"It is perhaps more fortunate to have a taste for collecting shells than to have been born a millionaire."

– Anonymous

The Collector

The old register at the grocery fell silent a quarter century ago. Worn wooden shelves that once showcased canned peas and collards are now crammed with beach glass, feathers, shells, sand, bricks and bottles. Glass cases that once tempted children with peppermint sticks and licorice whips are littered with whalebones, peace pipes and driftwood. Walls are draped in fishing tackle. Frayed lengths of rope coil like cobras under chairs. Chunks of old shipwrecks lie stranded on shelves. A watermelon sized wicker basket overflows with children's toys. A slender cash drawer cradles miniature china dolls. A fat orange buoy lounges contentedly in a corner.

All of it-every Cracker Jack toy, every set of false teeth, every spyglass, every shell, every World War II flashlight-was spit from the sea. And all of it was gathered off a mile long stretch of Outer Banks beach by Nellie Myrtle Pridgen, a Nags Head native who combed the shore at dawn and again at dusk nearly every day for nearly 60 years.

Now that she's gone, we're left to wonder: What will become of the riches she gathered and the beach she loved?

Article by Lorraine Eaton

This article, written by Loraine Eaton, originally appeared in the 1996 OUTER BANKS MAGAZINE, which was published by Sandy Flickner.

I would like to thank them for allowing us to reprint the article in this format so that we can share it with you. We greatly appreciate their interest and concern in preserving my mother's legacy and helping us protect the historical values that were so important to her.

Anyone interested in becoming a part of this ongoing effort is invited to visit our web site at www.oldnagshead.org for further information. Your involvement in this endeavor is crucial to our ability to continue to share this rich cultural resource.

– Carmen Gray, Kitty Hawk, North Carolina

Her daughter often drives down to the old grocery, where Nell lived, and walks into the room ringed with shelves, and always, always the inertia sets in. It has been four years since her mother passed, and Carmen Gray is still overwhelmed by the unusual legacy she left behind.

"She didn't let anything by her. She picked it all up," Carmen says, peering into a faded blue coffee cup, its interior crusty with barnacles. "There's a lot of history in this place. I'm not sure what to do with it, but I know it's important."

They say that life has its origins in the oceans; that 500 million years ago the first fish-like creatures swam in the sea: that 200 million years ago the 80-ton brachiosaurus dipped its head to dine on palm fronds; that about 1.5 million years ago ancestors of modern man began cooking over fire.

About 300,000 years ago they migrated to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Around 130,00 years ago they began cracking open crabs and oysters. Thirty thousand years ago modern man first went fishing Seventy-eight years ago, just after the dogwoods had bloomed and the white petals had fallen like snow, Nellie Myrtle Midgette was born in a cottage deep in the Nags Head Woods. Her lineage was Outer Banks proper, full of Fulchers, Twifords, Hollowells and Hoopers- proud, strong, self-sufficient people who negotiated with the earth for a living.

The Old Midgette Store, now houses the NMP Beachcomber Museum in Nags Head

It was 1918, a time when the sound side south of Jockey's Ridge was, to outsiders, the whole of Nags Head. Lured by salt air, wealthy families had been coming here since the 1800's for entire summers to escape malaria-carrying mosquitoes and deadly vapors that they believed wafted from the steamy, low-lying, inland marshes. The "resort" sported a hotel or two, a wharf and a few cottages along the sound and sea. The hub of social life was the pavilion, which often featured bands-a piano, a violin, and perhaps an accordion. And if there wasn't a band, patrons danced to the Victrola by lantern light.

Nell's daddy was a fisherman who cast his nets into the waters and dragged them ashore behind a boat. In the summer he supported his family by catering to the tourists. His children helped.

On hot afternoons, Jethro Midgette hauled his catch to the shore near the hotels and the wharf, where he devised a sort of fish compound, a square of nets in the shallow water. It was inside this compound that Nell first looked into the eyes of the enemy. Fashionable ladies lined the wharf, as Nell and Jethro Jr. Stepped over the net and into the pen, where speckled trout, flounder and spot darted this way and that.

