

Mystery of the Dunites

In 1934 Meher Baba visited a bohemian commune in Oceano, California. His 24-hour visit surprised the residents of this rustic community.

Valerie McKean travels back in time and introduces us to a few of the seekers, as she unravels the mystery of the Dunites

One evening, a few followers of Meher Baba in Santa Barbara gathered to watch a travelogue television show *California's Gold*, when to their surprise a photograph of Meher Baba flashed on the screen. The episode told the story of a group of bohemians, artists, and spiritual seekers who, during the 1920's, established a community in the sand dunes that run parallel to the coastal town of Oceano (the Spanish word for "ocean") in Central California. This eclectic band of people became known as the Dunites. Although the TV show host made no mention of Meher Baba or his visit to the Oceano Dunes on December 26, 1934, two still photographs of Baba were included in the segment.

When I learned about Oceano, I looked for the photographs of Baba taken at the time and found them. I was intrigued. "Who were the eccentric-looking people flanking Meher Baba, handsome and dapper in a double-breasted suit and wide-neck scarf?" I wondered. Before long I learned that the man in the rumpled suit who appeared to be in an ecstatic state was Sam Cohen, standing to the left of Meher Baba. Hugo Seelig stood with a pair of tennis shoes in hand, and John Doggett reminded me of the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky.

Why had Meher Baba interrupted his 1934 visit to Hollywood to pay these Dunites a visit? It was a mystery that I gradually unraveled with the guidance of Norm Hammond, author of *The Dunites* and the assistance of Paul Williams, caretaker at Meherana. Conflicting reports, confusion of dates, gaps in the various accounts, and the absence of precise details has made it challenging to piece the puzzle together.

While it is hard to believe that it was 70 years ago when Meher Baba walked the dunes of the California Coast, to me it feels like yesterday as I immerse myself in the complex saga involving many interweaving sub-plots and a huge cast of characters. It is in large part the story of Meher Baba's work with Sam Cohen, the ecstatic man in the rumpled suit. Sam, among so many players who stepped onto the Master's stage set in

this period, remained with him through several adventures at home and abroad, to the end of his life.

Sam Cohen was born in Brooklyn into a prominent Jewish family that owned a kosher sausage factory. Sam was trained as a *shochet*, an authorized slaughterer of animals according to the ritual laws of Judaism. But Sam was clearly a spiritual seeker who was driven beyond the confines of orthodox religion.

Sam Cohen's search led him first to Theosophy and then to a meeting with Avatar Meher Baba in 1932. It is thus in that year that we begin our story.

In 1932 Meher Baba undertook his second journey to America. This visit encompassed some of the most notable episodes of the Avatar's life, including establishing contact with his circle of close Western lovers, laying the inner "cables" linking East and West, engaging top stars and directors of the Hollywood film world in discussing ideas for a movie script about the theme of Creation, the excitement and bewilderment surrounding his much-publicized promise to manifest in the Hollywood Bowl, and initial signs of the defection of Meredith Starr, the mystical Englishman who had been a key figure in bringing together Meher Baba's circle of close disciples in the West.

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Sojourn in Hollywood, 1932

Laying Spiritual Cables between the East and West

In the spring of 1932, Los Angeles was gearing up for the coming Summer Olympics, *Grand Hotel* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* were both box-office hits, and people were humming the latest Cole Porter tune, "Night and Day." But these worldly preoccupations seem pale compared with Avatar Meher Baba's sojourn in Hollywood.

Meher Baba had traveled from India to New York by ship. After spending several days in New York City (at the Greenwich Village home of Mr. and Mrs. Stokes) and at a retreat in Harmon-on-the-Hudson, north of the city, he traveled by train to California. He was accompanied by several close disciples — his secretary, Chanji; his brothers Beheram and Adi Jr.; and Kaka Baria — and devotees Jean Adriel and Malcolm Schloss and, from England, Meredith and Margaret Starr and Quentin Todd.

The party arrived in Hollywood on Sunday morning, May 29, 1932. Baba was to stay at the home of Marc Edmund Jones, a well-known astrologer who was a friend of

Malcolm Schloss. For the next week, his whirlwind schedule was brimming with receptions, studio tours, and meetings with the elite of Tinseltown. The press had a field day reporting on his activities and his announced plans to break his seven-year silence at the Hollywood Bowl on July 13 via radio hookup. The *Santa Barbara Morning Press* picked up the following syndicated item:

Mystic Will Try to Recover Own Voice

Los Angeles, May 31 (AP) — Scientists, remembering the blind fish of Kentucky's Mammoth cave, today evinced interest in Shri Meher Baba, Hindu mystic who promises to break a seven-year vocal silence in Hollywood on July 13.

Dr. Charles Henry Hayton, laryngologist and fellow of the Royal College of Edinburgh and the American College of Physicians and Surgeons, said Shri Meher Baba may find himself voiceless when the time comes for his proposed radio message to the world.

