

Anecdotes Of Old Days Told Again

Narrator Remembers "Kind, Friendly People" Of Carefree Yesteryear

Cealus "Bus" Van Buskirk lives in a cozy, one-story cottage right in the middle of Old Plank Road. Seventy-nine year-old Cealus, who is the only surviving member of Bayonne's oldest colored family and one of the city's most beloved figures, isn't disturbed at his home's position, since Old Plank Road has been a thing of the past for many years. Cealus has a special fondness for things of the past and likes to sit in his comfortable front room, which is actually at 87 W. 43rd St., and recall the days of Bayonne's youth and his own.

Real Boy's Kingdom

In those days, he remembers, the peninsula was a young boy's paradise. Playing hookey was common, because it was pretty difficult to ferret out a delinquent pupil who had taken to the woods on a berry-hunting spree, or who had gone down to the shore for a bit of fishing. The latter was Cealus' favorite sport. He came by it naturally, since the elder Van Buskirk was a fisherman.

Tom Van Buskirk owned a string of staunch sailing boats, the biggest and best of which was the Gentle Annie, and Cealus and his young friends liked to scramble aboard the proud vessel on bright days to help with the fishing chores. At that time Newark Bay was one of the richest fishing waters in the country, so fishermen could be choosy about their catch.

If their nets brought in anything that seemed less than select, they threw it to the youngsters, who gathered it eagerly into wagons, and went off to town to peddle their easy-won merchandise.

The boys, according to Cealus, received high prices for the seafood until the fishermen finally caught on to the enterprise and started paying them for selling the catch instead of giving it to them.

Community Fire House

During the seventies, the fire house was often the scene of lively social affairs. There was always plenty of food and fun at those parties. The children were invited in during the early part of the evening, and when the hour arrived for the shindig to become strictly an adult affair, the youthful social lions were reluctant to leave.

Cealus displays his warm, playful grin when he tells about one such party which was given on a hot July night at old Truck 1 on 47th St. The children were hustled out during the latter part of the evening and were instructed to return home.

"Instead, we gathered up huge piles of leaves and set fires at several places near the woods," Cealus recalls. "Then some of us hopped over the fence in back of the fire house, and rang the alarm in the tower."

A minor revolution broke loose inside the house. Women screamed, musicians tooted nervously, and the men scrambled for their gear. The fire by then had become so widespread that the hand-drawn bucket apparatus was no match for it and it simply burned itself out. Such fires, it should be recorded, were fortunately of the harmless variety.

Vicious Profit Circle

Building unwanted fires wasn't the only kind of mischief Bayonne's younger set became involved in during the seventies. Cealus remembers that they considered it quite funny to open a field gate, and drive one or more cows to the community pound. There they were paid 50 cents for each cow, and when the harried owner came to the pound in the evening for his charge, he had to pay 50 cents for the return of each of his animals. The pound keeper, in the meantime, had milked the impounded cows and made his profit that way.

Cealus remembers the La Tourette House in its glory period. He can recollect Sunday afternoons when the silk stocking set of Jersey City drove down, the men in linen dusters, the women in voluminous skirts and chapeaus. They would stop first at Salter's Hotel, which advertised "tents, swings, and every moral and physical enjoyment."