"Those summertime ladies stood up there in their bonnets and long dresses and told Nell what fish they wanted. They'd point down ; Nell would have to catch the fish with her hands." The indignity has been passed down, mother to daughter, and survives in Carmen's clipped tones.

Nell hated the feel of live fish, the slime repulsed her. But she loved to crab and unlike her friends, she didn't use bait to attract them so she could scoop them out of the water. "She used her toes, nothing but her toes," says Carmen.

When Nell was 15, the Midgette's announced that they would leave the soundside and migrate to the ocean. It

must have caused considerable talk when the narrow grocery bumped eastward atop timbers, and then stopped 50 feet from the new road.

Behind the store, the Midgette's built a two-story house on timber piers. Mattie Midgette continued selling chickens that she raised herself, plucking them clean and washing them inside and out with Ivory soap before offering them up to the tourists. She stocked the shelves with basics-flour, baking soda, bread.

The Midgette family was gambling on tourism.

A rare panoramic photograph, circa 1920, hangs in the store today. The long, lean picture shows the area of a few years after

Mattie opened her store. The photographer stood at the back of Jockey's Ridge looking south and snapped of four frames, moving slowly from sound to sea. Starting at the soundside settlement, the resulting picture pans across the sand and scrub moonscape to a church, a hump of sand where the Nags Head post office now stands, and 13 oceanfront cottages. Nothing else.

At that time, only 1,881 people lived in Nags Head. But a few years later-three years before the Midgettes went seaside-the last nails were hammered into wooden bridges connecting the isolated Outer Banks to Currituck County and Roanoke Island. By 1931, a smooth, 18-mile sand and asphalt road connected them, traversing the shore from Kitty Hawk to Whalebone Junction.

The Nags Head roadside was desolate, the stretches of sand and grass seeded only by the Coast Guard stations and a string of rambling, brown, cedar-shake summer cottages on stilts. The beach was open range and livestock roamed at will, chomping whatever shoots grew out of the sand.

"Lunacy in the extreme," that's what most people thought of this new road and talk of tourism, says Wynne C. Dough, curator of the Outer Banks History Center. "People here were a conservative stripe and thought that building a causeway was ludicrous."

Still, Jethro and Mattie Midgette believed. They sensed what was to come, like seagulls sense a hurricane.

The 1930's was a decade of unprecedented change on the Outer Banks. The reign of the elements was coming to an end. The Beach Road was just the catalyst. Two years after the Midgettes moved, the state outlawed open grazing with the Livestock Act of 1935. The first man-made tourist attraction-the Wright Memorial- was built on land once owned by Mattie's parents.

Hundreds of down-and-out men with the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps and the U. S. Transient Services crossed the bridges in the 1930's and built 115 miles of oceanfront dunes with 600 miles of sand fences stabilized by 141 million square feet of American beach grass. The idea behind the dunes was protection of the slender barrier islands from erosion; the idea of the 1935 law was to keep livestock from eating and trampling the newly planted beach grass.

The result of the bridges and roads, the fences, the dunes and the monument to mans first flight was an era of head spinning growth. Man was taking the barrier island wilderness.

This was the stage for Nellie Myrtle's life. It would be her fate to witness the day-to-day transformation of the wild seaside that she loved into a multi-million dollar tourism resort that she came to loathe.

At the time, however, the new dunes were probably nothing more than a point of interest to the bright and curious teenager on her way to the beach. And Nell was probably relieved to be rid of the roaming cows and pigs. Even with pavement between her and the seas there was plenty of room for her spirit to soar.

Her youthful beachcombing was nothing special, nothing out of the ordinary. Outer Bankers have depended on mother ocean for lumber, food and even clothing for centuries.

Tales of the bounty abound in Outer Banks folklore-the raft of beaver hats that washed up in 1867 in the wreckage of the steamer Flambeau, for instance, or the brandied peaches and linen that floated ashore in the winter of 1907 with the wreckage of the schooner John I. Snow. Old-timers still wax on about the oranges, onions, chocolate bars and whiskey-filled barrels that appeared with the tide.

"I do not think that there was a child who grew up on this beach who wasn't a beachcomber," Carmen says. "You picked up what the beach threw out."

