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The Rosedale Refuge

During segregation, the Indian River resort gave African-Americans a place to enjoy meals, music and a chance to be themselves

BY LYNN R. PARKS

In her book, “Jazz From the Belly of the Blues,” Doris Price recalls lying in her bed in the family farmhouse east of Millsboro and hearing music from the dance hall at Rosedale Beach.

“During my preteen and early teen days, I lay diagonally across the pineapple posted Montgomery Ward bed with my ear pressed against the cool screen,” she wrote. “My head was dangerously positioned beneath a window known to suddenly fall shut for no apparent reason — but I chanced it! Over the evening sounds of the crickets, the owl, the barking dogs and the distant highway drone, there intermittently wafted music — American Jazz music.”

Price, born in 1929, is mixed-race. Her family lived in Philadelphia until the Depression hit and her father lost his job at a Campbell’s Soup facility. “People like my parents were the proverbial canaries of industry,” Price wrote. “They were the most dispensable factory workers, the first to be pushed out of their nests.”

After Price’s dad was laid off, the family moved to southeastern Sussex County, where the author’s mother’s relatives, the Harmons, had property. The house where they lived was just a little more than a mile from Rosedale Beach on the Indian River, home to a dance hall, hotel and restaurant and, unusual in segregated Sussex County, a place where African-American musicians and music lovers were welcome to perform and stay.

The first artist Price remembers hearing there was pianist and singer Fats Waller.

“I was 4 or 5 and I was standing out on a little hill with my parents,” she says by phone from her home near Millsboro, within walking distance of where she



grew up. “My mother and father never went into the dance hall and they didn’t drink, but they socialized. We were down there visiting and we could hear the music.”

Other musicians she heard include Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, Ruth Brown, Lloyd Price, Bill Doggett, Illinois Jacquet, Louis Jordan, Ray Charles and Miles Davis. “Certainly remembered is the night that Miles Davis left the bandstand, used his arm to sweep some space clear on the bar, jumped upon it

Top-notch African-American acts were often on the bill at Rosedale Beach on the Indian River in the days before racial integration.



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Look Back

The Dangerous Road

After he graduated from Delaware State College in Dover with a degree in health and physical education, and earned a master's degree from the University of Maryland, Don Blakey was invited back to his alma mater to teach at the historically black school. He also coached the baseball team, and remembers precautions he had to take for his players' safety when they were traveling, particularly in the South.

"We had to pack our food, because there was no place we could stop to eat," he recalls. On the ferry that crossed the Chesapeake Bay at the southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula, the team had to park their cars in a blacks-only lot, and had to eat in a room separate from white people.

"We only traveled during the day and had to make sure that anyplace we stopped was a safe place. We had to be very careful, or else we could get ourselves in trouble that we couldn't negotiate out of."

But at Rosedale Beach, which he first visited when he was a student at Del State, "there wasn't any of that." For the people in the black community, the resort "was a respite." ■

and trumpeted away!" she wrote. "I have since wondered if that was the beginning of his famous attitudinal back-turned-to-the-audience stance."

Donald Blakey first visited Rosedale Beach in 1954, when he was 18. A freshman member of the football team at the historically black Delaware State College (now University), he came down to Rehoboth Beach with fellow classmates and teammates over Labor Day weekend to get short-term jobs in restaurants and hotels.

"It was late at night when we all got off work, and there was no place in Rehoboth where we were allowed to stay," recalls the Dover resident and former state legislator. "It was suggested that, instead of driving back to Dover, we could go on to Rosedale, where we would be allowed to get something to eat and where we could spend the night."

Once they got there, "the whole world



Famous performers like Lionel Hampton would make a stop at Rosedale Beach while on tour at major cities along the East Coast.

changed," he says. "Rosedale was an oasis, with all kinds of activities going on. It was like we had been in the desert — tired, thirsty, disheveled — and all of a sudden we saw this place in the distance where we could relax and be taken care of."

Black musicians who had been in Rehoboth to perform and who, like the Del State students, were not welcome to stay in the segregated resort town, stopped off at Rosedale. Many of them lived in Philadelphia or Baltimore and were uncomfortable making the long trip back at night, Blakey says.

But the resort wasn't just someplace to hear music and to dance. Rosedale was a place for the black community to hold fraternity and sorority meetings, get married, play baseball and have church services. Delaware had four high schools for African-Americans, including Sussex County's William C. Jason Comprehensive High School in Georgetown, and for students in those schools, Rosedale was a place for class trips, where they could play games, have picnics and listen to music.

"All communities need a place where they can have social activity," Blakey says. "For us, Rosedale was the only place we could get it."

Price especially enjoyed going to the hotel at Rosedale Beach, where she could play Ping-Pong. It was a welcome break from the endless chores of farm life: "Go get some wood from the woodpile," she wrote. "Go to the chicken house and get some eggs. Go to the barn and get some cracked corn to feed the chickens. Go to the garden and pull some onions or pick some peas."

But, she says, "when I wasn't working, I would slip away and go play some Ping-Pong."

She would also occasionally wander into the dance hall to listen to the musicians and watch the dancers. "I couldn't dance that well, but I loved the

music," Price says. "It was nothing like church music."

Unlike other dance halls in the state, Rosedale was not segregated. People other than blacks were welcome and once in a while, whites would drop in. Both Price and Blakey remember seeing a few there. But more often, white residents of nearby Oak Orchard would sit in their boats offshore, where they could hear the music.

"I knew a man who told me once that he used to do that," Price says. "But when his father found out, he got the worst whipping he ever had. Listening to our music was not encouraged, because we were 'those people.'"

