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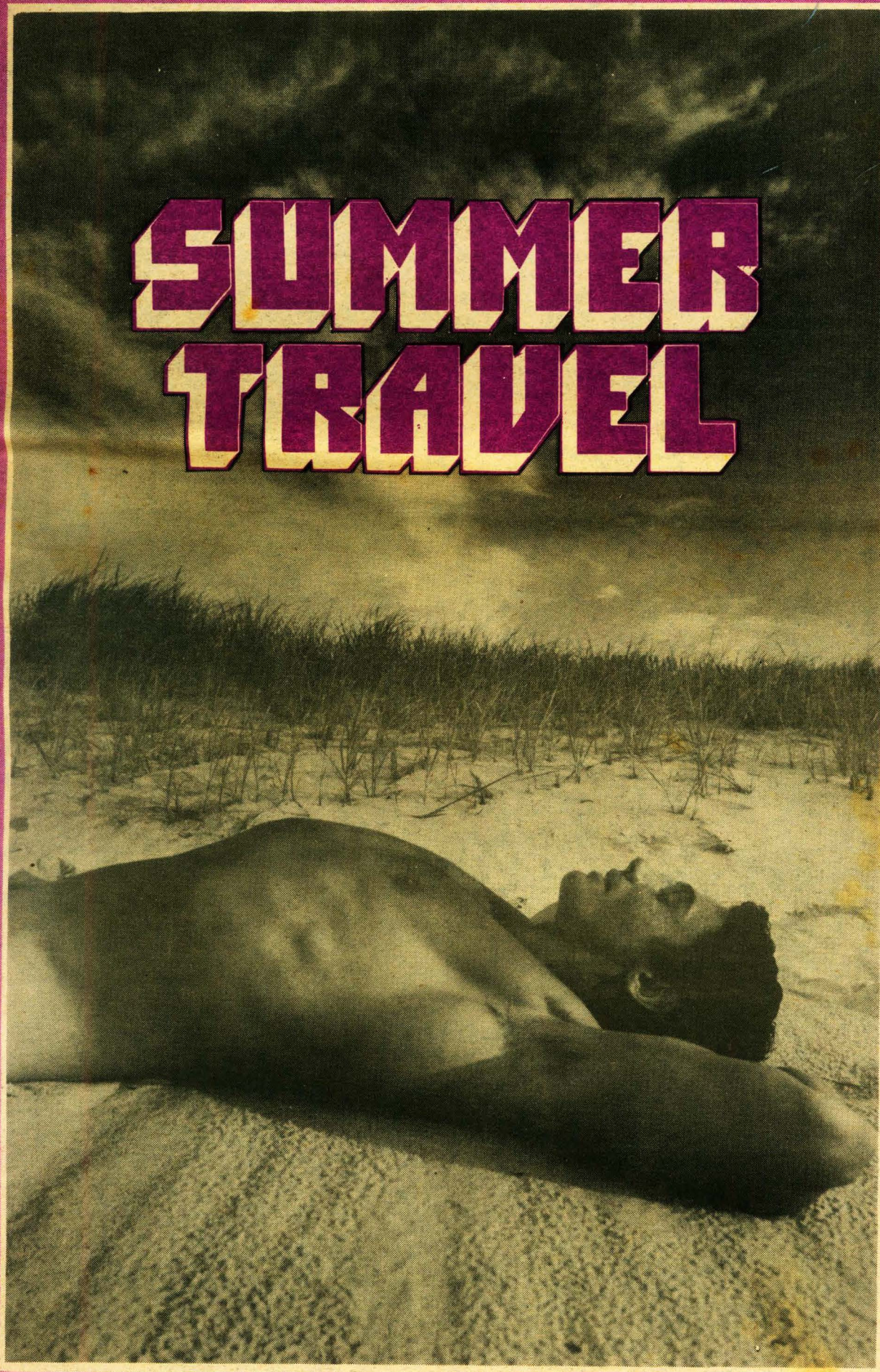
TOUCHING YOUR LIFESTYLE

