

F R A M E S O F R E F E R E N C E

*Photographer
discovers new
perspective
living in
Provincetown
dune shack*

By SUSAN HARRISON WOLFFIS
Photography by STEPHANIE FOSTER



Photographer Stephanie Foster faced solitude, silence and primitive conditions during her three fall stays at C-Scape dune shack in Provincetown. Her photograph "Autumn Day by The Sea" captures a sense of the isolating landscape and her simple life there.

It was the light that called her back.

The endless horizon. Smoldering sunsets. A canopy of sky.

Rainbows that appeared without warning, square-shaped, not arched.

When photographer Stephanie Foster first ventured into the wilds of the Outer Cape's dunes for a week in October 2005, living and working in the C-Scape dune shack in Provincetown, there came a moment when she realized she was "completely surrounded by sky."

"I didn't want to move," she remembers. "I didn't want to go inside or leave. I didn't want to miss one second of light."

The sensation inspired more than her artist's creativity, more than the desire to document everything within range of her camera, more even than the dream of turning words and images into poetry.

It beckoned her back.

Two years later, she returned.

Foster, who makes her home in West Harwich, knew she had to return to the dunes. Three times over a span of five years

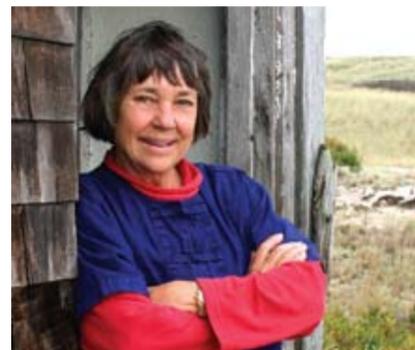
– from that first stay through her last in November 2009 – she took part in a lottery to choose individuals who would be given the opportunity to spend a week in one of the shacks – humble, primitive, worn wooden structures without running water or electricity – scattered in the dunes from North Truro to Provincetown.

And three times, Foster celebrated when her name was drawn.

"When I won the lottery, I cried. But it wasn't a big jackpot; it was a residency in a Provincetown dune shack. I was thrilled, until the reality hit me," she writes in her diary. "There was no electricity, running water or indoor toilet."

Just getting to the shack was a major undertaking and an integral part of the experience. She had help getting her belong-

All around, the desert-like dune terrain is punishing, wild, often nearly impassable, a natural buffer between the outside world and the world of the artist.



Stephanie Foster stands in the doorway of C-Scape. Photo by Tom Boland

ings, her supply of fresh water and food and the rest of her supplies out to the shack. All around, the desert-like dune terrain is punishing, wild, often nearly impassable, a natural buffer between the outside world and the world of the artist.

As she prepared to go, she recalls in her

diary, "C-Scape overseer, Tom Boland loaded my belongings in his truck in late October. I looked as if I was going to Antarctica. He didn't say a word. The pale dunes looked dramatic against the bleak sky. Then, the two-room shack appeared in the distance. Up close, I could see that the doorknob hung from the door like an eyeball out of its socket. Inside the paint was beyond peeling.

"I quickly became acquainted with kerosene, propane and wood and put the word, 'combustible,' out of my mind. Outside, Tom pointed out the composting toilet, a plastic bag he called a solar shower and the water pump, where I learned what 'priming the pump' meant."

It was just the beginning of the grit – and gift – of the dune shack adventure.

"I brought linens, flashlights, warm clothes, bottled water and enough food to feed the crew of a capsized ship," she writes, veering from past to present tense, from

herbs in water. Shell necklaces I made decorate the wall. Beachcombing treasures line the deck ... And so far there are no mice."

They came later.

The truth is, Foster – a woman who works in nature every day, growing flowers, easily controlling bugs and blight in her garden – is terrified of mice.

At night, she imagined them scampering across her bed covers, getting perilously close. By day, she discovered they'd stuffed her duffle bag with acorns, hoarding them for later use.

"They were the only thing not wonderful about C-scape," she says. "They were my biggest fear. I had to look at it that I was overcoming fear."

