



# Well-Schooled

Fifty years after classes ended, the Corolla Schoolhouse caught the attention of local preservationists Doug and Sharon Twiddy, who restored the edifice of edification.

*By Molly Harrison*



Thanks to the renovation efforts of contractor Jim Andrews (above), the former Corolla schoolhouse (opposite) now serves as a museum dedicated to the area's wild horses.

PHOTOGRAPHY (THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE) BY ALAN NACHMAN



**T**he spirit of an old schoolhouse never dies. No matter how long it's been since the students and teachers moved on, the building always remains imbued with the energy and enthusiasm of its school days, ever ready to serve again as a place of community gathering, inspiration, and enlightenment.

Most of the old one-room schoolhouses that once dotted the Outer Banks are long gone or have been converted to serve other purposes, but the tiny schoolhouse building of Corolla, 50 years after it closed as a school, is back on duty in its intended capacity as an edifice of edification. Following a meticulous restoration in 1999, the building has been revived as the Corolla Wild Horse Museum and the home base for the Corolla Wild Horse Fund, the nonprofit group that manages the herd.

The cheerful Corolla Schoolhouse sits in the heart of historic Corolla Village, a small pocket of the Outer Banks that, miraculously, has retained

the character of its distant past — unpaved roads, historic clapboard buildings, and all. To the modern vacationer, Corolla encompasses the great strand of vacation-oriented development and beaches along the Currituck Outer Banks. But Corolla proper, in days gone by, was just a tiny settlement immediately north of the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. This settlement, one of many isolated villages just like it along the Outer Banks, contained a few-dozen homes situated on the sound side of the island. A general store, a church, and a one-room schoolhouse rounded out the village.

Village residents built the Corolla Schoolhouse around the turn of the 20th century, partly with materials that were salvaged from the beach — during the restoration, huge ship's timbers were discovered in the foundation. The simple, front-gable, frame schoolhouse had a louvered belfry, a chimney, two privies, and a water pump out back.

In the early years, the village parents funded the school, but in

1905, Currituck County took the Corolla Schoolhouse into its unified school system and provided money for the teacher and schoolbooks. In later years, children from the nearby villages of Wash Woods and Penny's Hill were bused down the sandy beach to the Corolla Schoolhouse. As the number of students at the school grew, a board-and-batten extension was added to the south end of the school building.

After World War II and into the 1950s, the population of Corolla dwindled rapidly. In 1958, the Currituck County Board of Education minutes noted: "The State Board of Education did not allot a teacher for Corolla. The board stated that the parents of the two children in attendance be informed of this." Before those last students scurried out its doors, the schoolhouse had been the center of Corolla's education and community life for more than 50 years.

All was not immediately lost for the schoolhouse building. Boys from Corolla Academy, a summer school held at The Whalehead Club from

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALAN NACHMAN



Displays about the wild horses fill the restored schoolhouse, even hanging from the classroom's old blackboard.



Today, the Corolla wild horses live north of the village on 12,000 acres of land.

1959 to 1961, used the Corolla Schoolhouse as a recreation hall, with a pool table set up in the main room. But after the summer school closed, the Corolla Schoolhouse sat empty for many years. In the 1970s, it served as a private summer residence.

### Back in session

In 1999, local preservationists Doug and Sharon Twiddy began the restoration of the Corolla Schoolhouse that brought it full circle.

Doug Twiddy, owner of a northern Outer Banks real estate company, has a passion for historic preservation. His first restoration project was the Kill Devil Hills Lifesaving Station, which he bought, moved 30 miles to historic Corolla Village, and restored.

In the late 1990s, inspired to preserve the untainted charm of Corolla Village, the Twiddys began restoring some of its historic buildings

— the Lewark-Gray House (circa 1895), the Parker House (circa 1930), and an outbuilding to the Lewark-Gray House. They also constructed a historic-reproduction building on the same footprint as the village's former general store. These buildings remain true to the character of historic Corolla Village, but they serve in modern purposes as individually owned retail shops. The Twiddys renovated the Corolla Schoolhouse in 1999 with a different intention.

"When we did the restoration of the schoolhouse, it was very much in our minds that we wanted to use the building to continue to teach," says Sharon. "We knew we'd do something of an educational nature there."

The schoolhouse required a great deal of renovation. The previous owners had painted the clapboard exterior red and covered the cedar shingles with asphalt. Sheetrock,

wallpaper, and other modern materials covered the pine floors and bead-board walls. The school bell had rusted in the salt air. Most of the foundation was rotten. The Twiddys are careful restorers, using as many original materials as possible and going to great lengths to get similar materials if the old ones must be replaced.

"It would have been easier to tear the schoolhouse down and start over," says contractor Jim Andrews. "But that's not the way the Twiddys do things."

The Twiddys used old photos and residents' memories to aid them in renovating the schoolhouse. The school is again wearing white paint and a cedar roof, and there is a new bell very similar to the original in the belfry. The old chalkboard was preserved, as were the windows, the cupboards, and the original pine floors.

