I Remember, Juhan Simonson

Ten years ago in 1985, the Upper Deerfield Township Committee published an illustrated history of the township entitled "This Place Called Home." It happens that I am one of the lucky few who, at one point in his life, could claim Upper Deerfield Township, more specifically a place called Seabrook, his home. This was during the fabulous fifties when Seabrook had become a colorful mosaic of peoples of different backgrounds, cultures, and creeds.

My place of birth, similarly to hundreds of other new comers to Seabrook, was thousands of miles away on the shores of the Baltic Sea in a small nation called Estonia. World War II and the subsequent Soviet occupation of our land of birth had turned us into refugees in post-war Europe. Thanks to the humanitarianism and hospitality of the American government and people, more than ten thousand Estonian refugees were admitted, under the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, to those shores in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Under the sponsorship of Charles F. Seabrook hundreds of these refugees settled at Seabrook and began to work at Seabrook Farms Co. plant and administrative offices.

An active ethnic community life ensued among the newcomers. Many also joined Estonian organizations established on a nationwide basis. In the summer of 1952, a central organization of the Estonians in the U.S.A., the Estonian National Committee (later renamed the Estonian American National Council) was established in New York City. Nationwide elections were held and several from the Estonian community in Seabrook were elected to its membership. Over the years, others have served on this 50-member council.

In addition to the participating in the Estonian-oriented activities, Estonians at Seabrook have served and volunteered in a number of local area community undertakings. Also, hundreds of youth of Estonian descent have graduated from the Bridgeport High School over the years and I can count myself a proud member of BHS Class of 1952.

For decades, the Seabrook Estonian community was actively involved in the cause of freedom and independence for Estonia. Now that freedom and independence have been achieved, many Estonians from Cumberland County have been able to visit their former homeland - a sentimental journey for all. The local community also continues to support, by whatever means possible, The Estonian nation as it struggles to overcome the effects of half a century of repressive Soviet rule.

New Jersey is one of the most ethnically diverse states in the nation with more than one-hundred different groups represented among its residents. The Estonians at Seabrook and surrounding area continue to be a part of his multi-cultural pattern. Hopefully, this publication will serve to increase the general awareness of this unique ethnic community in Southern New Jersey.

In conclusion, I wish to convey a personal recollection from my college days in the 1950's. The happiest moments, it seems, were trips home to Seabrook for the holidays. Soon after passing the village of Deerfield Street on State Highway #46 (later #77) the tall and imposing chimney of the Seabrook Farms Co. plant would come into view at which point a warm feeling would engulf me - I knew I had arrived home! Even though this famous landmark is now gone, Seabrook will remain a home in the hearts and minds of many of us.

On behalf of the Estonian American National Council, I salute the Estonians at Seabrook and its environs for their determination to preserve their heritage while diligently pursuing the American way of life.