Life on the Pamlico

The Legendary Oden Store

By Valinda Pilgreen and Lisa Brown Harris

Introduction

By Lisa Brown Harris

Oden’s Store has been a landmark for all my life. Passing it every day on my way to school, I remember the unusual facade of the three levels and the beautiful flowers that are planted where the old gas tanks once stood close to the front porch. Oden’s Store was the natural subject for my journalism project. We went there on a
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cool, rainy January afternoon to talk to the grandson of the original owner.

As we gathered around an old wood stove in Oden’s Store located at Hunters Bridge on Highway 264, east of Washington, N. C. John Oden, grandson of John H. Oden, Sr., who in partnership with his first cousin established the general store in 1896; Betsy Oden Elliott, daughter of John Oden, Sr.; Dr. Roy Armstrong; my classmate Valinda Pilgreen, and I talked about memorable events in the history of the store and the community. Actually, Valinda and I mostly listened with rapt attention to these stories of long ago.

John H. Oden, Sr., founded the store in 1896.
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John Oden, an outgoing and friendly person, talked about the history of the one hundred-year-old business. For example, he told us about the original store being moved from Bath Creek to the Hunters Bridge Community and a story of a robbery resulting in death. In addition, Mrs. Betsy Oden Elliott, a lively, spry lady, described some of her most vivid memories of growing up in this historic site. As a young girl, she loved to sleep on the new overalls on the wooden counters. Also, she revealed her exciting adventures as a young school girl at the Washington Collegiate Institute. And who will ever forget her misadventures with the candy bar with the profane name!

Now Oden’s Store is more than a landmark of my Bath community. It is a symbol of the heritage of my homeland.

Life: What we wanted to talk to you about is the history of the store. When did it first open?

Mr. Oden: My grandfather, John H. Oden, Sr., and his first cousin went in business in 1896. The town was down here on the creek. Everybody came and went by boat; that’s why a town was there. So when they put in the highway, that pretty well did away with the town. People then could get back and forth without the creek. It was just a general mercantile store. It had everything from coffins to barrels of molasses to hand frames, a little bit of everything in here. This past year was the 100 year anniversary, and somewhere around here we had the carpenter's original bill. Grandfather had sawmills and cotton gins up and down the creek, so he sawed his timber; the carpenter’s bill on this store was $90.00.
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Life: You couldn’t get them to give you an estimate for that now!

Mr. Oden: You couldn’t get a set of shelves for $90 now. Being
in the business, Grandfather had all the nails and kegs of nails,
everything he needed. They had rented a store building on the
creek prior to that. He and his cousin parted company, I believe,
in 1912. John William Oden, the cousin, got everything that was
in Washington; and Granddaddy when they dissolved the partner-
ship, Granddaddy took everything here. It was a very elaborate
deed when they did away with the partnership. The deed is
recorded in our deed book [Beaufort County]. They even named
the individual oxen and mules by their names.

Life: In addition to being a store, didn’t they buy and sell animals?

Mr. Oden: Oh yes. There were barter pens is what I have heard the
older folks refer to them as: where someone would bring their
chickens and swap. They would put the chickens in the holding bin
until someone wanted a live, fresh chicken. A lot of eggs were
swapped. There were little lean-tos, and there was a meat market
donw one side over here where now there is a shelter. That shelter
we had to put up when we nearly lost the building in the March
storm of ’91. [Strong winds] hit the building, and it was leaning.
It straightened up, but it would pop back the minute the winds
would die, and we had to get suspensions under it. My brother,
Dale, does carpentry, and Daddy’s first cousin was an architect.
We had to decide how to get the store righted to keep it from going
over.

Life: [Mr. Oden told us about stabilizing the store.]

Mr. Oden: If you will notice the cables [overhead], they put
anchors in the ground over on this side and you would come along
every day and just move it an inch or two because you could not
move it all at once to get the store straightened back up. And they
tied this shed over here to the side, or the building would have gone
over. And, quite frankly, it was one of the last things I remembered
my father specifically saying: he did not want the store to go down,
so we were able to stabilize it.

