



*Oyster Shell Alleys*  
*And Other Remembrances of Times Past*  
Robert M. Craig

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# OYSTER SHELL ALLEYS

*And Other Remembrances of Times Past*



*by*

ROBERT M.  
CRAIG

## Books by Robert M. Craig

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*Atlanta Architecture: Art Deco to Modern Classic, 1929–1959* [1995]

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*To the memory of  
Virginia Mason Craig*





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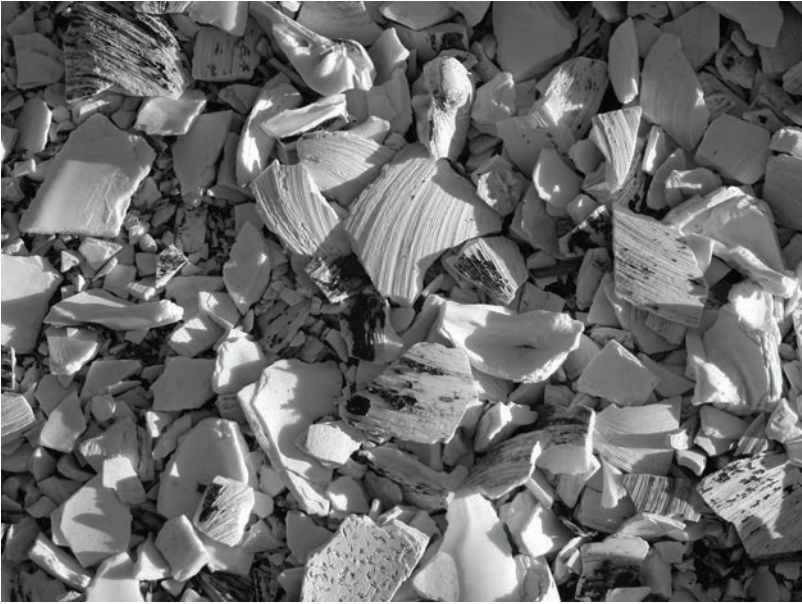
Downtown Docks. Photo by Robert S Craig.



PART I:

*Summerton*





Broken seashells. Photo by Robert M. Craig.

## Oyster Shell Alleys

WHEN I WAS not running through water sprinklers, or catching fireflies, or swinging so hard that the poles lifted out of the ground, I was spending my leisure time as a kid riding my bicycle. I could go anywhere in Ocean City on my bike, except on the Boardwalk after 10 am—only my Dad was allowed to ride his bicycle on the Boardwalk all day, because he was in charge of the lifeguards and that's how he checked up on them. Everyone in town knew Captain Craig and recognized him on his many bicycle patrols, and for a few years at the turn of the 1950s (when I was small enough to fit) they might have seen me on the handle bars or balanced on the structural bar in front of Dad. True, I was much smaller then, but pudgy enough that it really hurt my butt then Dad hit a pothole. And I felt a bit insecure when he flew down the down ramp leaving the Boardwalk.



Boardwalk Ramp. Photo by Robert M. Craig.

But I soon got my own bike, and rode everywhere. I never got lost on my bike in Ocean City, and I don't remember ever getting lost on the beach, although hundreds of kids did. I couldn't understand how so many kids got lost from their parents, but they did. Most of the lifeguard red-flag semaphoring was about lost kids: "LB [lost boy]: John, six, blue" meant some six-year-old kid in blue trunks and named John had wandered off, and his Mom was convinced that he'd already drowned during the "just two minutes" when she was not watching him. The lifeguards must have had advanced degrees in handling panicking mothers, but they also always found the delinquent kid, alive and well, sometimes blocks away from the family umbrella. "FG on 5th: Kathy, seven, multi" was a five-year-old girl in a multicolored bathing suit and was typical: she'd start crying while wandering aimlessly on the 5th Street beach alerting another parent who would take her to the nearest lifeguard stand, and the flags would signal up and down the beach that Kathy had been "found." The little girl sat innocently on the bottom rung of the lifeguard stand, digging small holes in the sand with her feet, until her panicking Mother marched up like a storm trooper either to hug her with grateful tears, or to slap her back cheeks declaring narcissistically, "How could you do this to me?" Even at eight years old, I thought Mum might have been happier to see her, and that this was a weird reunion.



