

14SHORTGRASS.DOC

Provincetown, Massachusetts - A July day. By the front entrance to the inn, in the expected spot, two news racks stand for the local newspaper and *USA Today*. The surprise is that the money slots and coin returns rust from the salt air off Cape Cod. The paper boy disappeared long ago.

All the way here, I watched for a chance to buy or nick a discarded newspaper in the terminals. Travelers seemed too distracted herding kids and grandkids to read a newspaper.

I wanted to track Hurricane Dolly off the Texas Coast. In 1915, 1935, and one other year for which the records are lost, hurricanes off the Gulf coast flooded the shortgrass country.

The salty breeze from Cape Cod Bay across the street from the inn not only rusts the news rack, but all knobs and latches facing the waters. Yet all material and real fades on the shores. By straining the imagination while stationed on the seawall, 7x35 binoculars project an image of the Mayflower's sails rocking in the sea winds, anchored in 1620.

Dim vision revives the first landing for the Mayflower ship - the Pilgrims aboard and Captain Miles Standish at

attention. You know the story, perhaps part of the true story if lucky enough to have had a good history teacher.

The lobby magazine rack logged plenty of offers for lighthouse tours and whale watches, but no Mayflower or Pilgrim episodes. One brochure mentioned that the tower downtown on a hill commemorated the Pilgrims' landing. The man who gave us a ride from the airport pointed to the tower the first day here. It wasn't hard to see: 252 feet high, made of reddish granite.

A second look across the bay whipped a Pilgrim/Standish/Mayflower fever stronger than the closing prayer at a Daughters of the American Revolution convention. On the cab ride to the monument, visions arose of ascending a stage to accept an award for investigative reporting by the Capitol Press Club. (*Fetch*ed if not *far-fetch*ed – a Capitol Press Club?)

The base of the tower included a museum. Entry to the museum cost the same price as the 10 bucks to climb the tower. In dim light common to many registries, the eyeglasses low focal failed to magnify enough to read underneath the photograph of the destruction of a hurricane in 1938 and the winner of the fishing contest in '04.

Defeated, I returned to the lobby to check book titles for a lead on the Mayflower. Other than one tiny,

spectacled lady character always present in book stalls and libraries, the shelves stood empty of readers.

Down 10 bucks for admission, I speed read to recover my money's worth. I whirled page after page on Provincetown's industry, old homes, parks and recreation. A random find from the children's section solved the problem.

For proof, turn to page 39 in "A Journey to the New World - The Diary of R. Patience Whipple" on November 9, 1620: "Land ahoy! The call from the crow's nest cracked the dawn. Sailors saw shore first the faint dark line against the horizon."

Page later, she tells of all night whispering over and over, "We are in the New World. We are in the New World." The entry marked 65 days with her parents in the hold of a cargo ship, sickened and tested by the stormy Atlantic.

Twenty-four dollars down for the book, I left without climbing the tower. Progress on foot through the streets says little for the state of the traffic in Provincetown today. The amount of stalled pedestrians licking ice cream cones alone causes enough delay to caulk and tar a ship larger than the Mayflower. Communion with halter-to-ankle-tattooed girls by slewfooted boys in summer comas further blocks the walks.

I found refuge on the porch of a closed restaurant to wait for a ride. (Shuttles run on the half hour.) I read from Miss Whipple's diary of Indian children laughing and swimming for lily pad bulbs. Orientation for the Mayflower cleared from a footnote on Captain Cook's charting of Cape Cod Bay six years before the Pilgrims. One hundred or so paces away on the beach from my vantage may have been a landing for one of those parties. I missed three shuttle rides.

Seems I heard at a graduation ceremony, or maybe a baccalaureate, that discovery trills freedom in the hearts of America. For sure, I am struck by a big dose of founding father fever at this writing.

But don't get the idea I am going to blow 24 bucks every trip on the outside chance that one reader might relate to the history of our country deeper than how to hum Yankee Doodle on the Fourth of July. I may be a cow-herding, soft-hearted scribe from the shortgrass country, but that extends only to underwriting the citizens' appetite for roast beef and fulfilling the need for jelled hooves and tanned cowhides.