

The Look Box

By Gail Maran Brockett

Cobwebs and spiders were there in the dimly lighted cellar on that windy, clear, March day on the eastern tip of Long Island. I had come to resettle 65 years of accumulated treasures and trash in our unoccupied family home. My first sense was the musty air. Breathing was difficult as I reached up to open the tiny three-paned window allowing in air and sunlight that was unclouded by mud and mold. Better, I thought, when I stepped back noticing it. There on the asbestos-covered pipes next to my Red Rider sled was 'The Look Box,' an overused, hand constructed, porch gray box with a glass bottom. Lifting it down, first by the sides and then by the tattered tug rope, I recalled the magic of its' use, something known only to those who scalloped the bays when the season opened in mid September. Looking into it, as if on a dusty mirror, my own present face was imaged, but then the sunlight made rainbow rays across the surface and it was as though I saw through the reflection into a long ago time. My jaw was not tight, but by head felt numb, as if I were bending down for a cold drink of water from a fountain.

This precious box was used for the scallop harvest. How Dad loved the water! There was a secret spot in Three Mile Harbor where he would escape. He would lay the glass surface on the water to reveal a whole world of underwater life. Green seaweed swayed in the current where bay scallops attached themselves while gently opening and closing to allow the fresh sweet saltwater to cleanse them. Horseshoe crabs shared the environment, and blowfish and minnows but this time for him was about the water, the experience and the harvest. Ceremoniously he would gather, and open and present the tiny treasures to Mom for a fresh deep-friend feast. We would gather at sunset to taste again how delectable there were. Our family was small. Mom, Dad, Maureen and I were fortunate in that there was plenty for all.

This was the mirror that revealed my youth, a time I have come to know as living in the present. Innocent, carefree, days filled with activities, so many, there was little time to get lost in the past or the future. Summer meant clamming. Apart from this box, Dad's other greatest treasures were the clam rakes. Shinnecock was the special spot for this harvest. Afternoons were spent in the ocean. I had learned to ride the waves, dive the breakers, respect the pull of the undertow and mind the lifeguard, Hank Zebrowski, when he called me out because my fingers were webbed from too many hours of swimming. It was time to rest in the sunlight.

Crabbing, too, with a chicken leg and a string, two or three lines at a time. I reminisced thinking of the days when multiple cousins would gather overlooking Gardiner's Bay at Tom Gilmartin's cabin. We convened in August to harvest the treasures from the sea with Long Island potato salad, sweet corn and tomatoes. I would give anything for one of those evenings when we would build a fire, play the guitar, listen to Tom sing opera and conclude with every verse of Roll 'Um Down McClusky. "Sing it again." Tom pleaded to Dad as he handed him another glass of gin and oranges and Tom Collins mix.