In the ’50s and ’60s we knew very little about the hurricanes; we
didn’t know the eye was coming over. When my father, John H.,
Jr., or Jack, came over and checked the building, he had to use
crowbars to get the front door open because the building was
going this way from the wind. And while he was here, the eye
passed. And the door stayed open because then the door was that
high off the floor and he couldn’t get it closed. The older people
always said these buildings stood as long as they did because they
did move. They would give when these severe winds settled in.
How much truth it is to that, I can’t tell you.

Life: There was some huge storm around here in about 1911 or
1912.

Mr. Oden: The storm of ’13. The store was still on the creek. They
paved this highway [264] out here in 1923; ’23 to ’25 somewhere
in that area. But it was still on the creek then, and they moved
everything up to the very top shelves and upstairs. Before it was
moved off the creek, I heard my father tell about rowing across
these counters in a rowboat when the waters were up that high.

Life: Was the store actually moved at some point?
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Mr. Oden: It actually was moved in the ’20’s up here [to its present location].

Life: It had been down on the creek?

Mr. Oden: Yes, and 264, or the Washington-Leachville Highway as a lot of people knew it as years ago, was concrete. They poured concrete and what they did, they put logs and rolled it [the store] on logs with a windlass that went round and round. Each time they’d get up far enough, they’d move the log and put it up ahead of it until they got it here to this location.

Life: A windlass?

Mr. Oden: It is a pulley system with mules. You’ve probably seen pictures of mules walking around it.

Life: And so the store was literally put on logs and with this windlass moved by the mules and was rolled up here. Boy, I bet that was a job!

Mr. Oden: Yes! Daddy said the engineers were real perturbed that it was moved because they didn’t know how good their concrete was, but they were able to find out [the moving] didn’t bother it. [This happened] between ’23 and ’25. I think it was ’23 because I think that’s the same time Granddaddy gave them the land back here for the church. But the old highway, you see, originally came behind my house up here on the other hill, turned at a 90 degree angle, came across the creek, and then came in here in front of mom’s house. It went just a little stretch down here; then it turned beside the store and went to the church. And then what it did it literally went to everybody’s home. It was full of 90 degree turns.
Valinda and Mr. John Oden are enthralled by “Aunt Betsy’s” stories of long ago.

Life: [Mr. Oden told us about the early cash register.]

Mr. Oden: The store had a spring-loaded cashier system. It ran on a track and they used springs and the cashiers were obviously up the stairs. After the purchase, it sent the funds upstairs, and then it came back down with what change or whatever was needed. Obviously this was before there was any current, so power was produced with a DELCO Power Plant. And I remember playing with the magneto [produces alternating current] as a child. It was under one of these counters, and it would knock you off your feet!

Life: [Mr. Oden showed us a trade token used in the ’30’s.]
because, you know, a 100-acre farm would support an awful lot of people. So they used trade tokens; a certain amount of their pay would come in these tokens. We still have a few tokens left but very few. Technically what happened was with the road coming through, the town of Hunters’ Bridge disintegrated or disappeared; there were maybe seven or eight stores. There were butcher shops on the creek itself. There was a post office until 1903, and I was fortunate enough to acquire a couple of the letters with the Hunters Bridge post office mark. Hunters Bridge was a community, so everyone has always asked [about the origin of the name]. As near as I can tell from all the deed work I’ve done, there never was a family of the surname Hunter. It was the place where the hunters could ford the head of Bath Creek, which was right here, to get from one side to the other the first time it was narrow enough to. I kept looking for the Hunter family and there wasn’t any such, not in the deeds as I can see.

Life: I’ve come up in a boat all they way out there. You can take a boat out of the water there.

Mr. Oden: If you know the creek. But you better know the pilings, and back then there were warehouses that extended into the water. So, certainly, you don’t want to get near any of those in a boat. But slowly going in and out is no problem. There’s plenty of water depth. There is more water depth after you turn where the two creeks branch. There’s more water depth there in the smaller creek than there is in the other. Until everything was moved up here, it’s my understanding that they poled the large boats in the creek; they were not sailed. Here where the old town was is a slip that’s probably 50 feet long that they dug to back the boats in so they could turn them around. If not, they would have had to pole them backwards all the way back out to the big creek to where it widened. They made provisions to turn them around. There are still lanterns. Up here you see the covered lanterns. They are off of old boats and were upstairs here. They’re off of the boats that came in and out of this creek probably before 1920.