The lanky, curly-haired Nell just never shook the habit. With age, her respect for the ocean and her knowledge of the natural world grew.

Inside the house behind the grocery, Nell would wait for the first light of day, perhaps smoking a Lucky Strike, but never inhaling. At dawn, she would put on her lipstick, pull on her trousers (she wore only trousers for the last 39 years of her life and she had no use for pants without pockets), Bang through the screen door, and head due east at a brisk clip. Hers would be the first footprints n the beach each day. But none of this leisurely, lollygagging beachcombing for Nell. Her style was aggressive, her stride long and sure. Squinting , her head moving from side to side, she scanned the shore.

"She knew what winds would bring in what things," says Carmen, who as a child was often left on the beach in her mother's wake, knowing better than to whine.

Nell came prepared for the best. In the days of paper bags, she purchased bolts of plastic from Mr. Nunemakers's hardware store and sewed pouches for her growing collection of Scotch bonnets, coral and rare shells from distant seas. Later, she switched to plastic shopping bags before finally discovering the advantages of the canvas tote bag.

Lots of things slowed Nell's pace-a tire, a snarl of fishing line, a patch of black sand. But shell beds brought her to a halt.

She dropped to her knees if something caught her eye. Crawling on all fours, Nell raked the course debris with perfectly manicured nails, picking up great handfuls of shell chips, sifting them through her fingers as she searched for bits of buffed beach glass or a slim olive shell or perhaps a child's toy. The solitary silhouette of the lean woman rising up from the sand at dawn, her hands full of nature, was to her neighbors, as natural as the sun rising out of the ocean.

Nell married twice and had two children. Carmen and her brother Elwood. Neither marriage lasted long. But with two children to raise, she had to bring in some money.

This was the late 1930's and tourism had gained a foothold on the Outer Banks. By 1940 motels like the Croatan Inn and the Carolinian were doing brisk business along the Beach Road. There were several restaurants and real estate agents could make a living selling sandy lots to people from Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey and North Carolina.

Tourism seemed unstoppable. Then came World War II.

Like hundred of Outer Bankers, Nell became part of the war machine. But forget knitting socks or joining the USO. Looking fit and trim and self assured, she worked at the Naval Air Station in Norfolk, the only woman in a crew of hydraulic mechanics.

Nell's father worked at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard and her brother, Jethro Jr., at Smithfield Packing. The trio would spend the weekends in Nags Head, then board a bus for Norfolk every Sunday night, suitcases in hand. Nell rented a room in a boarding house in Norfolk.

Nell still combed the beach when she was home, but the flotsam and jetsam was changing. Sea rations of jam and chocolate washed up with the tide, as did German military helmets and, occasionally, the bloated bodies of soldiers and civilians thrown from cargo ships and submarines that had been torpedoed offshore.

The collection swelled as coffee cups with the names of ships and sailors painted on the sides and military issue flashlights were added to the thousands of shells and sand dollars and chips of buffed glass.

Carmen remembers those years with just her grandmother and her brother as the loneliest time in her life. German submarines skulked along the coast and blackouts were mandatory along the beach. "There was no tourism, no nothing, especially after dark," Carmen says.

After the war, Nell returned, and so did the growth.

"V-E Day was almost like a long awaited go-ahead signal," wrote historian David Stick in The Outer Banks of North Carolina, "and even before the defeat of Japan in 1945, the boom began on the North Banks."

Nellie's precious argonaut shell.

Nell, who had worked occasionally in her mother's store, had to turn to tourism, to the enemy, full time to make a living. Her parents had moved into rooms over the grocery, and she had charge of the handsome beach cottage out back. She named the place "The Last Resort" and charged $2 for a nights stay and a home cooked breakfast that became near legendary. Her operation catered mostly to band leaders and musicians, the men who played at the beach dance halls. They'd cram as many as they could in a single room.

"They just loved her," Carmen said. "They were like the surfers today and they'd even stay on hammocks on the porch if there wasn't room inside."