And early on, simplicity and serenity began to settle her.

"Today the shack is filled with silence," she continues in her daily entries. "I walk, fill the water jugs, bring in wood. I love this

simple life. Clothes don't matter or how I look. My body is merely a container for my spirit. There is no stress or strife. Just peace."

While there, her diary served not only to document her days but as an attempt to capture in words what she was seeing with new eyes and new spirit. "I have a need to work and be worthy," she writes in a

journal entry early one week.

Excerpts from the diary accompany her photographs, which are on display at the Addison Art Gallery in Orleans. An exhibit of some of the images from her stays at C-Scape form the basis of a collection that will be featured at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis in "The Dune Shack Experience," a show that will run from Nov. 20 to Jan. 23, 2011.

Inextricably bound to the maritime and

cultural history of the Cape, the ramshackle dune shacks are listed on the National Register of Historic Sites. They remain part of a continuing artistic legacy on the Outer Cape, a thread to the past.

Scattered throughout the dunes in the Peaked Hill Bars Historic District, extending from Provincetown through North Truro, most of the shacks – which range in size from a single room to multiroom cottages – are within walking distance of Commercial Street. They are rustic, weathered shelters that yield up more in the way of romantic maritime history than creature comforts.

The shacks were originally erected by The Humane Society to serve as refuges for shipwrecked sailors who might find themselves stranded on shoals or overwhelmed by the treacherous waters along the outer shores of Cape Cod. More than 3,000 vessels have been wrecked along this coastline since 1600.

"Dune shack residents today recount a history of the shacks covering over a hundred years, from at least the late nineteenth century and stretching into the twentieth century," writes ethnographer Robert J. Wolfe in a 2005 study of the shacks and their use conducted for the National Park Service. "Most of the shacks originally were built by the precursor to the coast guard for their families or for their own use."

Later, "local fishermen started using the shacks because it was far more convenient staying out there to fish off the Backshore (of Provincetown) than it was to keep trekking across. Then it was by word of mouth and that sort of thing that the artists that were coming into town at that time found out about the shacks, especially writers. Through their friendships with fishermen and others, they started using the shacks."

In the early 20th century, writers and artists flocking to the shacks included playwrights Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, poets Edna St. Vincent Millay and e.e. cummings, artist Jackson Pollock and authors Jack Kerouac and Norman Mailer – all yearning for the same solitude that would lure Foster 70 years later.

"The traditions associated with the dune shacks of today are rooted in that history," Wolfe writes. "The dune shacks figure in the



In "Dining in the Dunes," Foster documents the spartan interior of the Provincetown shack.

memory to immediacy. "I stuff newspaper into window cracks and hang a blanket between the two rooms. The living room is toasty but I can still see my breath in the kitchen. When I look at the chair covered with a puffy blue throw of unknown origin, the words, 'bugs' and 'pestilence' come to mind. I am reluctant to sit in it."

But there were moments of bliss, too.

"It's slowly becoming home," she writes a couple of days into her stay. "A lemon sits on the window sill along with a glass of fresh

history of Provincetown and lower Cape Cod, and have national significance in the history of American literature, theater and art.”

The dune shacks came under federal ownership after Congress established the Cape Cod National Seashore in 1961 in an effort to preserve the outer beach. Fewer than 20 of the perhaps 25 shacks that existed during the peak years of use of the cottages now remain.

Today the Seashore leases its shacks to three local nonprofit arts organizations: the Peaked Hill Trust, the Provincetown Community Compact and the Outer Cape Artists in Residency Consortium, which provide residencies to artists during the summer. The organizations receive dozens of applications each year from writers, painters and other artists hoping to stay a few weeks in the dunes.

Dune shack residents, Wolfe writes, tended to be “self-reliant mavericks” who chose to live “in what some dune dwellers call ‘a liquid earth,’ dunes that move, an unstable landscape of sand, wet berry bogs, thorny heaths and stunted patches of pitch pine and oak.”



