



# THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

VOL. 49, No. 4

MAY 2008



## CAPE POGUE MEMORIES:

Tracks in Chappy Sand —  
The Life We Lived There

By JUDY SELF MURPHY

## MONACTING:

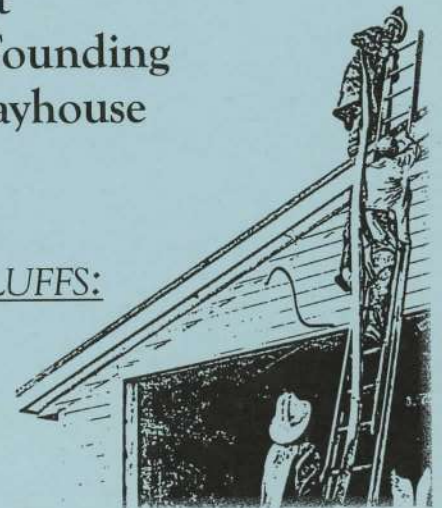
Phidelah Rice Made It  
A Specialty – Before Founding  
An Early Vineyard Playhouse

By THOMAS DRESSER

## WHARF FIRE IN OAK BLUFFS:

A Dramatic July Day  
Recalled in Photos

By SUSAN WILSON



Plus Christiantown ∞ Reunion of 1888  
Rejection at the Gazette

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## CORRECTION

In the February issue, in an article about the actress Katharine Cornell, the name of Lynn Fontanne was misspelled; thanks to reader Ralph Graves for mentioning it.

## ABOUT THIS EDITION

Two articles this month recognize the publication of new books steeped in portions of Vineyard history. The first article, "A Cape Pogue Memoir," by Judy Self Murphy, starts on Page 3. It is an excerpt from a comprehensive book of Chappaquiddick history, photos and memories to be published this summer by the Chappaquiddick Island Association. The second piece, starting on Page 13, is a discussion by Thomas Dresser of the role of the Rice family in building and developing an elocution school and playhouse on East Chop — a burgeoning campus, actually — in the years from World War I to the start of World War II. Mr. Dresser has a new book describing the murder that brought the Rice empire down, *Mystery on the Vineyard: Passion, Politics and Scandal on East Chop*, published this month by History Press.

The *Intelligencer* welcomes contributions. Letters to the editor intended for publication are also welcome.

Write: Editor, *The Dukes County Intelligencer*

John Walter

P.O. Box 1310

Edgartown MA 02539

E-mail: jwalter3337@yahoo.com. Put "*Intelligencer*" in the subject line.

# THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

VOL. 49, No. 4

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Founding Editor: Gale Huntington (1959-1977)

Editor Emeritus: Arthur R. Railton (1978-2006)

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## FIRST PERSON:

# 'There Won't Be Any People Where You're Going, Out to Pogue'

Life on Chappaquiddick's Most Distant Point

by JUDY SELF MURPHY

MY FATHER, ED SELF, first started coming to the Vineyard as a boy with another family whose son was his best friend. They would stay a few weeks, in town, at the Edgartown Inn or the Colonial Inn.

One of their favorite summer activities was to rent a catboat from Captain Prada of the Harborside Inn and sail out through the Gut into Cape Pogue Pond for a day of sailing, picnicking and swimming. Later in college he would drive up to the Cape from New Haven and rent a Crosby cat and sail over to Pogue for the weekend. He'd stay at the Finneys' summer cottage; all that's left of it now are the beach stone chimneys.

Little Beacon is one of five buildings built on our property in the 1920s. Previously the land at Cape Pogue had been used for grazing sheep, and the pond was called Sheep Shear Pen Pond.

Edna Whittlesy was a spinster and lived alone. Her only income was the proceeds from operating a teahouse out of our boathouse on Pogue Pond. The boathouse had a little addition on its north side that Mom says held a

JUDY SELF MURPHY has never missed spending some part of every summer of her life at Cape Pogue. Born in New York City, she grew up with her parents Ed and Bea Self, sister Karen Self Osler and brother Win Self in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y. She was educated at the University of Denver and Roosevelt Hospital School of Nursing. She has two adult children and currently resides with her mother at Cove Meadow on Chappaquiddick. This reminiscence is part of a forthcoming book, published by the Chappaquiddick Island Association, updating and expanding their previously published *Chappaquiddick: That Sometimes Separated But Never Equalled Island* (1981). The new book will be available this summer.



Edna See Whittlesy lived at Little Beacon in the 1940s and ran a teahouse.

small kitchen and dining area with a few tables.

Apparently Edna See had quite a business, and some days there would be a small fleet of boats anchored offshore with hungry sailors coming to the teahouse for lunch. Before sailing home against the southwest breeze, they'd enjoy a walk to East Beach and a swim; this is today still our favorite daily activity.

Edna's menu lists cucumber sandwiches, chicken sandwiches, meat sandwiches, club sandwiches, olive sandwiches and tea. I believe a sandwich cost 25 cents, a club 35 cents.

She had an arrangement with Captain Prada to sail out in his catboat and pick her up in front of the house every week to take her to

town to do her marketing. She always wore a dress, a hat and veil and white gloves, and she changed her shoes upon arrival in Edgartown. She'd pull her market basket up Main Street to Conner's Market, and when she was ready Captain Prada would sail her back out to Cape Pogue. In the fall, she took a room for the winter at the Harborside Inn and returned to Little Beacon in the spring.

The winterizing instructions she left for Mom detailed how to coat the stove, hinges, locks and everything else metal with Vaseline and newspaper to prevent rust.

### The Skipper and the Red Barn

The original six acres consisted of five buildings: the main house or Little Beacon, the boathouse, the Jib, the Red Barn and the Skipper.

Both the Skipper and the Red Barn were Massachusetts Humane Society Buildings, moved over from East Beach years earlier.

A website for the Humane Society describes how these buildings came to be: "When the Society was founded, survivors of shipwrecks might reach shore but often perished because the isolated beaches lacked any protective shelter. To address this problem, The Humane Society established huts of refuge and outfitted them with firewood and provisions to sustain survivors until local townspeople came to their rescue. The first hut was placed at Scituate Beach in 1787. By 1806, there were 18 huts along



The Skipper in 1946 after the Red Barn blew down. The white rowboat was built by Manuel Swartz Roberts, and the Self children all learned to row in it.

the coast and on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard."

The Society also built a barn to store a lifesaving boat: "More people could be saved if boats could be launched to go through the surf. Intrigued by a new design for a lifesaving boat, the Trustees provided funds for the construction of the first lifeboat in America. It was completed in 1807 and housed in Cohasset. With additional funding provided by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the number of lifeboats and boathouses along the coast expanded."

I believe the Red Barn was located near Drunkard's Cove, north of the Jetties, on East Beach. Years ago, Dad gave its identifying sign to the Dukes County Historical Society, now the Martha's Vineyard Museum, for safekeeping.

The society's lifesaving boat is now on the lawn by the Old Sculpin Gallery. The plaque says, "This Lifesaving Boat was built c. 1850 for the Massachusetts Humane Society. It was stationed at Cape Pogue from 1855 to 1933, when it was acquired by Captain Samuel B. Norton, who placed the boat here in 1941."

Perhaps from these dates we can surmise that the Skipper and the barn were moved off East Beach sometime between 1933 and 1941.

The kitchen cupboard in the Skipper still has a United States Coast Guard Station plaque over the door, as well as the original china plates and old ice box. The building consists of a little kitchen area and a single back room that has a sink, a spot for a double bed with a twin hung above from ropes and a box stove/chimney, along with a small but well-stocked bookshelf and two chairs.