The beachcombing continued. A delicate argonaut shell was added to the collection, a prize not only because of its extreme rarity, but because of the paper-thin membrane covering a hole in its side. The Arrogant was in the process of healing itself.

After the war, Carmen noticed another side of her mother. "Nell's champagne side." See, Nell had a gentleman friend, a handsome, rich, moustached lawyer from Norfolk. Carmen figures that they must have met during the war. The man, whose signed photograph Nell kept in a solid silver oval frame from Tiffany, was captivated by the smart, salty, straight talking beachcomber.

There were trips to New York and shopping sprees at the finest boutiques. "She didn't wear your ordinary Sears and Roebuck suits," Carmen says. "No, no. It was white floral Capezio pants and fancy hats with scarves" that tied under her chin.

The relationship lasted for years, but ended when the lawyer sold Bay Colony, his house atop Kitty Hawk dune, and asked her to leave the Outer Banks. Nell refused to speak to him. Even when the beach house phone rang and rang and Mattie coaxed her daughter, saying, "Nell, he's calling for you," she wouldn't budge.

Between 1950 and 1965, businesses sprang up along the Beach Road.

Scarborough's Garage opened in Nags Head in 1950. Carl and Charles Nunemaker opened Nags Head Fish Ice & Storage the following year, selling 300-pound blocks of ice to hotels and restaurants. Miller's Pharmacy, the first drug store on the beach, opened in 1957. And when U.S. 158 Bypass was completed in 1959, Thats'a Burger opened at the foot of Jockey's Ridge.

Nell became bolder and less tolerant with people she considered outsiders.

Karen Griffin came to the Outer Banks from Germany in 1962 on the arm of her new husband, Charles Griffin Jr., son of the mayor of Kill Devil Hills. Karen, a vivacious blonde who quickly established herself as one of the area's finest anglers, be-

came a popular subject of photographers for the new tourist guides and fish wrappers.

Karen had never met Nell, but Nell knew her number.

"I'm sick and tired of seeing your picture in the newspaper," Nell crackled into the phone one summer afternoon. Then she hung up. More than 30 years later, the memory still makes Karen Griffin laugh.

Nell was also becoming a regular at town and county meetings. She was a hard-liner, opposing anything she thought hurt the environment. She was particularly critical of building the Bypass.

"Boy, she could really give it to them," says Betty Crawford of Hertford, a friend of Nell's since childhood, when her family spent summers in Nags Head. "She'd tell them exactly what she thought of their plans."

It seemed that the ocean itself remained unchanged. It became Nell's escape from the concrete and the crowds.

A strong swimmer, she sometimes slipped into the sea and ventured so far east that her head was almost invisible to her daughter. She'd stay there floating on her back and treading water for hours.

"That," Carmen says "was her peace time."

Still, Nell kept walking the beaches. A corked glass bottle from the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey was added to the collection. Inside, a letter dated October 24, 1960, explains that it was part of a study of currents and offers the finder $1 for its return.

No one now can remember quite when it started, but at some point Nell began collecting rocks and bricks.

Bent into a comma, her head bowed, she hauled them around her yard and began spacing them around her yard and across her drive. Then she got a bucket of red paint and a paintbrush and wrote two words on planks out front of the grocery.

"Keep out!"

Nell had a soft side, but not for those who dared tread on her piece of the island; trespassers would suffer.

Win Crawford, Betty's son, knew Nell's soft side well. Troubled as a youth, Win found a friend in Nell, who took him under her wing, taught him about nature, and helped him change his life. Over the years, the pair spent hundreds of hours together and had more than a few adventures.

One summer night, Win got a call. Patrons of the Casino, a rollicking dance hall near Nell's home, had dared to penetrate the barrier.

"Win, I want you to come over here now and move this damn car out into the street," Nell commanded.

Win did, and when the car was square in the road, Nell spray-painted the windshield. The avengers had retreated into the grocery and turned out the lights and waited.

When the couple came for their car, they were furious. But along with the paint and the embarrassment, they had to endure a storm of cussing and hollering from Nell that blew them down the highway, and away.