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## SUMMER TRAVEL





# AS FAR AS YOU CAN GO

by George DeWoody

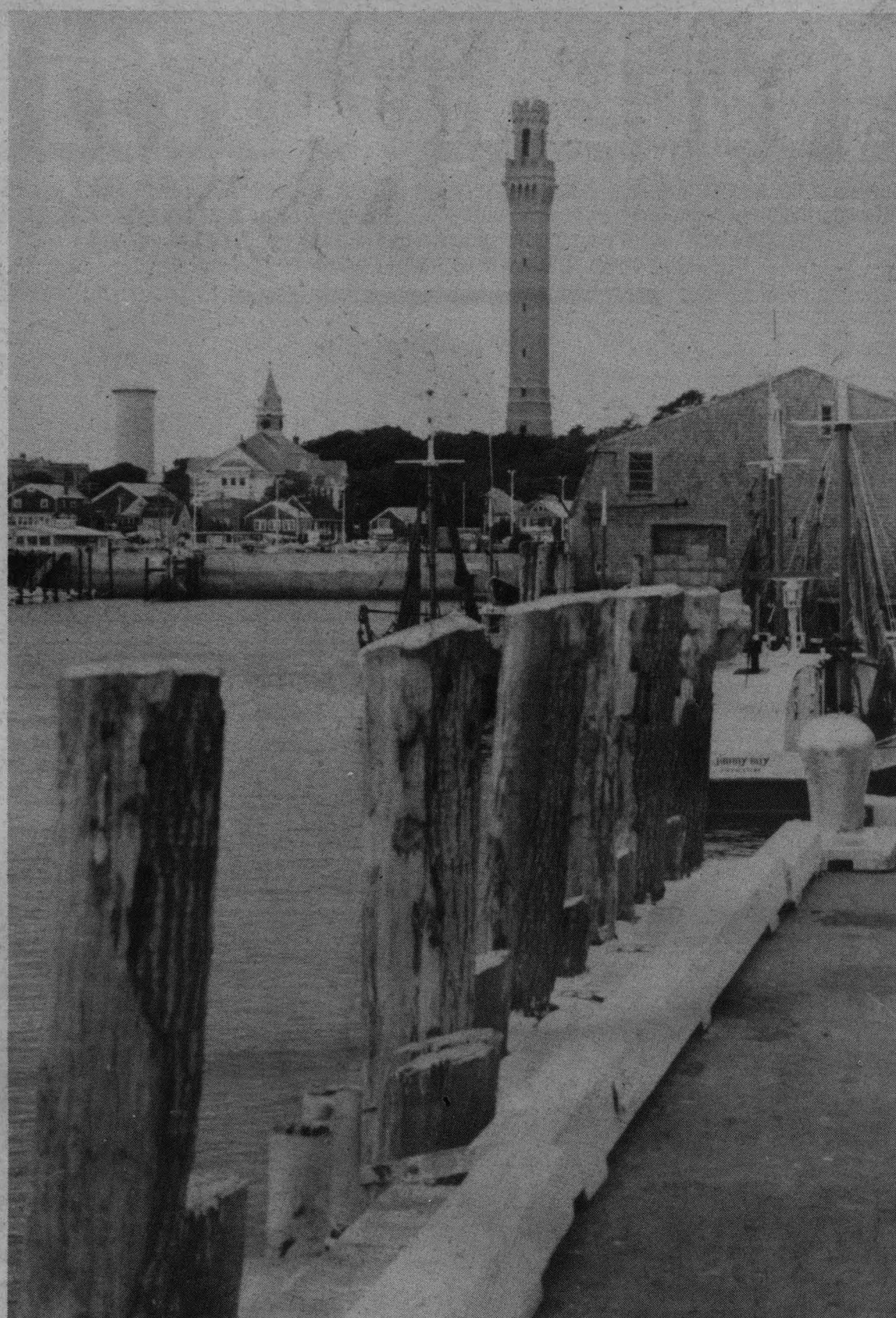
There is a peculiar magnetism about the tip of Cape Cod. Going to Provincetown is like going to the end of the world, looking over the edge to see what's there, and falling off.

In any case, Provincetown is as far as you can go, and for its thousands of summer visitors and intrepid winter population that's exactly where they want to be. This feeling of "reaching the limit" is as much the bait luring the mobs as the not-too-real depictions of a quaint fishing village or a thriving artist colony. This is not to deny the reality of fishermen and artists, but the fact is that neither adds up to the principal fact of life in the Provincetown of the '70s—gay freedom, gay enterprise, gay spirit.

Provincetown is not simply another seaside resort. While there are no official census figures, a good case could be made that this "first landing place of the Pilgrims" harbors the largest per capita gay population in the world. Of the 4,000 "off-season" residents probably one-third are gay people. And during the all important "season" (Memorial Day to Labor Day), when the number of people living on and visiting the Lower Cape can reach 100,000 on any given weekend, the proportion can double.

