

## **AWAY FROM THE MADDENING CROWD**

Imagine a summer retreat without the sound of cars, boom boxes, and music emitting from assorted nightlife spots. No beach badge checkers, overly sunburned families, amusements or arcades. Living in an expanded old houseboat on Sedge Island is paradise for Jackie and Tony Raniero who treasure both their privacy and ability to commute with nature.

Shore birds nestle in Bayberry bushes; Rugosa Roses bloom throughout the summer; butterflies light on well-tended gardens. Vegetables, herbs, annuals, perennials and native foliage all seem to flourish under Jackie's ministrations.

Many people would not want to visit Sedge Island with its abundance of biting critters and complete isolation. Nor is it possible to just drop in for a visit. The Great Sedge Islands are owned by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. It is part of a large State Park just off Island Beach State Park located on the peninsula south of Seaside and just north of Barnegat Inlet.

We were lucky enough to be friends of friends ... and, since we have an eye for the environment and a love of history, we acquired an invitation. Before sunrise on an early summer morning we motored our way north along the inside (ICW) of popular Long Beach Island. It was suggested that I would get better pictures an hour or two after sunrise – true, but I was half-asleep. Too early to fix breakfast, we settled on trail mix and orange juice.

Maneuvering around the sometimes confusing buoys at the intersection of islands around High Bar Harbor/Barnegat Light and Barnegat Bay, the Sedge Islands sat to our north. We checked our chart and phone instructions in case we had ventured too far out Barnegat Inlet. What did one ever do before cell phones? Half the time our VHF collects dust.

We anchored just inside the Sedge Island Marine Conservation Zone and waited for Tony to come out in his pontoon boat. Luckily we don't draw too much water. Beside us a few fishermen were anchored and two boats aground, no one paying the least bit of attention to them. Tony told us this was par for the course in the shallow waters, especially at night when the whirrr of motors are heard colliding with sandy bottom. No doubt Boat US and Sea Tow have a field day around here.

One of our reasons to go to Sedge Island was to pick up the old cedar flagpole from the Skinner/Donnelly Houseboat that is now on site at the Tuckerton Seaport. Tony had kindly saved it to display with the historic houseboat. He met us with the flagpole strapped to his pontoon boat. We transferred all thirty-some feet to "Sink'r Swim" (did we ever look tacky) and tied it down.

We jumped aboard Tony's NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife pontoon boat for a tour of the area. Mosquitoes and greenhead flies attacked us as we got near the marshy islands in spite of an over abundance of heavy-duty bug spray. We swatted madly while Tony Raniero seemed almost oblivious to their human-eating habits. No wonder we didn't see anyone else around.

Our first stop was the remains of the Skinner/Donnelly Houseboat – pilings where a dock used to be located, cedar logs, a discarded window, tumbling down shed, and a lot of junk. Soon it will be cleaned up and nothing will be left of the old houseboat on Spizzle Creek where, it could be said, hunting was prolific, partying constant, poker games continual, drinking almost mandatory, and a love of nature shared when anyone was in residence.

We could envision a day when a plethora of freshly killed ducks hung from the dock railing while inside members of the Skinner and Donnelly families stayed warm in their bunks or around a table with a kerosene stove. Water was collected in a cistern on the roof; a later annex was added to accommodate friends and house a makeshift "bathroom".

At the end of Spizzle Creek on the southern end of Island Beach State Park a small dock is located. Nearby were two cars, no doubt owned by employees of the Fish and Wildlife Division or kayakers. Programs are offered to school children and adults on Sedge Island and around the uninhabited islands varying from kayak tours and turtle programs to learning about the native grasses.

“Look at the peregrine falcon tower, we have three chicks,” Tony exclaimed, pointing to one of the islands. “Not to mention lots of ospreys.”

Jackie Raniero greeted us as we tied up at the old 1919 Hensler House next to their home on Sedge Island. Now owned by the State of NJ and managed by the Fish and Wildlife Division, the Hensler House has been preserved almost intact with bunk rooms, kitchen, and a front parlor where walls are adorned with old pictures and information on programs lay on a large table. The building is an environmental and teaching facility in addition to an example of an early 1900 gunning retreat in Barnegat Bay.

