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Seabrook Educational & Cultural Center Bulletin

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SEABROOK REUNION KEYNOTE SPEECH

SEABROOK REUNION 2017 Keynote Speech John M. Seabrook, Jr., Trustee

Thanks to you Michael and the JACL, and my fellow SECC trustees, for honoring me with this invitation to speak to you today. I am deeply impressed that so many of you have to come so far for this weekend. It is certainly a testament to the special character of this community, and the impact that Seabrook Farms had on so many lives.

It is also my pleasure to honor John Fuyume, who did so much for my family, and whose friendship with my father lasted for more than fifty years. They worked together until my father left Seabrook Farms, in 1959, and then resumed when my father, who was also named John but called Jack, made John the controller at his new company, then called International Utilities, and later John became vice president of Gotaas Larsen, the Norwegian tanker company that owned Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, where he was the all-important keeper of the minutes of the Board. I was talking to Adam Goldstein, who is now the president of Royal Caribbean the other day, and he remembered John fondly, as a generous man full of helpful advice. Adam did however note one piece of advice that John was mistaken about, which he heard from him back in 1988. "John made a very particular point of stating that loyalty flows only one way -- from employee to employer and not in the reverse direction," Adam told me. At least in the case of my family, John was wrong about that.

They met when they were young men -- Jack was 25 and John 18. They shared, in addition to a name, an interest in engineering and an engineer's approach to problem-solving. They did not share a talent for music -- John was a gifted musician, while Jack never touched an instrument, to my knowledge, in his life. But my father had a music of his own and it was in his style of living: his clothes, horses and carriages, his friends in high places, his famous parties. Both men had an engineer's exterior surrounding an artistic core. And I think they understood this about each other, and it was part of their sympathetic connection.

That connection deepened after the sale of Seabrook Farms, in 1959, because now they shared something else: the experience of great loss, and even of exile. John knew

this at a young age, as many of you also did -- the loss of a home, of friends, of future plans. My father met with great loss at the age of 42, and while the circumstances were vastly different and it is false to equate them, he also lost his home, his job, many of his friends, and at least some of his dreams. And the experience was all the more traumatic because it was brought about by his own father -- CF Seabrook himself.

Like John, and partly because of John, my father was able to make the best of his own personal tragedy, and go on to create a new life for us in Salem, and to succeed in his new career at IU, in Philadelphia -- again, with John's help. John was one of the few later day colleagues of my father's who formed a vital link to his previous Seabrook Farms life and to life in Deerfield, all of which ended abruptly four months after I was born. Bill Scheffer was another such link. As a young boy, when I saw my father together with these men, I could tell there was something different about their relationship -- it was almost in the way they stood when they were together, at ease with a sense of shared experience that people who have gone through life changing events together get.

In 1994, when my father spoke to many of you at the dedication of the Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center -- the institution John had so much to do with establishing -- he chose to speak about his own father, in a talk he called "The Henry Ford of Agriculture," which he later expanded into a short book. I recall him working on that speech in the summertime at my parents' farm in Vermont, which is now ours, sitting at the very same desk where I sat when I was working on these remarks, twenty-three years summers later. (I can tell you the desk drawers are far less orderly now.)

I was struck at the time by the difficulty he was having with his speech. He was always such a fluid writer. When I was a kid, I would sit there in the library, reading or watching TV, and he would be sitting in an armchair with a writing board on his lap, writing -- covering sheet after sheet of yellow legal paper, back and front, with handwriting. He wasn't a writer, he was a businessman, so what was he doing all that writing for? When I asked he'd usually say he was writing a speech. As an adult I

Continued on page 2

Oral History Workshop conducted by Rutgers Oral History Department Director Shaun Illingworth was offered at SECC on November 16 and made possible by Cumberland County grant funds.



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came to understand that the smooth, exceptionally prepared manner with which he bestrode the world of international high finance was possible because he never made a move he had not already worked out in advance, in writing.

