



Seabrook Educational & Cultural Center Bulletin

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Research Continues: Seabrook Farms

The following article is continued from Winter 2018-2019 and published at seabrookhistory.org

By John M. Seabrook, Jr.
President, SECC

In my time at the New Yorker, I have learned to aim for a standard of excellence in reporting, fact finding and fact checking that this great American literary institution is justly famous for. Around the magazine, this process is simply called "reporting," and it is at the core of what the New Yorker is all about, made timeless in the work of writers from John Hersey, whose "Hiroshima" was published in its pages, to New Jersey's own John McPhee, who in all his rambles around the state never made it down to Seabrook. I think he's still somewhere in the Pine Barrens.

At its heart, reporting is the belief that facts really do matter, even when they are inconvenient or go counter to what you think the story is. It's heartening to see this tradition continuing every week in the pages on the New Yorker as young writers come along to keep that faith alive.

So, when I turned back to the Seabrook story a few years ago, and began to accumulate new information about C.F. Seabrook, I brought these New Yorker standards with me. My plan was to try to find, wherever possible, other contemporary sources to check the company's own story against. In particular the earlier parts of the Seabrook story, about which much less is known. I mean the period from 1893 to 1924, before Clarence Birdseye patented his quick-freezing method of preserving fish, back when Seabrook Farms was an enormous produce farm -- a truck farm, it was called back then -- that grew high quality fresh vegetables and fruits, for markets as far away as Chicago, as well as for the nearby Snider's Cannery. There are also the missing years of C.F. Seabrook's career as a road contractor during the 1920's, a career that ended, improbably, in Moscow in the early 1930's. And, of course, the 1934 strikes.

The further into this work Lexie and I got, and the more we discovered about C.F. Seabrook, the more problematic the SECC version of Seabrook Farms history became. At a certain point I realized why my father hadn't been able to write that speech. Because the real story was something else altogether. It is the story of a man who let nothing stop him from getting what he wanted.

It became clear to me that bringing the story we tell at the SECC up to the level of fact-based truth telling that I learned at the New Yorker was going to require more than fact-checking. We would have to dismantle the entire narrative, wipe away all the messy hyperbole and spin and outright deception, and then put the master narrative back together again so that it incorporated the facts, not the public relations.

We would have to start with the single greatest public relations coup of all -- the "global village." This feel-good notion -- that Seabrook was designed by C.F. as a sort of model United Nations where race and background didn't matter -- has proved to be so popular with local historians and with the founders of the SECC that it has almost become real. But it isn't real. The global village is spin at its very best, geared to cover up the actual conditions of life in Seabrook.

The historical record shows that Seabrook was not a global village for most of the groups who came through town. Nor was it a place of equal opportunity for everyone willing to do an honest day's work. C.F. was no different from a lot of other agricultural employers of his time, in this regard. Women were paid less than men, and blacks were paid less than whites and were the first to be let go in the slow months.

Far from holding progressive views on race, C.F. Seabrook was a reactionary -- a strict segregationist who insisted that Seabrook be a completely segregated workplace up until the early 1940's, when wartime labor shortages forced blacks and whites to work together in the packing plant. My father effectively integrated the plant, against his father's wishes; I have a document in which C.F. complains bitterly about this. Still, there wasn't a single black executive at Seabrook Farms, nor was there a female executive, in its sixty years under family ownership.

Integration was completely the opposite of C.F.'s intentions in building the "villages" that made up Seabrook, New Jersey. The very reason Seabrook was made of separate villages, rather than one big village, was to keep the black and brown people separate from the white people. Segregation is hard-baked into the global village's design.

Still, Seabrook really was a successful melting pot of some cultures and races, with many positive outcomes, whatever the intentions of its founder (who wasn't really the founder at all, but that's a topic for another newsletter). Real cross-cultural understanding and lasting friendships did emerge from Seabrook, and the SECC exists in part to keep that spirit alive.

C.F. Seabrook himself made no pretensions about believing in racial equality. He brought together different peoples of color, not out of any humanitarian impulse, but because non-white workers, whether they were American blacks, West Indians guest workers, or Japanese internees, were the most vulnerable, and therefore least expensive, labor populations that Seabrook could find. The global village was a concept cooked up by the company's PR department in part to disguise this hard truth -- a brilliant bit of doublethink worthy of another farm I can think of, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

As Lexie and I have pieced together bits of our research over these two years, and gained larger insights into the true story of C.F. Seabrook and his work, I have struggled with what to do with all this new information. It's a complicated and delicate matter, and in thinking about it, I've tried to break the problem down into pieces.

