



S. O. S.

THE BEGINNING

Through all these 35 years that I've been learning and teaching the SHAG, the one thing that's consistent is the look on the faces of the people in the classes when I explain what SOS is! However, no explanation can fully describe the migration so they really don't understand what I'm talking about until they go to Main Street and Ocean Drive and experience the excitement and comradery that's been going on in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina now

since 1980! But how did it get started? Who started it? The following story is from excerpts from the great author Bo Bryan (who I met several years ago and wrote the popular book called "Shag, The Legendary Dance of the South"), and my own personal experience with the GREAT man himself, Robert Gene Laughter, "Swink". This is how I came to hear the story and was able to contact and talk to the man himself!

I had already been going to SOS for 15 years and one afternoon I was having a drink (imagine that?) with a friend of mine who used to own INVESTORS SAVINGS AND LOAN here in Richmond and I was telling him I just got back from SOS and he said; "That's the thing Swink started, right?" "Yes, but how did you know about that," I said. He proceeded to tell me that he had known Swink for many, many years and that Swink had designed the Squirrel Logo for Investors and had come up with the slogan, "Squirrel Your Money Away At Investors". He said he could put me in touch with Swink and he did and through my conversations with him and the history from Bo, I learned the history of the SOS beginning.

Gene, born in North Carolina in 1932 was a life guard in his youth at Myrtle Beach and he spent many summers there, met his wife of 62 years there, and loved the beach bum life and the dancing at the Pavilions along the Ocean. He was a mischievous (funny mischievous), and creative man! He would entertain his family on summer vacations by writing notes and putting them in bottles and throwing them into the sea. He would take old coins and etch them with acid and bury them on the beach and watch as people with metal detectors found them and thought they had discovered coins from old shipwrecks!

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 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.

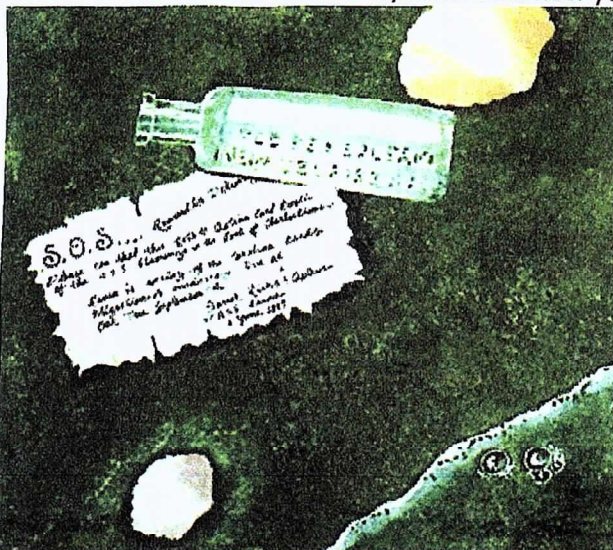
I could tell from my conversations with Swink that he was a true renaissance man, a romantic, with whispers of Mark Twain or Earnest Hemingway in there. He resolved in 1980 to have a reunion of his

old beach buddies and he spent a great deal of time tracking them down and arranging the places to dance and stay at in North Myrtle Beach. He was already famous at the Charlotte Observer so he got two of the columnists (Kays Gary and Jerry Bledsoe) to feature a story for the reunion. The stage was set for what we now enjoy 43 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 antique 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 is 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 archivists 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 RVA 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 on the number of people who showed up that first year. Some say 500; some say Swink was expecting 500 but 1500 showed up; some say 2500 showed up. When I talked to Swink, I didn't ask him because to me, the number wasn't that important; it was the ONWARD and UPWARD thinking of the great man himself that mattered to me.

Thus began the migrations (now 3 times a year) that 10 to 15 thousand shaggers enjoy at Ocean Drive and Main Street. The party grew in size quickly and it became impossible for Swink to handle it by himself so in 1987 the Association of Carolina Shag Clubs bought out Swink and took control and still run it today.

In my conversations with Mr. Laughter I told him that RSC would like to make him an Honorary Life Time Member if it was ok with him since he lived right here. He said he would be honored so at the annual party on August 8th, 2008 we presented a plaque recognizing Robert Gene Laughter, "Swink", as an honorary life time member. At the last minute an illness kept him from attending but he still received a standing ovation from the club!

I never saw Swink after 2008 but 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. I never saw him, though I always looked, but some of my friends said that Swink could be found sometimes in the afternoon hanging around the O D Pavillion!!-----He passed away in 2017 at the age of 84 but I think of him often and especially when I'm at S. O. S. and marvel at what one man's vision created and how much enjoyment he's afforded us all for all these years. And now you know HOW IT ALL BEGAN!!



The prints are by Becky Stowe
 The quotations are from the man himself;
 "And they came from all over to relive those days of youth at the old O D haunts"
 "Give me your bold, your grey, your masses of former beach bums yearning to be free"

Sid

"And they came from all over to relive those days at the old O D haunts."