

Dick Cook recalls younger days at Cape May Point

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CAPE MAY POINT - When Dick Cook was a child he was not aware he was growing up during the Depression, probably because of the richness of a boy spending summers in Cape May Point.

Richard C. Cook was born in 1924 in Philadelphia, and his father built a house in Cape May Point in 1930.

"That's about the time I remember Cape May Point," Cook said. "It was the start of the Depression, but it was a happy bunch of people back then. They said 'Hello' when they passed you by."

The Cook family was able to get by during the Depression because Cook's father was able to work on the Penn Railroad. But as a child, Cook was not really aware there was a Depression.

"I didn't know a depression from stupendous economic times," he said.

All Cook knew at the time was the freedom he enjoyed to fish, hunt, and play on the beaches during the summers of his youth.

"I did what I wanted," Cook

said. "The summers were all good. I was always an outdoors person."

Cook said he started fishing as a child, and because it was basically a barter economy they were living in at the time, his mother would have him visit a chicken farmer on Cambridge Avenue and trade a couple fish for a dozen eggs.

He actually caught his first fish in Lake Lily. He went there with a piece of line, a hook and a few worms. He cast his line and when he felt a tug he hauled in a 12-inch black bass. He was so excited he ran home dragging his fish.

After catching his first fish, Cook was hooked and he started fishing all over the area. Mainly he fished in the ocean, but Cook spent a lot of time around Davy's Lake, which is now part of the Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area. There he learned to catch frogs and take the legs for eating and use the rest for bait. He said he could catch bass that way. He would also go crabbing in the creek for the sand mining company, where he said he could get a couple dozen

crabs to take home.

The area of Davy's Lake was also a place to trap muskrat, which Cook surprised his mother with the first time he brought one home. A man named Eddie Holman, who retired from the Coast Guard, taught him about trapping and they trapped a lot around the lighthouse pond. Cook learned to trap well and he sold muskrat and skunk pelts to Sears and Roebuck, which would have them made into ladies' coats.

"Skunks were ubiquitous," Cook said. "I was the bane of the family when I skinned them."

Cook said he couldn't get rid of the smell and often wondered what the mail carriers thought when they got a whiff. But the time and trouble of trapping and skinning skunks was worth the effort.

"Some weeks I would make more than my father," Cook said.

Cook also learned to hunt. He had a .22 rifle for shooting rabbits and squirrels, and he hunted Canada Geese with a shotgun. Cook said ammunition was hard to come by during the Depression.

"I used to buy my shells one at a time," he said.

He said if he got 10 shells he would try to get at least nine birds. He said a lot of men used to hunt along Sunset Boulevard, and they would line up shooting geese, hawks, or whatever else they could get. At the time, Swain's was the best place to go for hunting supplies.

Cook said one time he went out and started shooting Canada Geese and before he knew it he had six of them. Then he realized he had to carry them all home. He ended up tying them together at the feet and staggering home under the weight. His mother, he said, was not impressed.

But Cook said he really enjoyed fishing - and there were plenty to catch. He told about going out in the rips in a small duck boat and it nearly being swamped because he had it loaded down with 250 weakfish. He also told about netting weakfish off the beach as the schools ran down the coast. Every once in a while a couple of floats

would get pulled under and they knew they had something big in the net, which normally turned out to be a sand shark.

They would also dig for oysters and clams, sometimes using the whole clams for bait to catch drum fish.

Cook said the fish his family couldn't use he normally gave to neighbors. He started smoking fish and gave much of that away as well.

Spending a lot of time on the beach also prompted another interest for Cook - archeology. He joined the New Jersey Archeological Society (NJAS) when he was just eight years old as a student member, and he still looks for artifacts during his daily walks on the beach. Cook said he has 30,000 artifacts in his personal collection. He said he was an active member of the NJAS, wrote a number of articles for the organization, and went on expeditions to places like Belize, Honduras, and southern Mexico.

The boy who enjoyed the freedom and adventures summers at the Point offered

grew up and went to Penn State in 1942. He entered the Air Force in 1943 and was sent to Italy with the 451st Bomber Group, which bombed Italy and the Balkans. He returned to Penn State in 1943 and earned his Bachelor of Science degree. He married his wife Winifred, who he said was an accomplished newspaper reporter, and he earned a master's degree in Environmental Science from Duke University. Cook went to Rutgers in New Brunswick as an assistant professor for a year, where he said he started chatting with people from Johnson and Johnson. He went to work for them for 20 years, then spent another 13 or 14 years with the National Wholesale Druggists' Association, a trade association for the pharmaceutical industry in Washington D.C.

Cook now splits his time between Cape May Point and another home in Florida. He has three grown daughters, including Pamela, who was the catalyst for this article.