It is easy to imagine the excitement that permeated the reception line at Hollywood's Hotel Knickerbocker on the evening of May 31, 1932. Many from Los Angeles and the surrounding areas came to the "spiritual" or "Love" gathering. There were so many people that the hall had to be cleared of all furniture. Men, women and children stood in line waiting to meet Baba. In a theatrical setting, Baba was seated higher on a platform with the four Eastern mandali on one side and six Westerners on the other, forming a semicircle at his feet. Behind Baba, two harpists were playing softly. Up to a thousand people queued up to be admitted one at a time to meet Meher Baba, shake his hand, and then take a seat in another room, where they waited for the Master to address them.

Sam Cohen, then thirty-one, was among the fortunate who waited two hours for this privilege. Of his contact with Baba, he reported: "The hand clasp of a Master is not a mere hand clasp nor is his gaze just a look at you, but by his touch and look, he thins the veil and sometimes completely removes the veil which separates man from divinity." With this significant contact, Sam's connection with Meher Baba was firmly established.

Once all were gathered in the room, a discourse was read out. In the discourse Meher Baba referred to his silence:

When [the God-Man] speaks, Truth is more powerfully manifested than when he uses either sight or touch to convey it. For that reason, Avatars usually observe a

period of silence lasting several years, breaking it only when they wish to manifest the Truth to the entire universe. So, when I speak, I shall manifest the divine will, and worldwide transformation of consciousness will take place. (Lord Meher, Vol. 5)

Those who were intrigued by Meher Baba's silence and imminent manifestation were stunned by the news of his plans to interrupt his stay in Hollywood to make a one-day visit to China, to lay a spiritual "cable" between the East and the West. Once this inner connection was established, he said that he would return to California and break his silence.

However, while en route to China, Meher Baba decided to cancel this momentous event, as "conditions were not yet ripe." He thus returned to India from China instead of going back to America.

The sudden change of plans left many people in shock. Some would leave Baba over this "broken promise," but others — such as Darwin and Jeanne Shaw, who despite hardship were prepared to travel from the East Coast to be present for the Hollywood Bowl event — accepted the disappointment and went on loving Baba. As Baba would subsequently explain, **"The promises given by the Masters are never vague or unfulfilled. They always come true and are fulfilled, but in their proper time. The question of time depends on the conditions or circumstances in which they are given. When Masters give their promises, they are given from the mental, or subtle, or physical plane, and thus differ in the time of their fulfillment accordingly"** (Lord Meher, Vol. 5).

When Baba canceled the breaking of his silence, it was Quentin Todd who was given the task of breaking the news to everyone, including the press, which he notified from Santa Barbara. Quentin was further instructed to give Meredith tickets to return to England, where Baba wanted him to continue his work at his meditation retreat in East Challacombe. The Starrs, however, decided to go to Santa Barbara, and instead of obeying Baba's order, Meredith, with his wife, went back to Oceano and stayed there until returning to England in October.

After Meredith drifted from Meher Baba in 1933, there was speculation about his "Judas" role in relation to the Avatar (see the accompanying article by Gavin Arthur, "Blind Faith" and the response from Jean Adriel). Darwin Shaw mentions in his book *As Only God Can Love* that when Baba decided not to break his silence, Meredith left him, saying, "My work is different from Baba's." Meredith and Marguerite Starr went on to

become followers of Subud, a spiritual movement from Indonesia, and changed their names to Roland and Allison Starr.

An Ashram in the Dunes

A photograph album dated August 31, 1932, as well as the accounts of Oceano residents of the time, notes that several followers of Meher Baba spent the summer of 1932 in the Dunes. Meredith Starr, with his wife, Marguerite, was among these. The controversial English disciple was known for his tenaciously held views on the spiritual life. Baba was not pleased with his attitude and directed Meredith to go to the Oceano Dunes and engage in his favorite activity, meditation.

How did Baba learn about the Dunes? Perhaps it was because Gavin Arthur, a leader of the community, was a friend of Marc Edmund Jones. But Baba's act of "exiling" Meredith to the Dunes may not have been the only reason for Meredith's visit there. In an interview with Gavin Arthur conducted by Masheikh Wali Ali Meyer, the secretary of the Sufi teacher Sam Lewis, it is recorded that Gavin invited Meredith and Marguerite to the Dunes for a weekend visit. However, as Gavin recalled, "they stayed the whole summer and turned my dunes into an ashram. We all took up meditation."

Perhaps the most well-heeled of the Dunites, Gavin Arthur (real name Chester Alan Arthur III) was the grandson of the twenty-first president of the United States. An unconventional fellow, he was deeply interested in astrology and dreamed of establishing a utopian commune in the Dunes, a small bohemian community that had sprung up in the 1920's as artists, writers, seekers, hermits, and eccentrics gravitated to various coves and built cabins and shacks out of scrap lumber and salvaged materials. Fresh water was accessible, clams were plentiful, and the coves were lush in vegetation. Dunite folklore is steeped in the magical quality of the seascape, and many who settled in the Dunes would move from cove to cove until the right "vibration" could be found.