Lankford Hotel. Photo courtesy The Fisher Collection.



But I never got lost. For me, the landmark was always the Lankford Hotel, with its giant white columns looking out to sea and providing easily recognized features along the Boardwalk and shoreline. I knew the Lankford like the back of my hand, because Eighth Street was my beach—always was and still is, except I am saddened to learn that just shy of the Lankford’s 100th birthday, plans are now afoot to tear the hotel down. It will be replaced, as all the historic hotels have been, by a characterless megastructure of balconies stacked up in a concrete superblock whose most noticeable feature is its capacity to cast a dark shadow across the beach in late afternoon. There ought to be a law. Ocean City beach has lots of rules: no beer, no bottles, no ball playing when the beach is too crowded, and there ought to be a “no shadows from ugly architecture” rule.

It was easy to get around town because the street names were so sensible. Streets were numbered from First Street on up to Fifteenth, which was the end of the Boardwalk and just about the end of town in the early 1950s. I could count, so 8th Street never eluded me. The island was so narrow, there were only three streets running its length (not counting the Boardwalk, which some misguided city planner insisted on giving a street name (Atlantic Avenue) when it was obviously simply “the Boardwalk.” But the main streets are named for major cities, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and St. Louis, the latter city I thought chosen because that’s where our family lived in the winter, and our summer cottage was on St. Louis Avenue. How neat was that? “Just a coincidence,” Dad always insisted, but in my heart of hearts I thought he was simply being humble.



Baltimore Avenue. Photo courtesy The Fisher Collection.

I hardly ever biked downtown, where the street names were more confusing: Somerset, Talbot, Worcester, Wicomico etc—kooky names which I later learned were the counties of the Eastern Shore of Maryland. All except Division Street, which I did visit on occasion, since my grandfather lived on Division Street. Division Street was at the head of the Route 50 bridge entering town. His house site is now a 7-Eleven, but after many Sunday suppers, we sat on “grandpop’s” porch from where we could see the road sign at the bridge marking the eastern termination of US 50 and informing us of the mileage to California at the other end: “Sacramento, CA, 3,073.” For grownups, “Division” made sense as a street name since that was the division between the county streets and the numbered streets, except that Division is a stupid name for a street. As dumb as “Subtraction.”

Then, one day, I biked all the way to the inlet and discovered another First Street and Second Street, a conundrum necessitating a serious consultation with Dad: “How come there’s two First Streets and two Second Streets?” I asked.

“One is South First” and the other is “North First” he explained.

“Well, that’s dumb” I said dismissively [most everything was dumb in those days]. “This must really confuse the postman.”

“You see,” Dad continued, taking on his role as teacher extraordinaire, “It was intended that numbered streets would extend both north and south of downtown, but the inlet was cut through by the 1933 storm, so South 3rd Street, South 4th Street, etc. are now in the inlet.”

“Ya mean underwater?” I queried in disbelief, “all the houses and everything?”

“There wasn’t much there in 1933,” Dad explained further—“just some fishing shanties and undeveloped blocks of low lying sand. But Ocean City might have spread southward onto what is now Assateague Island, as well as northward, if the inlet hadn’t unexpectedly become the town’s southern boundary. So there’s only South First St., and South Second St., down by Trimper’s, and that’s it—rock jetty and water...”