Mom and Dad actually stayed in the Skipper for Thanksgiving one year; that was the year my brother, in the twin bed above, rolled over in the middle of the night and landed on Mother. She declared it was their last Thanksgiving out at Pogue, but marked the first of many on Chappy, often shared with the Plumb family. I continue to spend Thanksgiving on Chappy with Mom and my family, and my brother Win Self and his family continue to spend Thanksgiving out at Cape Pogue in his house on Shear Pen.

As for the Red Barn, its end came with the great Atlantic hurricane of Sept. 16, 1944.

Mom asked her brother Howard, a bombing pilot out of Weymouth, to fly over Pogue after the storm devastated the Vineyard with peak winds of 140 miles per hour.

His telegram to her, dated Sept. 24, reads: BOATHOUSE TOTALLY DESTROYED BARN ROOF GONE WALLS BUCKLED OTHER BUILDINGS UNDAIMAGED.

But Mom and Dad — he was away for the war, and there was a family to raise — were unable to return to Pogue to assess the damage; they didn't get back until the summer of 1946.

In 1949 Mom and Dad used the barn boards to build a garage on to the Skipper to store our red Willys jeep in the summer and for boat storage in the winter.

### The Squatters, and New Neighbors

Ike Pease was the squatter who came "with the property" when Mom and Dad bought it. He would do odd jobs for Dad, such as paint the trim, but Dad soon learned not to pay him until all the work was done.

Then he would take his dory and row to the tip of North Neck and walk to town. Upon return, he would tumble into his dory and push off, fetching up in what became known as Drunkard's Cove, just north of the Jetties, on the southwest breeze. He lived off the land clamming and fishing and hunting.

It's my understanding that there used to be a smallpox quarantine station out at Cape Pogue on Shear Pen Pond, and I've often wondered if Ike took over that building as his own place to live. Unfortunately, he burned the house down one night smoking. His hand pump out in the field is all that marks the house site.

There was another squatter, Ben Cromwell, who lived deep in the Cedars. He was rarely seen, but if you broke down on the beach, he would appear and help change the tire.

At that point in the 1950s there were only the Selfs, the Manwarings, and either Gill and Donna Ross or the Holzingers living out at Pogue. Johnny Edwards would come out weekly to refuel the lighthouse. The only four-wheel-drive vehicles manufactured at this point were two models of Willys jeeps, a little CJ model like our red one, or a wagon model, which



The Skipper's attached garage/boatshed under construction. Win and Karen Self watch the Willys jeep try the new ramp.

had a different axle width. This required separate tracks on the beach; to break your own tracks in the deep sand on non-radial skinny tires was pretty hard on the engine, which often overheated. So we would share the middle track and keep to "our" sized track.

Looking at the beach, there were always three tracks: one for narrow rigs, one for wider. As kids we got pretty good reading the tire treads and could easily figure out who went by, which direction and when.

In 1954 the Manwarings bought their property at the north end of the pond and decided to build a harbor for their boat, so they hired a young guy named Eddie, who had a crane and a bulldozer. Over the summer he scooped out a harbor and built twin jetties for them. I believe this is the job that gave him his start: Cottle's Lumber. Some days we would go over and spend hours zipping around their harbor in their dinghy's outboard. We also enjoyed many hours reading forbidden comic books.

Both Mrs. Manwaring and Mother loved to water-ski from the house through the Gut and all the way into town.

One day when Johnny Holzinger was about 15 and on his way into town, the Secret Service on the Honey Fitz hailed him. They had cruised over from Hyannis and anchored up off the Gut. Would you be able to take Jackie water-skiing? He said sure; so he took her skiing. When he returned her to the boat, the Secret Service asked if he'd like to come aboard to meet President Kennedy. They were holding his Whaler snubbed up too tight, bumping into the yacht. So he turned them down and zoomed back home to Pogue.

One year the Manwarings called Ted Henley and asked him to build them





Stuck in the sand at Cape Pogue. Perhaps the driver didn't follow the shared Jeep tracks.

a house for Benny. "How big a house?" "12 by 12." "Who's Benny?" "He's our daughter's horse," they said. "Build him a 12-by-12-foot stall." So he did, and Benny grazed freely all over Pogue each summer for years, only occasionally ridden. Sometimes he'd be down on our lawn grazing, sometimes over by the Lighthouse at the Holzingers', who rented the Rosses' house for years. They had a bathroom outdoors off the kitchen porch, and when Mrs. Holzinger would go to use it at night Benny would make a noise and scare her half to death.

A few years later there was a request to build a house for George. "How big?" "5 by 8." "Who's George?" "He's our other daughter's sheep." So he built a 5-by-8-foot house for George. But it, too, was rarely used as George also grazed free all over Pogue.

After a big Nor'easter the Manwarings called and announced that Loo Loo had blown over; could we all come over and help lift her up again? "Sure. Who's Loo Loo?" Loo Loo was their outhouse.

### Driving to Pogue

I believe it was Gerry Jeffers who was first to drive his model T out to Cape Pogue on balloon tires.

This was after the Jetties filled in and closed up so you could drive out. Up to this time, everyone traveled by boat to Pogue.

Gerry was always there doing whatever he could to help repair anything that had broken. After Hurricane Carol washed over the Town Wharf and

destroyed both our cars, it was Gerry who got them running again and even drove one to New York with Dad and the family and all our gear. I think it might have been his first trip off-Island.

The Norton hunting camp and dock was out on the Elbow; it was a single-story, simple structure, empty in summer and just used for hunting in the fall and winter; later it was made wider and higher and the windmill was added.

Dick and Bella Parmenter had a camp inland on Pogue and would come out weekends in their dory or their catboat *Saucy*. (This is now the Murrays' camp.) They were the first to use a wind generator power system out at Pogue. Now all the other houses use solar panels with generators for backup.

The Finneys' summer cottages were where the twin chimneys are near Stony Point. This is where Dad used to stay when he would sail over in the catboat from the Cape. The easterly house burned down in the '40s; the western house was removed due to erosion by 1970 or so.

During World War II, the Coast Guard lived in the keepers' house at the lighthouse and put in telephone service to Pogue. Their mission was to walk the beaches patrolling for enemy submarines, but their most important duty according to Mom: Bring the butter to Little Beacon for their clams!

When the war ended and Dad heard they were going to remove the telephone line, he urged them to leave it in place and we all had telephone service. The four houses shared a party line. It was great; each house (Manwaring, Ross/Holzinger, Self, Finney) had its own distinctive ring. So if we were visiting the Holzingers and it rang we would know if it was our ring and answer it. There were long or short rings, single or double rings.

Curiously, it was the Coast Guard that named our house Little Beacon. Coming from the Gut, they would take up a heading between the Cape Pogue lighthouse and the lights of our main house and find their mooring in the middle just off the beach from their boathouse; so they named our house Little Beacon.

### Growing Up after the War

When the war ended, Dad returned home to his family, now consisting of three kids: Karen, Win and me. He set out to establish summer traditions for his family. Besides buying Little Beacon he did another most remarkable thing: In 1949 he bought the world's very first fiberglass production sailboat: a 12-foot Beetle Boat Swan. In those days, the boat was named *Sea Elf*, a play on our family name, but none of us kids liked that name, so later we changed the name to *Twilight*, our favorite time to sail. The boat was restored in 2006, and she now shepherds the fourth generation of the Self family around in Pogue Pond with her blue sail, "BB 1."



The Lady Ship — a 16-foot bass boat built by Erford Burt of Vineyard Haven — pictured in 1961.

During the 1950s we sailed her weekly to the Dyke to go get the mail. We'd go on picnics, and later raced her every Tuesday against other wooden Beetle Cats in Cape Pogue Pond. The Race Committee first operated out of the Marshalls' boathouse, near the Heywoods', who raced their wooden Beetle Cat. Later Edo Potter headed up the races from the Welches' boathouse at the south end of the Pond.

It seems all of Chappy would come and spend the day down on the shore swimming and picnicking. Our Erford Burt-built *Lady Ship* was always on patrol duty. The fleet consisted of our Beetle Boat, Beetle Cats and perhaps a Knockabout. Still later came the Sailfish and Sunfish.

