

## Special Deliveries



Lobsters lined up for a race on the Kaufman porch, winner to be dunked first in a pot of boiling water, August 1967. Lobster handlers are, from left, the author, Whitley Kaufman, Meg Gehman, Clayton Kaufman. *(Photo courtesy of Clay Kaufman)*

In the summer of 1969 astronauts opened the moon, Woodstock Rockers closed the New York State Thruway, and I began delivering the U.S. mail with Yaz.

The route, and routine, was virtually the same virtually every morning in Wainscott, N.Y, a hamlet of 500-odd folks on Long Island's South Fork, the farm community and beach resort also known as the East End and commonly called the Hamptons. First I hopped on my Stingray bicycle, the one with the banana seat and the spokes clipped with eight years of baseball cards starring Carl Yastrzemski—Bridgehampton native, Boston Red Sox hero and my first role model who wasn't my parents. Then I crossed Whitney Lane to the Graves' newspaper box to borrow their *Newsday* to check Yaz's latest box score. After returning the paper to its proper place, I cycled to the main drag, Sayre's Path, a slightly humped, lightly sandy lane splitting woods of scrub oak and fields of potatoes. Pumping furiously, I passed the screened porch where Paul McCartney played guitar during his early months as an ex-Beatle and the yard where a well-off, well-oiled Scottish chauffeur named Pete Morrison toasted the sunset by playing "Amazing Grace" on bagpipes.

At the end of the path I stopped to soak in the fabulously wet, amazingly graceful South Fork light, which bounces off the Atlantic Ocean and a half-dozen other kinds of waterway, turning the sky into a sea of silky scrim and everything else into crisply outlined islands. Turning right onto Main Street, the rare main street in America without a single working store, I pedaled by maples and lindens planted after the 1938 hurricane, three centuries' worth of six architectural styles, a potato-dairy-strawberry farm owned by a family who came here from southern England in the northern

half of the seventeenth century, and a nineteenth-century church that began life as a Bridgehampton school. Beyond the chapel was a holy quartet of earthy landmarks: a rectangular cemetery where I learned to meditate on mortality; a rectangular baseball field where I hit foul balls off gravestones as a member of the Wainscott Wildcats; a one-room school house where my wildcat sister contemplated her misbehavior in a trash can, and a dead general store I resurrected with my imagination.

Near the western end of Main Street I parked by a shingled cottage that served as a one-room post office. After removing the mail from our box, I saluted postmistress Ethel Pierson, a former New York City teacher with a remarkable collection of seashells and life preservers and a husband who was a carpenter comic. (Asked why the post-office flag flew at half-mast, Sam Pierson quipped: "For the death of the three-cent stamp.") Before leaving the premises I scanned the FBI's most-wanted list, memorizing the frightening faces of violent criminals just in case I met them roaming Beach Lane beach, disguised in sunglasses, bathing suits and tans.

Back on the Stingray, I turned left onto Town Line Road, detouring to a new house that resembled two old walls. A cross between an avant-garde castle and the back of a huge fireplace, it could have been built by masons from outer space. After staring in awe for a few minutes, I scooted around the corner and down Main Street, where, picking up speed on the straightaway by Wainscott Pond, I dreamed I was driver Mark Donohue attacking the Bridgehampton Race Circuit, a wicked serpentine of blind bends blocked by dunes.

At the eastern end of Main Street I sped across the finish line, the open gate of the Georgica Association, a colony founded

in the 1880s by wealthy, sweaty Manhattanites seeking free air conditioning from summer sea breezes. I cycled through a forest seemingly imported from the Adirondacks; past the coved creeks of Georgica Pond, a tidal swimming pool for the likes of Carlos Montoya, the famous flamenco guitarist; around the softball field and former golf link where I turned double plays with my father; along the tennis courts where Dad hustled me in the shadow of a windmill moved from Montauk and Wainscott; over the speed bumps that made me a daredevil; through the prairie meadow that made me a naturalist; past a grove of wind-gnarled trees where I camped and fell asleep to the ocean's whispering hiss.