The vegetarian celibate nudist George Blais, the reclusive poet Hugo Seelig, and the Irish fiddler John Doggett were among these resourceful people. A notable Dunes resident during the 1930's was Samuel L. Lewis, later known as "Sufi Sam." Several women were also among the Dunites.

In 1931 Gavin built his own cabin in one of the small coves of the Dunes, which came to be known as Moy Mell. Measuring 30 x 12 feet, the cabin had walls lined with bookshelves filled with volumes on a variety of subjects, reflecting Gavin's eclectic interests. The cabin also boasted a large wood-burning stove around which many neighboring Dunites would philosophize into the wee hours. Later on, Gavin built a

Community House that would serve as a meeting place as well as provide lodging for the numerous guests that he invited to Moy Mell.

Sam Cohen Arrives in the Dunes

When Sam Cohen arrived in the Dunes sometime in June 1932, he encountered an interesting assortment of people. Meredith and Marguerite Starr were regaling the Dunites with stories of Baba. Princess Norina Matchabelli and Elizabeth Patterson, who were later to found Meher Spiritual Center in Myrtle Beach, were in and out of the Dunes that summer. A mystery surrounds this time period. It is possible that the small group of Baba's devotees went to the Dunes in early June, directly after Baba's departure for China, and anxiously awaited Baba's return to Hollywood. What is known is that Norina had pitched a tent and was overseeing the building of a cabin for Baba's use; one that she insisted must be free of impressions created by any impure behaviour on the part of the libertine Dunites.

Had Meher Baba directed that a cabin be built? Or were they building this cabin as a surprise for him, not realizing that Baba was not to return to California that year? A *Daily Mirror* article of July 10, 1932, titled "The Long Haired 'Messiah' Who seeks to Save the World with a 'Ouija Board,'" speaks flippantly of "the 'grand opening' of his new retreat" in California — seemingly a reference to the Dunes. Sam Cohen wrote:

When I arrived there, I discovered to my surprise the group of people living here in one of coves were excited over the coming of Shri Meher Baba, and were all thrilled by the strange events told them by one of Baba's disciples that had been there. It was surprising to see how these people, very young and individualistic and who seldom could get together to co-operate without friction, suddenly fell into a line and were ready to undertake any kind of work that they had never been accustomed to doing, and community life which previously among these aspiring artists and poets was impossible now became very harmonious. They had settled down to six weeks of meditation and work. The place was highly energized and a power poured through from the Holy Master Shri Meher Baba, who although he had gone back to India, was actually working through the people here, and we felt as near to him as though his actual physical presence was here. Meher Gazette 6, no. 3 [July-August 1937]

In October, when Meredith and Marguerite Starr returned to England, Sam Cohen stayed on in the Dunes and built a small shack in one of the coves and settled into a simple life of reflection and meditation on Meher Baba. As Adi K. Irani noted in his diary, “Sam was an exceptionally ascetic type of man with no regard for clothes and sleeping bag. He wears a sweater and covers himself with newspapers at night.”(Beloved Archives)

Eager to see Baba again, Sam leaped at the news that Meher Baba was going to return to America in 1933. He later recalled:

While still in the dunes, . . . when I had word that Baba was to be at the Chicago Fair of Religions [the World Fellowship of Faiths Conference at the World’s Fair], I boarded a freight train and for five days and nights I rode on top of that freight. When I arrived in Chicago, I had discovered to my great disappointment that Baba had cancelled the trip. Elizabeth cabled Baba; Baba cabled back: SAM TO THE DUNES.

With little money I received from home I boarded a bus and back I went. They were old-fashioned buses, and, as we crossed the mountains the snow drifted right in. I landed back at Oceano with a good case of the flu. I walked the remaining miles to my shack. Awakener 11, no. 3,[1966]

Was it another “broken promise”? Or simply one of the mysterious means the Avatar uses to draw his lovers ever closer? One thing is certain — Sam Cohen was hooked on Baba.

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Return to Hollywood, 1934-1935

Film Project on the Theme of Creation

The Thin Man and *It Happened One Night* were now the box office hits, and people were now humming a different Cole Porter tune, “I Get a Kick Out of You,” and Meher Baba had returned to Hollywood.

This was a period that included intriguing activities such as Meher Baba’s encounter with his American Indian “agent for North America,” in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on the way to California; efforts to get Hollywood producers interested in

Baba's ideas for a movie script about his Theme of Creation; meetings with the producer Gabriel Pascal, whom Baba was to call his Phoenix, and the screenwriter Garrett Fort, whose *Frankenstein* became legendary; and three weeks of drawing those whom he had left behind in the West even closer.

