



30A A LOVE STORY

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My mother was born in the heart of the American Mid West, oldest child of a teacher and a mail carrier, about as distant from the sea as one could possibly be. Surrounded by waves of golden grain as far as the eye could see, she dreamed of the ocean, endless ripples of blue fringed with white. When she finally made it to the seashore at age 22, it was in reality a homecoming; “I knew when I saw it that that’s where I came from,” she says. “I just cried, it was so beautiful.” To this day she feels more connected to the universe at water’s edge than anywhere else on earth.

For her generation and during my childhood, being at the beach was elemental: sky, surf, sun, sand. Ashley Bates remembers when she was a child, they could walk for miles and not see another person. As Amy Toothaker was growing up, she had two aunts with beachfront property: one had a little cinderblock cabin on 30A in Santa Rosa Beach and the other had a cabin in Seagrove.

“There was absolutely nothing but sand dunes,” she recalls. “30A was this tiny road with a couple of beach cabins.” She spent countless hours in and around the shore. “There were lots and lots of cousins, and we ran back and forth, from the beach to the cabin, and stayed outside almost the entire day.” She laughs at the memory. “I don’t know why we’re not all burnt to a crisp from all the sun. We made our own fun.

“In Seagrove there was a little restaurant, I think it was called the Wheelhouse. We’d run in during the day, barefoot, sandy and wet to get burgers and fries. They must have run a tab for families; I don’t ever remember paying for anything there.”

The cabins were very simple, even rustic. Linoleum floors were easily swept and cinderblock walls were sturdy and cheap. Toothaker remembers they brought a TV set down to the cabin until the 80s, although it was rarely used. “At night, the grownups would sit around and talk, while all the kids were playing games. It was just a lot of fun.” Shopping was at least a half-day expedition into Destin. “When we got a Tom Thumb store in the early 80s, we were so excited. We thought we were moving on up!”

The earliest families on 30A were veterans and government employees. Tyler Limbaugh’s grandfather served in WWII and received a plot of beachfront property at Inlet Beach, near Rosemary Beach. The land was his, as long as they put up some kind of living

structure. For many years, the Limbaugh kids, cousins and friends enjoyed the simple pleasures of an undeveloped coastal paradise.

Ashley Bates’ grandfather bought twelve lots on 30A, sight unseen, from a lottery for government employees. “He purchased it all for roughly \$500 total,” Bates says. “They always laughed because if it had cost \$800, he wouldn’t have bought them.”

Most of the houses were just cabins until 1975 when Hurricane Louise swept away many of the earliest structures. “My aunt built four houses on her land then,” Toothaker says. “Two were beachfront. In 1978, my mother built a house with the intention of moving there permanently. It was one of the first houses on 30A that wasn’t just a little cabin.” Beachfront, with three bedrooms and two baths, it’s now a prime rental property 10 months out of the year.

Then as now, the sea yielded up occasional treasures. “When I was sixteen or seventeen, there was a huge influx of sand dollars,” Toothaker continues. “You couldn’t move without stepping on them. We collected, it must have been a thousand, laying them out in the sun to bleach.” Every kid who’s ever been to 30A remembers the ritual after sunset. After dark, squads of children descend on the beach with buckets, flashlights and nets to catch crabs, squealing and jumping either to avoid the scurrying creatures or catch them, depending on their tolerance for the wildlife.

When Highway 98 came through the area, the authorities needed a corner of the Limbaughs’ land. With the proceeds, Limbaugh father and son built what is now a beautiful beach house with their own hands, replacing the original tiny structure.

It was 1979 before Florida Scenic Highway 30A encountered its destiny. A sunbaked slab of nineteen miles between Destin and Panama City, it was home to a string of small sleepy beach towns. Robert Davis inherited 80 acres of white-sand beachfront and converted the scrub into a livable, sustainable coastal oasis. In the style of the architectural movement called New Urbanism, the town of Seaside grew up. Charming, pastel-colored homes of mixed sizes are linked by sidewalks and bike paths, delineated by old-fashioned picket fences, each one a different pattern.

Seaside inspired the other small towns on 30A to strive for something different. On the shady boardwalks of Rosemary Beach, within the bright white enclave of Alys Beach, strolling down the

streets of Watercolor, each distinctive patch has appealing architecture to make you yearn to call it home, to plop down your bags and pretend you’ve always been here. With the sun glinting silver on the deep emerald water, it’s a million-dollar view.

Now the houses that were once lonely outposts on a nearly forgotten road are cheek-by-jowl with cafes, shops, condos and gas stations. Amy Toothaker’s mother, Anne Norman, is 81 now. “Right before Katrina, Hurricane Dennis did major damage around 30A,” Toothaker says. “It took the foundation out from underneath the house and we had to make some hard decisions. Mom was tired of worrying about the beach house and said she was going to sell it. Well, my sister and I had a come-apart. So now we pay the taxes and insurance and worry about hurricanes so Mom doesn’t have to.”

The sand and surf and sun have always been there; now there are many more distractions to amuse the restless vacationer. Rent a bike and visit the artists at Gulf Place Artist Cooperative, or head over to the historic Red Bar, Grayton Beach’s general store from the turn of the last century. Rent a stand-up paddleboard at Watercolors Marina, or hike around a rare coastal dune lake at Grayton Beach State Park. Concerts, farmer’s markets, bonfires, beach worship services, wine festivals, children’s theatre presentations, a songwriters’ festival and many more events fill up the hours practically around the clock if that’s what you want to do.

But the folks who’ve been here the longest? You’ll usually find them sticking close to home. “We like to get a pound of shrimp, take it on the porch and watch the sunset with a bottle of wine,” drawls one woman, who grew up vacationing on 30A, raised her children on coastal summers, and is now watching her grandchildren grow up here. “We’re not big on all these activities. I like to see the pelicans and enjoy the beauty that’s been here forever.”

My mother returns to Stillwater, Oklahoma for high school reunions now and then. Once, she encountered a young woman cleaning the rooms. “Oh, you live in Alabama?” she asked, pausing in her work. “Have you ever seen the ocean?”