Back outside the association's entrance I zipped by a Kentucky antebellum mansion owned by cosmetics queen Estee Lauder; buttonhooked right onto Wainscott Stone Road, where actor Elliott Gould rented a house to escape the pressure of "M\*A\*S\*H" fame; hung a left onto Wainscott North West Road, nicknamed "Turtle Road" for the turtles that waddled from the woods during rains, and hung another left onto Roxbury Lane, passing steeply slanted houses called saltboxes, built in the sixties by Wesley D. Miller, a real-estate cowboy with a 10-gallon hat. I turned right onto Foxcroft Lane, a major artery in the Miller-developed Westwoods and Wainscott's best playground. There I shot the shit with my best friend Mike Raffel, fellow baseball nut, rock 'n' roll guru and guardian of The Forum, a street basketball court with Wainscott's only street lamp south of the Montauk Highway, rigged on the sly by Mike's lineman father.

Behind the backboard was the modular, cabana-style house-studio of Jake Murray, my first writing and sex coach. That summer I basked in the reflected glory of his novel *The Devil*

*Walks on Water*, the semi-autobiographical, quasi-pornographic tale of the black sheep of a golden Irish-American clan during the 1938 hurricane, which tossed haves and have-nots into the same soup. I read the dirtiest bits—including a blow-by-blow of an unforgettable blowjob—on Jake’s deck in seats from Ebbets Field, the late home of the late Brooklyn Dodgers, source of Jake’s great ecstasy and greater misery.

My 4.3-mile mail call ended with a swing around the block to Whitney Lane, where my six-year-old sister Meg was playing with Clayton, Whitley and Douglas Kaufman, keeping the boys at bay by whimsically changing the rules of their games, shouting “Red Light!” when it was really green. I parked the Stingray on our lawn, which was cluttered with baseballs, footballs and croquet balls, and entered our two-year-old New England–Long Island Colonial. I kissed Mom, who was making jam from strawberries we picked along Main Street, and made a date with Dad to play baseball in the backyard, me pitching to him from a mound he built from dirt, sand and bricks.

My parents didn’t care that their 11-year-old son had transformed a 20-minute trip into a 90-minute trek. In the anything-goes, everything-is-possible summer of 1969 they trusted Wainscott as a safe, stimulating, sanctified sanctuary. They knew it was my Woodstock, my moonwalk, mine.

Actually, I thought I owned the entire South Fork from 1967 to 1972, the years we lived on Whitney Lane. The Long Island Automotive Museum in Southampton, a Quonset hut with three bays, was my candy store for vintage vehicles, including a bullet-pierced 1933 Pierce Silver Arrow owned by Al Capone. The Penny



Henry Austin “Austie” Clark Jr., proprietor of the Long Island Automotive Museum in Southampton, pops a wheelie in a funny car made of odd parts from old vehicles, including a late 1920s Model T Ford. *(Photo courtesy of Walter McCarthy)*

Candy Shop in Water Mill was my pit stop for wax lips, chalky cigarettes and other sweets that turned kids into adults and adults into kids. At the Bridgehampton Race Circuit I fell for fiberglass spaceships hurtling at 170 mph; at the Hamptons Drive-In in Bridgehampton I fell for racing films starring Steve McQueen and Paul Newman, both of whom raced “The Bridge.”

Sagaponack was the summer retreat of writer Truman Capote, who taught me that words can thrill like Christmas gifts and who gave my mother another sort of thrilling gift. A former pharmacy in East Hampton housed *The Star*, a weekly newspaper that groomed and willed me to become a journalist with panoramic, probing

stories about fierce characters like Big Edie and Little Edie Beale, a mother-daughter tag team of aristocratic anarchists. Grey Gardens, their ramshackle-to-feral estate in East Hampton, pissed off their posh neighbors, triggered a class war heard 'round the world and made a financial angel of their notorious relation, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. The Edies could have been invented by Capote or Westhampton Beach resident Charles Addams, the gloriously ghoulish cartoonist who could have invented the sinfully outrageous Capote.