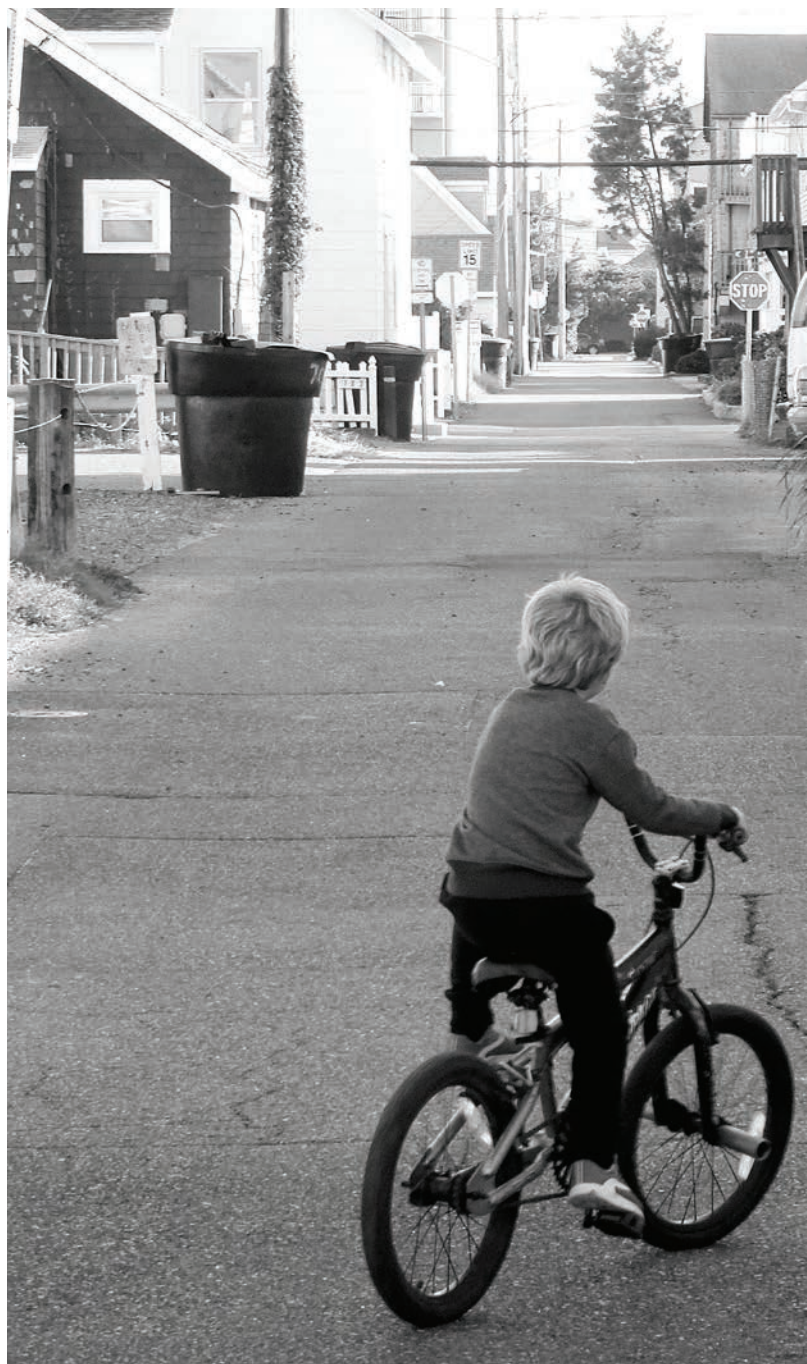
Well that’s cool, I thought, and then exclaimed, “Can you imagine: there might have been 15 numbered blocks south as well as north—how big a town would that have been!” It seemed inconceivable.

For me, on my bike, the town was just about the right size. Baltimore Avenue and Philadelphia Avenue were more crowded with cars



(although not in the post cards), but St. Louis Avenue was open and always an easy ride, and Edgewater Avenue didn't count. In considering the streets of Ocean City, there were no houses on the bay side of Edgewater, and few on the other side, and I knew no kids who lived on Edgewater. But you could fish off the 9th Street pier, bayside, just a block from my house, so I spent some time on Edgewater as well. Actually, both Edgewater and St. Louis Avenue, in those days, ended at 9th Street: beyond to the north was smelly marsh where the bay eroded the island and backwater extended to Philadelphia Avenue. At high tide, the wetlands had shallow water up to 14th Street (and at low tide, merely muck), but after about five blocks of yucky, squishy, wet sand, the coast curved back to the west at the Ship's Café and Mallard Island. That's where my great aunt lived, so Mallard Island was an easy bike ride, and the Ship's Café was neat because airplanes landed on a small strip behind the dock. One time, at the north end of Mallard Island, we saw an otter and so we named a tiny island there "Otter Island," although it was little more than a large sandbar off the north end of Mallard Island. The town never adopted the name, but we kids did. Much later a large house got built on Otter Island and someone renamed it Goose Island. Can you image? Goose?