Life: [Mr. Oden told us that his parents had an artesian or “flow” well.]

Mr. Oden: Things you don’t see anymore, what the old folks called the “flow well,” was an artesian well. The pipe was driven in the ground; it had enough pressure to force water up the hill to Mom and Dad’s. Typically the “flow well” or artesian wells were rather sulfuric, but this particular one was not. My grandfather’s brother that moved to Greensboro got into the bottling business by carrying that water back and bottling it and selling it as mineral water. So it was not as high sulfuric content as most of your flow wells.

Life: There are so many interesting things here. Are they for sale?

Mr. Oden: So much of the original stuff is still here and a lot of it we have moved. And that’s one reason that Lynda [Mr. Oden’s sister] probably got into antiques. People were constantly insistent on buying them. We had to tell them they were not for sale; it was family. She even, for example, painted the cash register with aluminum paint because it was brass. Everybody wanted it, but it just can’t be brought at any price.

Life: So most of the objects in here are not for sale?

Mr. Oden: This wall over here [pointing] basically is either things that were in the family or were part of her collection. A lot of stuff
was given to her over the years, so that wall is not for sale. But she
does a thriving antique business. The cabinets and different things,
you know, are marked not for sale. My brother and I have
showcases of arrowheads that we have picked up locally over the
years. You just can’t part with them. One small case of them my
father picked up when they were using the mules. You could even
hear each rock hit the turning plow and he was right there on the
ground with it and he just decided to pick them up and put them
in his pocket.

Life: Now the store is essentially antiques?

Mr. Oden: Basically, yes. My grandfather died in 1961 and
technically then the general store business ceased; it became more
of a [soda] pop shop. We quit doing things like keeping all the big
wheels of cake cheeses and the fatback and all the meats that we
kept here and different things. It more or less ceased about the time
he passed away.

Life: Did you continue selling gasoline?

Mr. Oden: Oh yes, sir! The gasoline continued, probably, until
about the early ’70’s. The building has been moved a second time
since it was rolled up here to get it farther back from the highway.
It was about 1958, I believe, when they widened the road here,
wasn’t it Mama [John’s mother, who was tending the store behind
the counter]. Somewhere in the late ’50’s or early ’60’s, it was
moved back. The oldest gas pumps that I first remember sat on the
porch itself. There is a hole out there, if you noticed as you came
in, with flowers in it. That’s where the gas pumps were. Now she
[Lynda] keeps it full of soil, and she puts flowers out there.

Life: You say the store became a gathering place where people got
Cokes and such?

Mr. Oden: More or less. Now, there were a few groceries that we
maintained probably up until about ’80.

Life: Since then you say it’s essentially antiques?

Mr. Oden: Yes.

Life: Did you work here as a boy?

Mr. Oden: As a child, yes, I did. Although Lynda, my older sister,
did more so. My grandfather in his last years, his eyesight was
failing and [his mental alertness]. He was 87 at the time he passed
away. All the family was in and out [working]. My job was to
sweep the store for my grandfather for a soda pop and a piece of
candy that I got each time. That was my pay. That was a pretty
good deal! Soda pops at that time period were probably still six
cents. Everybody was going to quit when they went to seven cents.
They went from nickel to six cents, and they swore they would quit
when they went to seven. But obviously they didn’t!

Life: No they didn’t! Do you remember any particularly exciting
things that happened here at the store?

Mr. Oden: There have been numerous break-ins, but probably the
biggest thing that I have heard the older folks refer to was when the
store was still on the creek. George Latham was cut in 1903 by a
Woolard fellow—his first name I don’t remember—with a straight
razor. Said he was wearing gum boots, and they said that before
he got to the front door, they got the femoral artery and his
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boots were full [of blood] and he was dead. He bled to death immediately. Yes there’s been a few things happening like that.