This was not just a matter of writing up notes. He was crafting narratives. My father was a master storyteller, but he never would have called himself a writer, and whatever literary impulse he may have had ended up coming out in his Dickensian horse and carriage driving. But he appreciated the power that stories hold, not only in literature by also in business. He knew that a story is more effective than mere argument in persuading people to go along with you, because it adds an element of inevitability to your position. That was why Seabrook Farms invested so much energy in telling its story, over and over again -- the family farm that became “the greatest vegetable factory on earth,” as Life Magazine called it in 1955. It was great marketing, and cheaper than advertising. General Foods – what was that? But Seabrook Farms came with a story, and my father was responsible for much of the narrative engineering. John helped him there too, and then, after Jack left the company, and the business eventually closed, John, perhaps more than anyone, kept that Seabrook Farms story alive, and embedded it in the heart of the SECC.

But in working on his speech about his own father, back in 1994, my father’s narrative instincts, always so supple, abandoned him. He seemed to be defeated, once again, by his subject. Clearly he had not resolved his feelings about his own experience with CF. The mythological CF that is celebrated in the Seabrook Farms story and at the SECC -- a PR-friendly image of the Old Man that Jack himself had had a hand in crafting -- was not the real CF of his experience. How was he to tell a story that was the truth for him, without insulting the memory of CF that others in the Seabrook community may hold dear?

Charles Franklin Seabrook was a self-made man with a vision – to industrialize the ancient work of agriculture – and with an intuitive gift, bordering on genius, for how to engineer and build things, at a time when the country idolized such men. He believed in the redemptive value of hard work, a core ethic he passed along to his children. He had begun working on his father AP’s farm in Deerfield the late 19th century, when the first phase in the long development of the factory farm -- the great cannery operations like Campbell’s and Diamante’s -- were already well established in South Jersey, and no doubt he had these early vegetable factories in mind as he started out to create Seabrook Farms. In the very first stories about him in the Bridgeton Evening News, in 1913, he is referred to by his employees as “the Old Man” even though he was just thirty-two at the time. With his oldest son Belford, CF further industrialized agriculture by coming up with key innovations in the harvesting and processing of vegetables in the early

1920’s, and in later decades, with Courtney and Jack on board, Seabrook Farms helped to create the postwar market for frozen food, and the modern supermarket economy that came with it.

In the speech he eventually wrote and delivered in ’94, my father did not challenge the accepted myth of CF Seabrook, and only hinted at his personal story in his very last line, in which he wondered if the Seabrook family would have been better off if CF had raised one of his sons to be a psychiatrist. It was a line that, while he delivered it with a smile, gave poignant insight into the power his father still had over him, thirty years after his death.

When my father died, in February, 2009, he left behind some of his papers from the Seabrook Farms days, including detailed daybooks kept by his faithful executive assistant, Betty Gaunt. Every meeting, every phone call he received, every business trip he took is here, typed up by Betty in detail, with context and outcomes. Basically, I know what he did every minute of his day for twenty-five years, from 1941 to 1966. His monthly expense reports are pasted into the pages too. He had to get those approved by CF himself.

His confrontations with CF are also recorded in detail, and while they are in plain business-ese -- the president of the company being dressed down by the chairman -- the scenes make your hair stand on end. Some of it can be blamed on aging, perhaps the onset of Alzheimer’s Disease, but not all of it, because as many of you know, CF was perfectly capable of being lucid when it suited him. For some reason, the family, and in particular Jack, became the enemy, and certain favored employees, such as John, became like family. But since the whole idea of Seabrook Farms was based on the Seabrook family, something was bound to give, and it certainly did.

When I read these daybooks, the difficulties my father was struggling with while he worked at Seabrook Farms became much clearer to me. Here he was, this immensely capable young man, who clearly worshipped his father, and was equally gifted with vision. Belford was an engineering wiz, Courtney a brilliant and in some ways pioneering brand marketer, but JMS had the vision, and the financial and legal wizardry to turn Seabrook Farms into an international pillar of the modern food economy that frozen food had helped to usher in.

CF did everything he could to stop Jack from realizing that vision. When he couldn’t stop him, he sold the company, and as a result a lot of people around here lost their jobs over the next decade, including Jack and his brothers. How was my father supposed to tell that story? How can anyone explain it? It stumped me as a youth, and now that I am the father of two children of my own, and it seems all the more unfathomable -- that a father would set out to undermine his son and business partner at every turn.

