Island Landmarks

After Sandy, ‘Star of the Sea’ Keeps Shining

By NEAL J. ROBERTS

The Maris Stella Retreat and Conference Center is to Long Beach Island as, say, the Morning Star is to the ocean—quiet, unassuming, beautiful.

The site in Harvey Cedars, owned by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, never fails to catch the eye of this reporter when he drives past. But surprisingly, in a journalism career that has spanned 34 years in Southern Ocean County, I had never inquired about the site until now. This vacation retreat for women of God always seemed to be too lovely, perhaps too sacred, to intrude upon.

That meant nothing, of course, to Superstorm Sandy, which intruded upon everything and everyone. Later, when time had allowed at least some healing and restoration, the time also seemed right to make a first visit during this year’s well-attended “Celebrate Irish Arts” festival, held in the Maris Stella chapel and community hall on March 2. More recently, Sister Pat Dotzauer gave freely of her time to describe Maris Stella, past and present.

First off, there was a new piece of news: The day before an interview with The Beachcomber, the town granted a permit to rebuild the guest house named Seton.

“It’s just one big room, and it’s round. . . . It’s like 15 feet from the bay. The people who use it love it,” Dotzauer said, referring to the sisters who select that small guest house for their visit. “But it was damaged by Sandy.”

Damaged how much was not readily apparent, according to Dotzauer.

On the last weekend in October, the guests at Maris Stella were reluctant to cut their stay short amid news of Sandy’s approach. Most conceded they should leave by Saturday night; the rest, plus the retreat center staff, obeyed the Sunday order to evacuate. Before the Causeway was closed.

“We did everything we could to batch down the hatches,” said Dotzauer, the retreat center assistant administrator. Sister Mary Morley is the chief administrator.

Dotzauer resides in a ground-level apartment on the bay side of the grounds; her office is on the ocean side.

After the storm, the good news was that the entire oceanside of the 10-acre site was unchanged. Not true, though, for the bay side, where the bayfront boardwalk was shattered in pieces and most of the buildings had flood damage.

The building named Holy Family had three feet of water in its basement, ruining all the center’s paper supplies and conference center furniture stored there, as well as the building’s furnace and laundry appliances.

Dotzauer’s apartment had two feet of water, forcing her to relocate until it was gutted and rebuilt.

Seton, the little building that was originally a bathhouse dating to the 1930s, was on pilings. It seemed OK after the storm; the flood had not entered.

Here’s why.

“It lifted it up and put it back down again. We didn’t even know that happened when we went in to check it, just a freak thing!” Dotzauer said.

Inspection by the insurance adjuster later discovered the pilings were compromised, and a lot more work was needed to restore Seton. That work was postponed until June because of higher priorities.

Sandy closed the retreat center but for only two months. In January, it was hosting guests again.

Some History

In 2005, the Sisters of Charity celebrated 50 years in Harvey Cedars. It was 1959 when Mother Elena Marie McCauley came upon a golden opportunity: The Small Estate in Harvey Cedars was on the market.

“She was the brilliant person who purchased this property,” said Dotzauer.

“Maris Stella, a ministry of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth is a center that provides a ministry of hospitality, offering space and nourishment to individuals and groups seeking physical, psychological and spiritual enrichment,” says the website marisstella.org. "Located on the Atlantic Ocean and Barnegat Bay, it is a rich resource for study and reflection on the sacredness of creation."


“If Long Beach Island has been the vacation retreat of some fascinating characters over the years, none is remembered with greater fondness and admiration than Frederick P. Small of Harvey Cedars,” Lloyd wrote. "The sprawling Small Estate, reaching from ocean to bay on both sides of the main highway, ran three full blocks from Seventieth Street to Seventy-third Street. In the decades of the 1930s, '40s and '50s, the incredible profusion and variety of his vast flower beds caught the eye of every passing motorist."

Small was a brilliant, if eccentric, man from Maine who learned shorthand and applied that skill to a post as official stenographer for the Maine House of Representatives, according to Lloyd. From there, he went to business school and then in 1896, at the age of 21, found an entry-level job with the American Express Co. By 1912, he was a vice president of the company. He rose to company president in 1923 and made his fortune guiding American Express through the Roaring '20s, as well as the Great Depression, when American Express was among the few finance houses not beaten down during the nation's long economic nightmare.

It was at this time he developed a then-wild stretch of Harvey Cedars into "Small Point." In addition to his magnificent oceanfront house, there were a large boathouse, a playhouse on the bay side large enough for a bowling alley and dance hall, various utility buildings and long stretches of greenhouses on the bay side, where Small’s avid hobby was raising orchids, some 150 varieties. The flowers were routinely distributed as gifts to his many visitors at Harvey Cedars.

Through the years, the family estate grew as he ordered additional homes built for family members.

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in 1944, yet still commuted to New York City—by public bus—for many years thereafter to attend company board meetings. He died in 1958 at the age of 83, leaving his estate to son Ted, daughter Katherine and property caretaker Bill Lange. Katherine died soon after her father. Ted and Bill were thus the heirs who sold the property in 1959 to the Sisters of Charity, wrote Lloyd.

An Odd Occurrence
Dotzauer relates an interesting twist through time. Notable features of the Small Estate are its stone pillars and stone walls, part of which front the Boulevard. They have endured the test of time and storm, including the hurricanes of 1944, 1954 and the infamous Ash Wednesday Storm of March 1962.

A couple of years ago, a motorist struck part of the wall, scattering a number of stones. Maris Stella needed a stone mason to repair it. R. Lange Masonry was found with an office in Ship Bottom.

Ronald Lange “was so excited,” said Dotzauer, “because his grandfa-
ther was the original caretaker (at the Small estate), and had actually built the wall and all the masonry structures on the property.”

Dotzauer took photographs of Ronald Lange as he lovingly restored his grandfather’s original work.

Those pillars and wall have endured every storm, but the centerpiece of the Small Estate did not. The big oceanfront house was the most hand-


PRESENT DAY: A stone pillar (left) remains from the estate Frederick Small named ‘The Cobblestones.’ Above, modern dune below, ‘Seton,’ which Sandy lifted up and put down.

westward migration of this barrier island. “The beach has cut in so much that the remains of Small’s old bulkhead are now out in the ocean where the waves break. Today, pieces of his pilings can be seen at very low tide,” Lloyd wrote prior to his death in 2003.

A decade later, Dotzauer believes the town’s pursuit of a federal govern-
ment beachfill project saved the site’s ground-level oceanfront structures from Sandy. The Sisters of Charity had readily signed their oceanfront easement that granted permission for the beachfill to include their acreage in 2010. “We were happy to do it because we knew it would protect our property. ... We were very fortunate on the oceanside (on Oct. 29). The dune held on.”

To learn more about the Maris Stella Retreat and Conference Center, visit marisstella.org. A special appeal is issued this season for donations to replace losses due to Superstorm Sandy. Contact Sister Mary Morley to learn how to help.

STONE GARDEN: This scene is on the bay side, former site of orchid greenhouses.

LIKE GRANDFATHER, LIKE SON: Ronald Lange repairs a wall built by Ed Lange.