We also would pack up picnics after breakfast and sail off for the day exploring, anchoring up for swims, taking out our friends, and returning home when hungry. There were many sails to the Jetties, where we would anchor up near Bob Marshall's *Sunshine*, a wonderful huge catboat, and get to know all our Chappy neighbors.

The Selfs would arrive at Pogue for the summer the day after school got out and stay through Labor Day. Our first stop was the grocery store; it was exciting as each of us kids was assigned our very own shopping cart. Dad would get the manager, and we'd go up and down the aisles making our selections. The manager would go back and fill up all the carts with unopened cases: dog and cat food, Bluebird orange juice in two-quart cans,

Hawaiian Punch, Spam, beef stew, tuna, Bisquick, cases of dry milk with a case of Hershey's chocolate syrup so we'd drink the lumpy warm milk, canned vegetables and fruits, soups, and so on. Since each car was loaded with all our summer stuff, and everything was in cases, we sat on it all for the rest of the trip. This would hold us and we wouldn't shop again until the beginning of August, when Dad would come back for his vacation. He would also come up most weekends when he was off call.

Endless days were spent exploring all over Pogue and out to the Gut, either by boat or on foot. We rarely left Pogue, and only left Chappy once at the end of summer for the "Island Tour" and picnic at Gay Head with some lucky guest. An evening trip to town for a movie and ice cream was a Big Deal.

The Hodders lived at the Gut, and George Hodder loved working in his large vegetable garden. Whenever we came back in from fishing off Wasque we would stop at his dock and trade fish for fresh veggies. He might have been our fresh egg source, too.

Mom always knew where we were by the seagulls hovering and squawking overhead. They nested from the Jetties, all over Pogue and all the way out to the Gut.

There were always terns nesting out on the Elbow. When I moved to Cove Meadow in the mid-1960s, I hardly knew my way around; all I knew was Pogue. If we didn't meet you at the races, softball games at Pimpney-mouse Farm, or at the Jetty picnics, most likely we didn't know who you were. Some big summer events to look forward to were the horse show at Pimpney-mouse Farm, the big Jetty picnic, Edo Potter's annual ride on the horses out to the lighthouse, and the Edgartown Yacht Club's Round the Island Race. When I was unlicensed, I used to drive to the Dyke and park the jeep there and use a bike I kept there to get to the softball games.

Our mother's helper, who would come every summer, would make a point on the ferry to have us look at all the people around us, "because there won't be any people where you're going, out to Pogue." I remember Tony driving the Chappy Ferry and letting us turn the big brass wheel to lower and raise the wood ramps.

We kids soon learned that Dad didn't want to spend his weekends fixing things, so we all had to learn how to take care of tools and engines. We grew into driving the jeep. When our feet could finally reach the floor, with our right heel on the top of the accelerator and our big toe stretched over to the right onto the starter button, and our left foot on the clutch, then we could drive. Of course we had to pass my father's typed, three-page single-spaced test: Trace the electrical system; identify all these marked items in this drawing; what six things would you try on a foggy night to start the jeep?

We always carried a chain between the seats and learned to tow by getting vehicles out of our way at the Dyke. Drivers often ignored the signs

— four-wheel drive only or reduce tire pressure to 15 pounds.

We gained most of our driving experience carting around the telephone repairmen. We'd meet them at the Dyke and drive them pole to pole; they'd climb each pole and look for the problem. Later they buried the line underground and we became the experimental field testing ground for all the new wires. Service was poor, especially when foggy or damp.

There is still no electricity supplying Cape Pogue. In those days, we had a gasoline water pump up at the Skipper and it was the responsibility of us kids to run it twice a day to fill the water tank, which had a gravity feed down to the house. Kerosene was used for the Aladdin house lamps and lanterns, propane for the Servel refrigerator and gas stove. Weekly chores included gathering up all the lamps, cleaning the chimneys, trimming the wicks and refueling them all. One year the big project was spending the summer building the dock, which we all helped to do with a generator and a water pump to jet in the cedar spiles Foster had cut over the previous winter. Seems we had a lot of houseguests that summer....

We went everywhere by boat in all kinds of weather, day or evening. It was our responsibility to keep everything pumped and afloat, topped off and running. I remember how proud I was, alone at age 13, to run the 16-foot *Lady Ship* into the Finger Piers to pick up Dad and take him out to Pogue. Later we had the second Boston Whaler in Edgartown: *Pogue Rogue*.

Karen and I grew up visiting the kids at the Holzingers who were our age, but one of Win's best buddies, Bart Heywood, lived across the Pond.

Often the phone line to Pogue didn't work, so if either of them wanted the other to come over for an overnight, they raised a white sheet up the flagpole. Then the other would raise his sheet if it was okay, and sail across the Pond. Win would hoist his suitcase up the halyard of the *Sailfish* to keep it dry for his crossing.

To live on such a remote, inaccessible, primitive spit of sand dune far removed from life as we knew it at home required a certain type of person: a person who welcomed meeting a challenge, whatever it was, from wherever it came — sea, land or machine. The Finneys were doctorates in music; Gill Ross, Ed Self, Joe Murray, and Win Self are all physicians. Joe is even a Nobel Prize winner. Kathy Leisure, his daughter, is also a physician. Josh Manwaring created button-down collars and changed the way men dressed. I like to think that those who chose to live out at Cape Pogue thrived on rising to whatever the challenge thrown at them.

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## 'There Is No Money to Be Made In Operating a Summer Theater'

But the Rice Family Had Fun Trying It;  
From 1924 to 1940, They Ran a Playhouse

by THOMAS DRESSER

---

PHIDELAH RICE ESTABLISHED the second professional summer theater in the United States when he opened the Rice Playhouse on Arlington Street in East Chop in 1924. Rice had earned a national reputation for his acting prowess, so the Playhouse was a natural extension for his thespian endeavors. Son of a rugged pioneer preacher, Rice brought dynamic aspects of his heritage to his acting activities in Oak Bluffs.

To fully understand the depth of character and background of this unique individual and his family, let us begin with his father, also named Phidelah.

The senior Phidelah Rice was born in Kentucky in 1845, eldest of four children. When his own father, a teacher, died in 1850, his mother moved the family westward to Missouri. Phidelah became a Presbyterian missionary, following the career path of his great-grandfather. But ill health plagued him — possibly a case of undiagnosed tuberculosis — and Rice moved further west still in search of a more healthy climate. He ended up in Grand Junction, Colo., on the cusp of the American frontier.

There, in 1870, Rice married Annie Bernard. He raised cattle and in 1883 partnered with his brother William in the lumber business, cutting and milling timber for the influx of settlers to the state. An advertisement of the era announced the Rice Brothers have "the most complete stock

THOMAS DRESSER previously wrote "The Trial and the Tribulations of Ralph Huntingdon Rice," an exploration of the 1940 murder case referred to in this article, for the *Intelligencer* of August 2002. Now he has written a book on the topic, *Mystery on the Vineyard: Passion, Politics and Scandal on East Chop*, published this month by History Press; this article is based on a portion of the book. Mr. Dresser will speak on the murder case at the Museum on May 7 at 7 p.m., and at Bunch of Grapes in Vineyard Haven June 6 at 7:30 p.m.



ever brought to Grand Valley.”<sup>1</sup> Both brothers were involved in the Mesa County prohibition movement, and twice Phidelah ran unsuccessfully for secretary of state. William retired in 1896 and died in 1901, leaving sole proprietorship to Phidelah. The sawmill business flourished. He expanded his holdings as he planted fruit trees and began an orchard on his ranch.

