

Shifting Sands At a Historic Black Enclave



Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

TRADITION Michele Davis and her 3-year-old, Paul Munn, on the beach at Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard. Her family has come to Oak Bluffs for decades.

By DENNY LEE

FOR more than 50 years, Jeffrey Goldson's family has been coming to the Oak Bluffs section of Martha's Vineyard for its summer vacations. The house has been the setting for reunions, weddings and spontaneous gatherings of friends and neighbors that would often last well into the night. In the 1960's, Mr. Goldson's father even created a makeshift disco in the garage behind the house that quickly became a local favorite.

"Every night of every year, for 10 years, kids would party in our garage," recalled Mr. Goldson, 52, a doctor of emergency medicine who lives in Old Westbury, N.Y. "I remember we played Vanilla Fudge, Motown, Johnny Pacheco and some Latin bands."

But eventually the parties stopped, the family came less often, friends died or drifted away, and Mr. Goldson decided last year to sell the property with its five-bedroom salt-box that he inherited after his father's death in 1994. Now it is about to change hands: the buyer is waiting to close on her \$375,000 bid.

Mr. Goldson is an African-American. The new owner of the house, Lisa Sorensen, is white. And that, increasingly, is the story of Oak Bluffs.

Located seven miles off the Cape Cod coastline, on the northern tip of Martha's Vineyard, the town of Oak Bluffs has drawn African-Americans since the Civil War, first

Continued on Page 4

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Continued From First Escapes Page

as domestic help for wealthy white families, and later, as word spread about its pristine beaches and pioneering black-owned inns, as second-home owners. "By the 1800's, you had a middle-class black community who had the resources to come for a weekend vacation," said Robert C. Hayden, a black historian and co-author of the book "African-Americans on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket" (Select Publications, 1999). "Unlike other black resorts, this one grew alongside the white community."

Early homeowners included Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the writer Dorothy West, and United States Senator Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts, the first black senator to be elected in the post-Reconstruction era. More recently, Spike Lee, Oprah Winfrey, Diana Ross and Charlayne Hunter-Gault are among those who have been spotted in town.

There are other predominantly black resorts around the country, like the Azure section of Sag Harbor in New York and Highland Beach near Annapolis in Maryland. But Oak Bluffs claimed a special status. "Oak Bluffs has the highest concentration of black celebrities and really affluent doctors and lawyers," said Thomas Dorsey, the founder of Soul of America, a travel Web site for African-Americans. "In terms of mythology, it still ranks at the top." Among the most prominent residences was the Overton Mansion on Narragansett Avenue, a large Victorian house that was an intellectual salon for the black elite. "I can still see Martin Luther King sitting on the porch and writing," a neighbor, Mildred Henderson, reminisced.

But such memories are increasingly distant. Development on the island, along with a generational shift, is threatening the historic identity of Oak Bluffs. Black-owned shops and restaurants have closed, and many older black families are selling their homes to newcomers, most of whom happen



Photographs by Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

HERITAGE Three generations of the Shearer family, which has operated Shearer Cottages in Oak Bluffs, Mass., for a century.

African-Americans initially settled. "All the houses here used to be black-owned," Mr. Hayden, the historian, said as he walked through the district recently, pointing to a row of five cottages on Dorothy West Avenue. "Now there's only one."

One of the first black homeowners on that street was Cornelius N. Garland, a surgeon from Boston who bought a cottage there in 1921. When Mr. Garland died, his daughter, Thelma Garland Smith, kept the family tradition alive with her own children. But the tradition stopped there. Shortly before Ms. Smith died in 1992, her two daughters sold the house. "Our family was scattered," said Joan Reppert, one of Ms. Smith's daughters, who is now retired and lives in Reading, Pa. "My sister lives in Colorado and didn't use the cottage enough to warrant its upkeep. And I didn't have the time to manage it as a rental."

Across the street is a cottage where Barbara H. Houtman spent her summers as a youth. When she retired in 1985, she relocated to Oak Bluffs from Boston and became the first African-American to head the town's Board of Selectmen. But when her health started to fail several years ago, she moved to a retirement community on Cape Cod. "The Vineyard is so isolated," said Ms. Houtman, 80. "A lot of my friends are no longer there. And my children and grandchildren didn't have the love for the Vineyard that I had. They didn't feel the ties."

The decreasing presence of blacks is also felt along Circuit Avenue, the town's honky-tonk thoroughfare, where half a dozen



ENTREPRENEUR Bruce Zila has turned a house that Martin Luther King Jr. once visited into a luxury rental property.

black-owned businesses have disappeared over the last decade. The Carousel, a women's boutique, closed last summer after more than 15 years in business. Before that,

two other clothing stores, Summer Breeze and Vineyard Vines, went out of business. The Winifred House, a black-owned inn on nearby Pequot Avenue, closed in 1990 after a four-decade run. And the last black-owned restaurant in town, Lobster in the Bluffs, closed in the mid-1990's.

