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Oak Bluffs Squared: Where Everybody Knows Your Name

Julia Rappaport Thursday, May 8, 2008 - 8:00pm

At the center of Circuit avenue in Oak Bluffs is a square with ample room to sit this time of year.

The weather is not quite warm enough for ice cream, and the benches that face the main drag are empty. The summer tourists have yet to arrive, so no weary bottoms rest on the edges of the raised flower beds. Front stoops of storefronts are clear.

Despite the empty benches, a recent sunny afternoon found one elderly lady sitting in her own bright pink lawn chair, watching the world go by.

This is post office square, formerly the Park avenue mall and now officially named David M. Healey Square. It is both a thoroughfare and a connector between Circuit avenue and the town beyond.

The elderly lady in the pink lawn chair had plenty to see. Neighbors lingered to gossip on their way to Reliable Market, the grocery store just up the street from here. Women who work at the Edgartown National Bank ducked into the Corner Store next door for a soda. At least one selectman was seen trying to slip out of the post office without getting an earful from his constituents.

In an age of online communities and drive-through everything from coffee shops to pharmacies, post office square is a throwback in time.

"That whole oral history thing? That is where it happens. Oral history is kept alive in places like that," said Oak Bluffs selectman Kerry Scott. "That area, I think, in so many ways is the heart and soul of this town."

Ms. Scott grew up around the corner from the square, and it was her uncle, David Healey, who first suggested the town block off the street which once ran through there, restricting use to pedestrians. "It just struck him that it was such a gathering space," said Ms. Scott, remembering her uncle, a school teacher who was active on many town boards. "He and my grandfather used to talk about it all the time. If he had his way, all of Circuit avenue would be blocked off."

Back then, people driving up Circuit avenue would turn left on Park avenue and park on the street to get their mail. Sometimes on warm summer evenings, the town selectmen blocked off the short avenue for a town dance party. "I loved the block dances, we danced up a storm," Ms. Scott recalled. "Everybody came, it was multigenerational. I was there dancing with my grandmother. The community doctor was there dancing with his wife."

Mr. Healey also loved the dances, which gave the avenue the feel of the town squares in Europe where he had taught as a younger man. In 1975, the town planning board listened to his suggestions and hired a graduate student to sketch what it would look like if the avenue was closed to cars. The Vineyard Gazette reported: "The sketches are simple, yet they would transform the Circuit avenue area of Oak Bluffs. Sidewalks would be widened, trees would be planted, and alleyways and corners would become green and airy rest stops for pedestrians."

That year, the town built a split-rail fence at both ends of Park avenue to block cars. A newly formed organization, the Friends of Oak Bluffs, which Mr. Healey founded, installed benches and planted flowers. For small town residents used to the routine of the post office and the flow of traffic, the change was not entirely welcome. "The project got off to a rough start because of the difficulty in changing our driving habits," declared the annual town report from 1976.

And because this is the Vineyard, there was disagreement over the change. One resident called the park "a great inconvenience to the town" and "a terrible eyesore."

But in 1977, the Friends of Oak Bluffs put a tall Christmas tree in the center of the square and invited all to come down and light it. After that, it appears people forgot what they were complaining about. Neighbors and friends began lingering outside the post office, and the Christmas tree lighting ceremony became an annual tradition. When Mr. Healey died in 1982, the town renamed the square in his honor and installed a stand for the Christmas tree. "If he were here today, Uncle David would say, 'Well done,'" said Ms. Scott.

"It's a real gathering place," agreed Kerry Alley, who grew up in Oak Bluffs and was longtime friends with Mr. Healey. "We don't have enough of those, like in Europe, where everybody sort of gathers and it's a focal point. If you don't have a place like that, you miss that whole opportunity to gather and socialize." Every morning, Mr. Alley gets on his bicycle and pedals from his home near the Lagoon Pond into town to get his mail and catch up on the latest gossip.

He is not the only one who makes the square part of his daily routine. Before he moved to Chilmark, Joseph E. Sollitto Jr., a longtime Oak Bluffs resident and former police officer and selectman, sat down for tea and toast at Linda Jean's restaurant at 6:30 a.m., Monday through Friday. He would be at the post office to check his mail by 7 a.m., and then it was off to work at the courthouse in Edgartown, where he is the clerk of courts. "It's a social event when you pick up your mail. It's a meet and greet," said Mr. Sollitto, who is also known for his signature bow ties. When he moved up-Island, Mr. Sollitto kept his post office box and his morning routine. "It was easier than changing everything from our driver's licences to our credit card statements. Plus, my routine was to go to Linda Jean's every day," he said.

A few years ago, due to budget constraints, the post office pushed its opening hour back to 8:30 a.m. So now Mr. Sollitto escapes from the courthouse each afternoon on his lunch hour to travel to his former home town for tea and toast and gossip and to pick up his mail.

"You can see people when you walk by that you wouldn't see and can stop and talk. People find the time to talk to one another. When they come into the area, they just find the time. They take the five minutes," Oak Bluffs postmaster Paul Leonard said from behind the post office window.

Mr. Leonard began working in the town post office at age 12, making special deliveries. His father, who went on to become the postmaster in Edgartown, was a clerk in the office at the time. Mr. Leonard became postmaster in Oak Bluffs in 1993. From his spot behind the mail boxes, Mr. Leonard sees the same faces he has seen year after year. Sometimes, the faces he first saw as children now have children of their own. Sometimes the faces he used to see every day stop coming. Through the window of the post office, Mr. Leonard watches the passage of time.

"It has kept up the charm in Oak Bluffs," he said, adding: "I don't know if we would have seen that same vibrancy if the post office had not been allowed to stay in the center of town. This works in a town with a personality like Oak Bluffs. It saves a phone call."

In the lobby of the post office, selectman Gregory Coogan sat thumbing through his bills. "I could get my mail at home, but I refuse to do that," he said as he waved to his daughter's friend. "It's a meeting place every single day of the year. It's the fireworks, Illumination Night, Back Door Doughnuts. Everything goes through here. The car has changed the way people converse. This takes the car out of the situation. There are very few places you can walk and the car is excluded."