In reality, there are two Provincetowns, bearing only a skeletal likeness to each other. The off-season P'town is worlds away from its frantically-fleshed summer identity. Those who have chosen to stay on after their jobs have ended begin to knit together the strands of real community. Jaunts to the Hyannis welfare office or queuing up for unemployment become ritual meeting ground.

For nine months of the year, you can actually walk unmolested, or at least uninjured, the length of Commercial, the town's main street and all that its name implies. Now there is time to get to know that beauty you've seen speeding his tits off waiting table at Ciro's or any of a dozen other over-priced, over-crowded eateries. It's party-time for all the folks who have literally slaved away



their summer to cater to the queens from Philly, the brat-filled families from the South Shore of Boston, and the troupes of brusque, tight-fisted French Canadians. Romances which may have smoldered in summer passion can now have the air they need. The fireplace nook is made ready at the Back Room.

Others of the work force return from whence they came or seek out the warm sun of California or Florida. Summer's savings can be substantial enough to finance a laid-back, low-key existence until the cycle begins all over again.

There is a marvelous magic to spring in Provincetown. W med by the Gulf Stream, the Cape has a much milder climate than "inland" and spring blossoms come weeks earlier than in Boston. With the thaw of April, Provincetown shakes itself out. The rip of power saws and thudding hammers fill the air. Shutters that have protected summer homes come down all over town, and winter residents shed similar cocoons with the help of visiting libidos in search of summer work. Near terminal cases of spring fever erupt as the first

"dunes day" becomes evident in tripped-out, sun-burned faces.

Then, suddenly, it's Memorial Day—something like the first race in the Triple Crown. Shops, restaurants, hot dog vendors, lodging houses and motels all must be ready to test themselves for the Fourth of July and Labor Day yet to come. People are hired and fired; some quit and look for something better only to find that it's all just about the same. As anywhere else, work is work and business is business. The Provincetown variation has to do with the fact that the majority of seasonal businesses are gay-owned and operated. Reverse job discrimination abounds. The obviously straight man hasn't a chance against the equally obvious faggot. In some cases it's simply become the survival of the "flirtiest."

The crowds of July and August bring with them the urban mania from which so many have sought refuge. Times Square has nothing on the Commercial Street of a summer Saturday night. Cars bumper to bumper with bicycles and people. Lines waiting to get

into the choice restaurants and the unbelievable frenzy of hot, steamy, sweating bodies dancing and milling about the Back Room Bar.

The Back Room—the hottest spot in town. There are plenty of other bars, gay, straight and mixed. But with the infamous A-House shuttered and without liquor license, the Crown and Anchor's Back Room and associated watering holes offer the "get down" blend of booze and rhythm that appeals. The disco din makes up in volume what it lacks in variety; thankfully, it's not wired into the pool area where many a joint-inspired *tete-a-tete* leads to a *voulez-vous coucher avec moi?*

This summer there seems to be an interesting alternative to the bar scene in the form of a cabaret and restaurant appropriately dubbed The Alternative. The creation of a gay woman reformed-alcoholic, The Alternative offers good food, entertainment, and no liquor! Their *Second Provincetown Review* (to be followed at some point by the Third, Fourth, etc.) is an amusing mix of mime, song and dance, and whatever else

happens with—a creative bunch playing from an intimate stage. Several nights a week the spotlight is given over to anyone with a song to sing, poem to recite or instrument to play. In a town where the consumption of alcoholic beverage is legend, The Alternative may have rough seas ahead. But for many familiar with the P'town scene, this is one idea whose time has come.

Every gay ghetto has one, but Provincetown's has to be the most outrageous. After the bars shut down, all of Commercial Street becomes a "meat rack." When town-folk say it, as they all do, they mean the line-up of park benches bordering Town Hall. With the late night munchies attended to, nothing to do and nowhere to go, many a gay man has found his heart's desire sitting right there in front of the police station.

And if the meat rack doesn't do the job, there are any number of sleazier scenes happening on the waterfront or in the dunes. No more the free-for-all at the base of the Pilgrim Monument; the town fathers having recently sanctified the world's tallest granite phallus with chain link and megawatts of mercury vapor.

Sexual fervor aside, Provincetown quiets itself for the night. Most visitors and residents alike much prefer to save their waking hours for the sunshine glory of the dunes and beaches surrounding them. Many businesses operate with a "siesta" system designed to maintain sane mind and tan body. The in-town social set scurries off to the poolside bars at the Boat Slip or Back Room to bake away a few hours of "down time."

Out at the end of Route 6 sits Herring Cove, half of whose sands are taken over by gay people, their beach paraphernalia, pot and poses. Occasional nudity and public sex crop up along the further reaches and in the dunescape to the rear.