He and Annie Rice had six children; two died while still young. The four survivors were Mary (later called May or Mae), Bernard, young Phidelah and Ralph. Early on, Phidelah, born May 4, 1881, showed promise on the stage. He remembered being mesmerized as a boy at a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. To his father’s chagrin, he won a public speaking prize, which earned him the attention of the superintendent of schools, who advised his father to encourage his son in an acting career. The father was astonished at the idea.

The sons all attended Colorado College. Bernard entered the ministry; Phidelah journeyed east to Boston and continued his education at the Leland Powers School of the Spoken Word. Ralph did not graduate, due to ill health, but pursued a musical career, playing the cello and singing.

### **The Chautauqua Movement, and Monacting**

Phidelah became involved in the Chautauqua movement and earned an impressive reputation in a very short time. The Chautauqua movement flourished from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup>. It consisted of outdoor lectures, readings, religious and musical events. And acting. “Monacting,” also called “interpreting,” was the term for a performance when a single person enacted numerous roles, playing multiple characters in succession in a given play. When Rice, for example, performed *Hamlet*, he was the only actor on stage.

Rice excelled at this, and gained national recognition for the way he performed such roles. A lyceum flyer from 1911 described his limitless talents: “Wherever in our country the art of ‘Monacting’ is known and appreciated, the mere announcement of the appearance of Mr. Phidelah Rice is sufficient to evoke great expectations and enthusiasm among Lyceum patrons.”<sup>2</sup> In one memorable performance, Rice read for an hour and a half and was given the Chautauqua salute, a singular sign of appreciation.

While continuing his education at the Leland Powers School, the student soon surpassed the teacher, as the *Amesbury Daily News* reported in 1911: “Mr. Rice is surely a very strong rival of his great teacher, Leland T. Powers, and his effort last evening stamps him as one of the best impersonators now before the public.” Powers, too, expressed his admiration for Phidelah: “I am an enthusiastic admirer of the impersonation work of Mr.

1 *Progressive Men of Western Colorado*, A.W. Brown & Co., 1905, p. 145.

2 Lyceum flyers on Phidelah and Ralph Rice, in the Redpath Chautauqua Collection in the University of Iowa library.



Phidelah Rice wanted more than an elocution school — he wanted to act.

Phidelah Rice. It has the characteristic of masterliness. It is spontaneous and virile and full of splendid human nature and truth. Knowing the man as I do, with his cultivated mind, his clean heart, clear head and winning personality, I do not wonder at his astonishing success.”

It was also during these years that Phidelah’s younger brother Ralph mastered his musical talents. The *Grand Junction Daily News* of Dec. 7, 1912, reported, “He is an artist. He excels in expression and interpretation. While Mr. Rice played, he held the close attention of his audience.” A flyer added, “Ralph H. Rice has a baritone voice of unusual rich quality



The Rice Playhouse on Arlington Street in East Chop. No trace of the building remains.

and never fails to please the most exacting audience. His voice is well-controlled, is very sympathetic, and he possesses a pleasing personality.”<sup>3</sup> Ralph was listed as a member of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Orchestra and first soloist with the Colorado College Glee Club, “meeting with marked success at every appearance.”

### First, a School for the Spoken Word

We don’t know what the specific motivation was, but in the summer of 1912, Phidelah and his new wife, the former Elizabeth Pooler, ventured off his successful Chautauqua circuit to open a summer school on Martha’s Vineyard, modeled on the Leland Powers School. The Phidelah Rice School of the Spoken Word, housed in Trinity Chapel adjacent to the Tabernacle in the Camp Ground, matriculated four students that first year.

A school handbook from 1914 — the year the Rices purchased land on East Chop, and moved the school there — spoke to the beauty that enticed the Rices to the Vineyard:

Oak Bluffs is an ideal spot for a summer school. With its picturesque cottages, its adjacent bathing beaches, its wonderful blue skies and bluer waters, it resembles a fairy island. The scene on its streets at night might well persuade one that he had happened upon a fete day in some foreign city. Orientals cry their wares, children laugh, care-free pleasure-seekers stroll and talk — surely no place could combine a greater variety of attractions.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Also among the flyers in the University of Iowa library.

<sup>4</sup> Rice School Handbook, 1914, Redpath Chautauqua Collection.

Course offerings included *The Speaking Voice*, where “students are given a thorough knowledge of the principles of voice building. But more than this, these principles are made practical in the eradication of the vocal faults peculiar to the individual student.” *Extemporaneous Speech* was a course that “trains the student to express his own thought with facility and effectiveness.” And the *Philosophy of Expression* was defined as when “the entire school assembles for interchange of ideas.” The Rice School was at the forefront of elocution training.

Tuition for a four-week course was \$65 plus \$5 for a diploma. The handbook said: “There is an additional charge of 50 cents a week covering cost of mail delivery, swimming privileges, costume materials, make-up, laundering facilities and use of electrical appliances.”

The school flourished, attracting students from across the country. Its popularity drew a wide range of students eager to improve their speaking habits. They included clergymen, Bible readers, teachers, college executives, lecturers, public speakers, lyceum readers and recitalists. Almost all of them were summer visitors, not Vineyarders.

The school graduated between 50 and 75 students per season. In 1931 only two students were listed from the Island: Adelaide Bangs of Vineyard Haven and Ruth Jordan of Oak Bluffs. At the end of the decade, in 1939, again two graduates were local: Elisabeth Merrill of Vineyard Haven and Freida Kligler of Oak Bluffs.<sup>5</sup>

In 1930, younger brother Ralph followed Phidelah to the Vineyard. He was listed as a “concert singer of note.”<sup>6</sup> As a teacher, due to a strict manner he developed a respectful following. The school brochure noted Ralph “has been a concert and opera singer and has taught both the singing voice and the speaking voice.” It was explained that “in New York, where he has a winter studio, Mr. Rice gives private instruction to singers and public speakers. Here on Martha’s Vineyard, in the summer time, he gives the same private instruction to all who are interested, at greatly reduced rates.”

### The Rice Playhouse Emerges

The success of the Rice School of the Spoken Word proved not enough for the talented Phidelah Rice. He wanted more than elocution; he wanted to act. In 1924 he and Elizabeth founded the Rice Playhouse as a home for the Phidelah Rice Players. Phidelah wrote: “Twenty years on the platform as a monactor of plays has convinced me that the modern public is not sympathetic to theatrical display either in the performer or in his vehicle — but demands first of all sincerity — next beauty, beauty of imagination, loveliness — and finally power.” By that he meant action. He acknowledged, however, “Although there is no money to be made in

<sup>5</sup> Rice School brochures in the collections of the Martha’s Vineyard Museum.

<sup>6</sup> Playhouse playbill, July 22, 1935.

operating a summer theater, there's lots of fun in it." <sup>7</sup>

Phidelah developed a fervent following. A local playbill announced: "His appearances at the Belmont Theatre, New York City, this present season, were noteworthy successes. His reputation is national." <sup>8</sup> Of Elizabeth: "Among women readers of plays in the United States, none stands higher."

The *New York Sun* hailed Rice in 1934 as America's greatest monactor. "Mr. Rice played 24 parts and contributed that necessary element of presenting in a physical form, sustained at all times by a strong sense of humor, all of the 24 parts. By sheer force of imagination and a magical genius, he made his men and women appear, disappear and reappear on stage, as if not one interpreter but a great many were presenting their roles for the entertainment of the audience." <sup>9</sup>

Phidelah and Elizabeth, who wintered in Brookline, purchased a rambling summer home on Arlington Street on East Chop, which became the hub of his expansive endeavors. <sup>10</sup> He encouraged family members into thespian activities as well. A playbill from 1933 announced, "Phidelah Rice will play Uncle Tom and little Carolee Rice [Phidelah and Elizabeth's daughter] will be seen as Little Eva. The production will enlist the largest cast, about 30, ever seen on Martha's Vineyard." <sup>11</sup>

The next year it was noted that "Mr. [Ralph Huntington] Rice's truly magnificent baritone has received high praise from metropolitan critics, and to hear him sing will be as rare a treat for all of us, and especially music lovers." The following year: "Mr. Bernard Rice [the elder brother], our Box Office Chief this season, reports that patrons of the Playhouse have expressed hearty satisfaction with the high caliber of plays this season. They say that the Vineyard Players are their favorite." <sup>12</sup>

The Rice Playhouse produced notable Broadway plays: the 1924 Pulitzer Prize winner *Hell-Bent Fer Heaven*, for example. Phidelah brought the works of Noel Coward to the Vineyard. In 1930, Phidelah toured from Maine to the Deep South to promote himself and his Playhouse; he enticed actress Jessica Rogers to perform on the Vineyard stage. One of her

<sup>7</sup> Playhouse playbill of 1929.

