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# Amid beach bustle, it's home

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*Reader comment: "It was a wonderful tribute to 90-something Gertie Davidson, who refused to sell her property to the county on St. Joseph's Silver Beach. Gertie lived on Silver Beach for years until her recent move to a nursing home. The sad, ironic part of the story is Gertie passed away last Sunday the same day you announced your retirement" -- Frank and Shar Walsh, St. Joseph*

"We have this lady," Frank Walsh wrote to me cryptically. "She lives on Silver Beach, as she refused to sell her property to the county when it developed the beach. Her house sits right at the entry point to the busiest beach in southwest Michigan. "As the story goes, she's an odd duck."

From the driver's seat of my yellow Ranger I pay the \$8 nonresident's entry fee to Silver Beach in St. Joseph at about 3 p.m. on a sunny, hot afternoon. To my left, 50 feet away, stands her house, sided in crumbling brown shingles, most of its shades drawn, deep silky sand running up to its walls, a vast parking lot beyond it.

I ask the young man who takes my money if he knows her. "Gertie," he nods. "She sits on her porch and watches everybody go by. I wave to her, but I've never talked to her." He sends me to the park office a few hundred steps away.

On the way, I notice a blue bikini bottom in the sand.

I stop to read a plaque that tells me that for most of the 20th Century, starting in 1902, the Silver Beach Amusement Park thrived and thronged with people enjoying its roller coaster, Ferris wheel, carousel, roller rink and Shadowland Ballroom.

So, I realize, bustle has for a long time swirled like sand around Gertie's house.

I learn that the amusement park shut down in 1971, but the county bought the land in 1990, reviving it as a popular beach.

## **A St. Joseph mystery**

At the office, another young man in a park uniform, Zack Klug, describes Gertie as "kind of a St. Joseph mystery."

"I think she's hard of hearing," says Zack, 20, "because whenever I walk around at night"- the beach is open until 11 p.m. -"I can hear her TV blasting. We all kind of chuckle at that."

His boss, Brian Bailey, who runs the park, says Gertie Davidson grew up in the house "and has seen the entire history of Silver Beach." "And," he says, "she's seen it turn into what it is today," acclaimed as one of the top family beaches in America, hosting a half-million visitors each year.

"But," he warns, "she may or may not want to talk to you."

We step into her screened porch and he knocks warily on her door, but he needn't have worried. Gertie, 93, welcomes us warmly, although she's self-conscious about a missing front tooth. She doesn't rise from her chair, well-padded with cushions, at whose side stands a walker. Her living room is pleasantly cluttered with photos and knickknacks. A ceiling fan keeps the warm air moving.

She shrugs off the details of her life story, but I get the gist. She was born here in 1913, in the house her parents bought. She grew up at the edge of the amusement park. Her father was a carpenter, and her mother rented rooms to tourists for a buck-fifty a night. When she quit school at 16, she began her work life, selling dance tickets at the Shadowland Ballroom.

"I used to dive off the end of the pier, and now I can't even walk to the end of the pier. If I could only walk," she says. "Darn."

Gertie has lived all but two or three years of her life here. She was widowed twice, having followed her husbands to Flint and to Alabama. But "I always came back." She and her husbands lived with her parents while Gertie worked in a hosiery mill, a brother's drive-in and at Whirlpool nearby.

"Now," she says, "I'm the only one left." All five siblings are gone. Her only child, a daughter, died at age 40. Her closest relative, a grandson from Maryland, visits three times a year. But she mostly depends on well-wishers and friends from church, who stop in almost daily. One delivered the meal that took out her tooth.

"Yes, I still drive," Gertie says. "Once a week, on Wednesdays, I go out for groceries, but I'm putting that off till tomorrow so I can see the dentist, too. Isn't that something? My first time eating potato soup and I lose a tooth in it, gad dang it!"

And she does her own laundry, creeping down the basement steps, sweeping the floor while she waits for the washer to finish, then hanging wet clothes on an inside line.

She corrects misimpressions: She didn't refuse to sell. She just cut a deal with a local businessman, sometime in the 1980s, who then sold the whole beach - and Gertie's house - to the county.

The deal: "I can live here tax-free until I die," paying only utilities. "I guess the county thought I wasn't going to live this long."

She's never had a problem with beach-goers. No vandalism. No trouble of any kind.

### **'This is just home'**

Late in the afternoon, using her walker, she inches herself onto her screened porch and settles into an upholstered oak rocker "where my mother rocked every one of us." From that spot she watches cars come and go, families carrying picnics, teenagers tickling each other. She watched a new condo building go up and the first lights appear in its windows.

"I don't care if anybody visits or not," she says. "I just sit on the porch. I watch people walk by and I can sometimes see their mouths going, 'I bet she's holding out for money.'"

" She laughs. "No, this is just home. When I'm gone they'll tear it down. I've heard they already have building plans for this spot, and that's OK.

"I'm ready to go anytime. Everybody says I look great, but they should be in my shoes, these poor shoes." Her feet rest on a small blue stool, a memento from the old amusement park's penny arcade. She chuckles at that.

And I leave, grateful for an old woman who is neither odd nor mysterious, but only grateful for the familiar place she can park her shoes and her weary body each night at bedtime.