Life: I notice you’ve got an extensive collection of pop bottles.

Mr. Oden: There’s a little bit of everything. Lynda has always been a saver. Unfortunately, the store’s ledgers are upstairs.

Aunt Betsy [Elizabeth Oden Elliott]: The upstairs has about ten times more [antiques and such] than the downstairs.

Elizabeth “Aunt Betsy” Oden Elliott tells Lisa of her adventures with “Dam-Fine-O” candy bars.

Life: Is that right?

Mr. Oden: Yes, [the upstairs] runs the length of this building. To give you some idea, the girl that works with us here has an oak
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rocker somewhere up there that she can't find. That's how much stuff there is up there.

Life: I saw an article recently in the Washington paper that this store has been declared an historical site or something like that.

Mr. Oden: Yes. Significant architectural structure, I believe, is what they called it.

Life: [Mr. Oden went on to explain that the store is an A-frame but that the front facade appears to be a three-story structure.]

Mr. Oden: Yes. It's typical construction, an A-framed roof with, like, three stages on the front. It's indicative of nearly all the old store buildings I've ever seen, probably starting in the 1860's or '70's and coming right on up to the 1920's or '30's. Every one of them would have that sort of store front. It makes it look like it could even be three stories, and, for some reason I don't understand, the purpose of it was just to indicate the front of a business for some reason. [Looking at the floor] We hope there is never a fire because these floors, the way the dust was kept down on these floors was with kerosene. So you know a fire could not be stopped.

Life: When did the store really become just essentially an antique shop?

Mr. Oden: She's been back in that now, basically, for about five years. I don't know how to answer you because Linda's been in for about five years and then it was back to the pop shop, whenever it was convenient for us.

Life: You still sell drinks?
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Mr. Oden: Oh, yes! She still keeps the glass ones, and this is one of the few places you can get it in the bottle still before they discontinue them.

Life: Is that right? [The deposit on glass bottles, Mr. Oden explained, is making them uneconomical.]

Mr. Oden: Deposit is now all the way up to twenty cents for the drink bottle. Saturdays [years ago], from my understanding, seven different people were clerking here!

Life: Getting back to Hunters Bridge, the town, when did it essentially end?

Mr. Oden: It more or less ended within two or three years after this road [264] was paved. Probably by the late '20’s, the town itself was gone. The sawmill and cotton gin continued in operation until 1954, I believe, was the year. Of course, my grandfather rebuilt it, put in new boilers and everything else. He wanted to pass it over to my father who had no interest in it. All the old saws and everything were in it when the hurricane [Donna in 1960] took it down. [Mr. Oden introduced us to Mrs. Elliot, affectionately known as “Aunt Betsy,” who had just entered the store.] And this is my aunt over here, Elizabeth Oden Elliot. It was her father who built the store. I’ve heard her talk about using a nail to eat your oysters.

Aunt Betsy: Yes. I never did eat oysters. I do not eat oysters! Daddy would give us a pan to put the clams in. We would go down to the creek and put them in vinegar and eat them with a nail.

Mr. Oden: All you could eat for a quarter, or something like that?

Aunt Betsy: Something like that. But I never ate mine because I never could eat oysters. Those things were gritty!

Life: Who would open the oysters?

Aunt Betsy: The people on the boat.

Life: On the boat and for twenty-five cents you could eat all you wanted?

Aunt Betsy: Eat all you wanted. You would eat them with a nail.

Mr. Oden: One of the gentlemen was Captain Kitt Carawan.

Aunt Betsy: Captain Carawan. But he didn’t have an oyster boat though, I don’t think. He had a regular freight. We had a big round thing here [in the store] that would cut cheese, the big round pieces of cheese, into thin slices, and they would give them to us on—what were they?

Mr. Oden: Johnny cakes was what you called them.

Aunt Betsy: Yes, little round cakes. When you came back from the oyster boats, everyone loved them.