At first the Twiddys used the building as a little museum featuring an exhibit on the Corolla Schoolhouse, and a volunteer was on hand to talk about the old village days. Then the Twiddys' real estate company used the schoolhouse as offices for a while. But as soon as the office workers moved out, the Twiddys were ready to go back to using the schoolhouse for educational purposes.

"We had this space, and we wanted to use it to teach, but we didn't know what to teach," says Twiddy. "Then it occurred to me that one of the most-asked questions in Corolla is about the wild horses, and that was our answer. We decided to use the schoolhouse as a wild-horse museum."

### The mane attraction

While the Corolla wild horses once wandered freely through the area, today they live north of Corolla on a stretch of the island known as the four-wheel-drive area. The horses roam 12,000 acres of federal, state, and private land and are fenced in on the north and south to prevent them from straying back into Corolla or over the state line into Virginia.

The Twiddys hired exhibit designer Renee Landry and photographer Mary Basnight, and Sharon worked with



Karen McCalpin, executive director of the Corolla Wild Horse Fund, sees the museum as a great education tool.

them to create exhibits about the wild horses. The team focused on keeping the historic integrity of the schoolhouse intact and bringing in the fresh perspective of the horses. The resulting museum is both a fun educational experience about the wild and free horses and an eye-opener into the days of the one-room schoolhouse.

Upon stepping in the schoolhouse door, the small room with its worn pine floors takes you back to a simpler time, but the giant photographic images of horses grab your attention first. Basnight captured the horses' full range of expressiveness, and the size of the photos makes a dramatic impact.

As you walk around the museum, your attention is divided between schoolhouse memorabilia and wild-horse exhibits. An old ship's timber from the foundation was used to mount video monitors that continuously scroll horse images. Initialed tin cups and other items from the schoolhouse days are displayed in the original cupboards with wild-horse merchandise. Report cards hang in the restroom, and little informative tidbits about the schoolhouse are placed here and there.

But it's the horses that take center stage. A video about the Corolla wild horses, featuring the familiar narration of Charles Kuralt, runs continuously. One exhibit has a button to push to hear the horses whinny, nicker, neigh,

snort, and squeal. Another exhibit teaches about the colors of the wild horses — bay, chestnut, paint, black, and flaxen mane and tail. There's a horse's leg bone to study, text to read, and pictures to ponder. The back wall features an enlarged aerial photo that shows the horses' current habitat. A volunteer is always available to answer questions.

"It's a very effective exhibit," says Sharon. "It's in keeping with the vision we had for the schoolhouse."

### Helping the herd

The Twiddys ran the horse museum privately for two years but struggled to make it work financially. In 2006, Sharon approached the Corolla Wild Horse Fund (CWHF) to see if they had a need for the horse exhibits. At that time, the Horse Fund happened to be looking for new office space. Former CWHF Chair Edna Baden helped work it out so that Currituck County is now leasing the Corolla Schoolhouse for the Horse Fund (they use the back extension as an office),

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALAN NACHMAN

and, in turn, the Horse Fund is operating the Corolla Wild Horse Museum in the front room.

It's a partnership that has kept the museum open to the public and, even more importantly, brought much-needed public awareness to the efforts of the Corolla Wild Horse Fund. The new Horse Fund home is in the public eye, and it's made an enormous difference for the organization in terms of raising money through

donations, selling merchandise, and educating the public.

"The museum is ... a great opportunity for us to talk about the history of the horses and to educate the public about the horses," says Karen McCalpin, executive director of the Corolla Wild Horse Fund.

McCalpin and Herd Manager Steve Rogers, the Horse Fund's first-ever full-time staff members, started their jobs in September 2006 and have

been making great strides with the herd. One of their most exciting recent developments was confirmation by the Horse of the Americas Registry that the horses are definite descendants of Spanish mustangs. The registry was so sure of the horses' origins that they blanket-registered the entire herd.

"One of my missions has been to disprove the rumors that the horses are just feral domestic animals," says McCalpin.

The Corolla Wild Horse Museum is small, but it's a big draw on the northern Outer Banks. Based on past visitation, the Corolla Wild Horse Fund expects 35,000 visitors in the summer of 2007. The Corolla Schoolhouse is once again serving the community well. 

*Molly Harrison writes from her home in Nags Head.*

## if you're going

Corolla Wild Horse Museum/  
Corolla Schoolhouse  
1126 Schoolhouse Lane  
Corolla, N.C. 27927  
(252) 453-8002

Summer hours: Monday-Saturday,  
10 a.m.-4 p.m. (In the off-season,  
it's best to call ahead for hours  
of operation.)

Admission is free.

In the summer months, on Tuesdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., the museum offers children's painting parties. Each child paints a wooden cutout of a horse, and then the horse cutouts are hung in the trees in the front yard of the schoolhouse for the rest of the week.

For a link to the museum's website, go to [www.ourstate.com](http://www.ourstate.com), and click on "This Month's Issue."