First of all, as a member of the family, I feel a natural impulse to protect my family's reputation, as any of you would yours. After all, C.F. was my grandfather, and I met him once or twice, although they weren't particularly pleasant encounters. He is my patriarch, literally, as well as the figurative patriarch of Seabrook Farms. Seeing as how I have personally benefitted from his actions, am I being ungrateful to call him out for some of them? Or is it my responsibility to call him out?

Second, as the President of the SECC, I do have a sort of institutional responsibility to the legacy of C.F. Seabrook, and to the broader legacy of Seabrook Farms. Maybe the Disney version of Seabrook history, with its comforting platitudes and bromides about life in Seabrook, is better for the institution. Therefore should we bury this new research, and hope no future researchers come along and look beneath the surface of the story that we tell in the museum? What good can possibly come from complicating and re-litigating the legacy of C.F. Seabrook, in light of latter day woke-ness? On the other hand, isn't our responsibility as educators to do just that? Confronting the racism in our own past offers a great teaching opportunity, as well as a pathway to connect with students and educators interested in social justice.

Third, as a father, what do I tell my own children about this man who put the Seabrooks on the map, literally, but who is to them a remote and distant figure? I have a ten-year-old African American daughter. I don't look forward to explaining to her that Great Grandad was a segregationist who believed that the white race was superior to her own, and would have disowned me for adopting her. Maybe I could say that this was a long time ago and America was a different place back then. But when we see pictures of the torchlight parade in Charlottesville on the news together - what do I say then?

Aren't events like Charlottesville the reason to confront these unpleasant and hurtful truths about the role racism played in Seabrook history, rather than naively hoping all of that part of the narrative will be forgotten. Forgetting would be the best thing for the ancestors' reputations, but it doesn't seem fair to pass along fake history to future generations. And who are we here for? To paraphrase a proverb: We think we inherit the earth from our ancestors, but really we just borrow it from our children.

And finally, as a writer, schooled by the New Yorker, my professional obligation is to tell this story, one way or another. I am under no illusions about what C.F. would have thought of our work. Fake News! Certainly, I would not have lasted long on the staff of the Seabrooker.

I am under contract to produce a memoir of my father and Seabrook Farms for W.W. Norton. I'm not sure how much detail from our research will make it into that book, nor do I know how all this will translate into museum exhibitions yet. This is going to be a years-long, multi-faceted process.

In addition to laying out the complete Seabrook story as I think it should be told, these talks have been a way of inviting commentary, criticism, and contributions to our research, which is an ongoing process. And if your grandfather knew my grandfather, maybe you've got some of C.F.'s letters in your attic. Please check!

Making our story accurate and more inclusive of other points of view will require accepting some hard truths about my grandfather. The kind of conversation I will have with C.F. Seabrook's black great granddaughter one day, other Seabrookers' families may have too, across generations, as younger people come to their ancestors' stories with different eyes and see different things.

NOTE: Seabrook's talk on March 24th at Cumberland County Historical Society, *C.F. Seabrook Construction Engineer 1920-1930* picked up the story in the middle. The topic was C.F.'s career as a road contractor during the 1920's, which has been called "the Golden Age of American Road Building." It was in many ways C.F. Seabrook's most spectacular decade, but up until recently almost nothing was known about this period. Now we know a lot more. The series continued on April 20th, during Upper Deerfield Township Community Day, with *Strangers Graves: How the Seabrooks Got to South Jersey* and on July 20th, Obon Festival Day, with *Bloody Harvest: The 1934 Farmworkers Strike at Seabrook Farms*.

For information about these talks and future programming visit our website: seabrookhistory.org

ACQUISITIONS

Joyce Barth, Wildwood, NJ: Publication: *Favorite Recipes*. Seabrook School Parent-Teacher Association. 1948.

Carl Biletta, Vineland, NJ: Japanese record albums (4) in case, Abacus (Japanese Calendar)

Betty Brown-Pitts, Vineland, NJ: Ladies visor/net head gear worn by donor's mother at Seabrook Farms Factory

Rachel Cobb, Centerton, NJ: Japanese kimono robe

Nathan Goldschmidt, Bridgeton, NJ: Publication: Burgess, David S., *Fighting for Social Justice, The Life Story of David Burgess*. Wayne State University Press, Detroit, MI. 2000

Sug Henry and Ruth Young, Bridgeton, NJ: Publications: *The Seabrooker* June 1959
Table Talk, February-March 1962 and December-January 1962, Seabrook Farms Co.