He arrived in Hollywood on December 18, 1934, prepared to spend several weeks. Unlike his previous visit in 1932, this visit was not publicized. Baba was immersed in working with screenwriters and producers on an epic project to convey His philosophy of the evolution of consciousness, with emphasis on reincarnation through countless human lives to attain the goal of God-Realization. Filis Frederick wrote that Baba's outline for the screenplay contained a "miniature *God Speaks*."

Adi K. Irani describes the negotiations with the Hollywood bigwigs:

I was asked to discuss the film with scenario writers and producers also. We discussed and discussed and they could not agree on anything at all. They felt the entire material was such a heavy thing that they told me in a particularly strong manner that there was enough material to produce ten different films. They started fighting over every word — Maya — no Maya — etc., words suggested by Baba himself. And we learned two words from them — Box Office! They thought only of box office appeal. The theme was such that they did not want it at all. I really got a little fed up and told Baba that it was not possible. We would not get it produced. The theme was so diluted, so simplified by them that it had lost its aroma, it had lost its theme, it would become some mere box office story. And that is what I knew of Hollywood. Awakener 8, no. 1 [1976]

This "splendid scheme," as Baba called it, it seemed was a part of his unfathomable Divine Plan and Universal Work of planting seeds, laying cables, establishing links, and preparing the blueprint for the next seven hundred years until the Avatar comes again.

On December 24, Baba sent a letter to Kitty and other close lovers in England, expressing his frustration with the "tiresome" difficulties of getting film producers to understand and accept the project. He acknowledged that Norina, Elizabeth, and Nonny Gayley were trying their best to make it happen, but couldn't "for one reason or another." He alluded to "the great work that is ahead and in which you all My dearest ones have in future to participate, each in his or her capacity," concluding with warmly loving reassurances to his lovers, calling them "Mine own." How intimately and humanly Baba related to his near ones while at the same time engaged in far-reaching Avataric activities.

Meher Baba Comes to the Dunes

Sometime during the week of December 18, Sam Cohen, who had had a brief meeting with Meher Baba in Hollywood, returned to his shack in the Dunes and then cabled Baba, inviting him to come pay a visit. Much to Sam's surprise, Baba cabled back and told Sam to prepare for eighteen people. Realizing that his 6 x 10 foot cabin was insufficient, Sam made arrangements for Baba to stay in Moy Mell, where there were several cabins, including the "pure" one that was built specially for Baba in 1932. Gavin Arthur was out of town, so both Gavin's cabin and the Community House were available. The news spread like wildfire through the coves of the Dunes: the holy man from India that they had heard so much about was about to arrive!

On a chilly morning, Meher Baba and party set out for Oceano in three cars. Only some of the eighteen names have been recorded in written accounts by Adi K. Irani and Sam Cohen: men mandali Jal, Chanji, Kaka, and Adi Sr.; Norina and Elizabeth; Ruano Bogislav, and Nadine Tolstoy. The date is uncertain: Sam Cohen's account indicates December 24, while Adi K. Irani noted the date as the 26th. The group arrived in the town of Oceano at about 3:30 p.m.

Like many visitors to the Dunes, they stopped at Dr. Rudolf Gerber's home first. Dr Gerber had moved with his family to Oceano in 1930 and established his medical practice in an office within the home he built. These were the days of house calls, and the doctor often traveled to treat his patients, many who could not afford to pay for his services, and no one was refused treatment. Instead of paying with cash, people would sometimes pay for their treatments with cords of firewood, home-grown vegetables, or artworks. Dr. Gerber, while not a Dunite, was a friend of the Dunites (who called him the Patron Saint of the Dunes), and his home a gateway to the Dunes. Elizabeth and Norina had become friendly with him and his wife in 1932.

Dr. Gerber and his wife, Katherine, now joined the caravan, and the group headed out to the Dunes. Norm Hammond relates a story that was told to him by Dr. Gerber. Evidently, Dr. Gerber was driving a two-seater car with a rumble seat that was packed with Baba's belongings. The car took a bump a little too quickly, and the contents of the rumble seat, which included containers of what looked like herbs or perhaps cooking spices or tea, spilled out over the sand. Dr. Gerber was a little embarrassed, as the group was held up while Baba's things were repacked. What this signifies is anyone's guess, but we know that mishaps and delays were not uncommon during travels with the Avatar.

Upon arriving at Moy Mell, Meher Baba was shown to the small cabin that his followers had built for him in 1932. After looking at this “pure” cabin, Meher Baba pointed to Gavin Arthur’s cabin and indicated that he would prefer to stay there. If there were any “impure” vibrations present (since Gavin, like many other Dunites, was a free spirit in some of his behaviour), Baba evidently did not mind. So Baba and his men mandali stayed in Gavin’s cabin, while the remainder of the group stayed in two small cabins and the Community House. Moy Mell was rustic; the amenities were few and consisted of an outhouse and outdoor shower. In the morning, buckets of hot water were brought to Baba for bathing.