But for me, it was the alleys of Ocean City that intrigued, and I could ride my bike up and down the alleys, past the rear of the hotels and cottages, smell the kitchen and backstreet odors, and meet interesting people. The alleys too had names, Washington Lane and Wilmington Lane, the latter named for the Delaware town where my Dad was born, so I remained convinced that he had a hand in naming both St. Louis Avenue and Wilmington Lane. But since my Dad informed me that the town of Ocean City was founded in 1875 and that he was not that old, I had to accept, ultimately, that he had no part in naming the streets. Wilmington Lane (running parallel to and between Baltimore and Philadelphia Avenues) was dead straight and mostly macadamized. On a hot sunny day you could look down its full length, as the alley crossed over the many numbered streets, and, in the distance, steam appeared to rise from a pool of liquid, bright against the blacktop, an image of distant water illustrating a phenomenon that I normally associated with the desert: a mirage. It was always really cool.



Boy on a bike. Photo by Robert M. Craig.



Street sign, Washington Lane at 8th St. Photo by Robert M. Craig.

But of the two alleys, my favorite was Washington Lane, a north-south oyster-shell alley between the Boardwalk and Baltimore Avenue, covered over in places with “improved” blacktop and running in interrupted short stretches behind the Boardwalk hotels. The hotels put their best foot forward on their oceanfront facades, but the stretches of oyster shell alleys along sections of Washington Lane, bordered by sand and an occasional mini-Boardwalk, offered a collage of interesting sights. The alley was always rich in scents that ranged from salt air, to kitchen smells of dinner in preparation, to whiffs of garbage and rotting crabs and other discarded shellfish. Best of all the oyster shell alleys were populated by a fascinating layer of the town’s workforce. It was here, on more than one occasion, that I met the housekeepers, the kitchen help, the waiters and dining room staff, and the maintenance personnel of the big hotels. They were mostly black, and to them I was “Mr. Robert,” and they are part of my memory of oyster shell alleys and the back streets of town.

“What ya doing?” I’d ask, as I slowed my bike to a stop behind the Lankford Hotel. There, on a stoop, sitting with legs spread-eagled so that her house dress and apron formed a hammock-sized open pouch cradling unshelled peas, was a large black woman with a head

scarf tied in back and who looked like the lady on our Aunt Jemima pancake box at home. The discarded split shells were in a cardboard box at her side, and next to it was a large bowl containing the fresh peas raked from the shells by dexterous fingers, long experienced in the process of shelling peas.



Alley behind the Lankford Hotel. Photo by Robert M. Craig.

“What ya doing?” I repeated.

“Shelling peas for today’s dinner; my boy TJ (that stands for Thomas Jefferson), he’s here’a helpin’” she said smiling, and then added, “What you doing??”

“Just riding my bike,” I said, “My name’s Robert.”

“Well, good afternoon, Mr. Robert, I’m Maurita.”

“No, my first name is Robert”

“Well, Mr. Robert, have you ever watched your Mom shell peas?”

“Sure, but nowhere’s near as many peas as you got there. You must have a huge family.”

With that, Maurita leaned back with a hearty laugh and almost spilled the contents of her cradled dress. “No, all these peas is for the hotel’s evening meal; we grewed them on the farm, and now we’re gettin’ ’em ready to cook—the hotel is full this weekend and the dining room’s fixin’ to be too.”





Preparing vegetables. Photo by Barbara Jackson from Pixabay.

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a huge white laundry bundle, slung over the shoulder of a younger black woman half its size. Her name was Sissy, and she quickly dropped the bundle on the edge of the alley platform and soon returned with three more, nearly equal in size.

“Venable’s truck is due soon,” she said, wiping beads of sweat off her brow. These are the bundles from the first floor rooms,’ and she

turned around and ran back through the hotel's rear alley door in pursuit of the bundles from the second and third floors.

"Sissy works in housekeeping—works hard, she does, but I'm afraid I got her behind schedule because earlier she helped me shuck corn."

"I can do that," I volunteered, "want some help?"

"Already done, but thank you, Mr. Robert,"

I then heard the creaking sound of a freight elevator well past its prime, followed by a loud thump, and soon Sussy was back through the alley door with another huge bundle of laundry for Venable's Laundry Service.

