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## **Hyde County: A Journey Back Home**

It has been some time now since I've traveled this neck of the woods. As the road meandered before me houses began to be further apart in distance and vast stretches of freshly plowed land or marshy ground nestled in between. Often times the journey here is referred to as the "road less traveled." But here is where the natural splendor and historical charm present the perfect mix for an ideal getaway. The lights, parking, sounds and crowds are just a bit different from that of most counties.

The lights are the kind that will illuminate your spirit-a peaceful Ocracoke sunrise, a breathtaking Mattamuskeet sunset, and a night unfettered by towering city scapes. The parking is on a "lot"-a lot of wide-open beach where only seashells are bumper to bumper and where the view is the endlessly Atlantic Ocean. It has sound, not noise. Like the wonderful sounds of gulls at the harbor, swans yodeling from overhead, and ducks sounding a wake-up call. And last but not least, it is crowded- with birds, bears, deer, and many other kinds of wildlife that inhabit the vast wild places.

All of the above so accurately describes a place where I once called home. Yes, as some folk would say, "I was born and bred" in this somewhat desolate area known as Hyde County. Right smack in midst of a little town called Swan Quarter. Many people believe Swan Quarter was named for the tundra swans that spend their winters here. It was actually named for Samuel Swann, a landowner who settled near the mouth of Swan Bay.

### **A Glimpse at Its Formation**

The boundaries of Hyde County have evolved over almost three hundred years.

Because of the changes in the county's boundaries, a person may have lived in several counties in his lifetime, while residing in the same location. Hyde County covers a total area of ? square feet and population is somewhere in the vicinity of 5300. The land was first visited by English explorers from Roanoke Island in 1585. They discovered an Indian village called Pomeiooc between the waters of the Pamlico sound and Lake Mattamuskeet. The Indians left a lasting influence on Hyde with names like Mattamauskeet, Pungo, Ocracoke, Waupoppin and Wysocking. Some Hyde families today can trace their ancestry to the Mattamuskeet Indians.

Originally a part of Bath County, it became Wickham precinct in 1705-1706.

In 1712-1713, it was named Hyde precinct in honor of colonial Governor Edward Hyde, grandson of the Earl of Clarendon. The courts for Hyde County were held in the courthouse in Bath until 1720. In that year an act was passed separating the precincts of Beaufort and Hyde and authorizing a courthouse to be built on the land of William Webster. In 1738 a town by the name of Woodstock was laid out on Webster's land. The courthouse at Woodstock burned about 1789, and in 1790 an act was passed moving the courthouse to Bell's Bay or Jasper's Creek. The county seat was on Jasper's Creek during 1791-1792. A law was passed in 1791 establishing a town on the land belonging to Germain Bernard where the courthouse stands. In 1820 the old courthouse was authorized to be sold and a new one erected at Lake Landing or two miles of it. In 1836 commissioners were named to purchase land from Zechariah Gibbs for a county seat, or within one-fourth mile of the place called Swan Quarter and erect a courthouse. The Hyde County courthouse was built circa 1854. It has been remodeled and annexes built several times over the years. The original bricks are said to have come from England. It is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

Hyde has attractions.....sure it does

After leaving downtown Swan Quarter I ventured about 9 miles east which

brought me to the Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge, containing North Carolina's largest natural lake, Lake Mattamuskeet, its prominent feature. Measuring 7 miles wide, 18 miles long, and 2 to 3 feet deep, its certainly majestic.

"Mattamuskeet" means "dry dust" in Algonquin. The misnomer is explained by an Algonquin legend that holds that Mattamuskeet was formed when fires, set during a long drought, carved out a long, flat depression in the peat that covered the forest floor.

According to the story, when a drought plagued the people of Mattamuskeet for many years, they desperately concluded that they had done something to anger the gods. Restitution must be made. Their bonfires, dancing, and praying were to no avail. There was no cessation of the drought and, to make matters worse, the bonfires ignited the dried-out peat beds, creating a huge fire that destroyed large areas of their hunting grounds.