Mr. Oden: The round cake cheese [container] is still here somewhere. It sat on a metal frame, and it had a glass cover. It was marked off and raised for what would roughly be a fourth pound, one-half pound or a pound. And it was sort of like a cleaver handle you pulled down, and it would slice it.
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Aunt Betsy: You pulled it down and it cut the cheese so thin, then you’d put it on a cracker or cookie. And it was so good! I bet it wouldn’t taste like that today.

Life: You put the cheese on a cookie?

Aunt Betsy: Yes!

Mr. Oden: Johnny cakes is what they called them, more or less a short bread cookie as I recall, short bread and sour dough. They were bought [not made locally], and if you remember probably when you were a child, the big containers, they were like a penny a piece.

Aunt Betsy: At night if we didn’t have the oyster boat, we would have sardines, potted ham, and all that sort of stuff. Oh, it was wonderful! We looked forward to Saturday nights.

Mr. Oden: How old were you at that time, maybe 10 or 12?

Aunt Betsy: Somewhere around there [1920]. We would go sleep up there on the counter with the overalls.

Mr. Oden: I remember when the counters were full of overalls and shirts and different things like that.

Aunt Betsy: We sold material over there. We sold sheeting. If you wanted some sheets for your beds, you would come down here. The material was folded like this, and you would open this piece and this piece and then put your hand under there and measure off the yard. We would lie up there [on the material and clothes for sale] and listen to the ghost tales that people told when they came
Over the years, much of the merchandise has spilled over outside the store.
down on Saturday nights. Everybody came from miles around. We would sit around the heater, and we’d be scared to death to go home. One night [when] we were going home, a hoot owl hooted and its eyes lit up and it like to scared us to death! Those were the days!

Mr. Oden: She and my father both were driving by the time you were, what, 10, 12, 14?

Aunt Betsy: Well, we were younger than that because we couldn’t sit on the seat of the car and see over the steering wheel. He [her father, J. H. Oden, Sr.] would let us drive from here to the house by ourselves in the car. We had to crank it. Jack would crank it. Sometimes I let him drive, and sometimes I would drive standing up.

Life: Do you remember some of the people who would tell the ghost stories, and what some of the stories were?

Aunt Betsy: I remember one story and I’m trying to think of who told it. I think it was a Moore; I can’t remember. Their husbands used to go out at night to look for buried treasures around in the woods and around the creek shore and so forth. And when you were digging, you weren’t suppose to say anything; if you did, the treasure would sink. And one night they were out digging—it was a Moore [who told the story]. And one night they were digging, and somebody hit something, and they were so excited, somebody said something, and it sank and they never could find it. And Mrs. Moore was at home in bed asleep and she said the bed wiggled like this [demonstrating] and she fell off the bed. Now you believe it or not, but that’s what she told us, if I remember. [I was] a young thing, and it scared me to death to hear her tell that tale, how the bed wiggled like this and whatever it was sank and they never could dig to get it, whatever it was. I would like to know where it was. Today we would mine for it, wouldn’t we?

Life: It wouldn’t have been Blackbeard’s treasure, would it?

Aunt Betsy: I don’t know. It is supposed that he did travel up and down the creek shore, I mean that was common.

Mr. Oden: Everyone [back then], if they had anything accumulated, for protection it was buried.

Aunt Betsy: Well, you do know over in front of Dale’s [John’s brother] house somewhere, Daddy was having a well put down, and they struck something. I don’t know what, but they couldn’t dig any further and they never have. I don’t know where it was, but they never did. I would have gone and delved into what it was had I been here at the time.

Mr. Oden: When Aunt Betsy retired and came back here, she would have gone and delved into it. I assure you she would! She taught in Virginia and North Carolina. If they [his sister Lynda and others] were ready to crawl under a building and look for old bottles, they would go get Aunt Betsy. If they were down here next to the creek digging, Aunt Betsy would just walk through hollering, “shoo, snake!” and go right on through everything.

Aunt Betsy: I would have gone and found out if I knew where they were digging that well. I would have had that thing investigated!

Mr. Oden: Probably part of the reason too the store was such a center in the community was the fact that it had one of the first
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phone lines. And the old hand-cranked phone is still over there behind the counter. People would come to use it. The wall, if you noticed back here, is where the last ones were, and it’s covered with numbers. Everybody would stand there and doodle while they were on the phone, or to remember the number they wanted to call, they would write it right on the wall. That section obviously has never been painted again.

