

S. O. S. in Retrospect *A Brief History*

By Phil Sawyer

"S. O. S." "The Raven is rolling and rocking off the coast. Get in touch with Capt. Earl Bostic aboard the Flamingo and ask him to meet us at Oak Tree in Sept. (Signed) Captain Wynonne Harris . . . June 14, 1896."

The antique bottle was authentic. The message neatly printed on what appeared to be very old parchment was legible. The bottle was found and reported to several museums. The curators believed it and announced the find and the story soon made the national wire services. S. O. S. was hot national copy after a D. J. solved the riddle.

Thus, with a hoax and a hope, Gene Laughter, a former life guard and beach bum on Ocean Drive in the early fifties launched the first S. O. S. in the spring of 1980. September 1980, the magic week-end finally arrived. The migration began and never stopped. They came by the hundreds. Billy Smith's Beach Party, Fat Jack's, The Afterdeck were packed. The Oak Tree Inn sold out early. Gene expected two to three hundred former life-guards, stranders, and beach bums but about 5,000 showed up. Ocean Drive Beach hasn't been the same since; neither has anyone who was at that first, never to be duplicated, experience.

S. O. S. continued but it's future in the early days was by no means certain. The format evolved. At first there were contests and bands. Many of the clubs had a cover charge. Clubs opened and closed. They changed hands from one season to the next. What was, suddenly wasn't. The city fathers didn't quite know what to make of or what to do with it. Encourage or prevent . . . support or squash. No one quite knew what to make of it.

Gene Laughter knew. He, more than any other one person knew the people, the music, the beach, and the potential of the brand new product he had suddenly become the guardian of. But the unbridled joy of everyone who attended told him one simple thing. This is too good to be true . . . keep it going and even expand.

Thus, in September of 1981, S. O. S. II, and September 1982, S. O. S. III followed. Things were now well organized. There was a data base of members, regular publications, and organized and structured events. Membership cards replaced cover charges and entrance to the clubs. The early Boogie Boat proved unworkable. Contest and bands were eliminated. The D. J.s took over. S. O. S. began to look like what we know it is today.

Throughout the mid to late 80s, S. O. S. grew in strength and character. Shaggers and stranders came back to Ocean Drive in the Spring and Fall by the tens of thousands for what everyone who ever had one grain of sand in his shoes agreed the S. O. S. was great for the Grand Strand, and to miss one was unthinkable. Fat Harold's, Duck's, Crazy Zack's, Harold's Across the Street, and the Gallion became shrines to which devout

stranders made pilgrimages many times each year.

Everything was good until 1988 and 1989 when the business interest at the beach became divided. Further, the originator for personal and business reasons could not continue to run S. O. S. The dancing space became smaller as the crowds grew larger and larger. The competition became fierce, and the one thing that had kept it all going was uncertain.

In February 1989, the Association received an offer from Gene Laughter for the sale of S. O. S. The Board of Advisors discussed this offer at length at the Winter Workshop in Moresville, NC and without a dissenting vote approved the purchase of S. O. S. The discussion centered around the desire of the Association to bring unity to all elements involved and to assure that the kind of S. O. S. that we all loved so well would continue for many years to come.

Since there were scarcely six weeks until the Spring Safari, the interim board plunged into the planning and organizing for that event. The Association ran our first S. O. S. with Headquarters at Crazy Zack's. As in any first effort there were mistakes, but we learned a lot. The bottom line is we brought it off, paid the bills, and made a little money. A lot of people worked long and hard and managed to have a good time doing it.

The interim board, with minor modifications became the Board of Directors of S. O. S. and Larry Taylor of Columbia was elected Chairman. The Board then elected officers of the corporation with Phil Sawyer, President.

The new board and officers discussed the goals of S. O. S. at length, and little has changed. Unity, crowd control, high class parties, responsible use of funds, permanence, and outstanding relationships with the North Myrtle Beach municipal officials and residents were then and are still the goals. We are proud to report that we have achieved all of these objectives.

S. O. S. continues unprecedented growth. Many exciting features have been added. The uniformed security at all participating club doors, the Trams, food, and expanded Carefree Times are Association initiatives. Funds from S. O. S. support local club activities, The Association budget, the Mid Winter Beach Classic, and charities. We are committed to a contribution of \$100,000 over time to a foundation to support the national Hospice effort.

S. O. S. is now in its twelfth year. It will soon be a teen-ager. Most of us were teen-agers when we got on this train; many of us have teen-agers of our own now who we have brought through these troubled waters. We know that they can be difficult years. However, with our attention firmly focused on our established objectives and a deep commitment to "do what's right", S. O. S. will grow to a rich and rewarding old age.

The S. O. S. Board of Directors: Larry Taylor, Chairman, Phil Sawyer, Bob Wood, Joe McGhee, Shirley Gough, Sandy Braddock, Ken Hudspeth, Donny Way, Hector Pheifer and Speedy Lewis.

