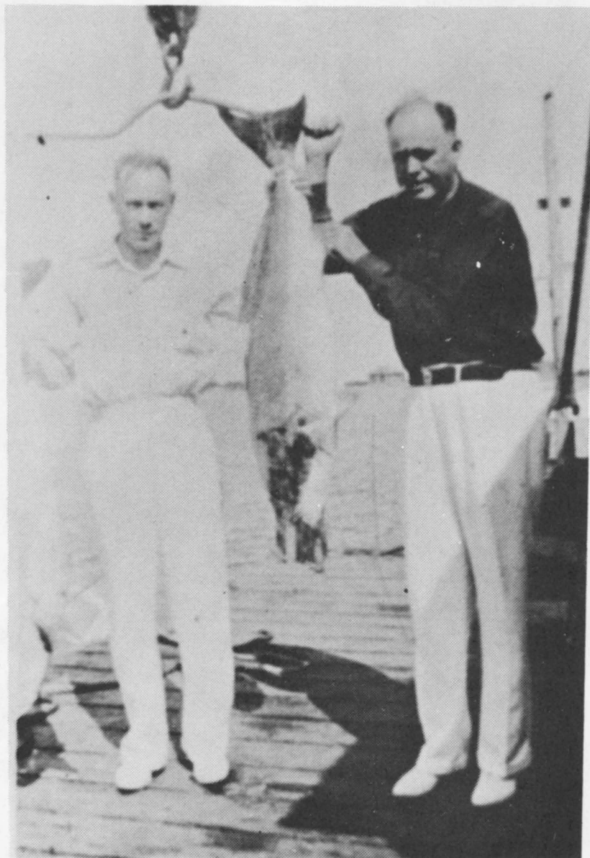


The Wahabs of Ocracoke Island



R. Stanley Wahab, right, and friend with one of Ocracoke's prime examples of the excellent fishing.

Article by Kevin Cutler

As a resident of Ocracoke since the summer of 1976, I've come to love and appreciate the island and its people.

When Dr. Armstrong asked me to write an article on an interesting Ocracoke resident, I didn't have to think twice about who I wanted to interview.

Mrs. Myra Wahab is a charming, gracious woman with a wealth of knowledge. For two afternoons, we sat in the living room of her beautiful home, warmed by a crackling fire. The Wahab home, a stately dwelling similar to the traditional image of a Southern mansion, rests on grounds landscaped with a variety of trees and plants.

Among the topics Mrs. Wahab and I discussed was her late husband, R. Stanley Wahab. Before his death in 1967, Mr. Wahab made numerous contributions to Ocracoke that are still in evidence today.

The photographs accompanying this story are from the Wahabs' private collection and are appearing in print for the first time in this issue of Life on the Pamlico. I'd like to express my thanks to Mrs. Wahab for their use.

Mrs. Wahab, when did you first come to Ocracoke?

My first visit here was in 1937.

What are some of your recollections of Ocracoke Island at that time?

The Wahabs



An aerial view of Ocracoke Island taken many years ago.

Well, of course, the roads were sandy roads then because World War II hadn't started. They didn't pave any of the roads until World War II. And then they paved the strip to the ammunition dump, which, I guess, they still call the ammunition dump. That was the first pavement. Then in 1951 the state gave us two miles of road through the village, and that took us down to Corky Mason's and joined the "T" by the fire department that goes on out to the ammunition dump, and circled back around by Wahab Village Hotel, now Blackbeard's Lodge.

Tell us about the population of Ocracoke at this time. Were there more or fewer people than today?

Approximately the very same "home population." We do have a "floating population" (non-residents) that come for the summer and own summer places, but they aren't taken in our census.

Was Ocracoke a big tourist spot then, as it is now?

Yes, Ocracoke has been a tourist spot since the 19th century. There was a big hotel over where the heliport at the Coast Guard is now, called the Ponder. It had 100 rooms and a dance hall. It burned in 1904, prior to the building of the Coast Guard station.

What brought you on your first visit to Ocracoke? Did you have friends or family here?

I came with Mr. Wahab, and my grandfather, my mother's father, was born and reared on Ocracoke. I'm a seventh generation Ocracoker.

When did you come to Ocracoke to live permanently?

1949.

In your opinion, do you feel Ocracoke has changed for the better or for the worse since that time?

Essentially, I would say it hasn't changed at all. As civilization progresses, any place changes. But I can't see that much change in Ocracoke. It's still a lovely place.