Life: Aunt Betsy, you say you would sleep on the overalls?

Aunt Betsy: Oh, yes, we would sleep on the overalls!

Mr. Oden: And they would play tricks too with the cans and strings and everything else while the others were walking home trying to scare other people. I heard them talk about doing that, as a matter of fact.

Aunt Betsy: We had a man, a red-head man came down here. What was his name? Lived at the end going to Bath up that road in that big white house. I was scared to death of him. Every time I saw him coming, I would run and hide under the end of that counter and stayed until he left. He never did anything we know of. We were scared to death of him, though. Mrs. Martha Cutler used to tell about [him]. Oh, she would go up to his house, and whoever the girl was there, they were real good friends. And she would go up there and spend the night on a weekend. They would go to bed at night, and just about time they would go to sleep, they would hear the ghost. Somebody had died. They would go between the bed and the house, and they would hear the buttons of their clothes scraping on the side of the house. And she would say, “I swear to God it would scare me to death!” And my hair would just stand right up on end when she would tell those tales, scare you to death,
and she believed it! That was a thing she believed. And I wonder if it happens to the people who live there now, if they ever hear strange noises.

Mr. Oden: The large elm tree beside my house, they had a funeral somewhere over in there, and they said they missed Aunt Betsy during the funeral. They looked and she was up the tree. That would have been 1920 or so.

Aunt Betsy: Things were so different then than they are today.

Life: What do you think is the biggest difference between today and 1920?

Aunt Betsy: Everything's different. Hunters Bridge community is much smaller. There were three stores the size of this one down

Remember Old Gold cigarettes?
by the creek, the cotton gin, sawmills, two barber shops, a post office, meat markets.

Mr. Oden: There were little warehouses, fertilizer warehouses and everything.

Aunt Betsy: And a flowing well. I miss that flowing well more than anything!

Life: That’s your artesian well?

Mr. Oden: Yes, the flow wells.

Aunt Betsy: We sold sodas, did he tell you?

Life: A little bit about it.

Mr. Oden: Baskets, guns, anything they needed.

Aunt Betsy: Oil, gas, ladies’ gloves, shoes, ladies’ linen, clothing. What else?

Mr. Oden: Any kind of food staples.

Aunt Betsy: Sardines and crackers, molasses. The shed that’s on the side of the building has been built on it since it was moved here.

Mr. Oden: I told them about it.

Aunt Betsy: When it was a pop store, we had a shed out there and it was closed in. And it had a car, chains, plywood and all kinds of things in it.

Mr. Oden: One of the interesting things that I didn’t mention was that Granddaddy would leave here on the boat to go to Baltimore, out of this little creek, and Grandmother was in charge. And Grandmother evidently liked finer things like pressed-cut glass and things of that nature and [would buy them from] the salesman who would come through. But I was told that before Granddaddy came back, a lot of it ended up in the creek. And, true enough, we have found some things like that in the creek.

Aunt Betsy: I wonder what happened to the beautiful spittoons that were in here. They were polished brass. Some of them were this tall. They were beautiful. I believe they’re in the creek. Whatever she liked, she bought it.

Mr. Oden: She thought better of it before he returned, so overboard it went. She was raised outside of Richmond. She was not local anyway. And, she had seen a lot of things that she really liked and through here people had never seen.

Life: What was this about your 86th birthday?

Aunt Betsy: I went riding on the combine [with David Burbage, Jr.]. Last year they let me pick corn. I mean, they let me drive it, and I picked corn literally till I got to the end of the row and they wouldn’t let me turn around. They were afraid I’d run in the ditch not knowing how to handle it. This year they wouldn’t let me drive it because [the corn] was this high, and they were afraid I’d get too excited and go too fast.

Mr. Oden: At 86 she crawled on that combine.
Aunt Betsy: Have you ever driven a combine?

Life: No, I have never driven one.