<sup>8</sup> Playhouse playbill of 1932.

<sup>9</sup> Playhouse playbill, July 22, 1934.

<sup>10</sup> The East Chop campus for Rice-run enterprises eventually included five residences, mostly dormitories for the school students; the School; the Theater, and a couple of smaller buildings. Today, little remains of the place. The foundation of one woman's dormitory, Sumner Hall, is on East Chop Drive, just up from the Beach Club. Phidelah's old cottage remains and a second dormitory has been turned into a private home. The Playhouse itself is gone.

<sup>11</sup> Playhouse playbill, July 1, 1933.

<sup>12</sup> Playhouse playbills, July 9, 1934, and July 15, 1935.

**THE ISLAND PLAYGOER**

VOL. IV. NO. 2

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**THE VINEYARD RICE 1935 SEASON PHIDELAH RICE PRESENTS PLAYERS**

*"Frame your mind  
to mirth and merriment,  
which bars a thousand harms  
and lengthens life."*

ARTRBENZ



leads was in *The More the Merrier*, a farce by May Cerf and Robert Hanna, having its "world premiere" here in 1935.

While the country suffered through the Great Depression, the Rice Playhouse continued on. The 200-seat Playhouse tried to make a night out an event: paintings and pottery were on display in the lounge, musical recitals entertained playgoers at intermission, iced soft drinks were available at the refreshment stand.

Henry Beetle Hough, editor of the *Vineyard Gazette*, was a fan, although he fretted that some of the Island's sophisticated summer visitors looked down on the efforts — too sophisticated for their own good, he thought.

In the early part of summer one would drive to the ... playhouse before twilight and see the sunset glow in the sky during the first intermission; as August neared its end, one would go in darkness and, stepping out of doors between the acts, hear the locusts and smell the pines in the full velvet of night itself. The bright stars and the Milky Way were the real proscenium, and if the whistle of the late steamboat could be heard during the action of the play, we did not mind, and for us the illusion was not spoiled.<sup>13</sup>

To further boost attendance, Rice arranged free bus service from the Island House on Circuit Avenue, with stops at the Wesley Hotel and the Ocean View Hotel. An evening ticket was \$1.50 while a program of nine plays, with front row seats, cost \$12. Reservations could be made at Island pharmacies, or by dialing the three-digit exchange, 441.

In 1932, Phidelah opened a 25-seat Children's Theater, with two productions each summer: Peter Rabbit, Little Joan of Arc, Treasure Island introduced children to what theater could be.

But at the height of success, Phidelah Rice took ill. It was the season of 1940. By now, Phidelah, Elizabeth and Ralph were devout Christian Scientists (we do not know the origins of their interest in this religious teaching). The June term at the Rice School was popular with Christian Science practitioners, who, in one class, read aloud from the Bible to practice diction and elocution. As a Christian Scientist, when he became ill Phidelah allowed no medical efforts to be taken on his behalf. Playhouse management that year was leased to a man from New York, but Mae Rice, Phidelah's sister, managed the school operations. The Playhouse season opened with *A Bill of Divorcement*, a comedy-drama.

Then, on a sunny Sunday morning in late June, Mae Rice was notified that one of the school's elderly students, Mrs. Clara Smith, had been

13 Henry Beetle Hough, *Once More the Thunderer*, Ives Washburn Inc., New York 1950, page 157. As with other individuals in the book, Hough changed the names of the Rice family, but his admiration for what Phidelah Rice accomplished is clear.

found murdered in her bedroom. The ensuing police investigation threw the campus into turmoil from which it never recovered. Ralph Huntingdon Rice was jailed on a charge of murder; he was soon acquitted. But it was too much disruption for the family enterprise to survive: The school was shuttered, and the last show of the 1940 season, *No Time for Comedy*, a play popularized on Broadway by the Vineyard's Katharine Cornell, ended the Rice Playhouse.<sup>14</sup>

Phidelah Rice did not regain his health. He died on St. Patrick's Day, 1944. His obituary noted, "His greatest thrill in this career, he says, was when he was introduced at the New York State chautauqua grounds." Then it added: "For a great many years he had been the head of a widely known and successful dramatic school located at Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. Naturally, since the country has been at war, the activities of this well known school have been curtailed."<sup>15</sup>

Bernard Rice died on Christmas Day, 1949, but we are unable to determine when siblings Ralph and Mae died.

Elizabeth sold the Arlington Street house and moved back to the family home in Brookline. Daughter Carolee continued to visit the Vineyard and eventually relocated here, settling in Vineyard Haven. Her daughter, Susan Canha, married and raised her family here, and currently is a licensed practical nurse at Windemere Nursing and Rehabilitation Center.

14 Under the name Martha's Vineyard Playhouse, it continued briefly.

15 Obituary of March 19, 1944, in the collection of the Museum of Western Colorado.



Martha's Vineyard Museum

## 120 Years Ago, 'Sons Who Are of the Great American World' Come Home

IT'S JULY 1888, and the Sons of Martha's Vineyard — men of all ages who have moved off-Island — gather before the camera in the grove at Tashmoo. It is their first reunion.

THE MARTHA'S VINEYARD HERALD salutes the Sons: "Their annual visits are now an assured fact, and the great good to grow out of it will be seen in the broadening of the views of the home people by contact with Sons who are of the great American world, a lessening of the petty contention between towns, a union of Martha's Vineyard into one people with broad, progressive ideas."

THE CENTRAL EVENT of the visit is a Fourth of July reception — school-children, townsmen, the Fitchburg band, and the Sons parading out the dusty road from Vineyard Haven to Tashmoo. There in the woods, a temporary platform, splashed in bunting of red, white and blue, is erected; in front of it, a dozen tables groan with food. There is speechifying, with one representative from each of the Island towns, and the Star Spangled Banner is sung.

AND THEN everybody adjourns for a baseball game. Abner Doubleday's game is still, in 1888, evolving; under the rules of the day, it takes five balls to make a walk. The Sons of Martha's Vineyard thoroughly whips the home team, 16-9. Will they be invited back?

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## FROM OUR ARCHIVES:

# Remarkable Christiantown

Its Beginnings, Preachers ∞ Confusion of Boundaries  
The Rights of Women ∞ A Square Mile Dwindles  
Division Among Eight Families ∞ The Chapel Ground

by ELEANOR RANSOM MAYHEW

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**W**ITH THE NEXT ISSUE, the Dukes County Intelligencer begins our 50th year of publication. The first edition, in August 1959, was a relatively modest affair of 16 pages, and the editor, Gale Huntington, only said he "hoped" that the journal might be issued quarterly. It has been here ever since. The full run of bound copies, available at the library of the Martha's Vineyard Museum, offers an extraordinary collection of articles, photos and illustrations that, in subject matter, span the range of recorded Vineyard history. We thought as we approach this milestone, our current readers might enjoy seeing how it all started. This is the story that launched the Intelligencer, 50 years ago, in Volume 1, Number 1. It runs here as it first appeared, with slight editing. — Ed.