Of course, anyone familiar with the history of Ocracoke knows of the contributions Mr. Wahab made to the island. But could you tell our readers about some of them?

Well, he built the first really modern hotel here--the Wahab Village Hotel. And he built and gave the light plant to Ocracoke. At the time that he built it, he also built an ice manufacturing plant. The fish boats used that facility for their refrigeration for fish.

With his own efforts and his own finances, he got telephones for Ocracoke. He was also very instrumental in getting our permanent road to the inlet and getting ferry service to Ocracoke, free, from Hatteras Inlet. And a toll ferry, at that time it left Atlantic; now it leaves Cedar Island. The state bought that facility from the Taylor brothers. They built the ferry to show that it could be done and that people could get from Carteret County to Ocracoke. in Hyde County.



The Wahab Village Hotel following its construction in the late 1930s. The hotel continues in operation today as Blackbeard's Lodge.

Mrs. Wahab, could you tell us about the big Fourth of July Celebrations that were once held on the island? I know Mr. Wahab was involved in these as he sponsored the 1939 Miss Ocracoke Beauty Contest.

Right, he did, and of course it was the day for the pony penning. They penned the ponies; at that time there was quite a herd of ponies. They were called wild horses, but they actually weren't wild. They all belonged to someone and you could ride most of them. The new colts were penned and branded with the brand of the person who owned the stud and the dam. I guess the last pony penning was in the 1950's. The park service reactivated itself, so the ponies were taken off the island with the exception of the allowed 20, and they corralled them at the present pony pen.

Could you tell us a little about Mr. Wahab's background? Did he spend his entire life on Ocracoke?

No, he went away when he was 16. His first trip away from Ocracoke to stay was on the DuPont yacht, the "Tech." He and another Ocracoke boy left here on the "Tech"; it had come in from Florida on its way back to Delaware. A couple of the crew "jumped ship," and they needed deck hands, so these two 16 year old boys decided it would be a good experience.

After he finished his tour on the "Tech," he went to Goldy's Business College in Wilmington, Delaware. He finished there and got a job with the Wilmington Provision Company.

He worked there until he decided to come back home again or as close as he could. He went to Norfolk and then taught at Maury High

School; he taught commercial math.

And then he and a friend of his organized a company called Retail Store Services, which was a cooperative chain of furniture buying for really high-class furniture stores that had no buying power beyond their own wholesale prices. The chain stores had great buying power because of their number. And they decided that would be a good protection for the individual furniture merchants. They had 29 stores to sign up with them to begin with, and when Mr. Wahab left the chain, they had 449.

He retired in 1947 and came home to stay.

By the way, how old is this house, the Wahab home?

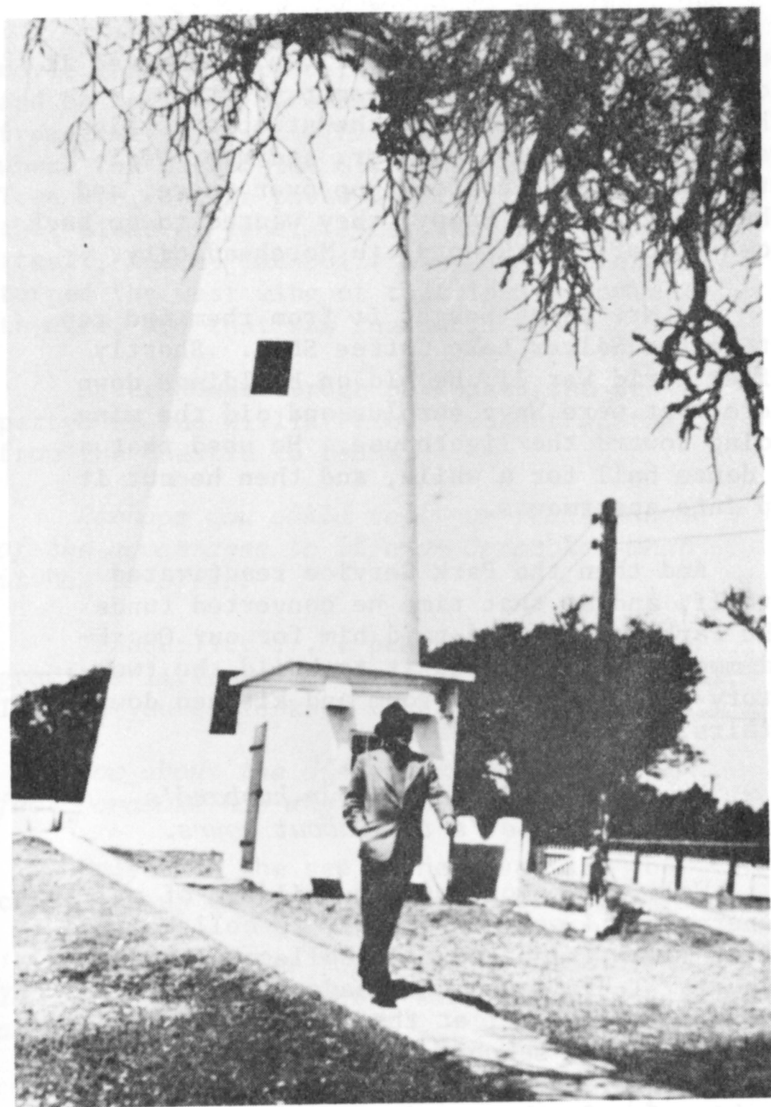
Mr. Wahab's mother and father moved into this house in 1887, so the house is almost 100 years old--it's 96 full years old.