In the mid-'70s, after Jethro and Mattie had passed on, Nell moved into the grocery. It was now stuck on one of the busiest stretches of Nags Head, flanked by shopping centers and restaurants. The Beach Road was in her front yard, the U.S. 158 Bypass at her back. The North Carolina Department of Transportation counted more than 30,000 cars per day driving past the nearby Nags Head ABC store that summer.

Nell had had enough.

"Keep out."

That same hand-lettered message is what greeted National Geographic reporter Charles E. Cobb Jr. When he ventured to Nell's house in1986. But Cobb had learned about Nell from the locals, one of whom graciously offered a bit of advise: Better get someone to call before you go over there. He did, and the 68-year-old curmudgeon with sand in her pockets and bare feet agreed to an interview. When she answered

the door that late summer day, 50 years of pent-up resentment shot out.

So, what do you think of this tourism, this robust economy? Cobb asked.

"Some call it progress. I call it rape," Nell snapped.

But something about Cobb appealed to Nell's soft side, and she invited him to walk along her beach. The unlikely pair walked the shore for almost two hours, he lobbing questions and scribbling notes, she stopping every so often to harvest some treasure or release a bit of wisdom.

"To know what this sea is doing you must see it on every tide," she told Cobb.

"My ignorance of the sea is embarrassing; she is kindly about it," he later wrote.

"She was kind of sad on that walk," Cobb now recalls of that day a decade ago. "She kept saying, 'It's all gone, all gone."

At one point, Nell pointed to a house leaning into the sea. "She was pleased," Cobb remembers.

At the screen door of the grocery she said, "Come back when ever you want to."

"She didn't have patience with many people." Carmen says. "If you wanted to take the time and really listen, she'd talk. If not, she'd show you the door right quickly."

Charles Cobb's October 1987 story is also part of Nell's vast legacy. Sometime in the 1940's, she had gotten out her scissors and started clipping every newspaper or magazine article written about the Outer Banks and its environment, even the daily weather reports from page 2 of the newspaper. The "library" of clippings and complete publications would eventually spread to every room in the grocery and the beach cottage, an estimated two tons of papers and magazines.

"She was one of the best read, most intelligent people I have ever known," Betty Crawford says. "She had a real scientific mind, amazingly well-versed."

Betty Crawford points out that Nell's knowledge ran deep despite her lack of formal education. She liked National Geographic, but she also loved Oceanus, the scientific journal of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

"She was just a wealth of historical documentation," says Bonnie Strawser, a wildlife interpretive specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Manteo.

For example, when a manatee was spotted in the area, the local media reported that it was the first time that one of the subtropical, aquatic mammals had been found this far north. Strawser didn't tell them any different. But Nell was on the phone immediately, setting the record straight. According to her clippings, a manatee had been spotted off Jennette's Fishing pier in Nags Head 23 years earlier.

She wrote scores of letters to the editors of local newspapers, correcting mistakes and providing detailed documentation in her elegant script. And though Strawser was one of the chosen few with whom Nell talked, it didn't mean that she got any slack from the self-spun specialist.

Once, in one of Strawser's wildlife columns in the Coastland Times, a local tri-weekly newspaper, Strawser used the word "waumpam" to describe colorful shells on the beach. The morning the article was published, Nell dialed Strawser.

"Waumpam is a specific type of shell, not just a colorful shell," she informed Strawser in her gravelly drawl. She demanded a reprint.

"She was very oriented toward being absolutely correct," Strawser said.

She was still combing the beaches. Whalebones and plastic army men were added to the collection.

As she got older, Nell took to toting a cane to the beach to poke the sand and sometimes lean on, and later because the beach didn't seem so safe to her any more.

But if she happened upon someone who, say, missed when he threw his Old Milwaukee can at the trash barrel, she'd raise that cane up and "cuss the shirt off them," Carmen recalls. She was the unofficial keeper of the string of original Nags Head beach

houses, and there "was never any trouble in those cottages," Betty Crawford recalls. "As long as she was there, no one could come near them. She'd accost them."

The "13 Mile Post Cop" is what some people called her.