George Blais and Hugo Seelig were two Dunites with whom Meher Baba spent considerable time. Blais, a reformed alcoholic, was an ardent preacher of nudism, God, and vegetarianism to anyone who would listen. Once a month he would don a loincloth, wrap a bandanna around his head, and walk into Oceano to purchase a fifty-pound bag of grain from the feed store — his primary food source.

Hugo Seelig was a poet-philosopher who lived on and off in the Dunes. On one of his trips out of the Dunes he met Elwood Decker, who shared with him an interest in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna (whom Baba has identified as a Perfect Master). Seelig convinced Decker to move to the Dunes. However, not long after Decker’s move, the two fell into some disagreement about the Goddess Kali, and the entire community became engaged in the debate. Adi noted in his Diary that Baba spoke to Hugo about the conflict he had in his mind and explained the three qualities known in Sanskrit as *rajas* (desire), *tamas* (ignorance), and *sattwa* (truth). In Indian philosophy, all that exists is said to be an interplay of these three forces. (*Beloved Archives*)

On the morning of December 27, Baba granted interviews to those who had heard about his coming, and later the group carried folding chairs over the sand to the next cove to the south of Moy Mell. Doggett’s Cove was the most populated area of the Dunes, and it was here that Meher Baba gave a discourse. Chanji wrote in the *Meher Gazette* that there was also a party that day where the Master was received with love and devotion.

One skeptic who did not join the group was Mary McMeen, poetry editor of *Dune Forum*, a periodical launched by Gavin Arthur; but she observed that many “society women” from the nearby city of Santa Barbara and the outlying areas of Montecito and Carpenteria came to meet Baba (interview with Norm Hammond, 2004).

“I Am as Big as the Ocean”

Meher Baba's group left the Dunes at about 3:30 p.m. but was delayed due to the rains and incoming tide. Their cars got stuck in the sand, and the group did not arrive back in Hollywood till 12:30 a.m. Sam Cohen reported:

As we walked along the beach single file, Baba's car had broken down, and we all kept looking at Baba in the hope that he might perform a miracle: but Baba decided to let the law of mechanics take its course. So the car was pushed forward and Baba and I walked on ahead.

This was when a most unusual experience took place: Baba looked at me and then pointed to the Pacific Ocean. I said, "Oh yes, it is very big." Baba shook his head, as if to say "No." Again he waved his hand, and I said, "Oh yes, it is very beautiful." Once again, "No." Finally, a loud speaking voice said, "I AM AS BIG AS THE OCEAN." And you know Baba does not speak. Awakener 11, no. 3, [1966]

Thus concluded Meher Baba's twenty-four hours in the Dunes. Sam Cohen noted in the *Meher Gazette* that "Baba had made quite a number of contacts, and as always the case with his presence, he stirred up everything."

Twelve days later, Baba boarded a train in Los Angeles bound for Vancouver, British Columbia, from where he would depart for the East on the steamer *The Empress of Canada*. The train passed through Oceano after midnight, and we can imagine that Sam Cohen must have waited along the tracks at the Oceano Depot in the hope of one more glimpse of the Beloved.

Sam subsequently had a vivid inner experience of Baba. The date of Sam's experience varies in his two accounts of it that have been published. In "Meeting with the Master," written for the *Meher Gazette* of August 1937, Sam wrote:

About 6 months later, in June 1935, when Baba had retired in seclusion at Mount Abu in India and I was still at my place in the sand dunes of California, I experienced something most unusual— an experience which would have repaid and completely satisfied even if I had gone through a thousand years of austerities. I had suddenly become completely unconscious of this gross world. Sand-hills all disappeared and a new vivid ecstatic consciousness entered me. Gossamer-like hills appeared, then a Great Being, carrying with him all that was bliss and joy, passed by. It seemed to me that in the twinkling of an eye the quintessence of all life was lived in that ecstatic moment. One's consciousness goes back, back through sages [ages], when only the Lord walked in his Garden and no other being was created. Was this knowing Baba as the personal God!

Almost thirty years later, Sam elaborated on the experience in *The Awakener*:

The date was about May 15, 1935; Baba was then staying in Mount Abu, [Rajasthan] India. I was walking among the sand dunes. I sat down to rest. With my eyes open I saw and experienced the following:

The time of day was towards evening. In the distance I saw a chain of mountains, then a long streak of sunlight, as if stitching mountains to the sky. Suddenly, I found myself lying in the mountains. A being stood above me a short distance away. I felt him with the eyes of my entire being; as he turned towards me, a powerful energy went through me, penetrating me from head to toe. I felt only unutterable bliss. In that short blissful experience, I seemed to live a thousand years, so intense was that feeling. The strange part of that experience was that I lay in those mountains in my entirety. A fisherman might say “hook, line and sinker”; but I not being a fisherman, I merely say, “spirit, soul and body.”

