

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Seabrook Farms workforce in 1955 is featured in Life Magazine. Assembled in the front platform area and atop roofs of the plant complex are the entire day shift of 1,924 plant workers, the office staff, and many of the 996 field workers posed for a historic two-page group photo. Photo: Life Magazine/Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center.

A Mini United Nations

Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center showcases a culturally diverse assemblage of people, whose descendants continue to enrich our region.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

On August 24th, 2024 I was fortunate enough to view *The Paradox of Seabrook Farms*, a documentary film about Seabrook Farms and its employees. The film was directed by

Helga Merits, an independent Dutch-Estonian filmmaker; she interviewed 50 people (2019, 2022, 2023) who had ties to Seabrook Farms primarily during the 1940s and '50s leading up to the point at which C.F. Seabrook and his family parted ways.

The film premiered on March 16th at the Levoy Theatre to a sold-out audience of 700, and again August 24th to about 650 people. Its theme covered how displaced people from different countries came to unite at the village of Seabrook. Despite the displacement caused by the horrors of World War II, workers endeavored to keep their traditions alive. They strove to give their children a future of possibilities.

The documentary also explored some of the complexities of Seabrook Farms owner Charles F. Seabrook as an industrialist, and concluded with his estrangement from his family.

The film inspired me to join a CU Maurice River field trip to finally visit the *Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center* in Upper Deerfield Township. Even with the address in hand, that proved no easy task for the nearly 30 visitors who were to meet at the museum. At length we discovered that the collection is housed in the basement of the Upper Deerfield Township Municipal Building.

It's wonderful that the Township hosts this extensive collection; however some signage directing visitors to its entrance might give it a wider audience.

The museum provides a great deal of information that needs to remain in the public consciousness from many important perspectives. We began our tour with an introduction by Executive Director Larry Ericksen. Later our entourage divided into two groups, with Bonnie Bertram and Ericksen guiding us through the collections. Those who lived in the multicultural villages of Seabrook during the 1940s and 50s were a unique and diverse assemblage, brought together by the circumstances of World War II and what Charles F. Seabrook saw as an opportunity for an affordable workforce.



Bonnie Bertram and Larry Ericksen, Executive Director SECC show CU Staff Member Julia Wiberg a collection of Estonian photographs. Photo Cyndie Hornblower.

Japanese Americans from both the United States and Latin America were arrested and put in internment camps due to U.S. government fears about possible disloyalty to the U.S. and allegiance to their former homeland. These individuals were deprived of their civil rights. Their lives as American citizens were derailed. They were confined to camps patrolled by armed guards in tarpapered army-style barracks, surrounded by barbed-wire fences.

Seabrook, an agriculturalist and innovative businessman, found his laborers among those displaced or detained by the distrust and prejudices caused by war. He offered the opportunity family units, albeit within rudimentary housing. With the support of the U.S. government he recruited these detainees. They could choose to leave western-U.S.-based camps for a rural agrarian lifestyle in Southern New Jersey. It sounded more idyllic than it was, but nonetheless it was most likely a significant improvement over camp conditions.



"Evacuee children in Seabrook village 1944. Family housing built by the Federal Public Housing Authority. Single men and women were assigned to the dormitories that the government built." Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center, New Jersey Digital Highway



"Prefabricated houses - located in "Field no. 16" - were preferred residences at Seabrook, and in 1943 and 1944 housed white Southern migrant workers and their families. Though small and made of flimsy material, they were better shelter than the simple tents and converted farmhouses provided to mainly black migrants from the South."
Narrative and photo Library of Congress and Rutgers University Community Repository.

Seabrook Farms continued recruitment of released prisoners after the conclusion of World War II. Nearly 1500 Latin American Japanese had been incarcerated at the Crystal City, Texas internment camp. Roughly 80 percent of them had been deported from Peru. After the conclusion of the war, 209 of these former detainees resettled at Seabrook Farm.

Labor was in short supply during the war. Those who have studied his life generally agree that C.F. Seabrook's motivation was primarily business-related rather than altruistic in his recruitment of these potential employees. His sons describe their father as "cold and calculating" to the family but "highly successful at projecting a warm, caring, friendly image to the public at large."
(Rutgers Digital Exhibits Seabrook Farms)

Other groups of people displaced by war came from Europe to begin their lives anew at Seabrook Farms. Estonians arrived in significant numbers, and German soldiers

who were interned at Parvin State Park also became part of the village.

At the Seabrook Cultural Center today, flags depicting the homelands of people who found new beginnings at Seabrook are displayed around a model of the village and its surrounding farmland. These include (in addition to countries already mentioned) France, Mongolia, the Czech Republic, Italy, Russia, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Hungary, Barbados, Ukraine, Cuba, Lithuania, Puerto Rico, Latvia, and Norway. Other countries mentioned in museum displays include China, India, Korea, Austria, Denmark, Bulgaria, Romania, Scots-Irish, Jamaica, St. Kitts, St. Lucian, Trinidad, and Yugoslavia.

Additional recruits to the workforce were laborers from the Caribbean, Appalachia, and the Deep South; all were significant contributors to what the Center calls an "authentic global, bootstrap village."

This diversity created a multicultural heritage which is thought to be unmatched by any other rural area in the continental United States. The museum's narrative suggests that this section of Upper Deerfield Township was indeed "a rural 'mini-United Nations,' a place, surprisingly, more culturally diverse than many urban areas. In the 1940s,

Seabrookers would not have found it at all unusual to witness German prisoners of war eating in the Seabrook Community House cafeteria or Jamaicans playing cricket on the Seabrook School grounds or a Japanese American baseball team competing against an Italian American one.”

Photos of cultural performance groups such as the Estonian choir, the Japanese Hoh Daiko drummers, and Minyo folk dancers grace the walls as examples of maintaining and sharing cultural traditions.



