

Blast from the Past

Native Islander to preserve family history in Gullah Museum

Growing up Gullah on Hilton Head Island in the 1950s, Louise Miller Cohen reveled in the simple lifestyle of her native islander heritage.

She picked tomatoes from the family farm in the summer and harvested oysters from the marsh in the fall. Getting to the neighborhood two-room school house was just a short skip through the woods from her mama's house on Gumtree Road. And like all Gullah-Geechie descendants, Cohen spoke the English-based Creole language developed by West African slaves isolated on the sea islands of South Carolina 200 years ago.

That was BB – before the bridge.

“After they opened the bridge to the island, everything changed,” Cohen recalled. “All of a sudden, Geechie was something to be ashamed of. People said we spoke broken English. They said Gullah was backward talking. They made fun of our (dread) locks.”

To fit in, the young teen straightened the kinks out of her hair and stopped speaking in Gullah.

“I had to speak very slowly and distinctly so I would

say the right words,” said Cohen, a fifth-generation native islander. “But I couldn't get rid of the accent. They thought I was from Jamaica.”

It wasn't until the late '90s that Cohen would embrace her Gullah heritage once again. She began volunteering with the Gullah Celebration, a monthlong

festival started on Hilton Head Island in 1996 to showcase the music, food, history, art and crafts of the Gullah people. The turning point came when she heard Gullah activist Marquetta Goodwine speak the native language.

“It awoke something in me,” Cohen said. “I started remembering the songs and stories I had learned as a child. It took me three years, but I finally got over being ashamed.”

Today, the mother of four is spearheading a campaign to preserve what is left of the old Gullah lifestyle. Her plans include restoring several buildings dating back to the early 1930s and furnishing them with the personal artifacts such as beds, tables, pots, water buckets and kerosene lamps that once were used in the homes.

The Gullah Museum of Hilton Head Island will be located on a 15-acre parcel on Gumtree Road purchased after the Civil War by Cohen's great grandfather, former slave William Simmons. Among the buildings to be refurbished are the homes of her mother and uncle, Bubba Dewey, and two structures that



Bubba Dewey's tin-roofed house
Photo by John Brackett



Louise Miller Cohen
Photo by John Brackett

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housed migrants who would come to the island in the summers to harvest crops.

Bubba Dewey's tin-roofed house will be the first to be restored. Approximately \$35,000 is needed to repair the structure, which includes a small kitchen, bedroom and living room. To help raise the funding for the project, Cohen will share stories on her Gullah history at 7 p.m. May 11 at the Arts Center. Benefit tickets are \$10.

Kathleen Bateson, Arts Center president and CEO, and avid Gullah preservationist, suggested the symposium for *BRAVO!* – the annual monthlong celebration of the arts – since there was no Gullah representation.

“If we let these houses go, we will be losing the history of life as it was on Hilton Head before the bridge,” Cohen said. “People need to see how we lived to understand the Gullah culture.”