Then I found myself lying back in the dunes. I visited a few of the dune neighbours, but I could not stop weeping. I am sure that they thought I had gone completely wacky or was very sick. I remember how one “duner” literally put me to bed, but I kept on weeping and saying “Baba, Baba.” I knew what really happened was the loosening of the chain of sanskaras. People have a tendency to speak of this rather glibly. They do not know what it really entails; for the entire psyche is turned inside out. I then knew that I had experienced the “Ancient One” . . . even before I learned that Baba was using this term.

From then on, although I could not recapture that great “rapture” many events came “tumbling down from heaven’s brink.” I thought at first I might be able to get back to the “holy mountains.” But it was hopeless. It seemed as though I was trying to climb a ladder that had no existence. God just would not repeat Himself.

Sam Cohen’s Devotion to Meher Baba

Sometime after Baba’s visit to the Dunes, Sam Cohen paid an unexpected visit to Dr. Gerber’s home. Norm Hammond describes it: “In the dead of night, Sam pounded on the door of the local doctor in Oceano who treated many Dunites. The doctor turned on the light and opened the door for Sam to come in. He was puzzled when Sam asked to see his globe. Sam eagerly examined the globe to find the place in India he had decided to visit.

The doctor asked, ‘When are you leaving?’ ‘I think I’ll go right now!’ said Sam, and left into the night.”

Norm continues: “The grocer in Oceano was amazed to receive a postcard from Sam a short time later. Sam was on a luxury liner bound for England, thence to India. He had a first-class ticket! Sam owed the grocer money; never having an extra dime in his pocket! The news traveled, and the other Dunites were equally amazed. Only much later did they learn that Meher Baba’s disciples had funded Sam’s trip shortly before they left Moy Mell, to help him on his path to spirituality” (*The Dunites*).

Sam recorded several trips to see Meher Baba, one to Cannes in Europe and another to India. The story of Sam’s nocturnal visit to Dr. Gerber’s home sets the date of Sam’s departure soon after Baba’s visit to the Dunes, it is probable that Sam was on his way to visit Baba, as Sam did not arrive in India until 1937, to join the Nasik ashram. At Nasik, Meher Baba ordered Sam to spend a night in the cave in Tiger Valley at Panchgani, at a spot that had been given to Baba by the Maharaja of Savantwadi; the cave was dug at Baba’s order, to be used for seclusion work, and a number of disciples stayed there at Baba’s order. But Sam was afraid to stay in the cave alone overnight and declined Baba’s instruction.

Meher Baba then sent Sam to travel to Europe via Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), from there to reunite with Baba in Cannes, France, where three villas had been engaged for mandali members from the East and devotees from the West. On October 25, 1937, Baba sent Sam Cohen from Cannes to Mexico. The why and wherefore of Sam’s visit to Mexico are unknown, but we can assume that Meher Baba was using Sam as a conduit for his work.

Darwin Shaw notes in his memoir, *As Only God Can Love*, that an “opportunity to work for Baba’s cause came in 1940 in the form of a cable delivered to John Bass for himself, Sam Cohen, and me. In it, Baba asked if we would do whatever he asked us to do for a full year beginning on August 1, 1940”. They were sent a two-page typed list of thirty-one orders, and Baba had check-marked the orders that were to be followed. Two hundred and forty followers of Meher Baba throughout the world received these orders.

Nineteen years passed before Sam was to see Meher Baba again. Sam was then living in New York and often attended the established Monday night Baba meetings. His reunion with the Beloved occurred during Meher Baba’s second visit to Meher Center in Myrtle Beach in 1956.

At Meher Center, Sam posed the following question to Baba: “Suppose one feels that meditating by oneself is service? I like to visit the Monday group, but not all the time.”

Baba replied: *“I would like you all to belong to certain groups. Why? Because you can cooperate and tell others about me and share your thoughts. You learn much more than when you remain by yourself. When you listen, exchange thoughts, prayers, my presence is there. Where there are five collected together, there is Parameshwar [Supreme God]; I am there. If you are talking of me, having love for me, then there I am. Is it all clear?”* (Lord Meher, Vol. 14).

In 1958 Meher Baba returned to Meher Center, and Sam Cohen was among the many who had gathered to spend time with their Beloved. Later that same year, Meher Baba ordered Eruch Jessawala in India, Francis Brabazon in Australia, and Sam Cohen in the United States to participate in a forty-day fast, in which they were allowed a portion of milk each day and asked to repeat God’s name.

Sam Cohen remained devoted to Baba until the end of his life. The following excerpt is from a letter of January 4, 1984, addressed to Adele Wolkin and written by Fay Fisher, who lived in the same building as Sam in New York City:

... Sam lived in my building the last couple of years before dropping his body. I used to do his shopping and did a little cooking. Sam was a very private person. He very seldom spoke about Meher Baba except when he told me about the Dunes. He claimed being in a very lonely spot with all kinds of wild creatures around him. He asked Baba why he wanted him there and Baba replied “You will find out.” Sam told me he had some marvelous mystical experiences and when I asked to explain he would not go into details. He was really a very difficult person in some ways. However we did get along very well.

