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Bryant opens his historical resources

By Steven Schwadron

"Provincetown has more historical material that has been misplaced than most towns of its size ever had to begin with," said George Bryant, who will soon open to the public his extensive resources of Lower Cape history.

Bryant is putting the finishing touches on an historical resource center emphasizing the social anthropology and industrial archeology of Provincetown's past. The 12-by-16-foot resource room, which will be behind the wine rack in Bryant's Market at 467 Commercial St., features records and relics from the Atlantic Coast Fisheries Company.

The resource room is only one of Bryant's current historical projects. On the east side of the grocery's parking lot, Bryant has nearly finished restoring the old Joe Souza blacksmith shop for use as a modern workshop. He has already refitted its original blacksmith's forge.

Bryant bought the shop two years ago for \$500, rescuing it from under a developer's bulldozer at its former West End location, the site of the new Coast Guard station. He has invested another \$3000 and considerable labor to restore the shop.

Directly behind the market, Bryant is digging to unearth the original base of a wind-driven saltworks pump, which he plans to fully restore.

The restoration will include a 25-foot-high windmill. Barring a torrential winter gale like that of last January, Bryant hopes to dig down to the 1810-1840 level by early in the spring.

He is expecting delivery soon of an auger, a specially-made 15-foot hand tool to manufacture saltworks wooden pipes out of pine logs. Three successive borings with the tool can make pipe with an inside diameter of three-and-a-half inches. He has been waiting a year for the tool to arrive.

Bryant hopes to polish off the workshop within a few weeks. He will continue to work on the saltworks project through the winter. He intends to set up a saltworks museum on the site.

Meanwhile, Bryant plans to open the resource room the first week in January. The room will be open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., every day year round except Fridays and Sundays. Bryant requested that anyone wanting to use the room call him at 487-0134 ahead of time. The material is not



George Bryant laying foundation in September for relocated blacksmith shop, which he renovated to be a modern workshop. It contains Joe Souza's original blacksmith's forge.

catalogued, but it is sorted, shelved and filed according to subject.

Bryant had to move the records from his home, which he recently sold. So establishing the resource room was more convenient at this time.

"Since I first started writing on historical subjects, I have been approached hundreds of times by people with a need for information, including lawyers, engineers, genealogists, marine fanatics and the general public," he said.

Bryant is particularly well-informed about the local saltworks business up to World War I and can provide referrals to sources from Maine to Virginia.

A large part of his collection consists of manuscript records of the Atlantic Coast Fisheries Company.

Atlantic Coast was the first big fishing firm in the country with operations integrated from the coastal banks to the consumer. "It was, appropriately, first organized by a lawyer," Bryant said.

Many of the records will be filed in cabinets Bryant bought or rescued when the West End building was torn down.

At one time, this Provincetown firm had several cold storage filleting plants and dozens of fish traps and was the largest single local employer of all time. Even so, the bulk of its operations spanned nine

other states, England, Canada and Japan.

Much of the historical material has survived adverse storage conditions. The firm's records were stacked in boxes untouched since they were compiled many years ago. Bryant rerouted many of them from the town dump.

Atlantic Coast documents were stored for years in the attic of the Cape Cod Storage building in filing cabinets that were drenched with nearly every rainstorm. To prove the "charmed existence" of the equipment and files, Bryant recalled lowering a 600-pound filing cabinet from the top of the Cold Storage. The supporting rope snapped and the cabinet tumbled 45 feet to the ground.

The only damage to the cabinet, which now stands in Bryant's store, was a barely visible dent on one corner. Bryant will

store the Atlantic Coast records in this original cabinet.

Bryant thinks the collection can appeal to a range of scholars and laymen.

"For someone interested in the history of technology, Atlantic Coast Fisheries was the first to develop a workable fish filleting machine. We have over 500 large sheets of original drawings of thfs," Bryant said. These 500 drawings will be housed in their original map cabinet.

"For the economic historian we have the corporate records of the company," he said. "There are plans of steam trawlers that they operated from other ports. For the local history buff there are curiosities such as land deeds written by the company.

"Even a lot of practical people with little time to waste have become interested in history in the wake of the Indian lawsuit at Mashpee. Among other things this event has illustrated that there is no such thing as 'past' history," he said. "Something that happened 187 years ago or 35 years ago can be just as crucial as what took place a minute ago and furthermore can change the future."

The balance of the collection includes many Provincetown photographs of local street scenes and vessels from 1860 to 1930. Many were gifts from Bryant's cousin, Jane (Rosenthal) Pike, the granddaughter of Irving Rosenthal. He was once the photographer and sheriff of Barnstable County.

The collection also includes a broad selection of current newspaper and magazine clippings on local affairs and marine topics. From Atlantic Coast are industrial catalogs of machinery and supplies and books on steam engineering. There is extensive manuscript material from E. and E.K. Cook, Provincetown's oldest salt-fishing firm and from P.A. Whorf, the town's last one.

Bryant has yacht registers, lists of fishing and merchant vessels and other reference works comprising several hundred hardbound and pamphlet volumes. He also has expanding files on the Portuguese and Nova Scotians who settled here.

"It all constitutes a window looking back into a very different Cape Cod than we know today," Bryant said.

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