Aunt Betsy: That big thing out front of the combine, it will mesmerize you! It goes around and around.

Life: [Aunt Betsy told us that she went to Washington Collegiate Institute when she was about 12.]

Aunt Betsy: The old building, they tore it down. There was a main building, a girls’ dorm, a boys’ dorm, classrooms and rules.

Mr. Oden: Tell them about the whipping you got over the candy.

Aunt Betsy: I don’t remember that.

Mr. Oden: The candy bar that Grandma didn’t like what you said.

Aunt Betsy: That “Dam-Fine-O.” That was the name of the candy bar. Mama said, “Betsy, what you eating?” I said, “Dam-Fine-O.” She whipped me good for that. But that was the name of the candy bar, Dam-Fine-O. You didn’t say words like that!

Mr. Oden: They used to give them time every morning and she would roller skate all over Washington Park, she and a couple more. They had paved streets out there, but they could not go across the bridge into town, is that correct?

Aunt Betsy: You weren’t supposed to.

Mr. Oden: She’d leave Washington Collegiate Institute (WCI) with some of her classmates; they’d come down here on a weekend. One weekend they took the oyster boat and went to Ocracoke and spent the weekend.

Aunt Betsy: They [the students from Ocracoke] were school age, and they could not go home but at Thanksgiving and Christmas because the boats didn’t run every weekend, so that they could go home with family.

Mr. Oden: So you see, she’s always done about what she wanted. She always had that streak in her.

Aunt Betsy: I lived on the third floor [at Washington Collegiate Institute]. The steps went down to the first floor. I had a boyfriend—we called them boyfriends, but we were all just friends. They could go to the store and get hot-dogs or whatever they wanted. If we wanted any, we’d send them, and we’d take our laundry bag and put a rope to it. And the other end of the rope we tied to a chiffonier—half of it you hung your clothes in it and the other half had drawers. I’d take that rope and go to the top of the steps and let it down, the laundry bag. They’d put our food in it. We’d draw it up and have the best time upstairs. We did so many things that were against the rules. It was challenging! Don’t tell anybody they can’t do anything! Even today, don’t make that you can’t do something ’cause it will be done anyway. Mr. Hodges was the science teacher and he lived over the boys’ dorms, and I thought his name was Godyes. I didn’t understand the children saying Hodges. And I called him Godyes for a long time. I went with Sid Eagles. His family lived right outside of Wilson; they were day students. And Sid would drive the car in back of here, and Mr. Hodges would see me get in the car and we’d ride around a little, but he never said anything. Mr. Godyes, he never said a
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Inside are many antiques from decades past.
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word. That was funny! And I could skate in Washington. I could skate all around the park. I knew every person that lived in every house and they knew us, the students, by name. I went to Wilson [to college]; I couldn’t skate. I couldn’t walk around the school outside on the sidewalk. It was a completely different world because I had been trusted, even though I didn’t need to be trusted sometimes because of the things we did. One time Mr. Fletcher went up there and Mr. Hilley asked him to have lunch with us and asked me to sit at the table with them because I was the only student from down here that he knew. And he asked me if I liked Wilson, and I told him, “No, I don’t.” And by that, I mean I was honest; I was taught to be. I guess I said, “I don’t like it here.” I could see Mr. Hilley’s eyebrows go up to here. He said, “Well, Betsy, why don’t you like it?” I said, “They don’t trust me.” And he said, “What do you mean they don’t trust you.” I said, “I can’t walk across to the store across the street. I can’t walk around the block. They don’t trust me, and I don’t like it.” Now you see, I wasn’t afraid to say things like that; but I told the truth. I mean, I was honest. I could see Mr. Hilley’s eyebrows go right up to here.

Life: If you could change things in the past, what would you change?

Aunt Betsy: Oh, good Lord, the whole world!

Life: The whole world?

Mr. Oden: Does that mean you’d be willing to give up your car for a Model T and sit out in the open again?

Aunt Betsy: Yes, I think I would.
Mr. Oden: I guess that wouldn't go much this time of year, would it?

Aunt Betsy: I'd put those things—what do you call them?—outside on my Model T. What were they called? What were they made out of? It cracked and broke.