Now about my dream: Sam had a heart condition for many years. Evidently it wasn’t too bad except for the last couple of years before his death. He had been in and out of the hospital on short stays several times. The last time he went to the hospital he decided to give up his room in my building so that he would save the rent, not knowing when he would be discharged from the hospital. However, when he returned there was no vacancy here so he found another place nearby. When I went to visit him he said he was fine. That very same night, in a dream I saw MEHER BABA. It was so vivid and real. Baba commanded me to go and see Sam and to tell him that “He, Baba was coming to see him.” That was all. The next morning I ran to Sam’s place and gave him the message. Sam was so grateful, happy and elated. He made me dine with him that evening. Somehow this message it seemed to me made him concentrate on Baba more than he had recently. The very next day I received a phone call telling me that Sam died. I

didn't think I would be able to write as I'm still feeling the effects of this experience.

The Dunes Today

What Happened to the Cabin Where Meher Baba Stayed

After Meher Baba's visit to the Dunes, the community of Moy Mell began to slowly disband. The halcyon days of the cove had passed, and by 1938 the cabins were locked up and were rarely used.

During World War II, Gavin Arthur had enlisted in the U.S. Army and contributed to the war effort by turning over the cabins of Moy Mell to the Coast Guard. Moy Mell was used as an outpost for soldiers who were patrolling the dunes on horseback. Norm explains that there was concern about a Japanese invasion at the coastline, which is "level, flat, and uninhabited. It so happens that the area of the dunes is as close to Tokyo as you can get. It's a straight line. Take the latitude line and go across, and you come out in Tokyo Bay" (interview, August 2004).

By the end of the war in 1945, the constantly shifting dunes had begun to encroach upon the area of Moy Mell, and a 20-foot dune was about to bury the cabins. Back taxes had not been paid, and Gavin Arthur abandoned Moy Mell. The buildings of Moy Mell were put up for public auction. Oceano realtor Harold Guiton, Sr., was friendly with many of the Dunites. Knowing that Gavin was out of town, he paid the small amount of back taxes. Later, when Gavin returned, he said he was no longer using Moy Mell and that Guiton could have it. There was talk of breaking up the cabins for scrap lumber, and proceeds from this salvage would settle the debt from the back taxes.

After taking inventory, Harold Guiton had paid one hundred dollars for the cabins. The Community House, the largest building, was dismantled. In 1946 Gavin's cabin in which Baba had spent the night was jacked up and hauled over the dunes to the beach, where wheels were placed under it and it was moved to Paso Robles Street in Oceano. "The cabin was repainted and patched up to become home to a series of tenants who never imagined its history or the dreams that centered around it in the 1930s," Norm Hammond reports (*The Dunites*, p.103).

The current owner has donated the cabin to the local museum, the Oceano Historic Depot. Plans are in the works to move the cabin to Depot grounds, where it will be placed adjacent to the Rudolf Gerber Memorial Garden. The Depot plans on installing a photograph of Meher Baba within the cabin. The cabin is currently obscured from public view by a large fence but will soon be accessible to all.

A Passion for Oceano

Norm Hammond (who shares Meher Baba's February 25 birthday) is passionate about the history of Oceano. He published his book *The Dunites* in 1992 and a second history, *Oceano, Atlantic City of the West*, in 2004.

Baba's enduring presence in the area seems to have worked its magic. Norm was vacationing in Oceano in 1960 when he had a life-altering experience. While a passenger in a car making its way back to the guest house at which he and his friends were staying, Norm had what he calls a paranormal experience, which he described to me and Paul Williams in August 2004. Norm didn't know it at the time, but the cabin in which Baba had stayed stood less than a half a block away from where this experience took place.

Right after we turned onto Paso Robles Street, I had a paranormal experience. I felt like my whole life had been suddenly dumped out before me onto the road, and I was picking through the pieces to see what was relevant; to see what it was all about, what it meant, and what I should be doing. I had no idea what that experience meant, but it was with me the rest of the day. I suddenly felt a connection to this area, and it's stayed with me ever since.

That evening I went for a walk, and began to recover from that feeling of having my life dumped out before me. I felt like I an empty shell, and I was picking up pieces and putting them back in. Most of what did not go back in was what had transpired in my life before that day. That's about the best I can do to describe it. I have not had a lot of those kinds of things happen to me. I'm not one of these people who are always having out-of-body experiences or anything like that. It told me that this is where I need to belong. It took me another seven years to work my way back.

Several years later, Norm was able to move to South San Luis Obispo County, where he joined the Oceano Fire Department. During the twenty-two years that he was a firefighter, he served as Training Officer and Assistant Fire Chief.

