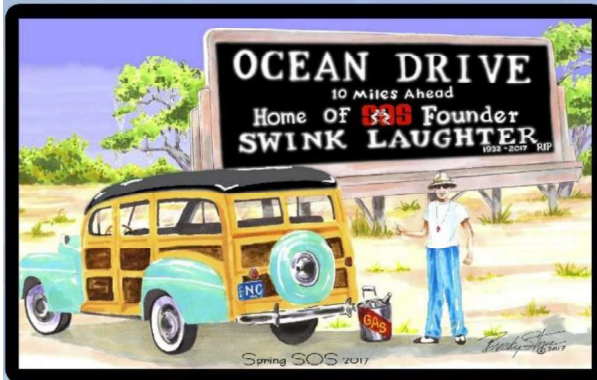


YES OH YES, COME BACK TO S O S. THE STORY OF THE BEGINNING

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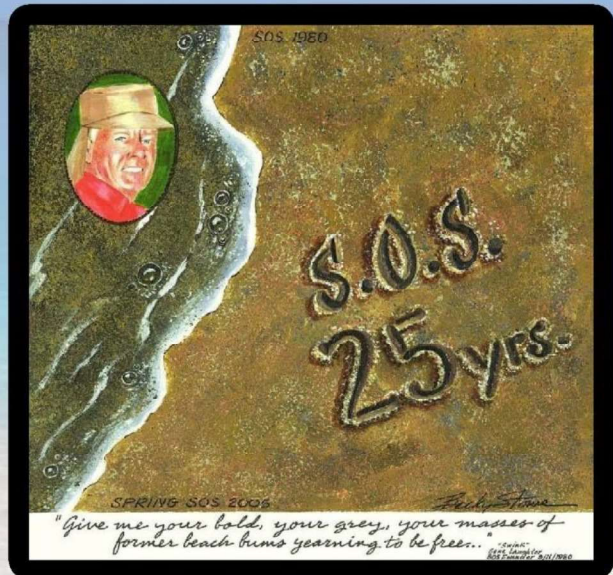
I have been to S O S 76 times over the years, and it still excites me, the same as the first time, when I drive down Main Street and lower the windows and hear the music coming from Ducks, Ducks 2 and Fat Harrold's and see the people congregating on the street! It's a feeling that can't be described, only experienced!! You have to be there and once you go, you will never stop. But, since Covid we haven't stopped but we have slowed down! This article I hope will help change that and inspire not only the veterans to come back but motivate new Shag Families to experience what has been titled by some as "The Greatest Adult Party" on the East Coast! My first adventure to S O S was 34 years ago so obviously I have met a lot of the Great Legends and become friends with some of them and studied the history and written about it in Shag Club articles over the years but the greatest personal story for me began one evening when I was having a drink with a good friend of mine at our local hangout.

I told him I had just returned from 8 days at S O S. He said "S O S, that's the thing 'Swink' started, right"? My friend was a famous local Attorney and Builder but he definitely didn't know anything about shagging so I was totally stunned! "Yes, but how did you know that?" He went on to tell me that he had known Swink for many years, that they had done business together and that he could put me in touch with him if I wanted and he did and through my conversations with Mr. Laughter and excerpts from the well known author, Bo Bryan, who wrote the book "Shag, The Legendary Dance of the South" and whom I also had the good luck to meet, I learned the history of the beginning of S O S.

Robert Gene Laughter "Swink" was born in North Carolina in 1932 and in his teens spent summers life guarding in Myrtle Beach and dancing at the Pavilions along the ocean. He loved the beach bum life as he called it and it was there that he made what turned out to be long term friendships and also met his wife, Nadine. He was brilliant, creative and mischievous in a kind way! He

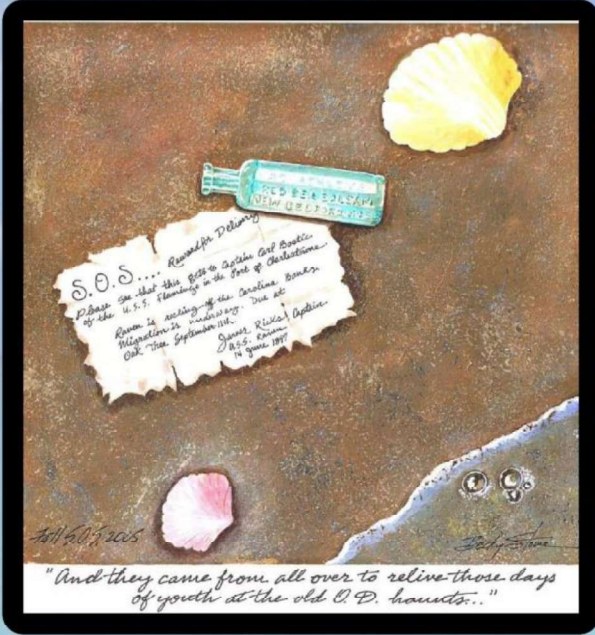
entertained his family on summer vacations at the beach by writing notes and putting them in bottles and throwing them into the sea. He would take coins and etch them with acid and bury them on the beach and watch, from his porch, people with metal detectors finding them and thinking they had discovered coins from old ship wrecks.