For her stays, Foster brought with her the tools of her own art – packing her cameras, pens and paper and preparing herself for what she describes as the “raw beauty” and sweeping expanse of the dunes. Rather than dreading the isolation that is an inherent part of the experience – seldom did she see another human being during her time at the dune shack – she reveled in it.

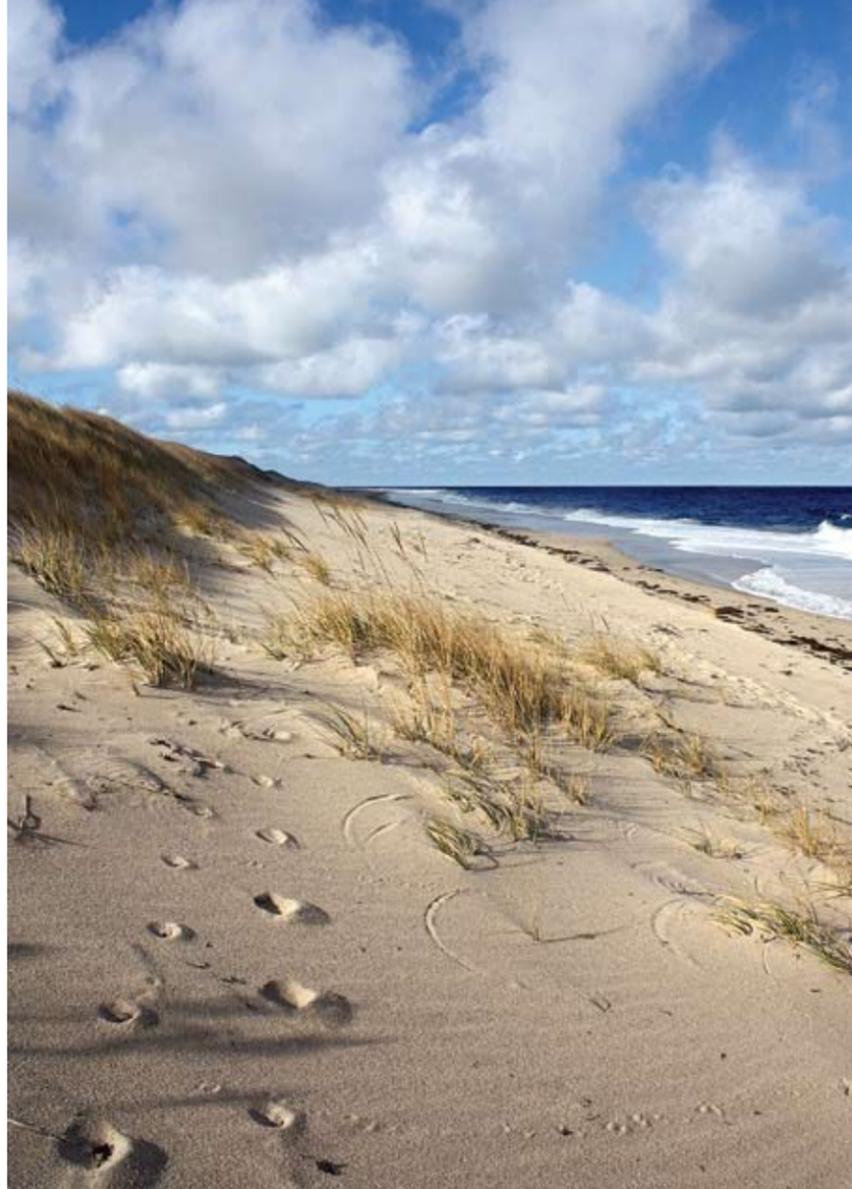
In fact, she counted on it.

“Solitude is the word for it,” she says, trying to describe the essence of the experience. “We’re never alone anymore. We have so many obligations. There’s always 20 things to do. When do we ever get a chance to be alone with our thoughts?”

Alone, with one’s thoughts: It is ever the artist’s desire.

Foster, who writes a gardening column for the Cape Cod Times and grows and sells flowers at farmers markets in Orleans and Harwich, knew that “to feed (her) soul,” she had to go it alone.

In a sense, that is the legacy of the



The hunting of a predator is preserved in “Coyote Tracks.”