She couldn't stop tourists from flowing into the county, but she effectively kept them off her property with the cinderblock and rock barricade. She added a new sign to the one that greeted Charles Cobb. It was proudly displayed about the same time that a Kill Devil Hills sub shop owner was ejected from the Outer Banks Chamber of Commerce for spelling out "So long suckers" on the south side of his sign, so that tourists could read it as they headed out of town.

Nell's new sign said, "Don't even THINK of parking here." The folks down at the chamber didn't dare say a word.

"She cared," Win Crawford says, "to the point where it was a battle. It was her against the world."

With each passing year, Nell removed herself more and more from the company of humans and became closer to the ocean. Even with locals, the folks she had grown up with, Nell didn't socialize much.

"She didn't have any time for friends," Carmen says. "She didn't want to be bothered.

And it wasn't only people she shunned. When her health was in decline, Carmen tried to convince Nell to move to a more modern house, to get a television for company. She flatly refused. "If I had that, I wouldn't have time for the elements," she told her daughter.

By age 70, Nell was a recluse and a legend. Reporters knew better than to cross the barricade; acquaintances made do with memories.

"She had a rough exterior, but that was not the true Nell," Carmen says. "It was a facade, she was a very kind, dear person."

She just hated growth. But her lot in life was to witness the progress day in, day out, with the ocean as a majestic unchanging backdrop, a constant reminder of how things used to be.

By now, the collection was draped over the grocery's shelves like a kudzu vine and had crept upstairs and into the old cottage out back. There were gallon jars filled with buffed beach glass, culled by color. A modern day beachcomber would be lucky to find just one piece of cobalt blue glass. Nell had gallons of it. And red, and purple and all shades of green.

Sometimes, if she couldn't lug her treasure off the beach, she'd stow it under one of the beachfront cottages to collect later. Or she'd call Billy Gray, her son-in-law, and say, "I have found this wonderful piece of rope and cannot get it in," and demand that he bring his four-wheel drive truck to the beach and extract it from the grip of the shore.

Nell was clearly obsessed, "She had no idols, except the ocean,"

Carmen says. "Even when the tide stood in her house three times, she had more respect for the ocean than for any living thing."

Some of those close to her believe that the growing collection was Nell's way of documenting the bewildering change she had witnessed, a way of safeguarding a tiny piece of paradise lost.

BY the spring of 1992, Nell was slender as a sea oat with the same slight bend. A survivor of three heart attacks, she often kept her head down as she walked to the beach, as if to block out the cars, the stores, the bars, the rape.

Everything about tourism irked Nell. Once Carmen drove up to the grocery and saw her sitting on one side of the cinderblocks in the yard, muttering and plucking sprouts of grass from the sand.

Perhaps she had decided the grass was a thing of tourists-a thing of those fancy, manicured developments and golf courses up the road.

Grass had no place in her yard.

"Come on inside." Carmen coaxed.

Nell never even looked up.

Her health continued to fail, and in July, 1992, at the age of 74, Nellie Myrtle Pridgen took her last breath of salt air.

This is Carmen Gray's burden: deciding what to do with Nell's bequest.

Some of it has little value.-the plastic tumblers stuffed tight with scores of seagull feathers, the roomfuls of clippings, magazines, and newspapers in the old cottage behind the store, the tons of bricks stashed underneath it.

"We've got enough bricks to build a house," Carmen confides. "She never left one on the beach."

Other artifacts, like the pieces of shipwrecks, are of historical interest, and probably quite valuable.

One of Nell's most cherished finds was a fulgurite that the Smithsonian Institution has expressed interest in. Fulgurites are formed by fusion when sand is struck by lightning. Most are small, slender icicles of hardened sand. Nell spotted this one, the size of a bicycle wheel, atop Jockey's Ridge.

"She took a bicycle pump and blew the sand away from it," Carmen says. It took her a full day to lift the piece out of the sand unbroken.. "She knew she had a treasure when she found it."

The stoneware jug that Nellie found

Much of the printed material Nell saved is in some way cross-referenced to things on the shelves, and part of Carmen's frustration comes from not fully understanding the complicated cataloguing system her mother devised. All the times that Carmen and Nell spent rocking in the grocery, they never talked about the encroaching collection and the old lady's cryptic system. They both thought there was plenty of time for that.