Price believes the musicians who visited Rosedale, even those who were used to performing in large music halls in big cities, enjoyed being there: "They could come to a place where they didn't have to be concerned with the larger community's expectations and comments." ➤

Musical Memory Lane

DonDel Enterprises, a singing group headed up by Don Blakey, will present "Remembering Rosedale Beach: An Iconic African-American Experience 1930s-1960s" on Friday, Aug. 11, at the Modern Maturity Center, 1121 Forrest Ave. in Dover. Dinner will be served at 6 p.m. and the show starts at 7. The performance will highlight the history of the resort community as well as music made popular by the musicians who performed there.

Tickets are \$30 and must be purchased in advance. Proceeds will benefit the center.

For information and to buy tickets, call 734-1200, ext. 167. ■

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Rosedale’s Rise and Fall



This white stucco hotel was built at Rosedale Beach after new owners acquired the resort in 1937. Its popularity started to decline in the 1960s, when previously white-only accommodations became open to all.

The property that became known as Rosedale Beach, on the north bank of the Indian River, once belonged to Isaac Harmon, the great-great-grandfather of Millsboro-area resident Doris Price. Isaac left it to his son Noah, who created a recreation area there. “Part of the river bank was cleared to make a local park area for bathing, playing baseball and preaching from a small pavilion,” Price wrote in her book, “Jazz From the Belly of the Blues.” Noah sold the park in the early 1930s to local entrepreneur David E. Street, known as Dale, and his wife, Rosetta. According to Harmon family lore, the couple combined their names to come up with a new name for the area, Rosedale Beach. It was “a resort and amusement park run by Negroes for Negroes, Moors and Indians,” according to “Delaware: A Guide to the First State,” published in 1938.

The Streets built a dance hall on piers over the river, and invited African-American musicians to perform there. And they did. From its opening through the early 1960s, such noted musicians as Ella Fitzgerald, Chick Webb, Count Basie, the Drifters, James Brown, Little Richard, Aretha Franklin, Lionel Hampton and Ray Charles played at Rosedale. Even, at the very beginning of his career, Stevie Wonder. In 1937, the Streets sold Rosedale Beach to Jesse W. Vause, who formed a corporation called Rosedale Beach Hotel Inc. Vause tore down the small five-room hotel on the site and built a larger white stucco one. By the early 1960s, with integration and the escalating cost of booking performers, the resort was seeing tough times. A Nov. 1, 1981, article in Wilmington’s *Sunday News Journal*, reporting on an

auction of the Rosedale hotel’s furniture and fixtures, noted that the “golden years of Rosedale seemed to fade with integrated hotel accommodations.” The hotel, which wasn’t air conditioned, “couldn’t compete after the civil rights movement opened up other public accommodations previously available only to white guests.” In addition, the March 1962 storm that proved to be the strongest northeaster of the 20th century washed away the Rosedale boardwalk. It never was replaced. Later that year, the property was sold at a sheriff’s sale to Donna Burton of Millsboro and Harry Morgan of Cheswold, both of whom had been on the corporation’s board of directors. They paid \$50,000. In the late 1970s, the owners became entangled in a suit with the state over an easement for a public boat ramp. The state considered buying the property in 1980, spurred by then state Rep. Charles P. West of Gumboro, but funding fell through. The next year, real estate agent (and former state legislator) Bill Vernon made a bid for the property and pro-



Patients from the Stockley Center were just one of many special groups that enjoyed picnics and outings at Rosedale Beach.

posed that, once the sale went through, he would give Rosedale to the state in exchange for a three-quarter-acre oceanfront property in Dewey Beach that the state owned. That swap never materialized — it turned out that the values of the two properties were not nearly equivalent, with Rosedale appraised at \$180,000 and the beachfront lot at \$275,000 — and Vernon’s purchase option expired. Finally, in 1983, the property was sold to developers and the Gull Point housing community was built. Today, the former site of the Rosedale Beach hotel is marked with a sign put up by the Delaware Public Archives. ■

The Art of Jazz

When Doris Price was growing up on a farm in southeast Sussex County, the music from nearby Rosedale Beach changed her life. “Jazz and Blues music floated a mile or so up river, cut across the growing green fields of corn, soybeans, tomatoes, cucumbers, cow pastures, apple orchards and such,” she wrote in her book, “Jazz From the Belly of the Blues.” “With a will of its own, Jazz entered my second floor farmhouse bedroom window and locked onto my heart.” After going to Delaware State College in Dover to get her high school diploma, and then to Temple University in Philadelphia to study dental hygiene, Price returned to Millsboro, where she taught public school children about the importance of keeping their teeth clean and sometimes worked in private dental offices. And then, “it just so happened that creating visual aids for the dental health profession, along with marriage and children, combined to lead me into the profession of art and painting,” she wrote. Many of her works portray jazz musicians and dancers. For example, “Playing to the Ancestors,” above, is a painting of trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie that captures his colorful improvisational style. Price’s book (which can be read for free on freejazzbook.com) is illustrated with her artworks. ■



As for the music lovers who flocked to Rosedale on the week-ends, from throughout Delaware and elsewhere, the resort “meant freedom from problems.” “It was a place to let off steam,” Price wrote in her book. “Plodding people came but they no longer plodded. The excited and exciting people were transformed. They sizzled with energy and glided with precision.” And in segregated Sussex County, which did not have a high school where an African-American student could obtain a diploma until William C. Jason opened in 1950, “Rosedale meant enjoying ourselves with a certain freedom, and it meant relaxation and exhilaration,” Price says. “We couldn’t change anything else about how we were treated, so we used this to be ourselves, without interpretation as to what we said or did meant.” ■

LYNN PARKS is a regular contributor to *Delaware Beach Life*.

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