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dune shacks.

On her first trip five years ago, Foster carried with her a set of paints, an attempt to nurture a new medium of self-expression, to discover a new aptitude in a place where, she says, the poets and artists who have come and gone before her are “part of the spirit, too.” And part of the reality of why she returns there.

Yet, it was during that first stay that “I learned I am not a painter,” Foster recalls. “I am a photographer. Painters can express their feelings. Photographers record the beauty ... the truth.”

And so, she was never without her camera – during that first trip in ’05, again in October 2007 and finally last November. She used the emptiness – of noise, of landscape, of everyday activity – that enveloped her, and let the scenery and the light fill her. They became at once both the sources of her creativity and the medium of her expression.

“Instead of interpreting it,” she says, “I lived it.”

“My goal is to find the beauty in life and then share it,” she writes on her website. “I’m attracted by color and light and the stories they tell. The beauty is there for

a moment, then the light shifts, the colors change, and it is gone. Sometimes the image is captured by the lens. Other times only by eye and the soul.”



Foster deliberately chose to go to the dunes during the autumn, because that’s when her growing season is done, and she can leave her gardens untended. In October and November, the shacks seem even more remote, less populated than they appear in summer. The weather is unpredictable, punishing, sometimes dangerous. She’s ridden out nor’easters and a hurricane, finding in her character a deeper depth of fortitude.

Foster was 67 on her last trip to C-Scape.

“To go at an older age gives you new appreciation,” she says. “I never camped when I was a girl. I wasn’t a Girl Scout. I was a city girl!”

But to spend a week under a seemingly limitless sky, to walk dunes and bluffs that shift and move, to live without running water, electricity and convenience – and to elect to do so – has stirred an unexpected sensibility in Foster.

“It makes me feel like a pioneer woman,” she says. “Like I can do things I didn’t know I could do.”

That sense of awe can be found in her photographs: a November moon rising over a sunset; clouds blowing out to sea, nearly touching the ocean at the horizon; beams of sunlight streaming in a darkling sky.

“Being alone there, in that kind of space, gives you time to find those inner spaces ... you wouldn’t (otherwise) have the time or place to find,” Foster says.

“What I hope to do is show people what the experience was,” she says. “I hope to show them the sense of ‘place’ that is with her now, always.”

It is in that small shack, she says, that she realized how little she really needs.

It is there, she says, that she learned how necessary it is as a photographer, but even more as person, “to have more air around me.” It is there that she recalled seeing a light that “connects to my spirit.”

“Each time, I had a hard time leaving,” she says. “I didn’t want to go. I wanted to hold onto the silence. I wanted to hold onto



Foster catches a full moon rising over the dunes in her photograph “Last Light.”

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She found herself wishing that she could stay longer or have more time before resuming her usual life at the home she shares with her husband, Frank Foster, a commercial photographer, and a Maine coon cat, Barney.

“The reentry is hard,” she confesses. “The noise jangled my nerves ... after all that solitude.”

But a year ago in November, when Foster was traveling home, wishing she didn’t have to break the spell by stopping at the post office and stores, she found herself looking up.

“And there was this incredible sky, the same sky that surrounded me in the dunes,” she says. “There was the same light at the post office, at the mall.”

“OK,” she acknowledges, “the telephone lines and the big box stores hide that beauti-

ful sky. They block out the light. But if only you can see the magnificence, if only I can see it from a different vantage point, it’s all there. It’s here.”

When she moved to the Cape, Foster left behind the fashion photography for which she was known. But she no longer feels a loss there; her interest has shifted to nature photography and portraiture.

Sometimes now, she says, she thinks “the spiritual connection to the dunes” – the beaches and sand, scrub pines and surf – is “cellular,” built into her DNA. “I have such a strong feeling about them.”

Nowhere is it stronger than at C-Scape.

“Everyone wants to leave a trace of themselves behind,” she writes in her diary on the last day of occupancy. “I place my walking staff by the woodpile and leave a tiny glass vase on the narrow windowsill. Alas, I also leave my heart.” ♦