### 1. Foundations of the 'Praying Town'

In 1659, ten years before the first purchase by the English in Takemmy (now West Tisbury), the Sachem Keteannummin, alias Josias, gave "land for a township" to the only four "Known" Christian Indians in his sachemship: his uncle Pamick, Nonoussa, Tahquanum and Poxsin. No record exists of the original transaction for it was conducted according to the "Indian custom verbally" as Josias' son, Zachariah Peeskin, later af-



firms. An actual deed of gift was executed only after the sale by Josias of a large section of Takemmy to Messrs. Allen, Sandish, Peabody and Skiffe had so incensed the Indians that Governor Thomas Mayhew was obliged to mediate between them and their Sachem.

The Governor's efforts resulted in three important documents. One was an agreement that no more land would be sold to the English without the consent of four named Indian trustees together with Josias and Mayhew. The second was a statement by Mayhew dated 28 May 1669 testifying that "Josias and Wannamanhutt did in my presents give the Praying Indians a tract of land for a town and did committe the Government thereof unto my hand and posterite forever: the bounds of the said land is on the north side of the Iland bounded by the land called Ichpoquassett and soo to the pond called Matta Paquattonooke & into the Iland so far Papamakes fields where he planted & now plants or soos: it is as broad in the woods as by the sea side..." Translated into modern geographical terms, the original grant extended from the mouth of Blackwater Brook on Lambert's Cove, south and east to Old House Pond, thence south and west to the field opposite Crocker's Pond on the North road and northerly to the Sound past a pond identified by Josias as "Pissa."

The third paper, signed by Keteannummin, witnessed by four Indians and Mayhew, and dated Jan. 9, 1670, reaffirms that "the Town Manettouwa-tootan in Taukemmy shall remain in the possession of the praying men." It further provides for the disposition of the land "if the inhabitants turn from god his Wayes." This is the first recorded use of the name Manettouwa-tootan, or God's Town, which later is called Onkokame, Onkame, and eventually just Christiantown.

Why Josias, who never became a Christian and of whom the Rev. Experience Mayhew said, "I can give no very good Character," should have set off a township for the praying Indians is somewhat of a puzzle. One explanation would be the influence of Wanamanhoot, whose name appears in two of the documents as co-grantor. According to *Indian Converts*, the Who's Who of Vineyard "godly" natives compiled by Experience Mayhew in 1726, Wanamanhoot "had for his Father a Sachem of the Massachusetts Bay, by whom being sent hither to take care of the Rights he here claimed, he settled on the Island and became a Christian or praying Man."

A pertinent statement notarized in 1714 by Thomas Mayhew III and Benjamin Skiffe relates:

The testimony of Sonommo and Samson and Isaac Wohonnottah, three Indians of full age witnesseth and saith that they being long since at a great meeting of Indians at Takemmy where the Sachims

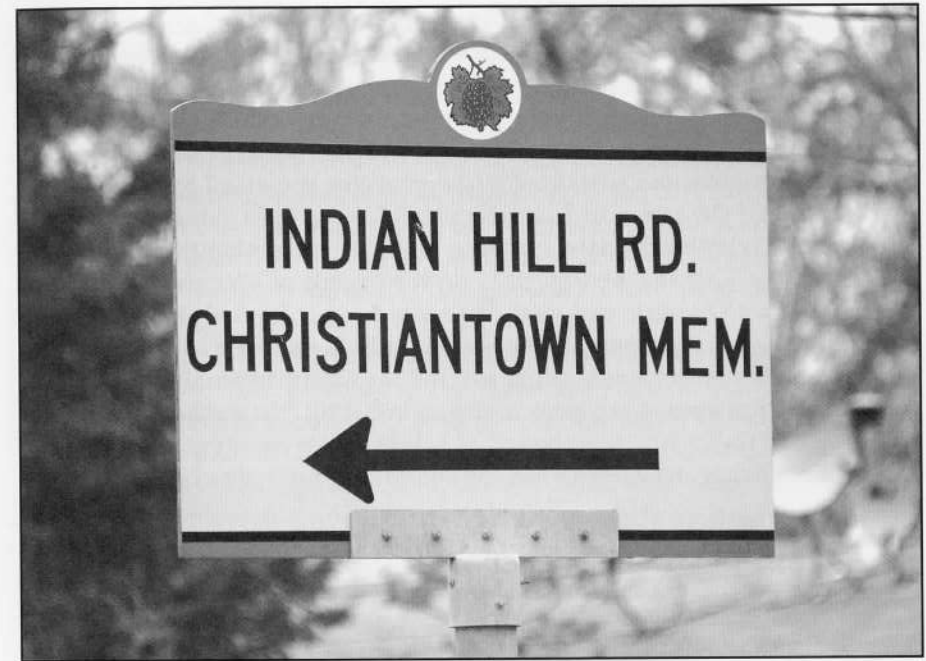


discoursed of giving a tract of land for a Town for the praying Indians — and at sd meeting Josias his father the old Sachim with the rest of the Sachems all agreed that Wonamohoot should have all the land to the westward of a place called Nippessiah to be at his own disposal this being don: the sd old Sachim Josias his father and the sd Wonamohoot agreed upon a tract for a praying town.

Indian praying towns were no novelty in the Bay Colony, the first one having been established at Natick in 1651, with at least six more in 1670 and 14 listed by Daniel Gookin in 1674. But these were set aside by the General Court rather than a “barbarous” Indian. In fact, Josias’ conveyance may well be the only instance whereby a non-conforming sachem made provision for his “Gospelized” subjects. There is some indication, derived from the fact that Pamick, Nonoussa, Tahquanum and Poxsin had agreed on Feb. 23, 1659, to pay him a yearly bounty of 20 shillings, and also from Josias’ subsequent real estate operations, that the Sachem was something of an opportunist. In other words, the idea of a praying town may have struck him as a sound business proposition. If so, he was doomed to disappointment for the 20 shillings was not forthcoming.

At any rate, less than five years after Josias had set his “mark” on these various agreements, he began selling off pieces of Manettouwatootan. For a “parcel of land at Wampache” in the southwest corner, Simon Athearn paid him 20 pounds of sheep wool, one hat, four sheep, four goats, four kids, one “fatt weather goat,” one cheese and one peck of Indian corn. The rest of his transactions were all for cash. In 1682, Isaac Chase picked up a nice section of shore front between Blackwater Brook and James Pond and “well into the land” for “a valuable sum.” Jonathan Lambert, whence the Cove’s name, gave seven pounds for a tract adjoining Chase’s and the Pond in 1694. All in all there were nine sales of Christiantown property involving about 300 acres registered as taking place between 1670 and 1699 at which time Josias did “ratify and confirm in a most legal manner” his original grant.

This latter document is actually a tabloid history of the grant to date. In it the Sachem complains that he has not received his 20 shillings bounty, the four original grantees “long since” being dead and having “forsook that place”; that Uncle Pamick never returned the 15 pounds he borrowed in 1669 to pay the settlers for a fire he made “which broke out and run so that it killed many of the English their goats...” ; that “being grown old and poor and not able to work,” he had sold land to the English “for my maintenance.” However, he says, since so many “have made much trouble” about this land he has sold, and “some men say the praying Indians must have their town I formerly gave them... I, Josias, ... have thought it fit to settle the bounds thereof and return the pay I have received for it.” Herein



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for the first time he describes the area as “one mile square.”

Whether this was an old man’s apology or he really intended restitution will never be known, for within two years he was dead. However, his son and heir Zachariah likewise “in a very ample and legal manner, did ratify and confirm his father’s grant...” Zachariah in a deed dated May 13, 1701 turned over Manettouwatootan to Isaac Ompany, a ruling elder in the Christian Church, Patuck, Thomas Paul “and their associates in the Christian religion and successors forever according to the law.” And in 1702 he discharged the inhabitants of “Onkecommie” from all obligation to him in consideration of “ye full sum of forty pounds current money in new England to me in hand paid.”

