

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

Chatham Beach Hotel

by Spencer Grey

During the second half of the 19th century, the abundance of shore birds on Monomoy attracted hundreds of hunters who considered it a sportsman's paradise. Accommodations for visitors to Chatham were limited at that time, especially in locations that provided easy access to that paradise.

In the 1880s, however, Nat Gould, the captain of the Chatham Life Saving Station on the northern end of Monomoy, provided accommodation in the station's guest house to his friends who came to shoot the plover, sanderling, snipe, peep and beetle head that were so prolific on the sand flats. He proved such a genial and accommodating host that the guest house soon could not meet the hunters' needs.

He therefore retired from the Life Saving Service and built an inn near the lifesaving station about three quarters of a mile southeast of the present Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge headquarters on Morris Island. Known as the Chatham Beach Hotel, the inn was built in the form of a cross and could accommodate 200 guests. When they arrived at the Chatham Depot, guests were taken to the shore on the southern edge of Morris Island in Parker Nickerson's stage coach, where they were met by George Bearse, who rowed them across the narrow strip of water to the tip of Monomoy, and there they were met by Russell Bearse, noted guide for the huntsmen, who took them in his horse and buggy to the hotel.

The brochure for the Chatham Beach Hotel extolls its excellence and its appeal, saying: 'Three hours from Boston, with excursion rates and ample train, telegraph, and mail service, it is entirely practical for the business man and enables him to enjoy the best shooting, bathing and fishing in New England, while in continual communication with commercial centers.

'For ladies and children its opportunities for out of door amusement are unequaled. Surf and still-water bathing, fishing, walking, and sailing, with ample bath-house and pavilion room, are but a few of the attractions the management has to offer. For rest, healthy recreation, good food and fresh sea air there is no better hostelry on the coast.

'Season: July 1 to Nov. 1; Terms: \$2 per day, families at reduced rates.'

While their families relaxed on the porch of the hotel or on the beaches surrounding it, the shooters enjoyed the abundance of game in the immediate area. After a strenuous day of hunting, they could return to the hotel and relax with a refreshing drink, possibly followed by a spirited game of poker.

One Saturday afternoon in August 1893, despite the success of his lucrative business, Nat Gould left the hotel, saying that he was going to town and would return by night time. He never came back. He wrote letters to his wife telling her that he was never going to return but gave no reason for his abrupt and unexplained departure.

His wife issued a missing persons report that ultimately reached the police in Norfolk, Va. who identified a strange man whom they had found wandering on the beach as the missing person. According to an article in the Yarmouth Register of Feb. 8, 1894, he was returned to Boston, where his wife met him and took him back to Chatham.

Another version of Gould's disappearance, however, is that he settled in North Carolina, married a woman there and had four daughters, the youngest of whom, Natalie Mandell, visited Chatham in later years. After his disappearance, Gould's nephew, Nat Eldredge, became manager of the Chatham Beach Hotel, which continued to prosper, partly because the sportsmen were able to hunt on Sundays, much to the disgust of townspeople who could hear the gunfire as they made their way to church. These disgruntled citizens had an ordinance passed forbidding shooting on the sabbath, but it was not enforced until rival innkeepers one Sunday morning led the police to Monomoy to apprehend the offending sportsmen.

Among those guilty of breaking the sabbath that day was a Bostonian who, when he saw the law approaching, hid behind a duck decoy and buried his gun, evidence of his misdemeanor, in the sand. In addition, in case he might be recognized as one who had been out shooting, he shaved his mustache. Later in the day he went to retrieve his favorite

gun only to find that the tide had covered the spot where it had been buried and washed it away.

But more serious trouble for the Chatham Beach Hotel lay ahead, for erosion brought the ocean nearer and neared to its doorstep. The waves eventually covered the doorstep at high tide and salt spray splashed against the windows. When the water began to flow under the foundation, the Eldredges moved the inn back 300 feet and felt they could relax. But the relentless sea continued to encroach, making it necessary to move it back another 200 feet a few years later, once more making them feel that they had cheated the sea. The following fall, however, a violent storm completed the job of destruction, and on Oct. 15, 1904, the building was razed and floated to shore, where the remaining lumber was auctioned off.

Ten years later, Nat Eldredge became the first manager of the new Chatham Bars Inn, but following the example of his uncle, Nathaniel Gould, he too disappeared without any explanation and was never seen nor heard from again. Perhaps there was something in the water of the Chatham Beach Hotel!

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