"My Mom uses Venable's Laundry at home," I told Maurita. "I don't live far from here, just down on St. Louis Avenue. But I know how to bundle all the laundry up," I boasted with unnecessary pride, and I proceeded to tell Maurita how. As her fingers continued to work the pea shells, Maurita listened like a patient school teacher, nodded approval, and let me carry on. "You spread out a sheet, and sometimes two, if there's lots of laundry, making a huge square on the floor. Then you toss all the other dirty sheets, pillow cases, table clothes, napkins, and dresser covers onto the sheet, while Mom counts out each sheet, and pillow case, and makes a list. Then you fold the bottom sheet from each corner up to the center at the top of the stack, tie a huge double knot to create the big bundle, and the knot at top becomes a handle for hauling the whole thing, and you then stick Mom's laundry list inside the bundle at the top and under the knot. Out it all goes onto our front porch, and Venable's comes by and picks up the bundle, and a day or two later they deliver it all back, fresh and clean, folded, and wrapped in paper packages." I gasped for air, as I had done all that "explainin'" with a single breath. "It's mostly the tourists' bed linen, 'cause Mom rents out the downstairs bedrooms of our house, and we have to sleep in the attic, but it's fun—all the family in the same room, although it can get hot some nights..."

"You got that right!" Maurita finally interjected. "Lord only knows—it do get hot of a summer's night."

"...but we can tell stories in bed about what we did that day. But I don't think I'll tell them about meeting you, though; it will be our secret."

“That might be best,” Maurita agreed, and then Sissy arrived with the last bundle of laundry and sat down exhausted on top of the accumulated pyramid of stacked bundles, wiping her sleeve across her forehead and letting out an audible “whew!”

“Sissy there,” Maurita offered, “that’s Henry’s and my little girl—she works in housekeeping. Hard work bending over all them beds, toting laundry bundles from the upper floors, and making sure she don’t miss the Venable truck what comes by ’bout this time ever day. But she’s young.”

She then scooped up the latest shelled peas, putting them into the side bowl, and grabbed some more, snipped the ends, and separated the seam; soon her fingers were raking the peas free of the next batch of shells.



Shelled peas. Photo by MW from Pixabay.

“Henry and I, we’ve been here at the Lankford most of our lives. They built the place in 1924, you know. I remember ’cause that’s the year after Henry and me got hitched. Had Sissy the next year, and Mrs. Quillen gave me two weeks off. Imagine that. I’d only worked a year so far, and she gave me time off for the baby.”

“Mrs Quillen? Is she that scraggly-haired old lady behind the desk upstairs?” I asked. And before Maurita could answer I went on talking (again without taking a breath), admitting, “Well, she scares me to

death. One time I went into the lobby to ask if I could use her bathroom, and all I saw was a white head of hair behind the reception desk, you know, at the far end of the lobby under the arch.” She stood up quickly, still looking as short as a Munchkin, and screeched at me like I was a stray cat.



Lankford Hotel lobby reception. Photo by Robert M. Craig.

“You got business in here?” she shrieked, sounding like that witch in *The Wizard of Oz*—you know—the one that said, “And I’ll get you, my pretty, and your little dog too.”

Maurita could not help displaying a smile, and then a frown. “Now, now, Mr Robert, I know your Momma taught you better respect for your elders than that...”

“But she scared me, and I’ve never been back in that lobby by myself since.” Then a dreadful thought crossed my mind: “She never comes back here to the alley does she?”

“You’re safe here, child,” Maurita assured me, unable to prevent, again, a half smile.

“Poor Sissy’s just tuckered out,” Maurita then said, anxious to change the subject. “About an hour ago, she was helping me shuck corn. Lord have mercy, I done told you that already,” and she let forth another boisterous laugh.

“Sure I can’t help do something,” I asked again.

“That’s OK, Mr. Robert, you done axed me that before, and the shuckin’ and shellin’s almost done for today. Besides, we gotta get on upstairs ’cause the pots is a boiling, and dinner can’t be late.”



With that, it seemed time for me to leave, but my departure was delayed by a stately elderly black man, upright and tall and even a bit lanky, who emerged from the hotel's rear alley door. I had presumed there was nothing behind that alley door except the hotel undercroft, but both Sissy, and now this older man had come through the door. He was elegantly dressed in black pants, black jacket, white shirt, a bright red bow tie, and he had a smile as wide as the Boardwalk "Well hello, young man, Are you learning how to shuck corn?" and then, looking at Maurita's lap, corrected himself: "Or shell peas?"

"Nope, I know how to shuck corn already" I countered quickly so he would know of my vast experience with such matters "My name is Robert."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Robert" he said, "I'm, Henry" and he then turned quickly from the group saying he was due upstairs right away to insure the dining room was ready.