Many cultural traditions were brought to Seabrook Farms by the diverse ethnicities that came to work at the farm and factory. Estonian refugees were also encouraged to perform ethnic music and dance, to maintain folkways. Photo: Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center.



"Nancy Morinaka Kuramoto performs a traditional dance for the Seabrook Farms' Brownie Scouts (1950). After the war, the company encouraged various ethnic groups to preserve and share their cultures. Whereas Japanese traditions were once marked as suspicious and indicative of permanent foreignness, by the 1950s Americans were more willing to tolerate this heritage as part of the "melting pot." Photo: Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center.

C.F. Seabrook was innovative in both equipment and process. He developed some of the first irrigation systems for watering crops, increasing production by 300 percent. He extended growing seasons by utilizing greenhouses, innovative for the time. Work was grueling and involved 12-hour shifts. The Seabrook Farms factory was automated, and C.F. Seabrook was known as the Henry Ford of farming. The factory was a labor-dependent and -run assembly line.



Docent Bonnie Bertram discusses farming innovations that earned C.F. Seabrook the moniker of the Henry Ford of agriculture. Photo: Author.

Seabrook and Clarence Birdseye were pioneers in the frozen food industry. When I was working on a documentary with Joanne Ruscio (c. 2014), of Greener New Jersey Productions, we visited the present-day Seabrook Farms and quizzed Jim Seabrook about the freezing process. He made it clear that aspects of the method still remain proprietary. As early as 1938 Seabrook

produced two-thirds of the frozen vegetables consumed in the United States; they were especially famous for their frozen baby lima beans.

The *Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center* has an amazing collection of photographs. One depicts many of Seabrook's 5,000 workers in front of the plant; it appeared as a feature article in a 1955 edition of *Life* magazine, proclaiming Seabrook as the largest vegetable farm in the United States (lead photo). Seabrook attracted national coverage in other magazines and newspapers such as *Newsweek*, *Reader's Digest*, *National Geographic*, *Forbes*, *Business Week*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Times*.

One cabinet displays a fabric bag imprinted "Cavalcade of Silver Dollars," with silver dollars strewn on top. This was part of a promotional campaign by C.F. Seabrook, in which he paid his employees in silver dollars so that when they made local purchases the community would witness the economic impact the company had on their cash registers.



C.F. Seabrook (center) watches an employee being paid in silver dollars as part of a promotional campaign to show the economic impact of Seabrook Farms on surrounding communities.

The quality of education received by children of workers at Seabrook School is historically

considered to have been of high quality. A number of accolades about individuals who grew up at Seabrook corroborate this assessment.

Most striking for me are the number of people who grew up at Seabrook and who went on to serve in the United States military. Particularly amazing were the Japanese Americans, whose parents were arrested for their potential to be disloyal to their country during WWII and who, as adults, went on to serve their country to protect our liberties.

The mission of the *Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center* is to establish a permanent place to preserve and present the settlement and experience of the diverse ethnic groups that were brought together in rural Seabrook. It acts as a repository of cultural and historical materials to further the awareness of Seabrook's rich multicultural experience. And it acts as an example of how refugees and diverse Americans can come together to overcome adversity, preserve their heritage, and ultimately achieve success.

Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center gives the visitor a greater understanding of C.F. Seabrook's agricultural innovations, community life at Seabrook during the 1940s

and 50s, the cultural influences of diverse cultures, and some of the accomplishments of people who worked or grew up in the village at Seabrook Farms.

Perhaps most importantly, it is a testament to people's tenacity and resilience in overcoming adversity and making new beginnings for themselves and their families. The museum proved to be well worth the visit. ■

Modeling Seabrook



This reproduction of the village of Seabrook in 1950 was built by Robert Yutaka Hasuike, who grew up at Seabrook, went on to become a U.S. Green Beret, and later was employed as a model maker at Mattel Toys for 35 years. Originally from Los Angeles, he was incarcerated with his family in 1942 along with 120,000 other Japanese Americans because they "looked like the enemy."

The miniature village and a water tower and factory model were made by Hasuike in California and were then shipped to Seabrook and assembled by local volunteers.



In remembrance of the model maker
Robert Y. Hasuike
(presented from Japan Pavilion September 6, 2006)

Size: 12-18"
Type: Seven Special Services Group, Florida with Special Forces insignia
Special Forces shoulder patch with Airborne tab
Plaque of Rank in uniform

Model: Special Forces Unit with Airborne badge
U.S. and Special Forces Unit insignia

Relics: Basic Airborne Unit photograph

INSTALLING THE MODELS



The buildings that housed Seabrook workers were principally built using World War II federal funding. "Sections of the village depicted include apartment and dormitory buildings, along with Hoover Village, Hoover Annex, West Village, Italian Village, Gelsten Village, and adjacent farmhouses and farmland. The Seabrook Farms plant complex, around which the village grew and where most of the villagers worked, was once the largest integrated farming-freezing operation in the world."

Hasuike also created a chilling diorama of the internment camp at Manzanar, which is housed at the *Japanese American National Museum* in Los Angeles, California.

The Millville Army Air Field Museum showcases a collection of Barbie dolls and Hot Wheels cars donated by Hasuike in a separate building.



Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center

Location: Upper Deerfield Township
Municipal Building
1325 State Highway 77
Seabrook, New Jersey
08302
Hours: Monday –
Thursday 9 a. m. –
noon

(additional visiting hours upon request)
(856) 451-8393

Sources

Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center – museum exhibits and narrative

Seabrook Farms: Invisible Restraints, Live and Labor
Seabrook Farms, "Origins, Innovations and Early Labor

Struggles," Digital Exhibits, Rutgers University.
(<https://exhibits.libraries.rutgers>).