

'Taffy' of Torpedo Junction alive and well

- By Ed Beckley | Sentinel correspondent
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In the Outer Banks Motel lobby in Buxton, Carol Dillon holds a photo of the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse taken in 1932 when she was five. The following year, Dillon stood at the base of the structure as waves from the Hurricane of 1933 licked at her heels on the site. The hero character, Taffy, in Nell Wise Wechter's story, 'Taffy of Torpedo Junction,' is based on Dillon's childhood World War II life on the Outer Banks, when enemy submarines roamed the coast looking to sink merchant vessels.

Leading up to and during the United States' entry into the World War II European theater, enemy submarines lay in wait off North Carolina's coast, looking for Allied ships which the Germans sunk at every opportunity.

Nazi sailors and spies also interacted with locals in Hatteras, and Wechter's story about Taffy growing up with her grandfather offers a unique perspective of that portion of history.

"My family shipwrecked here in the 1600s," said Carol Dillon. They were two brothers named Mueller, a German name later changed to Miller. "One of them married a full-blooded Indian."

Editor's note: Newspapers across North Carolina, including the [Outer Banks Sentinel](#), are currently reprinting the serial story of Taffy of Torpedo Junction by Nell Wechter Wise. The story is about a spirited teenager who grew up on Cape Hatteras during World War II. Wechter reportedly based the Taffy character on one of her students, Carol Dillon of Buxton, now 79 years old and a motel owner. Following is an interview with Dillon, who helped separate fact from fiction.

Dillon's grandfather's name was Christopher Columbus Miller, and to the consternation of the family, he fought on the Union side in the Civil War.

"My grandfather was very opposed to slavery; against the oppression of another man. My mother was his youngest child," she said. He eventually turned against the Yankees after General Sherman's destructive march to the sea.

"He died when I was a baby," she said, dashing the image of the fisherman in the book.

Dillon described her grandfather as a big man and a hard-working Christian who instilled in his children, "If you want something you work for it. You don't ask anyone for it. If you don't have the means, then you do without."

He married her grandmother, a highly intelligent woman from Bath named Mary Ormond Tyer.

"My grandmother received a master's degree from Adelphi University and came to be principal of the Hatteras School. Blackbeard's last wife was my grandmother's or her mother's great aunt," said Dillon.

Dillon, a University of Miami graduate, said her grandmother instilled the importance of education and that, today, almost all family members are either college graduates, or are on their way.

Born in 1928, Dillon's mother, Maude Leigh Miller White, was the Hatteras Postmaster for 30 years, beginning in the late 1930s. She also taught school locally. Her father, Estus P. White, was an insurance man who originally was from a small farming community near Windsor.

There were only a few hundred people on the south island back then, Dillon said, and most were poor. "But we didn't seem to know it. We had gardens. We ate well. We all had cows and chickens, and a hog now and then."

The house she lived in is now the oldest residence on the island. Only one room had heat. There was no bathroom. The kitchen was in a separate structure altogether, presumably so cooking fires wouldn't burn down the living quarters. Theirs was one of the only homes with electric lights, powered by a Delco 60-watt gas generator. However, unlike in the book, this house was not on the beachfront. "We all lived in the woods," she said.

Dillon attended Buxton School, where there were two grades in each classroom. She still sits by her 95-year-old first grade teacher, Jeanette Gray Finnegan, in church every Sunday.

"But my seventh grade teacher, Nell Wise Wechter, was the best teacher I ever had. She taught me all the grammar I ever knew. She really disliked the use of the double negative. Whenever I hear someone use it today, I think of her. She wasn't pretty; she was tall and smart. She had a brilliant mind."

Dillon's mother rented rooms in their house, and Wechter was a boarder. It was then, and in school, that the author came to know the spirit of the little girl who would become her novel's hero.

"I had a horse named Ivy, and a Beagle dog named Boozie," Dillon said. She said she also had a Boxer for a short period, surmising Wechter found that out and picked the breed for Taffy's pet in the book.

Because there were no girls in the area, Dillon became a tomboy, playing with the local boys and her cousins. She said there were three boys she particularly played with, and Jack Gray still lives locally.

"I had fiery red hair and green eyes and freckles," so that part holds true to the book. "I was just as strong as a boy. I didn't like girly things.

"There were no cars. You walked or rode. I didn't like to wear dresses. I'd climb trees, and fish. My father had an old boat in the sound. I had a

bamboo pole. He had a rod. I'll never forgive him for that," she joked, adding she still fishes in tournaments and has pretty good luck.

And then came the war, which came a bit close for comfort.