"My Henry's the maître d' in the dining room" Maurita announced with pride.

"No I'm not; I'm just a waiter," he called back with a laugh. "You do go on so."

"But he looks so sassy," she added, and the young girl chimed in, "Now, Mom, leave Dad alone. He looks very nice and is a good waiter. Always polite even when some of the clientele ain't."

"I's just foolin' 'round," the older woman said. "You 'bout ready to take the vegetables to the Otis?" she added, and dumped the last pea shells into the carrying basket and got up to leave.

"What's an Otis?" I asked, thinking they may have forgotten about me.

"Lawd a mercy, child," she guffawed, "we call that old rickety freight elevator inside, the Otis. Ya almost gotta hand haul yussef by rope and pulley clear up to the kitchen..."

"Oh, Mom, it's not that bad," Sissy countered. "Just hesitates a lot, but it's got a motor."

"When it's workin'," the older woman said with a smile.

"What's behind that door?" I then asked, wondering where the black man had come from. Maybe he had ridden down the Otis.

"Oh, nothing much. Mostly sand," Maurita said quickly, "Goodbye, Mr. Robert." and with that the two gathered up their peas, discarded

shells, and corn, and passed quickly through the door into the mysterious space beneath the hotel.

Suddenly the alley was empty, so there was nothing to do but ride my bike home. But my curiosity was still piqued regarding the Lankford's undercroft.

I returned frequently to the oyster shell alley, and met a few other kitchen workers, but Maurita was my favorite. Physically she reminded me of my rotund grandmother (except she was black), although I would never tell either grandmom or Maurita that they were fat. But anytime I sped down the oyster shell alley, the kitchen workers always responded to my waves and greeted me with a "Hello, Mr Robert; nice day" or "You best get home, a storm's a brewin'" or "Hot enough for ya, Mr. Robert?" Maurita always nodded her head as if to say, stop and chat awhile, so I did.

When the hotel was full, two or three shuckers and shellers might be found on the same alley stoop, behind the hotel, surrounded by pods, shells, husks, and other farm debris and with large quantities of fresh peas, corn, green beans, broad beans, and the like "makin' ready" for the hotel kitchen. Maurita, at least, was almost always there, unless it was raining. Periodically, one or the other of the blacks would go in or out of the undercroft door, never leaving it open, nor ever inviting me to peer inside.

One day, when I arrived behind the Lankford, a bit later than usual, the door was wide open. No one was sitting outside in the alley, and I guessed the day's shucking job had already been done. The stoop was spotlessly clean, no shells or shucks left behind. Just the open door, which I assume had been left open en route to the freight elevator that Maurita had spoken of. I couldn't resist the urge to see what was in the undercroft and behind the mysterious door.

It was pitch dark inside, but streaks of sunlight knifed through slats in the boarded siding giving the musty space a little day light, and spotlighting flecks of dust that angled down to the sand floor. In the near (back) corner of the undercroft, immediately to my left, was an open platform, appearing to float about a foot off the sand like an oversized pallet: the wall-less Otis, no doubt, but it was empty and still, and the entire undercroft was deathly quiet. The Otis must be either broken or awaiting another risky delivery of foodstuffs. Or maybe even people stood on the platform to be hauled upstairs, if

one dared use it as a passenger elevator, despite the “for freight use only” sign tacked on a post forbidding such use. Everywhere else, throughout the undercroft, was sand and pitch blackness. The round posts holding up the hotel had been pounded deep into the sand and were black-creosoted, and the chemical smell was apparent. Appearing like telephone poles, they rose to a ceiling of varied and sometimes barely adequate head room about seven feet above the sand floor, and the hypostyle crypt’s forest of structural posts supported huge open joists holding up the massive frame hotel above.



Creosoted undercroft post, Lankford Hotel. Photo by Robert M. Craig.