The medicine men decided that human sacrifice was in order. As their sacrificial victim they chose Prince Pamilco, the son of the chief. Pamilco offered himself with deliberate dignity, but his betrothed, Wacheeta, pleaded for a delay in his execution so she could try to appease the gods on her own. The elders of the tribe gave her a chance, and Wacheeta built an altar and prayed to the gods of her lover's life. When she collapsed, exhausted, the skies opened up and let loose a torrential downpour, thus

putting out the peat fires and creating Lake Mattamuskeet.

Could the lake have been formed this way? Probably not, says Dr. Stephen

Snyder, assistant professor of marine and earth sciences at North Carolina State University. Although peat fires are naturally occurring events in the coastal region, usually the results are very shallow-too shallow even to be considered an origin for two-foot-deep Mattamuskeet.

Nor does Snyder give credence to an alternate theory that Mattamuskeet was

formed through meteorite showers, as there are no meteorites or meteorite residue to support this idea.. Rather, he suggests another hypothesis: the lake was formed through tens of thousands of years of groundwater working on the carbonate-rich layer that lies beneath much of the coastal region. After many years, this layer collapsed, and a lake was formed in the depression.

An endangered piece of American history...

In this same area stands the famous Mattamuskeet Lodge which is a three-story steel-framed brick and wood structure, consisting of approximately 15,000 square feet, situated on the south shore of Lake Mattamuskeet. The original building was known simply as the "Pumping Station." It was built in 1915-1916 by the Mattamuskeet Drainage District and when completed, was the largest capacity pumping plant in the world. Morris Machine Works of Baldwinsville, New York and Charlotte, North Carolina, was the contractor for the original building and pumps. The plant had eight cross-compound centrifugal pumps, each with two 48-inch diameter impellers. The four 850-horsepower engines that drove the huge pumps were powered by coal-fired steam boilers. The four pumps were able to drain 1,200,000 gallons of water per minute.

Douglas Nelson Graves, Chairman of the Mattamuskeet Drainage Commissioners

in 1917, once stated, "the water pumped by this plant in twenty-four hours would make a lake a mile long, a half-mile wide, and thirteen feet deep.

Between 1916 and 1932, the pumping plant removed the water from 50,000-acre

Lake Mattamuskeet three times. The last time, the pumps kept the lake drained for six years. Eventually, farmers grew tired of the time and expense involved in the drainage.

Mattamuskeet Lodge has a unique physical structure that has been much influenced by its past uses. The interior walls consist of finished plaster. The exterior of the building is red brick which has been coated with a cement paint several times, giving it a white stucco appearance. The roof is of red terra-cotta tile.

When the building housed the huge pumps, furnaces, and steam engines, each

side was open from the ground floor to the steel truss girders. The ground floor on the north side of the building where the pumps were installed was about five feet lower than the ground floor on the south side that housed the coal furnaces and boilers. When the old building was transformed into Mattamuskeet Lodge, they removed the old pump station equipment and built intermediate floors in each side of the building. Taking advantage of the difference in the original ground floor levels, they constructed four alternating half-levels of floor space connected by way of wide stairways. The building has several large gathering rooms and nineteen lodging rooms. As used in recent years, there is an environment exhibit area, a gift shop and office for a "Lodge Coordinator" who has scheduled the public use of the building and provided tours for visitors.

Mattamuskeet Lodge remains the property of the United States Government as part of the Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge. Because the primary mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the protection of wildlife rather than historic preservation, the regular operating budget of the Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge has not included funds for maintaining and renovating Mattamuskeet Lodge.

A little beyond that is the Octagon House. It is located in Lake Landing's historic district and it stands as a testament to its forward-thinking builder. According to family accounts, Dr. William Sparrow "was an eccentric...and certainly not an ordinary 19th century man," so it is fitting that he would build a house sometimes called "the inkwell." Born in Craven County in 1825, Sparrow moved to Hyde when he married Elizabeth Jennette. Legend says he built the house to replace one lost in a hurricane. He wanted "no corners for the wind to howl around."

