001
www.deonsrestaurant.com
Chef Deon Thomas invigorates New England classics with Caribbean flair. Signature dishes include garlic crusted snapper, Jamaican jerk chicken, and conch chowder. Entrees \$16-\$35.

What to do

Cottage Museum

www.mvcma.org/museum.htm
Visitors can view the interior of a typical campground cottage, complete with period furnishings. Adults \$2, children ages 3-12 50 cents.

Tours

Guided 90-minute walking tours of the campgrounds start at the Tabernacle every **Tuesday and Thursday** morning at 10 a.m. in July and August. Adults \$10, under 10 free; free pass to the Cottage Museum included. A tour on Aug. 11 will **visit the interiors** of several cottages and the museum, \$25. Tours will run from 10 a.m.-3 p.m.; tickets sold until 2.

Class/Lecture

Aug. 17 at 10 a.m., learn how to **paint a custom lantern**; \$15. Aug. 22 at 7 p.m., the campground's **175th anniversary** will be celebrated with a MVCMA historical presentation by Marge Hopkins, music by Mark Lovewell, and an ice cream social.

Concerts, singalongs

The highlight of the summer season on the campground, **Illumination Night** is Aug. 18 at 7 p.m., with a singalong and band concert at the Tabernacle, followed by the community's Japanese and Chinese lanterns being lighted. **Community Sings** are held in the Tabernacle at 8 p.m. Wednesdays in July and August.