As my eyes began to adjust to the dark, I held my breath, heard or saw nothing moving, and then took a few more steps into the hotel's underbelly. My footsteps made no sound whatever, not even a slight whisper of shifting sand. The several slices of dusty sunlight streaking from the cracks in the southern wall began to have their effect: like a theater light dimmer slowly brightening a stage, my eyes adjusted to the dark. Along my right side (this same southern wall of the hotel), a series of open framed compartments became more distinct, lined up along the edge of the undercroft. Walls about four and a half feet high extended perpendicularly from the side walls of the hotel foundation forming a row of what looked like horse stalls. Above the long row of half-walled bays, the still and stuffy undercroft space was continuously open, and each stall was open ended. I crept forward to observe the first few recesses, empty except for a bare army cot or chair sitting in the sand, and a mirror, a clothes hook, or a rusty nail on the entry post.

As I walked forward and deeper into the space, one by one the empty stalls opened to view, and as I approached the fifth or sixth stall, I noticed clothes draped across the cot in an otherwise empty stall, and then I stopped cold: I thought I heard breathing. The next few spaces were again empty, but then I saw on the next stall's front left post a single cardboard-wrapped wire coat hanger, with black pants, a black jacket, and a red tie hanging neatly and crisply on the hanger. I stood aghast in front of the open stall, looking straight at Henry who was stretched out on an army cot, lying on his back on top of an old and bare grey and white button-tufted mattress with no sheets, His feet jutted forward to just inside the open end of the stall, and his head was on his raised arm atop a worn and almost deflated pillow, his eyes suggesting that somehow he was just beginning to sense that someone had invaded his private space, and his eye lids slowly opened.

"That you, Mr Robert?" he said with a smile. "What are you doing down here?"

"I, I... I didn't see anyone in the alley, so I came in to look for Maurita."

"Checkin' up on us, are you?" Henry said, with a strained smile, and half saddened look in his eye.

"No, I just wondered where Sissy and Maurita were." I missed her yesterday and Tuesday too.

"Last two days, I's here by myself. On Monday, Maurita done gone and got sick, and Sissy's taking care of her at the farm, but they'll be back tomorrow 'cause we needs the money."

"Is she very sick?" I asked.

Henry paused, looked down, and then replied, "No, she'll be fine; just a spell too long in the heat shuckin' corn in the sun all weekend." Then silence. Henry appeared exhausted, and much older than I remembered him as he swung his legs around and off the cot and sat up as though every move was an effort. "But ya ought not to be down here," Henry added, but not unkindly. "It's dusty and stuffy and... well, you just ought not to be down here." And he looked a little embarrassed, glancing around his stall, and then his look turned introspective, and again discernibly sad.

"Well, I'll be going home then," I said, and then added, "maybe I'll see you on the Boardwalk sometime."

"No, Mr. Robert," he said shaking his head, "Not on the Boardwalk; we're not allowed."

"Who's not allowed?"

"We black folks aren't allowed. Except on Negro Day—that's Labor Day weekend, the one day in the year that black folks can walk on the Boardwalk." And Henry began to brighten just a little, more bittersweet than really joyful. "On that day, last year, Mr. Robert, you shoulda seen how fine and proud Maurita looked. She dressed up in all her finery, her Sunday-go-to-meetin' dress, and me in my black suit and a new tie, and we promenaded—we prom-m-menaded just like the white folks." And then, Henry lowered his head, and I thought he was going to cry. "Other days, all summer long, Maurita fixes their food, what we growed on the farm, and I serve it to them in the dining room. Otherwise, we can't... we don't mix."

And then a thought struck me too horrible to think about as I looked around at the sand, and at the dust floating in the light streaks, and at the open stalls. "Do you live down here?"

"Oh no," Henry said, "this is just a place to sit down and rest for a few minutes, cause we work late in the evening. I must have dozed off. But I'm due upstairs, so thanks for waking me. I gotta get changed," and he nodded to his clothes hanging on the wire hanger and nail.

"Bye then," I said, turning to leave quickly.

“Goodbye, Mr. Robert,” Henry said. “Maybe I’ll see you in the alley tomorrow,” and I thought it strange he hadn’t said “Maybe Maurita will see you tomorrow” because she’s who was usually there.

As I left the undercroft, and looked down at the empty stoop where Maurita always sat, I reached down to pick up an oyster shell from the edge of the alley, and I carried it home. That dry and sandy shell became a cherished souvenir of the oyster shell alleys of my youth, because Maurita died that night, peacefully, in her own bed, in a small farmhouse in the Negro section outside of town, where she and Henry grew corn, and broad beans, and peas for the Lankford Hotel. I think Henry knew.