I'm sure upon his retirement, Mr. Wahab still kept busy here on the island.

He always found something to do. His last project for Ocracoke was the fire department. He donated the first money for it, and I believe the plaque acknowledges that.

Wasn't Mr. Wahab also involved in what is now known as the Island Inn?

The present Island Inn was originally the Oddfellow's Hall, and it was built across the street from where it is now. The school was downstairs, and the lodge hall was upstairs. Mr. Wahab often said he went to school there, taught there, and he owned it as an inn.



Ocracoke Island's lighthouse as it appeared several years ago. Although the structure is essentially the same today, the surrounding woods have grown up considerably.

But a man named Ben Neal and his wife purchased it from the Oddfellows, and moved it across the road to its present position. The center portion, just the steeple portion, was all there was then. Mr. and Mrs. Neal started a little coffee shop over there, and then they weren't happy; they wanted to go back down to Carteret County, to Morehead City.

So Mr. Wahab bought it from them and ran it as the Silver Lake Coffee Shop. Shortly after World War II, he bid on buildings down here that were Navy surplus and did the wing going toward the lighthouse. He used that as a dance hall for a while, and then he cut it up into apartments.

And then the Park Service reactivated itself, and at that time he converted funds the Park Service had paid him for our Quork Hammock tract; he used it to build the two story section--dining room and kitchen downstairs, bedrooms upstairs.

You've told us about your husband's background; now let's talk about yours.

Well, like most of the children of my generation, I went to school, to college, and after I was graduated from college, I taught school. I "followed the leader" and married for the first time; at the death of that husband I went back to school at the Medical College in Virginia, and from there I went to Johns Hopkins for further study, and then taught there for ten years. And I married Mr. Wahab and came to Ocracoke. And I'm still here!

There is no movie theatre on Ocracoke Island today, but I understand your husband once operated one here.

There were two. In 1914 he built a movie theatre here called The Ocean Wave, and he had live personalities that appeared from time to time. That was located between where the Harborside Gift Shop and the Yaupon Tree are, on the paved portion. It was down on that piece of land. After that had exhausted itself, and he had built the Wahab Hotel, he turned the west wing of that into a movie theatre, and that was run until 1959.

After Doward Brugh purchased the property, he and Willis Price transferred that from the theatre to rooms.

Perhaps you could tell our readers some of the advantages to life on Ocracoke--what it has to offer.

Tranquility . . . peace of mind . . . gracious living . . . friendliness . . . well, I guess you could keep right on and on!

How about the disadvantages? Do you feel Ocracoke has any at all?

Only when the sea washes over and you can't get up the beach by Hatteras way!

That's another topic we can talk about. You've lived here for 35 years. Have you seen any really bad storms?

No. The only storm that there's any record of a house being washed off the blocks was in 1899, and that was a three day duration. It left, and it came back. One house did wash off its blocks, but it was jacked up and put back on its blocks after the storm was over.

And at that time, the Porder Hotel was in

operation, and all the quests that were registered there came over to this house to stay. Mr. Wahab's grandfather was living here with them then, and there were 21 people from the hotel. So he said if he didn't do it himself, he guessed they'd drown. So he went out and killed 20 chickens and made a big chicken stew for the crowd!

That's the worst hurricane that's been reported here.

Coastal folklore also tends to center around shipwrecks. Have you seen many on Ocracoke?