Built in 1857, "the round house" is one of only two such houses in North Carolina built in the 19th century. The eight-sided dwelling has no posts except windows and doors. The house's unusual shape likely reflected in 1850s fad detailed in the book *The Octagon House—A Home for All*. The author, phrenologist Orson Fowler, studied the correlation between the shape of the skull and a person's mental capacity. Presumably, he applied the same connection between a house's shape and its structural strength.

The Octagon house had six rooms, along with entry and upstairs hallways.

A

central chimney serves four fireplaces. During renovation, removing 1890s cypress shingles revealed markings for false windows on the sides that had none. This is indicative of the Fowler design and the dimensions of the home matched his exactly.

By 1862, William Sparrow's children were, but they kept the house in the family until 1869, when John Norton bought part of the interest in the house and land for \$600. By 1879, he owned all the house and land

The house was last owned by Charles Payne until 1958, but sat vacant until a group of concerned citizens came together in 1976 to restore the house. The house's original details--a plastered interior and stucco exterior--are in place and original floors were kept intact where possible. The Octagon House and Restoration Inc. and Partnership for the Sounds work together to keep the house maintained and open to the public. It is open Thursdays and Fridays from 10a.m. to 5p.m.

Coming to a close

The next and final stop brought me to Engelhard, N.C. My purpose here? What

else but the Annual Seafood Festival. This yearly event is usually held on the 3rd Saturday in May. If you are a lover of seafood and enjoy having a day of fun with your family, then this is the place to be.

It kicks off its beginning with a blessing of the event on Friday night. Then early Saturday morning around 9:30 they have the grand opening. The day will end with a street dance from 8:00 to 11:00 p.m. different groups each year, with a variety of music for all to enjoy. Children and adults alike will enjoy the variety of rides and games. Additional activities include a petting zoo, a climbing wall and pony rides.

Music lovers will enjoy their choice of gospel, rhythm and blues, rock and other musical performances throughout the day. Arts, crafts and historical displays, the Little Mr. and Miss Seafood and the Miss Engelhard Seafood Festival pageants will round out the day. And, of course, there will be seafood prepared just about any way you could imagine, along with other good food. This is where I experienced my first helping of fried catfish. And boy, was it good! I had always been accustomed to having it stewed with potatoes and nice fresh shallots (onions) to give it a scrumptious flavor. But I have to take my hat off to it being fried.

One of the most exciting exhibits of the day was the Algonquin Indian Village. Ms. Shirley Little Dove Custalow of the Mettaponi Indian Reservation in West Point, VA set up long houses and a fishing and hunting camp like they used by the Algonquin Indians in the days of John White. Ms. Custalow and friends were on hand all day to give demonstrations and answer questions about the Algonquin traditions and their way of life. Ms. Custalow is a direct descendent of Powatan and Pochantas

I also had the opportunity to meet Romolus Sanderson Spencer, Jr. Maybe the name doesn't ring any bells in your hearing but to the residents of Hyde it's a different story. Born in Engelhard in 1940, "Tony," as he is known by all graduated from East Hyde High School in 1959 and from East Carolina College in 1963. He taught and coached in the Hyde County schools for thirteen years. In 1973 he was listed among the "Who's Who in the South and

Southwest. He then took over full time management of the family business which is a godsend to the community. You can purchase a variety of things there. A customer from Virginia happened to be shopping there and her comment about the store was, "it's almost like shopping at Wal-Mart."

But what caught my interest was the bookshelf displayed with publications by Romolus. The one I chose to purchase was entitled Hyde County Historical Society. With a very small committee he had compiled so much value information on the people of the five townships of Hyde County. What was so special about this particular book? There among the pages of the 'golden agers' was a picture and short article on my grandfather who had lived to be 100 years of age. There was also one on 'Miss Rebecca Bryant', the mid-wife whose name appears on my birth certificate.

With book in hand I headed toward the car, prepared to backtrack my journey here. Maybe it is spacious and bare in some areas, but this could be exactly what some people are looking for in their latter years. Something away from the clutter and commotion of the larger towns. This 'less traveled road' could be 'more traveled' if you would take the time to enjoy it as I did.