

Joseph C. Lincoln

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by Spencer Gray

At the beginning of the 20th century, when industrial activity was changing the face and atmosphere of the United States, many people longed for the simpler life that was fast fading, but to a certain extent Cape Cod was exempt from those changes because of its relative isolation. It continued to be a quiet, rural area peopled by retired mariners and members of its extensive fishing fleet, a characteristic that is captured and clearly illustrated in the writings of Joseph Lincoln. During his writing career he became the most prolific and successful author of stories and novels about the people and their lives on this peninsula.

Born in Brewster on Feb. 13, 1870, Lincoln's family moved to Boston when he was in his teens, and a few years later he worked as an artist and editor for the Bulletin of the League of American Wheelmen, a bicycle magazine popular at that time. Later he moved to Hackensack, N.J. and then to Villanova, Pa., but he maintained a summer house on Shore Road in Chatham. In his spare time he often visited with his friend John Emery, owner of the Swinging Basket, at his Old Harbor Candle Factory in the sail loft on Bridge Street. The two of them would sit for hours exchanging gossip and stories, many of which most likely found their way into Lincoln's books.

Early in his career he published stories and poems about an idealized Cape Cod as people liked to think of it in earlier and simpler days. He first published his stories in magazines, such as The Saturday Evening Post. Among his earliest published books was "Cape Cod Ballads," published in 1902. Typical of his work in that volume is his poem "Susan Van Doozen" that ended with the following stanza: O Susan Van Doozen! Before I'd be los'n One glance from your eyes of skyblue I vow I'd quit us'n tobacco and booz'n, (That word is not nice it is true). I wear out my shoes, 'n' I'm los'n my roos'n', My reason, I should say, dear Sue,-So please change your views 'n' become my own Susan, O Susan Van Doozen, please do!

His portrayal of Cape Cod pictured the virtues and lifestyle inherent in isolated Yankee villages. As Lincoln himself explained, life there in the late 19th and early 20th century was far less sophisticated than in mainstream America, resulting in the peculiarities and characteristics evident in the characters in his stories, along with the amusing, yet very real, situations and conditions in which they are immersed.

Readers enjoyed his writings because they showed a life and a society that they wished to escape to so as to leave the problems of industrialized society behind, especially its factories and cities inhabited by recent immigrants, most of them from Ireland and Italy, to whom they could not relate. While the society he portrayed was only partially true, his readers liked to think of it as a time that had only recently disappeared and to which they would like to return. Many tourists received their view of Cape Cod from his books, and they would arrive on the Cape with his books in hand, hoping to find the idealized villages and quaint people they had discovered in them. Readers of Lincoln's books sought to leave a world fraught with conflicts and problems and dwell in the villages of Denboro, Bayport, Trumet, and Wellmouth that they had found so appealing when reading his stories and novels. The titles of his books provide a clear idea of their subject matter: "The Aristocratic Miss Brewster," "All Alongshore," "Blair's Attic," "The Bradshaws of Harniss," "Cape Cod Yesterdays," "Cap'n Dan's Daughter," "Cap'n Eri," "Cy Whittaker's Place," "The Depot Master," "Doctor Nye of North Ostable," "Galusha the Magnificent," "Great Aunt Lavinia," to name just a few.

His books became so popular and were read so widely that he was known as one of the most prominent regional writers in the country. The popularity of his work is illustrated by the fact that at least 10 of them were made into films, beginning as early in his career as 1913. The most recent films, “The Golden Boys” and “The Lightkeepers,” were filmed on Cape Cod. Certainly there is no doubt, as it is often said, that Joe Lincoln “invented Cape Cod.”