This soulful amusement park was supervised by my parents, who spent precious little time by the ocean while growing up on different sides of the Atlantic. My father was a Mennonite minister's son from Easton, Pa., an ambitious advertising manager for a Manhattan magazine that covered the media business, a handsome Marlon Brando lookalike who invaded high society by playing squash, singing barbershop and schmoozing. My mother was a nurse's daughter from the London suburb of Palmers Green, a former telephone operator for the Queen Elizabeth I cruise ship, a brunette beauty who was fairly shy and cautious—except when she danced to a big band.

Patricia Cleversley and Larry Gehman met in 1957 through a mutual friend, a former U.S. Army soldier stationed in London during World War II. Their first date was a baseball game at the Polo Grounds in Manhattan; my very English mother wore white gloves and had no clue what Willie Mays was doing in center field. Six weeks later they married in the seaside town of Wildwood, N.J., where my father's minister brother-in-law was stationed. They began their life together in Manhattan, where I was born in 1958. That summer I made my South Fork debut in a rented

railroad cottage in Hampton Bays, a few miles east of Westhampton Beach, where my father rented other cottages with other eligible bachelors and popularized volleyball by the ocean.

My parents settled me in the Westchester County suburb of New Rochelle, a half-hour train ride from Grand Central Station and the future locale of “The Dick Van Dyke Show” (I bet I was the only kid living in New Rochelle who didn’t know that Laura and Rob Petrie lived in New Rochelle). After my sister arrived in 1962, Dad and Mom leased a roomier summer house in Quogue, another one of Dad’s Hamptons haunts. We were there in 1966 when he bought the Gehmans’ first piece of East End real estate, a half acre on Whitney Lane in Wainscott, across the street from a new home built by Bob and Jane Kaufman, his singing buddies. Dad purchased the property without telling Mom, an early sign of big trouble around the bend.

On this woodsy lot, in a relatively new, thoroughly middle-class neighborhood, my parents built a four-bedroom, two-bath home, converting a garage into a sunken family room with a two-way fireplace. House and land cost them \$21,000, a king’s ransom for a couple with two kids, two residences and an annual income under \$30,000. Those who know even a little bit about the Hamptons know that \$21,000 is chump change in today’s ridiculously ritzy real-estate market. If you’re lucky, it will buy you a two-month summer rental on the north, or wrong, side of the Montauk Highway.

Like virtually every adult from the suburbs or city, my parents had more fun on the South Fork. They lounged on the beach, played tennis and golf, had date nights with their underage kids while watching R-rated films at the drive-in. They hosted parties



starring my father's singing and my mother's beef bourguignon and attended parties starring celebrities. It was at an Amagansett wingding that I met Fred Gwynne, who played the lovably goofy, green-faced Herman on "The Munsters." I lamented to him that school bullies called me "Herman" because the large birthmark on my neck reminded them of the electrical bolts on Mr. Munster's neck. Shuttering the sun with his 6-foot-5 self, Gwynne smiled and said softly: "Leave it to me—I've got something that will shut them up." Within the week he sent me an autographed photograph of himself as Herman. My enemies shut up for good when they read the inscription: "To Geoff—my second favorite Herman."

While the South Fork was paradise for me, it became less so for my parents. Worried about paying two mortgages on time, they never fully relaxed in that adult oasis. Over six years they were increasingly divided by my father's boozing, his investment failures, their polar-opposite personalities. Simply put, Dad was a social bulldozer; Mom cleaned up his messes.

My family wasn't the only one flattened on the East End, much of which is bevel level. Too much boredom aggravated alcoholism and mental illness; too much freedom accelerated divorce and suicide. Lives eroded like dunes and duneside lawns, which disappeared into the sea despite ugly concrete jetties that turned beaches into Normandy battlegrounds. Falling potato prices forced farmers to sell acres to house developers who spoiled lovely fields with absurdly angled Rubik's Cube boxes. Rising property prices shoved the middle class off their comfortable island.

I was sheltered from these storms until the summer of 1972, when my father abruptly shut the door to my heaven on earth—

with my toes still on the saddle. By then the damage was done, thankfully. In six years the South Fork had significantly stretched my mind, my heart, my vision. I had learned lifelong lessons about beauty and cruelty, humility and decency. I had grown up, and out.