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Ocracoke in the Fifties:

“An island that lingers in the heart”

In the early 1950s, photographer Dare Wright lived in a small apartment on 58th Street in New York. She needed some peace and quiet.

Her friend Donald Seawell, a North Carolinian, told her about an island at the end of North Carolina's Outer Banks. The island could only be reached by boat or plane. It was peopled by the descendants of the island's first settlers, who fished the surrounding seas much as their forebears had. For years, the island had had no jail, no police, no bank, and only one telephone.

The island was Ocracoke. Wright would later say that Ocracoke “is a name that lingers in the mind, and an island that lingers in the heart.”

When Wright died in 2001, she had become famous as the author of a best-selling series of children's books that began with the classic *The Lonely Doll*. But among Wright's papers was an unpublished, hand-bound book with photos and words from her many visits to Ocracoke. Brook Ashley, Seawell's daughter and Wright's sole heir, and her husband, John Ogilvie, restored the photos and edited the text to produce the new book *Ocracoke in the Fifties*.

Wright first came to Ocracoke in a friend's plane, which he landed on the beach, since Ocracoke did not have an airstrip. She stayed in the one hotel in the one village on the island. The island has long attracted those looking for seclusion: Blackbeard had made the area his primary hideout. Just off Ocracoke's shores is the “Graveyard of the Atlantic,” where shoals and rough currents have sent many ships to their doom. During World War II, German U-boats turned the nearby shipping lanes into “Torpedo Alley.” Almost all of the islanders made their living from the sea, as shrimpers, fishers, boatbuilders, or salvagers.

Ashley said Wright, despite her “somewhat otherworldly” quality, was accepted by the Ocracokers. “She had no citified airs. Dare was



very kind and funny at the same time. People are still alive who remember her very, very fondly.”

This acceptance can be seen in the portraits from *Ocracoke in the Fifties*. “When Dare took pictures,” Ashley said, “people always opened up to her.”

An actress, model, and fashion photographer, **Dare Wright** had her greatest success as a children's author. Her first book, *The Lonely Doll*, was an immediate hit and led to another 18 children's books published in her lifetime. Wright, who died in 2001, has been the subject of recent articles in *People*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, and the *New York Times*, as well as a full-length biography in 2004. A movie about her life is scheduled to begin filming in summer 2006.

Growing up, **Brook Ashley** considered Wright her “second mother.” Her mother had appeared with Wright in a production of *Pride and Prejudice*, where they began a lifelong friendship. Ashley was a child actress who made her Broadway debut at age seven in Horton Foote's *A Travelling Lady*. She has her own Ocracoke memories from childhood visits, when wild ponies would come up to the cottage porch. Ashley now lives in California with her husband, **John Ogilvie**.

Title: *Ocracoke in the Fifties*

Photographs and text by Dare Wright

Edited by Brook Ashley and John Ogilvie

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