Norm began his research for his first book in 1979 and interviewed people who had met Meher Baba, such as Dr. Gerber, Marion Thorpe, and Mary McMeen. As his

research proceeded, Norm learned about the history of the cabin on Paso Robles Street. He wrote to me:

Sometime around the mid-eighties, the owner of Gavin's Cabin on Paso Robles Street offered the building to the Fire Department, to be burned as a training exercise. This was a common practice at that time, and I had burned many buildings in town this way. It was a good deal because it was fun and provided excellent "live" fire training for the firefighters. It also saved a lot of money on demolition costs and building removal for the owners.

The cabin had served as a rental from around 1946 (when it was first moved from the Dunes into Oceano), until the mid-eighties. By this time the cabin needed an upgrade to conform to modern electrical and plumbing code requirements. The owner had other plans, however, and was not interested in doing this. He then contacted the Fire Department and offered the building to them so it could be burned down as a training exercise.

I was aware of the history of the building, and explained to the General Manager of the Oceano Community Services District why I did not want to burn it and that it should be preserved. The cabin sat vacant for several years after that. As the years went by, I was always surprised to see that it wasn't torn down or otherwise removed.

The Dunites gives a lively account of Meher Baba's visit in 1934. It mistakenly states that Baba communicated with a Ouija board rather than an alphabet board; however, the account does capture the essence of Baba's visit. It also mentions Sam Cohen and how the women in Baba's group once had to bail him out after he was thrown in jail for clam poaching.

In our interview, Norm mentioned that he had read Charles Purdom's *The God Man* as part of his research on the Dunes. Norm also touched on his own spiritual life: "Basically, I'm close to Vedantism. It enables me to be able to be free to float from one concept to another, because it's basically all One. If it's all One, how can any of it not be valid? Of course, there are complexities in trying to work through that, but I use that as an anchoring place in my understanding."

Visiting the Dunes Today

In May of 2004 a group of Baba lovers from the Santa Barbara area drove to Oceano and met with Norm Hammond and his wife, Cindy. Norm had agreed to be our

guide and lead us into the sands once graced with the Avatar's presence. We met at a local restaurant, and over lunch Norm told us the story of the Dunes and what he knew of Meher Baba's visit.

After lunch, while the tide was low, our group of cars headed out, taking the same route that Baba and his entourage took in 1934. Driving down the beach, we were amazed at the sight of hundreds of people driving every type of vehicle known to man. Dirt bikes flew by us at rapid speed, off-road vehicles zoomed by, and there seemed to be no pattern to the flow of traffic. It was absolute chaos. The beach and dunes surrounding Moy Mell and Doggett's Cove are now part of a State of California Vehicular Park. Thousands of people and vehicles pour into the park each year. Environmental groups are deeply concerned over the damage that is being done to this rare coastal area.

Norm directed us to a spot on the beach where we parked our cars and began our walk into the Dunes. It was a slow ascent, for the Dunes were steep, and we had to watch carefully for vehicles that seemed to fly from one sandhill to another.

Ten minutes later we were gathered around the cove of Moy Mell. A willow grove still stands from the time of Baba's visit, surrounded by pampas grass and wallflowers. Norm pointed out where each of the cabins once stood and told us what he knew of Meher Baba's visit to the Dunes.

Meher Baba has not left the Dunes. His presence is still palpable and as deep as the ocean. We walked the same sand dunes that Baba and his companion Sam Cohen once walked, and while their footprints in the sand have long been erased, the imprint of those footprints of love and devotion remain etched in our hearts.

NOTEBOOK:

Driving Directions to the Oceano Dunes

If you decide to pay a visit to the Oceano Dunes, plan your trip for midweek or a non-holiday weekend, as the beach is congested with recreational vehicles during peak times. Consult a local tide chart and schedule your visit for low tide and refer:

<http://www.classic-california.com/tides.htm>. You do not need a four-wheel-drive vehicle, but you will need to exercise caution driving on the sand so you don't get stuck.

Take Hwy 101 to the town of Pismo Beach, and take the Hwy 1 Exit to Pismo Beach. Go South on Hwy 1 approximately 3 miles to Pier Avenue. Turn onto Pier Avenue and drive towards the Ocean. The road dead-ends at the Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area Kiosk at the beach. There is a \$5 charge per car to enter the area by driving on the beach.

After driving south 1.9 miles from the end of Pier Avenue (note that during the winter Arroyo Grande Creek, just south of Oceano, can be difficult to get across), park as high up on the beach as the wet sand will allow without being stuck. It's best to park facing the ocean to take advantage of the slope when it's time to leave.

Walk inland towards the east about 1/4 mile. As you come to the crest of the high foredunes, you will see a fenced-in area below you with some vegetation. This is the general location of Moy Mell. The walk from the beach to Moy Mell takes about ten minutes. The sand can be deep and difficult to walk in. Watch and listen for dune traffic, as this is a popular off-road vehicle area year round. Off-road vehicle drivers are not used to seeing foot traffic in this area; it is a good idea to wear a bright color so you can be seen easily. The GPS coordinates for Moy Mell are: 35 degrees, 4.592 minutes north; 120 degrees, 37.414 minutes west.

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