

Gloria Remembers

The Life and Times of Gloria O'Shea



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Book layout by Sarah Heath

In a sunny ranch home in the coastal Massachusetts town of Nahant, Gloria O'Shea sits back in her favorite chair. For more than 35 years, Gloria and Tom, her husband of almost 60 years, have made this their home. It was from this house, a short drive from their respective hometowns of Revere and Lynn, that daughters Pat, Nancy, and Judith, and finally youngest son Tom, left the nest to begin their adult lives. Pictures of their children and six grandchildren adorn walls and mantelpieces, as do other treasures gathered from the couple's frequent excursions to yard sales and flea markets.

The house on Forty Steps Lane is named for the beach just a block away, where visitors walk down the 40 steps, give or take, to reach the rocky shore below. The house, too, has a taste of the ocean—paintings depict coastal scenes, and on quiet evenings, one can hear the sound of the waves crashing and smell a hint of the sea salt wafting in from the beach. This is appropriate, perhaps, as Gloria and Tom's lives have always been intertwined with the ocean—from their many excursions to the "Forties" beach and the nearby wharf, to Tom's Navy stint at sea, and all the way back to Gloria's childhood, when nothing could match a Revere Beach summer riding the Cyclone, chewing taffy "kisses," and swimming with friends in the cool waters....

A Childhood to Revere

Gloria grew up on Revere Street, just down the road from Revere Beach. She lived in a house with her parents, grandparents, and three younger siblings—Herman Howard, Richard Russell, and the baby, Patricia Lillian. Her father, Henry Howard Locke, was about 28 when he married Gloria’s mother, who was a decade younger. Her name was Alice Pearl Victoria Natalie Morel. “That’s a handle and a half,” Gloria says.

The family lived on two floors: one for her grandparents and one for the rest of them, though they always seemed to be moving back and forth. “My grandparents lived downstairs, but they lived upstairs too, really,” she says. “There was always a little bit of movement back and forth, and then we finally all ended up together.” The house was a hub of activity. The family often rented out the upstairs for the summer, while downstairs was a grocery store that her grandfather tended. People always seemed to be coming and going.

While her grandfather, Louis Morel, was minding the store, her grandmother, Mary, was dabbling in real estate. She ran a string of 15 to 20 cottages along Revere Beach—right by the Cyclone roller coaster—that were rented out to summer visitors. During the winter months, she would have workmen come in to make repairs and paint the walls. Then, when summer arrived, crowds would flock in from miles away. Gloria and her



*The crowds swarmed to Revere Beach in the summer.
Photo courtesy of the Revere Cultural and Historical Society*

friends would make it their mission to get the most of the beach, the crowds, and the amusements.

“In the summertime, we lived at the beach,” she says. “The water was wonderful. Great swimmers, all of us were, and we loved the water.” Gloria stuck close with her best friends: Mildred “Moogie” White, Kathy “Lully” Moss, and June Dwyer. They had the run of the nation’s first public beach, and with the crowds swarming from Ocean Avenue to Beach Street, it felt like the center of the universe. “Everyone would be promenading all up and down and all around,” she says. “It was really fabulous.”

Tempting snacks abounded. Great wheels of flavored popcorn churned on wheels at Rotherham’s, mesmerizing the kids who stood by



The Hurley Hurlers Merry-Go-Round was one of many Revere Beach attractions. Photo courtesy of the Revere Cultural and Historical Society

to watch. Then there were the salt water taffy “kisses,” Sloppy Joe’s hot dogs, and Orange Crush to wash it all down—by Gloria’s recollections, one of the first places to offer the soft drink.

Even more enticing than the food were the attractions, from the merry-go-round to the roller coasters. Thanks to Moogie, they had an inside track on



Gloria and her friends loved to ride the Cyclone at Revere Beach. Photo courtesy of the Revere Cultural and Historical Society

the beach’s most famous roller coaster—the Cyclone. Her father, Ellis White, was the brakeman, and if they were lucky, they could catch a free ride with the paying customers.

“We used to hang around in the back, and if there were no seats being filled up in the front, he’d hail us kids and we’d go down for nothing. I wasn’t too crazy about it because it was always kind of frightening, but they always took very good care of it—it was always kept in tiptop shape.”

When they weren’t enjoying the attractions, some of Gloria’s friends kept busy by walking the dogs from the Wonderland Racetrack nearby. They would make a dollar a day walking three or four dogs in the empty parking lots during the day. Then on a few evenings throughout the summer, she and her friends would sit at the beach and watch the fireworks that lit up the sky from time to time.

Perhaps nothing, however, topped Nickel Day. On Nickel Day, everyone would cut out coupons from the newspaper for all kinds of things—treats for a nickel, hot dog and a drink for a nickel, two rides on the Cyclone for a nickel. All the kids loved it. “The place would be packed all the time on those days,” Gloria says. “It was special time.”





Gloria's mother, Alice

Gloria's mother, Alice, was an attractive, easygoing woman, always thoughtful, and not too strict. She was never one to raise her voice. She loved to dance—particularly in the marathon-like elimination dances in which she often competed. “She was never into crocheting or all that stuff,” she says. “That was old maid stuff.”

Alice had no surviving siblings. Her only brother, Herman, a bighearted boy who was fond of bringing home stray kids who had no place else to go, died of peritonitis, an abdominal disease, when he was 16. Gloria's father, Henry, however, had a large family. His father, Howard, who once made bricks in England before he arrived in America, ran a brickyard in Oak Island in Revere. Howard and his wife, Frances Sweeney, who was Irish and Scotch, had nine children, many of whom joined Howard in the brick business. Henry, meanwhile, opted to become an interior decorator along with his brother Victor.