Mr. Oden: I'm not sure.

Aunt Betsy: I can't think of the name, but you had things you could put on your car, the outside of it, to keep the rain from coming in, in rainy weather.

Mr. Oden: I've also heard you talk about going to see your aunt in Engelhard and riding in the rumble seat in weather like this, too.

Aunt Betsy: Oh, yes I have! That was fun. You see, I was much younger then, I wasn't 86. We went down to Engelhard. Uncle Charlie rode the boat to Norfolk. He was captain of a boat. And I used to love to go to Norfolk with him on the boat. He told us [Aunt Betsy's cousin Mabel was along] that one weekend that he was going to have an oyster roast for all of us, a bunch from school down there. And it rained and it rained and it rained! The water on the lot was about this high. The land is low in Hyde County; the whole area is low. And I said, "Uncle Charlie, we can't have any oyster roast!" He said, "Now, Betsy, don't worry, don't worry we're going to have an oyster roast." I said, "But we can't because the water's high down here." He said, "Don't worry." And I saw him out there with his boots on and he put some stakes down here and here and here, and he spread wire on it. And then he put some stakes that were higher up and put wire on those, and I wondered what in the name of heaven is he doing. Mabel, my cousin, said, that was her daddy! "Don't worry; we're going to have an oyster roast." He made the fire on this level, put the oysters on that level, and we had an oyster roast. And the water was boot top deep, almost out in the yard, and he got more fun out of it than we did. Uncle Charlie was funny! I loved to go to Norfolk on the boat with him. Mabel, Clement Miller, and I used to go out to Oceanview. Oceanview had, I guess a park you'd call it. Anyway, it had a Ferris wheel and all that stuff. Uncle Charlie was like one of us, and he'd have just as much fun. He was funny.

Life: Did you work here as well?

Aunt Betsy: Did I work here in the store? Well, I was in here, but I didn't work. I guess I was a nuisance.

Mr. Oden: The public didn't let young girls work in the store very much, did they, when you were growing up?

Aunt Betsy: No, we had etiquette.

Mr. Oden: You were supposed to stay home and be prim and proper.

Aunt Betsy: Yes, I know I was supposed to.

Mr. Oden: Which you weren't then and you still aren't!

Aunt Betsy: I wasn't prim and proper. Gracious me! But I can remember a lot of things that happened here in the store, funny things and some not so funny.

Life: What sticks out most in your mind?
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Aunt Betsy: I think after we closed the store on Saturday nights sometimes, Mama, Daddy, Jack, and me would sit here around the heater. We’d have crackers and stuff to eat and those Dam-Fine-O candy bars.

Mr. Oden: I don’t know if you [Armstrong] heard her, but she got a bad whipping when she came home from WCI one day. Her mama asked her what was she eating and the candybar’s name was Dam-Fine-O. And when she answered, her mama “Dam-Fine-O,” her Mama whipped her butt.

Life: Did you switch candy bars?

Aunt Betsy: No, I just didn’t tell anybody what the name of it was, but it was certainly good!

Mr. Oden: She’s been like that all her life!

Conclusion

By Valinda Pilgreen

As time moves on, communities change. We learned that Hunters Bridge was once a progressive, prominent town in the early 1900s with a post office, barbershop, lumber mill, and a large trading store where large boats would pole up the creek from Bath to bring or trade supplies. In the community today, only the store, whose main business now is in antiques, and a small church remain.

As we talked to John Oden about the earlier days in the community, to our delighted surprise, “Aunt Betsy” walked in. Mrs. Elizabeth
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Oden Elliott, known to family and friends as "Aunt Betsy," is still as spunky and determined as she ever was. When she was a child, she climbed a tree during a funeral just to get a better look. In her teenage years she got caught by the dean slipping out of her dorm. At the prime age of eighty-five, she climbed aboard a large John Deere combine to pick corn just for the fun of it.

We would like to express our appreciation to Mr. John Oden and Mrs. Betsy Oden Elliott for their time in sharing this interesting information about their life experiences and their community and, above all, about the legendary Oden Store.