Of the 160 businesses in the Oak Bluffs Business Association, only a handful are black-owned. Statistics are hard to pin down, but many believe that the black population has shrunk in recent years. According to census figures for Oak Bluffs, there were 160 blacks in 2000 (or 4.3 percent of 3,713 residents), compared with 193 blacks in 1990 (or 6.9 percent of 2,804 residents). But the census tracks only the year-round population. The Martha's Vineyard Commission estimates that the town's population grows to 20,000 during the summer, but it does not parse that figure by race.

"There isn't a new swell of blacks coming here and buying homes," said Delrdre R. Hammond, who this year started the first black-owned real estate firm in Oak Bluffs. C. Jack Coleman, a black homeowner, said he witnessed that trend when he put a house on Circuit Avenue up for sale. "I thought it would be a nice opportunity for a black family," he said, adding of prospective buyers, "Of the 100 times I showed it, probably 60 of them were white. I was shocked. There was not even one offer from a black family."

One reason younger African-Americans may be abandoning Oak Bluffs for other resort areas is a simple one: because they

can. In the Hamptons, for instance, few celebrities — black or white — have been bigger than P. Diddy over the last couple of summers. His July Fourth weekend bash at Resort, the hot East Hampton nightclub, was a standing-room-only affair, attracting such bold-face names as Kim Cattrall, Kelly Ripa, Bruce Willis and Star Jones.

Meanwhile, some blacks have not left Martha's Vineyard altogether; they are just moving to other parts of the island. "Just because you're black doesn't mean you have to live in Oak Bluffs," said Mr. Coleman, who is building a new house in Edgartown. Like others who have fanned out in recent years, Mr. Coleman said he wanted a larger space than Oak Bluffs, with its subdivided lots, could offer.

And those who have moved into Oak Bluffs came largely because that is where the deals seem to be. "Oak Bluffs has the most reasonable prices on the island," said Ms. Sorensen, an Edgartown hotel comptroller, who is buying Mr. Goldson's home.

In the six towns on Martha's Vineyard, home prices in Oak Bluffs consistently rank the lowest. "You get more value for your dollar here," said Alan Schweikert, of Ocean Park Realty in Oak Bluffs. During the first quarter of this year, the median price of a home sold in Oak Bluffs was \$441,875, compared with \$462,500 in Vineyard Haven and \$1 million in Chilmark, according to Link, a local research company.

Four years ago, the 18-room Overton Mansion was bought by white antiques dealers from Connecticut, Bruce and Faith Zila, who own a bric-a-brac store in town. "We bought it for \$420,000," said Mr. Zila, who revamped the house into a luxury rental property. "We just had it appraised at \$3.3 million."

Despite the apparent shifts in the population, it would be wrong to suggest a total exodus of African-Americans from Oak Bluffs. Pockets of town remain proudly black. Many prominent families have no intention of leaving: Nelsons, Finleys, Joneses, Powells and others whose names fill the registers of Boulé and Jack and Jill, social clubs of the black aristocracy.

Even Mr. Goldson still has family ties here. "My children's best friends are on the island," said his sister-in-law, Amy Robertson Goldson, a lawyer from Washington, who spends most of her summer in Oak Bluffs. "I met my husband here. My father, and grandparents are buried here. This is the place where we will all end up."

Meanwhile, interest in cultural landmarks has been piqued. Places like the Shearer Cottages, opened 100 years ago as one of the first black-owned establishments on the island, are being honored by the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard, a preservation effort started in 1997 by a local high school teacher.

But to some, it is this concentration on the past — rather than on the future — that is most worrisome. "The biggest concern is that the black presence is not going to be here for future generations," said Ms. Hammond, the real estate broker, whose family has been coming to Oak Bluffs for four generations. Warns Mr. Dorsey, the Web entrepreneur, "Oak Bluffs is at risk of becoming a historic black community, rather than a living black resort."

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to be white. While some see this shift as the welcome progress of integration, others view it as a loss of heritage. "Oak Bluffs is not a black resort anymore," Mr. Goldson said. "If more than 15 percent of the people are black, I'd be shocked."

His mother, Marjorie Goldson, 78, harbored few objections about the sale of the family home. "For me, it was an end of an era," she said. "But most of my friends had died." That seems to be a common theme among longtime residents. "A lot of the old-timers sold their houses because their children weren't interested anymore," said Doris Clark, a black innkeeper who traces her Vineyard roots to the early 1800's.

The demographic change is perhaps most pronounced in the Highlands district, where