In 1978 one of Gene's notes in a bottle ended up in the offices of the Charlotte Observer newspaper. It was supposed to have been written by marooned sailors on a whaling vessel that had sunk in 1887. One museum had authenticated the find and the story gained a bit of National coverage! Another nautical museum reported that it was in fact a hoax because the ship in question had gone down 30 years before the date of the note. Since no money changed hands, the prankster (Swink), did not go to jail but he did become a familiar name to the Charlotte Observer!!



From my conversations with Swink it was apparent that he was a true renaissance man, a romantic actually with shades of Mark Twain and Earnest Hemingway. In 1980 he decided to see if he could track down some of his old beach buddies and have a reunion. He spent a great deal of time arranging for places to dance and places to stay. Since he was already famous, (note in the bottle famous), at the Charlotte Observer he asked two of the columnists, Kays Gary and Jerry Bledsoe, to feature a story for the reunion. The stage was set for what thousands of people still enjoy 44 years later! But not before Swink, the prankster, struck again. ANOTHER bottle was found washed up on shore about a month before the reunion! The parchment note in the bottle said;

S.O.S.....(reward for delivery) . . .please see that this note gets to Captain Earl Bostic of the U.S.S. Flamingo in the port of Charlestowne. . . . Raven is rocking off the Carolina Banks. . . Migration in under way. . .Due at Oak Tree September 11th. . James Ricks; Captain, U.S.S. Raven, 14 June, 1897-----



This time it was the Sumter South Carolina Daily that was duped! It was picked up by the Associated Press and for days maritime activists were running around trying to verify authenticity! In reality the note was a coded invitation to Swink's reunion. Anyone familiar with the upcoming planned reunion and familiar with rhythm and blues music knew what it was. Captains, Earl Bostic and James Rick, were rhythm and blues group leaders. 'Flamingo' was the title of a hit record. 'Raven' referred to Jimmy Ricks and the Ravens. Oak Tree was the name of the revelers and September the 11th was the start date of the party! Swink owned up to the HOAX at a press conference in Richmond, Virginia in August of 1980 and for the price of an antique bottle and an old piece of paper he gained enough National advertising to kick off the first "Beach Bums Reunion" and S O S was on its way.

There are many different stories about the number of people who showed up that first year. Some say 500; others say Swink was expecting 500 but 1500 showed up; some say 2500. When I talked to Swink, I didn't ask him because to me the number wasn't important; it was the ONWARD AND UPWARD thinking of the great man himself that mattered to me.



Dr. Phil Sawyer with Swink Laughter 1989

Thus began the migrations (now three times a year) that thousands of shaggers enjoy every year at Ocean Drive and Main Street. The party grew in size quickly and it became impossible for Swink to handle by himself so in 1987 (or 1989) the Association of Carolina Shag Clubs bought out Swink and took over S O S and still run it today and do an amazing job!!

At that time Mr. Laughter still lived in Richmond, Va. and so the Richmond Shag Club in 2008 awarded him an "Honorary Lifetime Membership". I never saw Swink after 2008 but I kept in touch and I know that shortly after that year he and Nadine moved back to Myrtle Beach so they could be close to the places where they met and spent so much time in their youth and where they could once again see their "Beach Bum" friends. At S O S he could be found sometimes in the afternoon hanging around the O D Pavillion!!!-----Gene passed away in 2017 at the age of 84 but his legacy lives on and I think of him often and especially when I'm at S O S and still marvel at what one man's vision created and how much he has affected people's lives for all these years!!



The next S O S is in September of this year. I was there in April and there is a lot of new music; All of the clubs are doing their best to showcase the best bands and the best DJs and plenty of food and drinks. It's an exciting time again!! Covid affected the membership of many of the shag clubs, but now we have many new members joining and they don't know about S O S, so show them this article and encourage them to come in September!

By Sid Strawderman

Colonial Shag Club, VA HOF, SOS Icon, VP of NLLD