No. There've been one or two small ships--fishing trawlers and such--but the last ship that was wrecked here was the Charlie Mason, and that was in 1948. And Mr. Wahab did get it off. It belonged to the Smith Brothers in Morehead City, and he happened to be in the office down there talking to the man whose father owned the boat. The man said, "That's my father's favorite of all our boats," and that he would give \$40,000 cash for that boat in Ocracoke Harbor. Mr Wahab said, "Put it in writing and I'll get the boat off." So they signed the contract, and at that time he leased the airport in Manteo and had planes. He had the planes fly to Baltimore and pick up big sea anchors and put Van Henry O'Neal and Dallas Williams on there as a crew. They put the anchors out in the sea, and everytime they'd have a high tide, they'd take the slack off. And then, of course, the tide would ebb and they'd get it settled down.

They worked on it about a week or 10 days, floated it, brought it into the harbor here, and then it was taken home down to

Morehead City.

Things are changing on Ocracoke Island, as they are everywhere. Do you feel we should go back to some of the old ways and perhaps let technology pass us by?

Well, no, no more than any other small place that is a close-knitted place. I don't think that anybody wants to go back to kerosene lamps and outhouses. I think they're very satisfied with the modern trend. We pay the same amount of taxes as anybody else does. If we pay for them, why shouldn't we enjoy the privileges?



One of the island's early Coast Guard Stations. Built in 1905, it was torn down in the early 1940s to make room for the present facility.

Mrs. Wahab, could you tell us about the tombstones here on Ocracoke that attract a good deal of interest from the tourists?

Well, the most admired one is the 117-year old woman. She was born in 1724 and died in 1841. And then, of course, the epitaphs on some of the others--one says, "She was, and words are lacking to say what. Think what a wife would be; she was that."

Then there are the reversed tombstones. There were three brothers and they died in an epidemic of measles. At that time the only transportation was sailing ships, and the tombstones were cut in New Bern. When they came, the dates had been reversed. The date of their death had been recorded as the date of their birth, and the date of their birth was the date of their death. Of course, nobody can die before they're born!

But the father of the children said he was going to put them down exactly like they were brought to him because anybody that didn't have that much sense didn't need to look at them.

Let's talk about the Community Cemetery. When was this begun?

The Community Cemetery was started in 1953. The first person that was buried there, on the 24th of October, 1953, was Mr. Ben O'Neal. And that same day Mr. Ben Gaskill, Lum's father, was buried.

An especially interesting graveyard here on Ocracoke is the British Cemetery. Could you tell us about that?

There were four sailors from HMS Bedfordshire, which was doing escort duty from

Wilmington to Cape Henry. A torpedo caught it off the coast here, and four of the bodies washed up. They didn't all wash up at the same time. Three were washed up first, and the fourth later. Lt. Cunningham's dog tag was still on, and one of the other's was still on. But the other two had washed off. So there was no identification with those bodies, and they were buried as unknowns.

T. A. Loving Co. made crosses with brass plates for each grave. But coffins were scarce; in those days everybody kept lumber under their house to make coffins. There wasn't enough lumber to make the caskets, so the first three were buried in sink-boxes. And sink-boxes were hunting blinds level with the water and had iron decoys around them.

When the fourth one washed up, why, everybody joined in and had enough lumber to make that coffin. So the fourth one, unidentified, was buried in a coffin.

Next to that cemetery, between it and the Williams Cemetery, there's a diver buried. His name was Pete; he was always called "Ole Pete." He died of diving too deep and coming up too fast. And the same lady, Mrs. Alice Williams, who let the British be buried on a plot of her land, let them bury him there.

Who is responsible for the upkeep of the British Cemetery?

The Coast Guard keeps it up now, and once a year seamen and officers from a British ship traveling this way come here and have a service.

In closing, what do you think is in

the future for Ocracoke?

At the present time, I think we've just about reached the saturation point as far as building is concerned; there's not much available space. And I think it will still be a lovely, lovely place to live.



R. Stanley Wahab, 1888-1967.

At the conclusion of this interview, I was amazed at the amount of material I had gathered concerning the Wahabs and the history of Ocracoke. And I am proud and privileged to have Mrs. Wahab share her unique insight into the mystique of Ocracoke Island. Trying to retain the spirit as well as the substance of her talk, I've attempted to keep the interview in tact with as little editing as possible, for these types of oral histories are important in preserving our heritage, which would be lost except for people like Mrs. Wahab.