The S. O. S. Officers: Phil Sawyer, President, Speedy Lewis, Vice President, Ken Hudspeth, Secretary, Pat Smith, Recorder, Foster McKinney, Treasurer, and King Holmes, Council.

A SWINGING PAST AND A SHAGGING FUTURE

By Phil Sawyer

The ASSOCIATION OF CAROLINA SHAG CLUBS was founded in 1984. Ken Hudspeth, then President of the Rock Hill Shag Club, gathered the Presidents of the Clubs attending the 2nd Annual Columbia Invitational in October, 1983, at Pine Island on Lake Murray and suggested a low key organization of Clubs in South Carolina and the one in Atlanta to share ideas, exchange information and to sponsor a party for the Clubs at the beach in January. Harold Bessent (Fat Harold) also met with us and endorsed the idea.

Ken and the Rock Hill Shag Club arranged for the first of what was to become the MID-WINTER BEACH CLASSIC in January of 1984. Participating Clubs were Columbia, Charleston, Greenville, Shag Steps, Rock Hill and Winnsboro. The Presidents of local Clubs continued their efforts to form an organization. Earlier, Ken Hudspeth and Phil Sawyer, then President of the Columbia Shag Club, had met several times to formulate the concept and to develop a Charter. The representatives of these Clubs met again in February 1984, in Columbia, to formally establish the Organization.

The Presidents agreed that the Organization would be named THE ASSOCIATION OF CAROLINA SHAG CLUBS. Since Atlanta was a Charter Member, it is immediately obvious that there was no intention on the part of the Founders to limit membership to the Carolinas. Carolina in the name of the Association refers to the dance and not to the geography. The original Charter provided for the Association to be governed by a Board of Advisors to be presided over by a Chairman. Ron Whisenant was elected Chairman, the first, and served for two years.

The local Clubs continued to sponsor statewide parties, always with Atlanta included, and soon Columbia, Charleston, Atlanta, Greenville, Rock Hill, and Winnsboro were having regular weeklong events to which all other Clubs were invited.

The first major effort by the fledgling Association, still less than one year old, was a cruise. Over 150 Shaggers boarded the S.S. Galileo (now the Meridian) on March 3, 1984, for a five-day Caribbean Holiday. This was the first of what was to be many cruises to South America and the Grand Caymans, the Virgin Islands, Mexico, the California Coast, and the never-to-be-forgotten weeklong fantasy on Waikiki Beach in Honolulu. Trips became the forte of the Association.

Always exciting, affordable, and filled with Beach Music and Shagging, the travels are the highlight of many a Shagger's life.

News of the success of this little Association soon spread. Ken Hudspeth followed Ron as Chairman, and the Metrolina became the first North Carolina Club to become a member.

All the while, S.O.S., contests, invitational weekends, and other events at the beach began to flourish. The second Mid-Winter Shag Meet (still not named) was in January 1985, at where else, Fat Harold's. The late and very much loved Richard Nixon was the D.J.

The Clubs and statewide parties continued to grow and prosper. There was another cruise, and S.O.S. was becoming a bigger and bigger event. No Shagger worthy of the name of the dance would have missed it for anything. Cities all over both North and South. Carolina, Florida, Georgia, and Virginia were forming Clubs, and their first order of business was to become a member of the Association. The Association was inducted into the BEACH SHAGGER'S HALL OF FAME in 1986. This little known honor is one of our most distinctive. The flag was passed from Ken Hudspeth to Phil Sawyer, 3rd Chairman, an office he would hold for three years. Phil designated themes for each of his years as Chairman: The "Year of the Club" 1987; the "Year of the Trip" 1988; and the "Year of the Bold Leap Forward" 1989. In the "Year of the Club," order and structure were stressed and the Winter and Summer Workshops were begun.. In the "Year of the Trip," Hawaii became the all-time favorite shag vacation of over 200 Shaggers, and the "Year of the Bold Leap Forward" saw the Association acquire S.O.S. This might be equated to jumping off Grandfather Mountain on a hang glider. During these years Member Clubs increased from 18 to 45.

Bob Wood, then President of the Atlanta Shag Club, immediately became involved with Phil, Larry Taylor, and others in the S.O.S. There was much to do in order to organize and develop a plan for restoring S.O.S. to the place it once occupied. The potential of this fortunate union was too great to allow it to fail, and Bob Wood was one of the first to see this.

Thus, Bob was elected Chairman in 1990 and continued to lead the Association, having been re-elected in 1991 and 1992, until 1993. Under Bob's leadership, the Association grew to unprecedented levels. Workshops, which once attracted forty to fifty participants, now regularly attract well over 200. Serious business related to Association expansion, development, and benevolence, can occupy the most committed people in the Shag World for hours: All the while, serious parties are underway, often just next door.