Dillon recalled the high ceilings, white wood walls and tall glass windows in Buxton School. "The bombs would go off — when torpedoes hit the tankers. You could see the windows move...almost an inch. And it wasn't just one explosion. It was boom...boom...boom...boom. I wondered how those windows could withstand the blasts.

"The teacher would say, 'Run, Run.' And we'd go outside or in the hall where the windows couldn't crash on you. And the bombs would shake my bed at night," she said.

"We knew the Germans were coming ashore. There was this man who was a German. He'd go over to the old house off Buxton Back Road owned by the Melhouses. The house is still there.

"That German would come into my mother's Post Office and bring in wood boxes, which was unusual. They were maybe two-and-a-half-feet by two-feet and he would insure them. My mother would ask him what was in the box and he'd say, 'books.'

I don't know what got her suspicious, but she called the FBI. It wasn't easy for them to get here. It was all dirt roads and ferry. But they came."

Dillon said the FBI opened the boxes and found detailed maps of Maine to Florida including all the little canals and waterways. They secretly followed him to New York where they arrested him.

"The man's name was Hans Haas. I had seen the man many a time, and those boxes were heavy. I can see them just as plain right now as when I had back in the Post Office."

But Dillon didn't find the spy, as Taffy did in the book. "It was my mother. She got a commendation from the President [Franklin Delano Roosevelt]. My sister has it," she said, explaining that sister Ormond Fuller still lives in the brick house by the Comfort Inn.

As in the book, "We didn't have sugar. Gas was rationed. We blocked light from our house with dark curtains so the enemy couldn't see boats off the reflecting light in the homes. And we weren't allowed on the beach at night.

"One moonlit night me and my cousin wanted to swim really bad. The next thing we hear is, 'Halt, who goes there?' My cousin started to run and I yelled, 'Stop you fool. They'll shoot you.'

"The Coast Guard foot patrol let us have it. The guard, who wasn't much older than us, said he almost shot us. We didn't ever go back to the beach again. In the book, that part of the story has me with a girlfriend, but in reality it was my cousin, Charles Lindbergh Miller. He was a good man, who died five years ago."

And unlike the Wechter story, the family still fished in the ocean, but the beach often was covered in oil and tar from exploded tankers. Sometimes they'd find life boats washed upon shore.

The shore patrols always evacuated the survivors, but the children would check the compartments on the abandoned boats for bars of chocolate left behind. Sadly, bodies also would wash up but the authorities took them away before the children could see them. Occasionally locals would stumble upon personal items from a torpedoed ship, the last remnant of a sailor's lost life.

Another thing true to the book is the value of church. Dillon said her family has attended the Buxton Methodist Church, across from the new high school, for decades. "I went to church on Sunday or I didn't go outside. On Sunday you were in church," she said.

One thing not told in the series is that the submariners sometimes surfaced and asked local fishermen for fruit. "They didn't harm the fishermen here," she said.

"We also knew they were coming ashore in rafters," the patrolmen told her. She said it was word of mouth that the patrols would sometimes catch enemy sailors on shore, but it was never public knowledge. And to this day it isn't known what the coast guards did with the perpetrators.

"It was a good life back then." Going to the mail landing was "a big thing." The Post Office was a gathering point for the neighbors. "There wasn't much crime. No dope. I never remember our door being locked. I was a free spirit, and the kids back then were like that. We roamed all over the island.. And all the kids looked forward to May 1. That was the official day they were allowed to stop wearing shoes for the summer.

She said the grouchy storekeeper early in the story was probably based on an old woman in Frisco who had a "rotten disposition." Dillon said the woman most likely did something to Wechter, and she remembered her in her writings. "She was a hellion, just nasty to everybody," she added.

"There was no TV or radio. We made our own amusement. I was an avid reader. We'd go to people's houses for a candy boil or to cook fudge."

Dillon said Wechter attempted a sequel to the book, with a grown-up Taffy who was married with children. She died before finishing it. But in a sense it continued to parallel Carol Dillon's life. She married Bill Dillon and opened the Outer Banks Motel in 1955. Bill died in 1974, but she continues "trying to keep the hotel out of the ocean." And her grandchildren are in school, and the oldest one is on her way to college — as grandmother Miller would have it.

And Dillon doesn't speak with a hoi toide brogue. Nobody in her family spoke with the accent that was more prevalent in Hatteras Village than in Buxton.

And one final zinger... Carol's nickname wasn't "Taffy."

"They called me 'Tinker' up to the time I went to college." Some relatives still call her 'Aunt Tink.'

"Nell took it and changed it. There was a lot of truth in Nell's story. She tried to wind the story to where it would be a good story."