"There's something here we could be interested in." Carmen says, pulling a January 1982 National Geographic from a grocery shelf. Leafing through it, she stops at an article about a colonial settlement near Carter's Grove, Virginia.

There is a picture of a German stoneware jug. The stocky face on the throat of the jug looks oddly familiar. She pauses, crosses the room, pauses again, and then picks a piece of stoneware out from a glass case reserved for Nell's most special finds. The match seems exact.

"It just goes on and on and on," she says, sinking into her mother's old rocker, the inertia setting in.

If she had the time and the money, Carmen would turn the collection into an Outer Banks beachcombing museum. Thousands of tourists forage the beaches every day, fascinated by even the most battered of clam shells. Imagine what they'd think of the World War II canteens, the mahogany carving of a star from Haiti.

Last year a second bridge connecting Currituck Count and Kitty Hawk was opened, allowing even more tourists-and more amateur beachcombers-to flow into the area faster. Like her grandparents, Carmen Gray wants to gamble on tourism.

Although she passed on in midsummer, Nellie Myrtle Pridgen's private, invitation only sunrise service was held well after the millions of tourists had driven past the grocery for the last time for the season and gone home. The engraved invitations simply said: Please join us for a Celebration of Life Memorial Service for Nellie Myrtle Pridgen at seven o'clock in the morning Sunday September 20, 1992, on her beach. Carmen spent the night of September 19 in the old grocery, surrounded by her mother's obsession. Thunder cracked all night, and lightning divided black skies. "She blew through here with the

most violent thunderstorms I have ever seem," Carmen remembers. The next day was Nell's kind of day. Overcast and raw with a chopped-up sea. As the sun rose out of the ocean, 192 people moved softly over the dune to Nellie Myrtle's beach, leaving the first footprints in the sand. Billy, Carmen's husband, cradled the box of ashes in the crook of his arm as he climbed over the sides of a flat-bottomed dory. Carmen's childhood friend, Eddie Reber Jr., started up the outboard and Billy and Eddie made their way through the rough surf toward the point where heaven meets the earth. As the sun squinted over the horizon, Billy released the beachcomber's ashes. There was no sound, save the slapping of the dory against the sea and the breakers on the beach.

The memory of what happened next still brings chills to those who were there. A school of dolphin glided by, their glistening fins breaking the surface of the ocean. A line of pelicans swooped down, skimming the surface as if to salute as if to salute a kindred spirit. Then suddenly, skirts blew up and the congregation shielded their eyes from the sand. A stiff northeaster rushed in, hurrying the end of the service. "It was over," Carmen says, rubbing her arms. "She was tired. It was finished."

Nell was back in the ocean.

Just a sample of some of Nellie's treasures.

"MATTIE MIDGETTE'S STORE"

This is our second printing of this article by Loraine Eaton. Since the first printing in the fall of 2004, several new developments have shaped the focus and direction of Mattie Midgette's Store and the Beachcomber Museum. In October, 2004, we attended the First Annual Northeast Sea glass Festival in Rockport, Massachusetts. Speaking about the site in an interview with Catherine Kozak for the Virginian Pilot, noted Outer Banks author and historian David Stick said "Next to Jockey's Ridge and the Wright Brothers Memorial, it is the most historically significant place on the northern Outer Banks. It is an integral part of the Nags Head Historic District."

In the Spring of 2005, the store and back house were listed in The National Register of Historic Places. The roof of the store was replaced that summer, revealing interesting clues as to earlier styles and sizes of the structure. Last January we invited Dr. Stan Riggs, Geology Professor from East Carolina, to speak about beach nourishment prior to the vote on the "Sand Tax" in February. We are currently working with ECU to explore the educational opportunities presented by the historic site and my mother's collection.

Although the Beachcomber Museum does not have regular hours, several open houses are scheduled regularly throughout the year. Please visit www.osob.com to add your name to our email list so we can keep you posted about our upcoming events!

Thank you for your interest and support of our endeavors,

— Carmen Gray

NMP BEACHCOMBER MUSEUM

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