Of Gloria's siblings, she was closest with her brother Herman, who was just 18 months younger. Both Gloria and Herman struggled in school, and Herman went into the service when he was just 17. Richard and Patricia, on the other hand, excelled at school. Richard was involved in every activity he could find, serving as school treasurer, among other roles. Patricia skipped a grade because learning came so easily to her. “That's how they used to do it when we were younger,” Gloria said. “Not like it is today—now they have special classes for kids who are really smart. But then, they didn't. They just kind of moved them along with double promotions.”

Alice and Herman divorced when Gloria was 12. Alice began working a few days a week, and as the eldest, Gloria found herself taking on greater responsibilities. Though her grandparents were always around to pitch in, Gloria often took it upon herself to babysit Patricia when she got home from school and begin preparations for dinner—whatever a 12-year-old could do. “I was always kind of a mother figure,

or not a mother figure, but an older figure. She depended on me for a lot of things.” Gloria grew up fast, thanks not only to the situation at home, but to the events that were reshaping the country.

Living Through History

The increased responsibility Gloria felt at home was matched by tough times in her community. Growing up, the impacts of the Great Depression and World War II hit close to home.

“I just vaguely remember them talking about the stock market crash. I was only a kid, only four or five. Everyone went kind of crazy; an awful lot of people were committing suicide, jumping off buildings and everything.” The news came gradually. Newspapers were not delivered to the doorstep with the previous day’s news. Instead, people on street corners would be hawking papers with day-old news, so by the time they knew what had happened, new events were already taking place.

Gloria and her family were fortunate. Most of their friends took part in food programs, depending on whatever food was being doled out that week—milk, cheese, maybe butter. “A lot of people were really hurting bad. Clothes? Forget about it. We would have one pair of shoes for the year.” It was then that people started buying sneakers instead of shoes, because they were cheaper to make.

There was no social safety net to keep life bearable, and no economic recovery in sight. “When Roosevelt came in, he started everything going.” Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) program helped to get people working. Gloria’s grandfather spent time working for the WPA, laying down curbs. He also made extra money rolling fancy cigars

at a cigar company. (He also smoked cigars, and one of Gloria's fondest childhood memories is of sitting on her grandfather's lap while he blew smoke rings. "To this day, I love the smell of a cigar," she said.)

Most of the time, however, he was at home minding the store. With so little money in his customers' pockets, he was forced to balance the need to make a living with the needs of the endless line of neighbors, who might go hungry without the food on his shelves.

"They would come in with a list, and they never could pay," Gloria recalls. "He was always doling out soups and different things like that. They'd maybe have half the change. So he'd put it on a credit, but after it was all over with, people had never paid him. They didn't have the money, even after people got on their feet, which was quite a while afterwards. Some of them used to come in once in a while to pay back some of the money, but they couldn't do it, couldn't handle it."

While he tended the store, her grandfather always had time for the kids. They would often tramp down into the store with their roller skates and ask him to help them put them on. "He'd be supposed to be waiting on customers and we'd go in with skates, saying, can you help us put our skates on? He'd leave the customers there and bother with us, help us put our skates on. He was a sweetheart." When the skates were tied, the kids would go rolling off, up and down the streets and sidewalks of Revere.

While her grandfather's big heart was sometimes getting him into trouble, her grandmother was more savvy. She was involved in local politics, and seemed to have every politician's ear, from the mayor on down. And though she was ill with diabetes for much of the time, she ran a tight ship with the carpenters and painters she employed, setting up their work before they arrived and making sure



Gloria's grandfather in the garden

she always got what she paid for. “She was a strict bird, but she was a smart cookie. Whereas my grandfather was easygoing—he would give everything away. She couldn’t depend on him to be taking care of business. But they got along great.”

Gloria remembers clearly the day of her grandfather’s funeral. Among the crowds heading to the cemetery were four or five police cars, and her mother couldn’t understand why. “My mother was saying, ‘What are these people doing? What’s with the police cars?’ It was all guys that he knew as kids: as they got older, they had ended up as policemen. It was unbelievable.” They had come to pay their respects to a man with simple desires, but an enormous heart.



After the divorce, Alice searched for the right school for Gloria, who was struggling academically. She spent the first grade at the Paul Revere School, but didn’t stay long. Her mother soon moved her to Our Lady of the Assumption, a French school in Chelsea. Alice, who was French Canadian, thought Gloria would benefit from learning French. She spent three happy years learning from the nuns



Gloria spent just a year at the Paul Revere School.

at the Assumption before she and Patricia were sent to Saint Chrétien Academy in Salem, a boarding school where she spent seventh and eighth grade.

“She was trying to find the best schooling for me,” Gloria said of her frequent moves. “But maybe that had a lot to do with why I was getting behind in school. They were always ahead of what I was doing or behind, and I never did that great.”

Gloria spent her high school years at Revere High School. She was captain of the volleyball team and played softball. She also enjoyed horseback riding, something she and her classmates would do every other week in Wakefield or the Lynn Woods.

She graduated in 1943, at the peak of World War II. By then, many of her fellow students were fighting in the war. Most had not received diplomas—they would receive them when they returned to finish their classes, if they ever did return. Many never made it back.

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