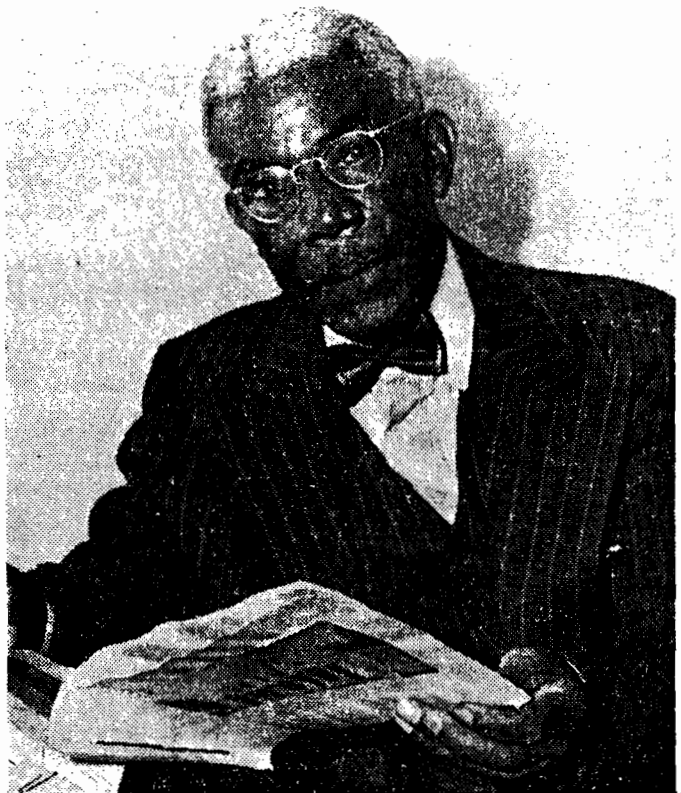
There they'd rest, sip a lemonade, and allow their overheated teams to relax, and there Cealus and his young cronies would be on hand to care for the uncomfortable horses. They usually received a dollar from each customer, and it was a threadbare Sunday when this work didn't net a young man five or six dollars. After Salter's, the pleasure-seekers went on to the La Tourette for a sumptuous dinner, and there again the young men gathered to look after the horses. Cealus' mother, Bessie, was on the staff of the La Tourette and probably glimpsed some of the notables who stopped there.

Become Real Firemen

Cealus and some of his contemporaries turned their arson interests to more serious expression in 1888 when they joined Protection Company 5 as volunteers. This company was on Broadway between 51st and 52nd Sts., and is now a Fire Department repair shop. Later

he joined the Exempt Firemen's Association and still attends their meetings regularly at headquarters on 47th St.

The Old World style of the pearl gray double-breasted vest that Cealus wears is a reliable key to his personality. He is almost courtly in manner, with a charming dignity that enlists respect. Born on July 4, 1866, in a little house on Newark Bay at 43rd St., near his present Van Buskirk fishing fleet, when the



REMEMBERS KINDLIER BAYONNE.—This picture of Cealus Van Buskirk, only surviving member of Bayonne's oldest Negro family, was taken when he visited The Bayonne Times. "Bus" is just four years older than the newspaper and can remember the town in its toddling days. He is shown looking over one of his prized possessions, an album of early local scenes. Many photos from his personal collection are being reproduced in this edition. (Photo by Manger)

home, Cealus was one of five children. The others, all dead, were Mat, Tom Jr., Bill and Jenny. His home was near two others, one belonging to his grandfather, the other one his uncle's. The land on which the three houses rested was given to Cealus' grandfather by Nicholas Van Buskirk, a fishery owner, who lived on Avenue C and 37th St., and by whom both the grandfather and father were employed. Cealus believes that some of his antecedents may have been slaves of the Van Buskirk family, and thus came by the surname.

The memory of Bayonne's early residents always brings a warm glow to Cealus, for as he puts it, people were "kinder and friendlier

latter went out of business. Cealus' father rented some of the boats and used others for fishing. The crews on the boats never went home to lunch, and a major problem was to find out when it was time to eat. Practically no one carried a watch, so they finally settled on a solution. They studied the movements of the daily excursion boats that went to Coney Island, and learned that one of them, the Thomas P. Wade, reached the lighthouse every day at exactly noon. After that the Thomas P. Wade became synonymous with lunch, and as soon as she'd slide up to the lighthouse, the boys would pull out their lunch baskets and go to work.

Cealus at one time was employed

on Combs farm at 46th St. and Old Plank Road, tending cows and working in the fields. Later he became coachman for both William and Joseph Salter, and about 1900 joined the Tide Water Associated Oil Co. where he was employed in various capacities until about 10 years ago. Dora Jackson, his first wife, died about 30 years ago, after which he married Mary Thompson, who died seven years ago. Cealus now lives with his daughter, Cecilia, who works during the day, and keeps house for him.

Cealus has lived to see Bayonne transformed from a farm center to an industrial hub, but to him the peninsula will always remain the sanctuary of a hundred sentimental phantoms. He rarely passes near the city line, but he is reminded of clear summer evenings when boatmen on the Morris Canal lifted their vibrant voices in song. He can remember the picnics, the berry-picking, and the irresistible smell of the brine on spring mornings. He remembers the days when frolicking youngsters made off with the fire apparatus, and exasperated firemen had to pull it from the mud.

But most of all, he remembers the people of early Bayonne—"the wonderful, kind, friendly people."