Restoration and reconstruction credit goes to Tony whose handiwork is evident everywhere. “I was in the building business in Toms River,” he laughs. “Before that I lived in Seaside, went to Toms River High School, and graduated from Rutgers majoring in Italian.” And sometime between college and years later living on Sedge Island, he married Jackie Treloar of Forked River.

Tony built motels with his father and brother as Ocean County began to grow. Jackie’s father had the old houseboat next to the Hensler House, acting as caretaker and jack of all trades. Built in Forked River, the houseboat was originally used to house salt hay harvesters. Salt hay was used to pack ice in the winter. The houseboat was then towed across Barnegat Bay in the 1040’s and pulled up on shore for living space. Jackie’s parents owned the houseboat for twenty-five years.

After Jackie’s mother died, the Ranieros began to spend more time at the houseboat with their children, then eleven and twelve. (Grandkids now live locally in Manahawkin). Since 1974 Tony has expanded the original houseboat, built docks, worked on the Hensler House, and old outbuildings. In addition he keeps the grass cut and does landscaping.

“I kept the original walls and cupboards (on the houseboat), and added a diningroom, extra bedroom, and deck. Our table came from the old Coast Guard Station in Forked River. It seats twelve,” Tony adds. “I’d like to strip down more of the wood. Paint peels from the moisture out here.” The original ice door stands as does the pump room and bunk beds. Screening has been added everywhere including around part of the porch.

In 1994 the state took ownership buying out six homeowners. Quick to realize the Raniero’s great dedication and talent, they were offered the job as caretakers and security in exchange for living on Sedge Island. Every building, every garden shows the love and care they have given on a voluntary basis. “At my age I do everything at my own pace. But I still like being exposed to the elements,” Tony says.

“We know all the fishermen and are here 99% of the time,” Jackie relates. Occasional marketing and shopping is done in Forked River or Toms River. Tony got an official captain’s license to transport students to the Hensler House and islands. The Ranieros pet project is the turtle project where the animals are labeled with computer chips, then turned loose. “We watch them lay eggs, 80% of the original turtles have returned, about 125 come in every year.”

The Ranieros have the best of both worlds they believe, living on Sedge Island from May to October and in Palm Bay, Florida during the cold months. In the winter their home is shuttered and locked up. “It is peaceful and quiet here, I hate crowds,” Jackie says. “It is like camping with a roof over our heads. The original houseboat is inside our home.”

Civilization has come to Sedge Island for the Ranieros and visitors in the form of cell phones, and three sources of energy for refrigeration stove and lights. A TV is run by a solar system. Even the special outhouse is environmentally friendly.

Water is still collected off the roof and then pumped up from a huge container. Wells would be much too salty and full of iron. Dirt for the gardens has been brought in over the years. Sedums, daisies and poppies appear every year when the Ranieros return from Florida. "I like to come back north to find something growing," Jackie says. Native greenery surrounds the house while phragmites rustles in the breeze.

On our visit spinach, lettuce and peas were ready to be harvested. Cucumbers, eggplant, tomatoes and squash were still small plants for later summer meals. An herb garden contains an assortment of annuals and perennials – cilantro, chocolate mint, oregano, basil, thyme, tarragon and parsley.

Wind-sculptured red cedars dot the landscape. Everywhere colorful pots are filled with geraniums, impatiens, petunias, and begonias. An inviting hammock, table and chairs, and humorous mailbox occupy the deck that Tony repairs almost annually from damaging winter ice flows. Out buildings next to the house like a potting shed and tool house, along with birdhouses, birdbaths and grill attest to the Raniero's love of the outdoors. An American flag flying in the southerly breeze lets would-be trespassers know that someone is in residence.

"We do a little fishing, a little cleaning, and a little bird watching," Jackie and Tony Raniero tell us. Away from the maddening crowd, "there is always a breeze, we have no need for air conditioning".