Due to the confusion caused by these attempts to reaffirm the original bounds of the praying town plus the fact that a good half of the area had been purchased and was being farmed by the English, an official survey was made at the request of the Tisbury authorities in 1709 to settle the matter once and for all. Then again, after another series of sales by Mr. Ompany and other Indians, notably Zachariah Papameck, the town clerk, a complaint was made which produced the survey of 1762 and an agreement with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England, etc., acting as trustees for the praying Indians “of Onkokame,” who now numbered 54.

## 2. The Act of 1828

Actually it was not until 1828 with the passage of an Act by the General Court "For the better regulation, instruction and government of the Indians, etc., in the County of Dukes County," that the land remaining to Christiantown was established by law. This Act was the result of recommendations submitted by a committee appointed by the Legislature in 1826 which included Daniel Fellowes, Jr. of Edgartown. Their report is both exhaustive and interesting. Among other things, it notes that the "existing Aborigines... on the Islands of Chappaquiddic, and Martha's Vineyard, and on the opposite main... formerly known in our history and legislation, as the South Sea Indians," were in a far happier condition than those in other parts of the Commonwealth. It describes their local form of self-government as imitating "the method...observed among their white neighbours" of holding town meetings, electing certain officials and auditing "all the accounts of their tribe."

No radical [the report goes on to say] could be more prompt and pertinacious to resist improper or prodigal expenditure than they. One usage of these assemblies is worthy of mention...of a principal of natural right, which political writers have advanced in theory but which was never carried into practice in Massachusetts, except by these remains of a primitive people. The *women*, being proprietors, vote in like manner as the men.

And this a century before passage of the XIX Amendment to the U.S. Constitution!

Section One of the 1828 Act, which applied both to Chappaquiddick and Christiantown, provided for the appointment of three commissioners to "make partition of the lands belonging to the Indians..." By now Christiantown had dwindled from the "flexible mile square" to 390 acres and the population was 45, composed of eight families: two Peterses, James, Mingo, DeGrass, Simpson, Weeks and Howwossowee. The division, far from the simple arithmetic procedure of putting eight into 390, was by law handled meticulously "according to rules of birth-right and descent and those rights individuals and families may have acquired by virtue of a possession and improvement." Thus, Francis Peters with a family of six received 48¼ acres where stood his dwelling house plus a woodlot of nine acres, while Diademy Howwossowee, who apparently "lived single," received but eight acres, which included a spring "considered free" and woodland totalling 3½ acres. Thomas Fish of Falmouth, John Hancock of Tisbury and Jeremiah Pease of Edgartown were the commissioners. The Christiantown partition was commenced April 14, 1828, partially completed June 4 when a cooling-off period until Sept. 24 was allowed

for adjustments, and concluded Sept. 29 "according to our best skill and judgment."

## 3. The Early Preachers

Happily, the ecclesiastical history of Manettouwatootan is less involved than its early topography. While no documentary evidence exists, it is almost axiomatic that the four original proprietors of the little praying town not only knew Thomas Mayhew, Jr., but received their first word of the "white man's God" from his lips. And without doubt, one of the several Indian teachers on the payroll of the Commissioners of the United Colonies, beginning in 1659, was assigned to this section of the Vineyard.

Among the early ministers enshrined in *Indian Converts* is Wunnanaauhkomun, who "preached at the Place now called Christiantown and died there in or about the Year 1676 ... He was highly esteem'd and honoured by many of the poor People, to whom he dispensed the Word of God ..." Another was Joel Sims, son of Poxsin, who "was called to preach the Gospel at Christian-Town the place where he lived ... He dy'd while yet a young Man, I think about the Year 1680 ... and much lamented by good People among the Indians..." There was also James Sepinnu, brother to Tackanash, the successor to Hiacoomes, first Indian convert on the Island, who "preached the word" at a "Place now called Okokame." And listed as "good men" are John Howannan, who died in 1678; Noquittompany, father of "that good Isaac Ompany," and Paul, "commonly called Old Paul," for whom Paul's Point is named.

Thus, it may be seen, Governor Mayhew, who continued his son's missionary work after the latter's untimely death in 1657, was not without his deputies. His grandson John, who lived at Quanaimes, was also intimately connected with the spiritual welfare of the Indians, especially at Christiantown. Thomas Prince notes in his addenda to *Indian Converts* that "the Indians very much repaired to his House for Advice and Instruction," also that he preached "once every week to one or other of the Indian Assemblies on the Island."

Following John's death in 1688, leadership of the native churches remained in the hands of native preachers for eight years until his son Experience came of age. A 1698 report on Vineyard Indian missions states that "at Onkonkemme ... are three score and twelve persons, unto whom Stephen and Daniel, who are brothers, are preachers; well reported of for their gifts and qualifications..." They were sons of Nashohkow, a "praying Indian of Taacame." Stephen is listed with the "Godly Ministers" in *Indian Converts* though the author damns him with faint praise, "In his natural Parts he did not excel; yet being looked on as a serious and godly Man, he was employed as a Preacher..."

The Rev. Experience Mayhew called himself "of Christiantown" and



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devoted himself entirely to missionary work. Dr. Cotton Mather wrote in his *Magnalia* that “in the Evangelical Service among the Indians there is no Man that exceeds this Mr. Mayhew, if there be any equals him.” And Thomas Prince says, “The Indian Language has been from his Infancy natural to him, and he has been all along accounted one of the greatest Masters of it that has been known among us.” Mayhew’s translation of the Psalms into the local idiom together with the volume *Indian Converts* are perhaps his greatest contributions to posterity. Actually Experience’s efforts were dedicated quite as largely to the material as to the spritual welfare of his charges, for he represented the authority of both the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and of the General Court. It was under his guardianship that a modicum of self-government was initiated at Christiantown.

Zachariah Mayhew succeeded his father in 1767 and carried on the combined work of preacher and schoolmaster during the parlous times before and during the Revolution. As the clouds of war gathered, funds from England lessened and finally ceased entirely. Thus it was not until 1787 that an American Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Indians and others was incorporated in Massachusetts which, in effect, took over the missions originally sponsored by the British Society. The records of this new group state that “they assist in the support of the Rev. Mr. Mayhew on Martha’s Vineyard” and also “on Martha’s Vineyard they sup-

port a number of small schools for Indian children.” Zachariah Mayhew was employed by the Society from 1790 to 1806 when his death ended the Mayhew jurisdiction over Wanittoutootan as provided in Josias’ deed of gift.

Frederick Baylies, known as the “last missionary to the Indians of Martha’s Vineyard” was appointed by the SPG in 1818. According to the regulations of the Society, the missionaries were not to bother with “people enjoying the ordnances of religion” but were to confine their labors to those “without privileges.” These latter apparently were the children, for Baylies’ reports to the Society concern schoolwork alone with no mention of church services. In 1824 he tells of teaching at Christiantown one week having “previously employed a female teacher 9 weeks.” In 1828 he taught two weeks and employed Miss “Salley Renolds” seven weeks. “I had 21 scholars,” he writes. “Ten read in the Testament, nine in the spelling book and two in the Alphabet. Twelve were writers. They answered 2000 questions in Colburn’s Arithmetic.”

The 1827 Report, drafted during Baylies’ incumbency, has this to say about education among the “South Sea Indians”:

Your Committee found, that in... Christiantown...schools are taught from 3-5 months in a year, chiefly at the expense of the Society for Propagating the Gospel... ; under the general superintendence, and partly under the instruction of their Missionary, the Rev. Frederick Baylies. From the specimens of proficiency which your Committee had an opportunity to observe in reading, writing, and orthography, they are of the opinion, that the different branches of a common school education are taught with fidelity, and success.