The situation at the nude beaches remains unclear. Over the past three summers, the popularity of Ballston and Long Nook beaches has caused considerable grief to residents and town officials of neighboring Truro. Nudism initiated by gay men and women turned stretches of once-deserted National Seashore beaches into a lively and loving mix of all sexes, ages and attitudes. Naturally, such a "gathering of the tribes" struck a nerve in the still strong Puritan ethic, but it was primarily the accumulated violation of property rights, inadequate parking, traffic control, lack of sanitation facilities and lifeguards that forced the issue. With the concurrence of the previously benign National Seashore Patrol, Truro town officials have begun to put an end to it. All nudity on the National Seashore is banned and a court fight looms ahead. A group of Truro residents is now taking their government to trial for violation of First, Fifth and Ninth Amendment rights.

If the town's edict is allowed to stand, many residents and vacationers will lose a personal freedom much more tangible than talk of constitutional law. This disrobing—the freeing of self—is a "coming out" not unrelated to the process of sexual self-acceptance. For many, these beaches serve as personal utopias. Once the uniforms of social class and sexual roles are shed, the discovery and joy of a common humanity be-



comes a central fact of life—at the very least, the most fun in the sun anyone will ever have.

The battle of the nude beaches touches on a bit of the Puritanism with which Provincetown has had a unique association. In November of 1620 Provincetown Harbor saw the mooring of the ship *Mayflower*, and Provincetown became the first landing place of the Pilgrims—not Plymouth! The signing of the Mayflower Compact, the first form of self-government devised by immigrants to the New World, took place in the Harbor—an event overly-commemorated by the 252-foot Pilgrim Monument. For five weeks, until moving on to make their famed settlement at Plymouth, these Puritans ranged over the landscape of this sandy spit of land, walking the same beaches prized by today's nudist.

The next group of immigrants, more visible today than that first historic band of misfits, were Portuguese. Some came from mainland Portugal, but the majority were sailors, fishermen and families from the Portuguese Azores. Fleeing the economic misery of their mid-Atlantic outpost in the late 19th century, they settled along the shores of New England to work the successful whaling fleets.

Today the whales are no longer, and the U.S. fishing industry has been out-technologized by the Soviets and Japanese. But the aura of Provincetown's Portuguese fishermen hangs on, fueled by a dwindling fleet of small commercial vessels and sport charters. The lobster buoys and traps, marked by the family colors, still see service and the Wellfleet oyster is prized as highly as ever. But one gets the feeling that it's all just part of the game played to fill the need of the straight tourist trade while maintaining the native family culture. And in the midst of all this picture-perfect poverty settle the "newcomers."

Over the years since the advent of the motor car, thousands of artists, writers, professionals and camp followers have been drawn to the beauty of this small town. Where once Eugene O'Neill, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos and Norman Mailer practiced their craft, a new generation of writer, poet and social critic is at work. The captured visions of Charles W. Hawthorne, Edward Hopper and Robert Motherwell derive from essentially the same spaces experienced by the artists just now uncovering their talents.

Provincetown's acceptance of unconventional lifestyles may have had something to do with the seafarer's more cosmopolitan experience. And the creative mind's humanism has had a part to play in making this haven for the funky and free-spirited.

The essence of Provincetown? It is the spirit of Eugene O'Neill:

*I love life. But I don't love life because it is pretty. Prettiness is only clothes-deep. I am a truer lover than that. I love it naked. There is a beauty to me even in its ugliness. In fact, I deny the ugliness entirely, for its vices are often nobler than its virtues, and nearly always closer to a revelation.*

Analyzed or not, P'town goes along its merry way, season on and off, as the gayest spot on God's green earth. The first landing place. The limit. Come. Enjoy. ●

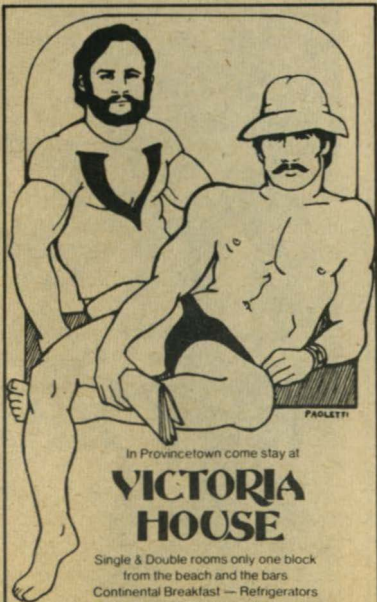


All photos: Rick Quattrucci

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