Henry Honda, Federal Way, WA: Various photographs related to Seabrook community life.

Hunter, Sandy, Bridgeton, NJ: Seabrook Farms photographs: 5.5 x 8, b & w, published in the *Seabrooker* February 1945.

Roy Kaneshiki, Bridgeton, NJ: Publication: *Seabrook Farms Frozen Foods Cookbook*, Seabrook Farms Company, undated.

Richard Masatani, Bridgeton, NJ: Items relating to Seabrook collected by Teresa Mukoyama Masatani

Luong Mukai, Easthampton, NJ: Photograph: Factory workers packing Seabrook Farms product, 8 x 10, b & w. Photograph: Mr. G. Mukai, Seabrook Farms Company headshot 2 x 2, b & w. Identification buttons without photographs: #384 Seabrook Farms Company, Inc. and #25 Seabrook Farms Division, Seabrook Foods, Inc.

Darlene Mukoda, Bridgeton, NJ: Booklet: Annual Banquet Pickettes Bowling Program, 1959-1960. Photograph: 8 x 10, b & w, Seabrook Farms Company Plant Supervision surrounding Charles F. Seabrook, taken at Supervisor Dinner, winter 1952-1953, and list of 119 persons in the photograph.

Dana Ono, Publication: Wehrey, Jane, *Images of America, Manzanar*, Arcadia Publication, 2008

Bruce Peterson, Bridgeton, NJ: Publication: Burgess, David S., *Fighting for Social Justice, The Life Story of David Burgess*. Wayne State University Press, Detroit, MI. 2000

Kaelyn Riddle, Bridgeton, NJ: Publication: Hughes, Dean. *Four-Four-Two*. Atheneum Books For Young Readers, NY. 2016

Robbie Schaffer, Bridgeton, NJ: DVD: Seabrook Buddhist Temple, 73rd Annual Obon Festival. 2018

Eevi Truumees for Seabrook Estonian American Association, Bridgeton, NJ: Publication copies for SECC sales: Truumees, Eevi and Bajars, Emmi, Editors, *Estonian Americans, Seabrook, New Jersey, 1949-1999*. The 50th Anniversary Jubilee Committee of Estonian American Community in Seabrook.

Andrew Urban, Rutgers University: Postcard, linen, Seabrook Farms 1940's. Seven Press photographs,

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HAPPENINGS: The photograph above shows a Seabrook Farms field crew posed with converted corn forks used to cut spinach in the Pittsgrove Division of Seabrook Farms, a museum artifact on loan to Bayshore Center at Bivalve for *Tools of the Trade & Home* Exhibit which runs from July 12 through September 30. Other upcoming events include the Annual Volunteer Recognition Dinner on September 11 and outreach at the NJ State History Fair at Monmouth Battlefield on September 14. A steering committee has been working towards planning museum updates based on the development of a broader narrative of the Seabrook Farms experience.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Dear Contributors,

It is a pleasure to invite you to the Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center, Inc.'s (SECC) twenty-seventh Annual Meeting of Contributors.

SECC is supported by volunteers who provide invaluable services to make the museum a success, such as our Advisory Board, auditor, tax advisor, legal counsel, artifact donors, docents, consultants and officers. Your generous support by tax deductible contributions have made it possible for SECC to be recognized nationally for its mission to preserve and make known the unique history of Seabrook.

Sincerely yours,

John M. Seabrook, Jr.
John M. Seabrook, Jr.

Your philanthropy helps to insure our future!
Call our office for options (856) 451-8393

NOTICE OF MEETING

The Annual Meeting of Members of the Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center, Inc. a 501(c)3 public supported organization will be held at the Upper Deerfield Township Municipal Building, Seabrook, New Jersey, on Wednesday, July 31, 2019, at 4:30 p.m. for the following purposes:

*To elect the officers for the ensuing year as nominated:

| | |
|------------|-----------------------|
| President: | John M. Seabrook, Jr. |
| Treasurer: | Stefanie Pierce |
| Secretary: | Ingrid Hawk |
| Trustees: | Michael Asada |
| | Larry Ericksen |
| | Rev. Dale Johnston |
| | Donna Pearson |
| | Bruce T. Peterson |
| | Eevi Truumees |

*To act upon such matters as may properly come before the meeting.
Members of record at the close of business on April 10, 2019, and who are present will be entitled to vote with respect to this solicitation.