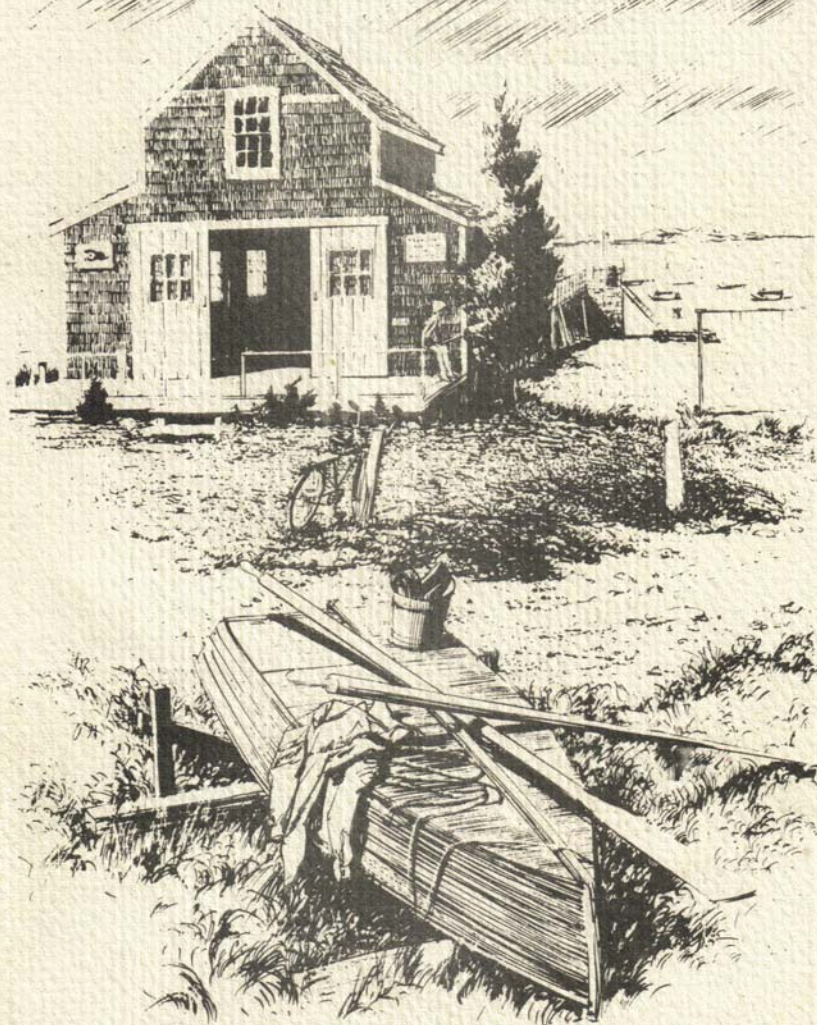


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YOU'VE NEVER BEEN
TO BARNSTABLE?

KURT VONNEGUT, JR.



Illustrated by Louis Cary

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Barnstable on Cape Cod, Mass.

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Some years ago, so the story runs, an encyclopedia salesman stopped by America's oldest library building - the lovely Sturgis Library in Barnstable Village, on Cape Cod's north shore. More in pity than in anger, he pointed out that the library's most recent general reference work was a 1938 Britannica, backstopped by a 1910 Americana. He added that much of importance had happened since 1938, listing, among other things, the discovery of penicillin and Hitler's invasion of Poland.

The salesman was advised to take his astonishment to some of the library's directors. He was given their names and addresses (the list included this writer) and told that he had a chance of catching several directors all at once if he went to the Barnstable Yacht Club. So he drove down the narrow yacht club road and nearly broke his neck when he hit a series of terrific bumps put in the road to discourage speeders - to kill them, if possible.

He wanted a martini and wondered if a non-member could get service at the bar. He was appalled to discover that the club was nothing but a shack fourteen feet wide and thirty feet long, a touch of the Ozarks in Massachusetts. In it was a hilariously warped Ping-Pong table, a wire lost-and-found basket full of sandy, fragrant objects, and an upright piano over which the roof had leaked for years.

