

Strangers in a Familiar Land

By SUZANNE BERNE

Published: July 21, 1996

FOR every single summer of my childhood, my family packed a stack of suitcases in late June and traveled up the East Coast to a foggy little seaside town on Cape Cod, and there we remained until Labor Day. In that same town my uncle and cousins and grandfather were also "summer people," and had been for years. My great-grandfather had summered on Cape Cod as far back as the turn of the century. But the year I turned 8, my father -- who loved the Cape and hated the end of summer -- made the radical decision not to migrate in September with everyone else we knew. He put our house in Virginia up for sale (our "real house," as I persisted in thinking of it); my younger sister and I were enrolled in the local public school, and it was understood that from now on we were no longer summer people, we were "year-rounders."

On the first day of school I was surrounded on the playground and accused of being a summer person. I had been sighted on a sailboat; my family was a known summer family. "Bet your dad has a million bucks," one girl said, dark eyes narrowing. A grim-faced boy said, "Bet you have a swimming pool." I protested that neither was true. No one believed me. "So what's your dad do?" growled the first child. My father happened to be writing a book; dimly I realized this answer would not serve. "He stays home," I admitted at last, because it was all I could think to say. My classmates decided my father must be unemployed and that I was therefore all right, and no one accused me of being a summer person anymore.

My new status lasted only until Thanksgiving, when my father accepted a teaching job in Washington, D.C., and so I offer this anecdote to illustrate the worst aspect of being a summer person, which is what I have been ever since.

It involves, for me at least, a certain disequilibrium, the sliding impression that I may not be wanted where I want to be. In my experience, the inhabitants of resort towns resent summer residents. Summer people are frequently perceived as rich (richer than the townspeople, anyway), imperious, demanding and possessive about any available body of water. With summer people come squadrons of Volvo station wagons and Ford Tauruses, parades of golf pants and boat shoes, whole arsenals of flashy sports equipment. With summer people come the necessity for beach stickers and reservations at restaurants and venomous disputes over whether it's trespassing to walk below the high-tide line.

In the fall, I've been told, when the summer people and the tourists decamp, those who are left feel Cape Cod is theirs again. And herein lies the paradox of being a summer person: you can be deeply, passionately, even historically attached to a place that considers you an invader. No matter how many years you have been a colonist, the colony will never be yours. On Labor Day, smiling Cape residents crowd the overpasses along jammed Route 6, holding aloft hand-lettered signs that read: "See you next

summer!" and "Bye Bye!" Some farewells are not so good-natured. My mother knows of a hardware-store owner on the Cape who, when asked by a wealthy dowager what on earth the local residents did after the summer folk departed, replied: "Madam, we fumigate." This story may be apocryphal, but the sentiment is not. That many resort-town residents rely on seasonal visitors for their livelihood does not always increase their affection.

Then again, many summer people appear to regard year-rounders as a kind of grumpy servant class that exists to mow lawns and sell overpriced groceries. A friend who became a year-rounder on Martha's Vineyard a decade ago once pointed out that summer people either behave too familiarly in their negotiations with the natives -- the "feudal lord approach" she called it -- or ignore them altogether. Summer people, she concluded, "don't really see the people who live where they vacation."

But here's another paradox: despite whatever complaints they engender, summer people love their summer homes, love them perhaps more carefully and inhabit them more thoroughly than where they live the rest of the year.

Our summer place on the Cape, for instance, is where we pay attention to tide charts and cirrus clouds, to the shifting sun and the smell of rain, where we forget to turn on the evening news and listen instead to mourning doves sighing in the locust trees. Our summer place is where both my husband and I might be home in the middle of the day in the middle of the week, where the baby cries less and the dog loses weight. Our summer place is really my mother's house, which she bought years ago after my parents divorced; she wanted to make sure that she would always have a place on Cape Cod. On some weekends my sisters and I all sleep down the hall from each other, nearly one family once again.

A summer place is home the way home ought to be, or so nostalgia tells us. This is the life, people say while on vacation, meaning they feel untroubled and gratified. This is the life, they murmur, already wistful. Because it is the life -- the one we dream of having on snowy afternoons in February when the children have fevers and there's nothing for dinner and you find yourself staring out the window, imagining warm green grass and a reach of bright water.

AND yet, to be a summer person is to be at odds with your summer home for the simple fact that it's regarded as temporary, and there is in all homes an intrinsic demand that you stay there. Even if, as in my case, that summer home helped determine where you chose to settle. You may love your summer home more than anywhere else in the world, but you would not say "I am from Cape Cod," if you live in New York or Boston most of the time; you do not claim to be of a summer place. Your intimacy is always limited, always a summer love, which must make your brief appropriation of that place all the more galling to its more constant denizens.

Even the term "summer person" implies someone transient, feckless, a fair-weather friend. A summer person is something more than a tourist and less than a resident, a

kind of lingering house guest who stays a week or a month or a clutch of long weekends. When one set of summer people returns to their real home, they are usually succeeded by other summer people in the same house, who themselves will be succeeded, and so on. No one mourns their absence. And still each family has its own special claim to this place that they imagine will renew them, and often, amazingly, it does.

The year I turned 8, when our experiment in living year round on the Cape ended so quickly, I was sorry to leave. I'd grown to like my classmates and felt they liked me, too. The day before I left they gave me a farewell present, a little Scholastic paperback about Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan. I was touched and kept the book for years. It's only now that I begin to wonder at its subject, which of course was the relationship of an impoverished young teacher and a rich deaf-and-blind child. I'm sure the book was an innocent choice. On the flyleaf was written, in cherry-pink Magic Marker, "See you next summer."

Ads by Google