So, in addition to honoring John, like my father, twenty-three years ago, I would like to use this occasion to honor my father and his struggle. Of course, my Seabrook Farms story is not his story. And should my son Harry, who is with us today, one day follow in the family tradition and speak at this reunion, I’m sure his Seabrook Farms story will be different from mine. Which is great. All of us are here today one way or another because of CF Seabrook – many of us drove here on Route 77, which he laid out and built. We all have different stories about him. Some of them don’t exactly burish CF’s myth. But insofar as they add to our understanding of this complex man, I welcome them.

Likewise, at the Seabrook Cultural Center, as we try to place this precious collection of historical materials on firm footing for the future, and to attract young people to the remarkable history of this place, I believe we need to open up the way we tell the history of Seabrook Farms to different interpretations and new narratives. We also need to build up the oral histories and narratives of other immigrant groups, as well as the African American migrant workers who came to Seabrook.

If we are to make the museum and archive a place of active interest and research for students from elementary to graduate school, including scholars researching the history of immigration, labor unions, work, agriculture, and New Jersey, we need to be open to different narratives of what happened at Seabrook Farms – even it means challenging some of the very history my father and John worked to tell. Indeed, some of it makes better marketing than history.

We are three generations removed from the events that brought many of you and your ancestors here, and we are five generations from the beginnings of Seabrook Farms. The stories that resonate with young people and students today are bound to be different from the stories told by the earlier generations, which are persevered at the Seabrook Cultural Center. The hard work and endurance required to survive the war years may matter less to many students today than the injustice and the outrageous civil rights violations that came with Executive Order 9066. And as the Supreme Court considers President Trump’s Muslim Ban, who is to say that the millennial generation’s interest in social justice is any less relevant to our time than the Old Man’s gospel of hard work?

I hope we will be able to achieve that kind of future for the Seabrook Cultural Center, but ultimately it will depend on the willingness of the community to accept different narratives and interpretations of what happened at Seabrook.

As for me, I will be sitting in my armchair with a board on my lap – well, maybe a laptop -- scribbling away, just as I used to watch my dad do when I was a little kid, until I get my Seabrook Farms story exactly the way I think it should be.

Thank you.

Note: An image of Reunion committee member, Eevi Truumees, author John M. Seabrook, Jr., keynote speaker, and Recent SECC newsletter columnist, Marilem Ferentinos, taken at the Reunion, appears on page four of this issue.

ACQUISITIONS 2017

Ingrid Hawk, Bridgeton, NJ: *Two suitcases used by donor’s family to relocate to Seabrook.*

Eiko Ikeda, Audubon, PA: Publication: Ryder, Tom, *Half a Century of Coaching, The Driving Career and Carriages of John M. Seabrook.* The Carriage Association of America, Inc., Salem, NJ. 2001. Given to John Fuyuum by John M. Seabrook, Sr.

Seika Okamoto, Simi Valley, CA: *Enlarged photo, 12 x 18, b & w, League Champions 1948-1950, Blue Devils Basketball Team. Row 1: Kats Kasaoka, Frank Koshimizu, John Mori, Henry Kato. Row 2: Nobu Hasuike, Richard Ikeda, Coach Jim Okino, Hardy Fujiki, Seika Okamoto (donor).*

Dana Ono, Concord, MA: *DVD - Memories of Five Nisei, The Untold Stories of Five Former U.S. Prisoners* recorded at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles on September 24, 2016

Masao and Shina Takeda, Bridgeton, NJ: *Group photos Seabrook Chapter JACL Keiro Kai 1994-1999, 2002-2017, memorial publication: Ellen Ayako Noguchi Nakamura, paperweight: Celebrating 50 years 1944-1994 Seabrook Farms, folder Seabrook 50th Year Reunion, publication: Desert Sentinel, High School at Gila Rivers Camp, AZ, June 8, 1945, publication: The Story of Bridgeton, 2011, originally published 1934, publication: Pacific Citizen – The Camps, January 19, 2012, High School Yearbooks Gila River, Arizona Internment Camp 1943,1945*

Penny Tevis, Millville, NJ: *Items belonging to William “John” Weiss, donor’s father, who worked for Seabrook Farms Company, Inc. Items are dated between 1952-1982 and include 11 employee badges, eight photographs of truck and driver, four negatives, two driver’s daily logs, fabric badge, driver’s license, Seabrook Welfare Fund card, teamster’s card, two bumper stickers, lapel pin for ten years of service, five pay stubs, directory of over the road workers.*