



HOWARD'S Restaurant

A LOOK BACK AT ISLAND'S 'QUIETER DAYS'

By VICTORIA LASSONDE

They say the more things change, the more they stay the same, but the Long Beach Island of the 1950s sure was a different place from the one we know and love today. For one thing, it was a quieter place, with far fewer homes and faces. That was the Island Jackie and Kingston Sparks knew as kids. It's where they met, got married and raised a family.

The Sparks family has owned Howard's Seafood Restaurant in Beach Haven Terrace for 60 summers. The original owners, Kingston's parents, Howard and Virginia Sparks, bought it from Beri Dennis when it was a luncheonette, with "just a counter and a few tables," Jackie said. They opened the restaurant as Howard's in 1950.

Howard, Ginny and Kingston had relocated to the Island from Camden County about two years earlier, when Kingston was a third-grader. Prior to that, the family had often come to Long Beach Island to vacation and camp at the south end.

Howard, as both a businessman and a builder, was resourceful and driven to succeed. As Kingston recalled, two of his father's greatest loves were fishing and cooking, so opening Howard's Seafood was a logical move.

It also made sense that Howard was a partner in a pound fishery in the early '50s - one of the last pound fishing operations on the East Coast, as a matter of fact, along with Ted Kassner and Tonnes Bohn. Behind what is now the G. Anderson Agency but closer to the beach there were about 10 shacks, occupied by "Norwegian

guys - gigantic gentle Swedes," as Kingston recalled. The boats were pulled out to sea by long cables attached to bulldozers (instead of horses); a crowd would gather at 5:30 a.m. to watch the spectacle, Jackie added.

The earliest signs outside the restaurant proudly advertised Chicken in the Basket, a popular dish in that era. Another one of his specialties was turtle soup, Jackie recalled. Jackie's family, too, settled on LBI, about three years after the Sparkses, when she was in fifth grade.

Kingston and Jackie knew each other as classmates at Long Beach Island Grade School and then at Barnegat High School and, finally, as graduates of Southern Regional, in 1959 and '60, respectively. It was right around 1960 that Jackie began working at Howard's as a waitress. Kingston, meanwhile, was doing a little bit of everything to help his dad, including frying and prepping food and cooking all day.

Thanks to Howard's carpentry skills, he made whatever repairs, renovations and additions were necessary in the 16 years he ran the restaurant. Sadly, Howard died suddenly in 1966, at the age of 48.

One of the last major improvements to the restaurant was sometime in the '80s, Kingston said, with the addition of the second floor. A big collage now hangs in the restaurant, showing the changes that have taken place over time.

During the infamous nor'easter of March 1962, Jackie was working in Linwood. She had made it in to work on the day the storm hit, but she couldn't get back home. She got as far as a friend's house in Parkertown and stayed there until it was possible to get back onto the Island.

To maintain some semblance of order and control, people were issued passes to get on and off the Island, she said. They had to

show proof that they lived or owned a home on the Island in order to cross the bridge.

"It was eerie, in a way," she said. "You just didn't even want to look at the destruction. You sort of hated to look at it." The cleanup process took a very long time.

Jackie also remembers being a bystander at the Lucy Evelyn fire in 1972, which she described as "the most solemn thing ever."

"We were all just standing there, and everyone was in shock."