There was no bar, no telephone, no electricity. There weren't any members there, either. To cap it all, there wasn't a drop of water in the long harbor; the tide, which can be as great as fourteen feet, was utterly out. The so-called yachts - antique wooden Rhodes - 18s, Beetlecats and a couple of Boston whalers - were resting on the bluish-brown glurp of the harbor floor. Clouds of gulls and terns were yelling about the glurp and all the good things to eat they were finding in it.

A few men were out there, too, digging fat, succulent clams from the rim of Sandy Neck, the ten-mile-long

sand finger that separates the harbor from the ice-cold bay. Ducks and geese and herons and other waterfowl were also out there, in the great salt marsh that bounds the harbor on the west. Near the harbor's narrow mouth, a yawl from Marblehead with a six-foot keel lay on her side, waiting for the water to come back in again. She should never have come to Barnstable Village, not with a keel like that.

The salesman, very depressed, and insensitive to the barbarous beauty all around him, went to lunch. Since this was the seat of Barnstable County, the most booming county in New England, and since the boom was a tourist boom, he had reason to expect something mildly voluptuous in the way of a place to eat. What he had to settle for, though, was a chromium stool before a slick plastic counter in an aggressively un-cute, un-Colonial institution called the Barnstable News Store - a general store whose motto was: "If it's any good, we've got it. If it's no good, we've sold it."

After lunch the salesman went trustee-hunting again and was told to try the village museum, which is in the old brick Customs House. The building itself is a memorial to those long-gone days before the harbor filled up with all that bluish-brown glurp, when it was still used by fair-sized ships. There were no trustees at the museum and the exhibits were excruciatingly boring. The salesman found himself strangling on apathy, an endemic affliction among casual visitors to Barnstable Village.

He took the customary cure, which was to jump into his car and roar off toward the cocktail lounges, motor courts, bowling alleys, "gift shoppes" and pizzerias of Hyannis, the commercial heart of Cape Cod. There he worked off his frustrations on a miniature golf course called Playland which had, at that time, a maddening feature typical of the random butchery of the Cape's south shore. The little golf course had been built on the lawn of what was once an American Legion post - and right in

the middle of all the cunning little bridges and ground-cork fairways was a Sherman tank.

The tank had been set there in less enterprising days as a memorial to the veterans of World War II; and, though it has now been moved, it is still on the south shore, where it is bound to be engulfed by indignities again.

The tank's dignity would be protected in Barnstable Village, but the village would never accept it. It has a policy of never accepting anything if it can help it. As a happy consequence, it changes about as fast as the rules of chess (though the Sturgis Library does have a new Britannica now, and a new Americana too).

The biggest change in recent years has been at the polls. Until six years ago, the Democratic poll watchers and the Republican poll watchers were all Republicans. Now the Democratic poll watchers are Democrats. The consequences of this revolution have not been nearly as awful as expected - so far.

Another break with the past has to do with the treasury of the local amateur theatrical society, the Barnstable Comedy Club. The club had a treasurer who, at every monthly meeting for thirty years, refused to say what the bank balance was, for fear that the club would spend it foolishly. He resigned last year. The new treasurer announced a balance of four hundred dollars and a few cents, and the membership blew it all on a new curtain the color of spoiled salmon. This ptomaine curtain, incidentally, made its debut during a production of "The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial" in which Captain Queeg did not rattle steel balls in his hand. The balls were eliminated on the theory that they were suggestive.

A really big change took place about sixty years ago, when it was discovered that tuna were good to eat. Before then, Barnstable fishermen had called them "horse mackerel," and cursed whenever they caught one. Still cursing, they

would chop them up and throw them back into the bay as a warning to the other horse mackerel. Out of either courage or just plain stupidity, the tuna never left the area - a fact that now makes possible a post-Labor Day festival called the Barnstable Tuna Tournament. Sportsmen with reels as big as courthouse clocks come from all over the eastern seaboard for the event, the villagers are always mystified as to what brought them, and nobody ever catches much of anything.

Another discovery that the villagers have yet to make (and learn to live with) is the fact that mussels, too, can be eaten without instantly fatal consequences. In places, Barnstable harbor is clogged with mussels. They are never disturbed. One reason for their being ignored, perhaps, is that the harbor abounds in two other delicacies far simpler to prepare - striped bass and clams. To get clams, one has only to scratch almost anywhere when the tide is out. To get bass, one simply follows the birds, looks for cone-shaped formations of them, and casts his lure at the spot toward which the cone points. Bass will be feeding there.

As to what else the future holds: Few Cape villages have much chance of coming through the present greedy, tasteless boom with their souls intact. H. L. Mencken once said something to the effect that "nobody ever went broke overestimating the vulgarity of the American people," and the fortunes now being made out of the vulgarization of the Cape surely bear this out. However, the soul of Barnstable Village just might survive.

For one thing, it is not a hollow village, with everything for rent and half the houses empty in the winter. Most of its people live there the year round, and most of them aren't old, and most of them work - carpenters, salesmen, masons, architects, teachers, writers and what-have-you. It is a classless society, sometimes an affectionate and sentimental one.

Barnstable Village's houses - often riddled by termites and dry rot, but good, probably, for a few hundred years more - have been lining both sides of the main street ever since the end of the Civil War, so developers find little room in which to work their pious depredations. There is what looks like a vast green meadow to the west, but this is salt marsh, the bluish-brown glurp capped by a mat of salt hay. (It was this natural hay that drew settlers down from Plymouth in 1639.) The marsh, laced by deep creeks that can be explored by small boats, will never be built upon by anyone sane. It goes underwater with every moon tide and is capable of supporting not much more than the weight of a man and his dog.

Speculators and developers got very excited for a while about the possibility of improving Sandy Neck, the long, slender barrier of spectacular dunes that bound the harbor on the north. There are grotesque forests of trees out there, trees which have been buried then unburied, and the outer beach puts the beaches of Acapulco to shame. Fresh water, surprisingly, can be had out there from quite shallow wells. But the local government, thank God, is buying up all of Sandy Neck - except the tip at the harbor mouth - and will designate it a public park, to be kept unimproved forever.

There is a tiny settlement on the tip that the local government is not taking over. It is clustered around an abandoned lighthouse, a lighthouse that was needed once when there was enough water around to let real ships come and go. This bleached and tacky settlement can be reached only by boat or beach buggy, and it has no electricity. It is a private resort less than a mile from Barnstable Village, and many villagers go there when they want a vacation.

All the anachronistic, mildly xenophobic, charming queernesses of Barnstable Village might entitle it to be called "Last Stronghold of the True Cape Codders" if it weren't for one thing: Only a few people in the village were born on Cape Cod. Just as petrified wood is formed as

minerals slowly replace organic material, so the present-day petrified Barnstable has been formed by people from Evanston and Louisville and Boston and Pittsburgh and God-only-knows-where-else slowly replacing authentic rural Yankees.

If the real Cape Codders could rise from their churchyard graves, stride away from their beautifully lettered slate headstones and attend a meeting of the Barnstable Civic Association, they would surely approve of the proceedings. Every proposal that has ever come before the organization has been hotly debated and then voted down, except one - that a new siren be bought for the rescue truck. (The siren goes bwweep-bwweep-bwweep instead of rowrrrr, and is guaranteed to be audible at a distance of three miles).

Since the village exists entirely for itself and not for passers-by, it makes a practice of hastening tourists on to paradises elsewhere. Visitors, therefore, usually find it difficult to learn what is worth seeing. There is, for example, Saint Mary's Church which has, unadvertised anywhere, one of the most enchanting church gardens in America - the work of Robert Nicholson, an Episcopalian minister, a good man who died young.

At a village cocktail party once - and the villagers do drink - Father Nicholson, in conversation with a Roman Catholic and a Jew was trying to find a word to describe the primitive spiritual unity of Barnstable. He found one: "We're Druids", he said.