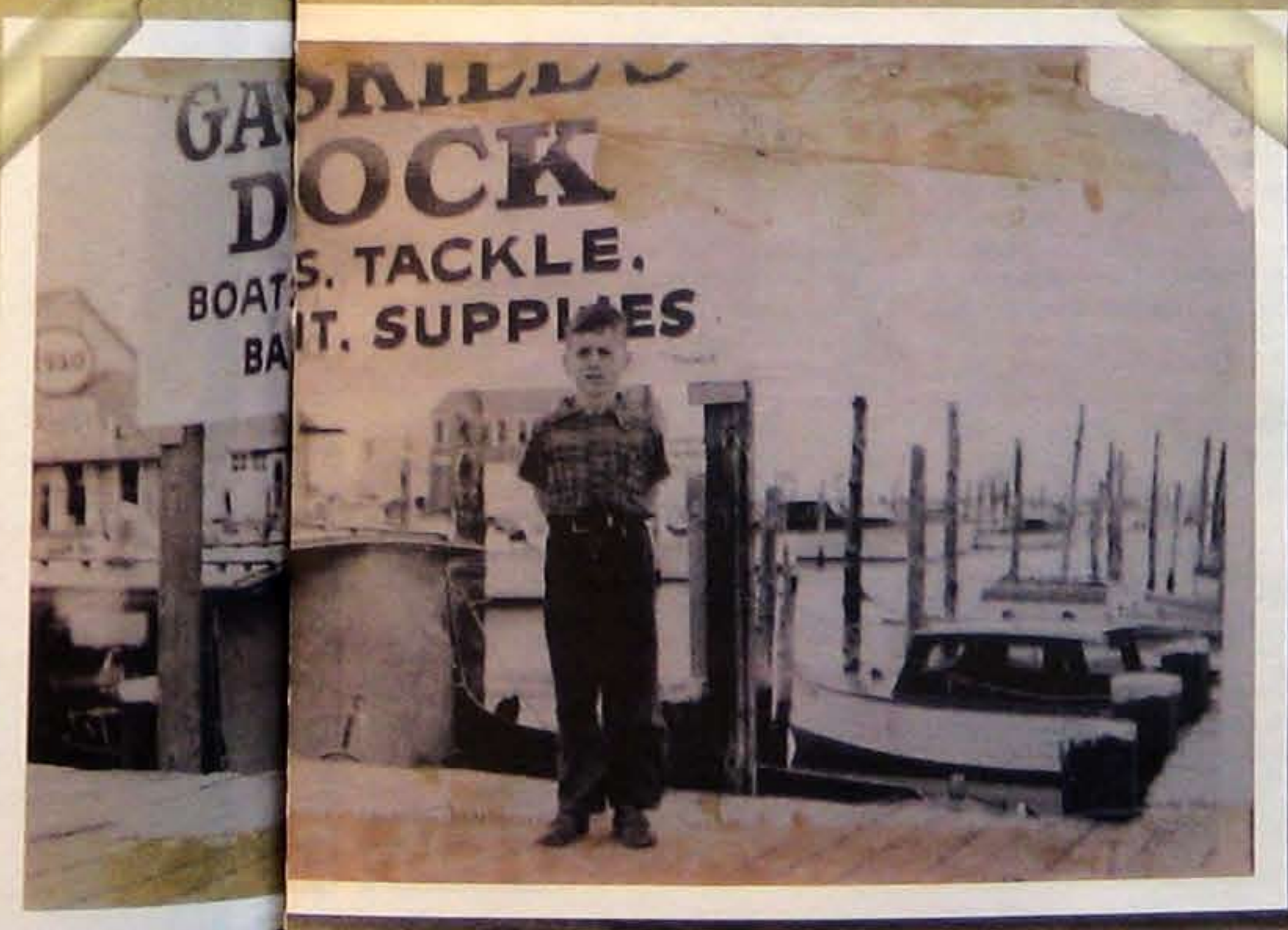
Though sad memories always seem to stand out in memory, for every tragedy there were countless happy memories.

One of the most popular places for the local kids to hang out was Stewart's A&W Root Beer drive-in, where Ott's Family Restaurant now stands, Kingston said. Stewart's offered car hop service Jackie would often go to the Colony movie theater in Beach Haven, now the site of Tuckerton Lumber Co. at 100 North Bay Ave. She recalled seeing a Bill Haley and His Comets picture there in 1956 with some of her friends. "We were singing and



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SANDS OF TIME: With passions for fishing, cooking and carpentry, Howard Sparks (far left) was seemingly destined to operate a seafood restaurant. Kingston Sparks (below) grew up in his family's restaurant business and took over for his dad when he passed away in 1966. Having stood the test of 60 years, Howard's remains a popular summertime eatery.



we almost got kicked out," she said.

Then there was the bowling alley at the site of the present-day Dave's TV and Appliance Center. And the roller skating rink that used to be where the Manahawkin Flea Market is now. The annual Lifeguard Balls - formal events for the beach patrols - were always fun, memorable affairs for the Island's young people.

After so many years in the restaurant serving the tourists, the Sparkses have observed firsthand the familiar, repetitive cycle that seems to follow the same kind of arc each year, ushering in "a whole different crowd" with each summer month, Jackie said. In the springtime, it's just the locals coming in for laidback meals and friendly conversation. The traffic volume builds from Memorial Day to the Fourth of July, followed by a rather noisy month, full of college kids, weekenders and party people. In August, by comparison, the vibe on the Island begins to calm and mellow. By September, when the weather is the most temperate and the ocean has warmed up, the population wanes, settling back down mostly to older folks and young families asking for high chairs.

Because preserving history has always been important to the Sparks family, at some point in the '70s when they started

thinking about redecorating the walls of the restaurant, they decided to have some of their large collection of old photographs enlarged, with help from Carl Van Thulin of Lynn Photo. They had so many old pictures, they would lend some to the Long Beach Island Historical Society, Jackie said.

Looking back, the Island's streets were dotted with "humble little cottages," she remarked. All those years ago, there was a public bus service but no home mail delivery; she would walk the 18 blocks from Peahala Park to the post office in Beach Haven Crest to pick up the mail. But the milkman and the bread man made regular rounds.

If any one thing in particular stands out as the most drastic difference between the Long Beach Island of the 1950s and '60s and today, Jackie suggested it might be the freedom they enjoyed as kids, as compared to the number of rules and restrictions that are now imposed. Fifty years ago, "you were allowed to gather at the end of the street," she said.

"You could congregate" and not get in trouble for it, she said. Kids built bonfires and threw parties on the beach.

The couple looked back fondly even on some of the mishaps at the restaurant during the years, now funny in retrospect. The sign outside, for example, has been replaced numerous times. At one point "we went to neon, and it caught fire," Jackie said with a laugh. They replaced that one with a new neon sign, and that one burned up, too.

Of their three grown children, their son Kevin is the one who has decided to pursue the restaurant business, which frees them up to spend more time doing what they enjoy; Kingston works on the restaurant, Jackie is an active volunteer at her church, and they both love to travel and go away often. "now that we can do it," Kingston said.