It was at this time, also, as provided in the Act of 1828, that the Christiantown Indians were specifically placed under the guardianship of a state-appointed and paid individual. This person, according to the new law, should be “a good and discreet man... a Justice of the Peace” who would hold office for a term of four years, post a bond in the amount of \$1000 and receive an annual salary of \$100. His duties were to call a town meeting in March or April at which the people would choose a clerk, two overseers, a constable, field driver, pound keeper “and other town officers whom they deem necessary.” The guardian had jurisdiction over money matters, all real estate transactions except between natives, and jointly with the overseers exercised police power and provided the instruction of the young and support of the poor. The Hon. Leavitt Thaxter, son of the Reverend Joseph of Bunker Hill fame, was the first guardian under the new Act, and his successor, Barnard C. Marchant, the last.



#### 4. The Bird Report, 1849

The "Conditions of the Indians in Massachusetts" evidently remained on the legislative conscience, for a second commission was appointed to report to the General Court in 1849. This was the so-called Bird Report, House Document 46. The Christiantown statistics of this date note a population of 48 with nine at sea; two horses; an increase from 1828 in the number of swine of eight; of 13 in the number of neat cattle; and substitution of fowl for sheep. The Commissioners gave a good account of the "Onkokame" Indians, who, they found, lived in "comfortable houses," fenced in their fields properly, and planted "sauce gardens" in addition to the customary corn and potatoes. The Committee again called attention to the fact that "the rights of women are fully recognized, the females taking the same liberty of speech, and, when unmarried or in the absence of their husbands, enjoying the same right of voting with the men." It noted that while state aid was allowed the school, the Indians were without any preaching or religious teachers due to the fact that the "fund formerly appropriated was now with held." However, they "frequently hold meetings among themselves and the more gifted exhort and pray."

Recommendations by this Commission to the General Court included a subdivision of the lots set off in 1828 which was desirable because of "questions growing out of necessity of dividing the property of deceased persons among heirs" which were arising and "puzzled the guardian and legal gentlemen." It referred to the type of self-government allowed by the 1828 Act as "anomalous" and suggested a measure whereby citizenship would be granted the Indians with an implicit recognition of and liability to taxation.

This Report apparently fell on fallow ground for it was not until after the Civil War — 1869 to be exact — that any of the inequities listed were corrected. Chief of these was the admission into the Union as first class citizens of the native inhabitants and their descendants designated as "Indians and people of colour." Also a redistribution of lots or shares at Christiantown was authorized with Joseph T. and Richard L. Pease appointed to this commission. The result was a genealogical triumph and a masterpiece of mathematical acumen. It resolved 18 lots into 100 and even satisfied the estate of Solomon Weeks, who had four wives to his credit and 18 heirs to share his 73 acres and 17 rods.

#### 5. Lot 8: The Chapel Grounds

In this, the final division, Lot 8 is specified as that "set off for the accommodation of a meeting House by the commissioners in 1828 having then for a long time been used for that purpose. It is still so used; with a small, well kept, and convenient building thereon, devoted to religious purposes and is so to remain." This is, of course, the lot taken by the county com-

missioners in behalf of the County of Dukes County under provisions of Chapter 78 of Acts of 1939 "authorizing Dukes County to take by eminent domain a certain Indian Chapel and Burial Ground for the purpose of preserving the same as an Indian Memorial."

This lot, with its bounds, is described by the 1828 set-off as "being the same land occupied for that purpose

during the faithful labors of the Revd Zacheriah Mayhew." That this is the original meeting-house lot is fairly indisputable, although Josias' 1699 testament only mentions the existence of a meeting house within the mile square without locating it. However the burying ground with its fieldstone markers is unquestionably Christian, and the early Colonial custom was to erect the meeting house within the cemetery bounds.

As for the building itself, the present one was built by the state for a schoolhouse in 1829, and probably used intermittently by the Congregational Meeting until 1870 when it was dedicated as a Baptist Church. That it was preceded by at least two structures is again verified by the Sachem's statement of 1699. In reaffirming his grant, he says, "In this sd tract of land was the Indian's meeting house when Joel the son of Poxin was their minister." This was prior to 1680. Josias then continues, "And in this tract of land have the praying Indians of Takemmy set up a frame for a meeting house now four years ago..." (1695). Presumably the latter was the one referred to in 1828 which tradition has it burned.

The story of Christiantown since enfranchisement can be detailed in the terse terms of the logbooks so many of its inhabitants as whalemen were accustomed to keep. In 1874 a smallpox epidemic decimated the population. Others married and moved away, some to Gay Head, the newly incorporated Indian town. In 1878 Leander Peters sold two lots of land to Thomas N. Hillman and Elisha Luce without benefit of clergy. In 1909, Joseph Quonowell Mingo raised \$40 and supervised repairs preparatory to reopening the old chapel, Sept. 15. Rev. C. L. Whitman of Gay Head was chairman of the exercises which began by



Mark Lovewell

singing "The Glory Song," led by Miss Cordelia Luce.

In 1911 a bronze tablet was affixed to a boulder at the end of the burying ground by the Sea Coast Chapter of the D.A.R. commemorating the establishment of Manewattoutootan. Then in 1926 the same chapter of the D.A.R. came to the rescue of the chapel building and underwrote its repair. Subsequent depredations which included cutting of timber and removal of tombstones aroused the ire and interest of the public, which urged the establishment of the old meeting house lot as a memorial to the Praying Indians, who as the commission of 1849 said, were a "Bulwark between the hostile Indians and the feeble colonists."

Today the "about 4 acres" fenced off by a mossy fieldstone wall, approached by a woods road slightly wider but not untypical of the path followed by the first Missionary Mayhew, now belongs to all the "praying people" — the taxpayers of the County of Dukes County, as doubtless the old Sachems would have had it. By arrangement with the County Commissioners, the Martha's Vineyard Garden Club supervises the maintenance of the Memorial and has planted a wild flower trail. Samuel George Mingo, grandson of Joseph, was the last resident of Christiantown and his house, built by George W. DeGrass, a doughty whaler, is the only one still standing of the old settlement of Praying Indians.



The Oak Bluffs wharf on a busy summer day in the 1920s.

## Photos of 1965 Wharf Fire Capture Ordinary Men in Extraordinary Test

When Oak Bluffs Had Four Firehouses,  
Joining the Department Was a Rite of Passage

by SUSAN WILSON

**T**housands of photographs reside in the archives of the Martha's Vineyard Museum. They date as far back as the beginning of photography, in the mid-19th century, and they include images of whaling captains and Civil War soldiers, the great storms of the last century and personal snapshots of families over the years. Writer Susan Wilson, happening to come across in the files a group of photos of "younger versions of men I recognized," was prompted to pursue the following story, and allow us the chance to share these photographs with you. — Ed.

Anyone hearing the seven blasts of the air horn atop the Lake Street fire barn, followed by two blasts — seven-two, knew something was happening at the Oak Bluffs wharf that late Wednesday afternoon of July 21, 1965. William (Billy) Norton recalls standing at the top of Ocean Park at Park

SUSAN WILSON is development and publications coordinator at the Martha's Vineyard Museum. She has published five novels and her column on writing appears twice monthly in the *Martha's Vineyard Times*. Wilson lives in Oak Bluffs with her husband, David. She last wrote for the *Intelligencer* about the history of the Triad Club (August 2007).

Street and thinking: *Oh my Jesus!* at the sight of the tornado-sized plume of black smoke rising above the Oak Bluffs Wharf. The alarm code alerted the men of the Oak Bluffs Volunteer Fire Department to drop whatever they were doing and run for the trucks.

In short order all four of the town's pumpers and its aerial ladder truck were in position.

A newspaper article at the time, speculating on the origin of the blaze, said the available evidence "...strongly suggest[s] that a cigarette was dropped by a landing passenger from the steamer *Nobska*, which had docked at 4:30."<sup>1</sup> Forty-three years later Don Billings believes that the cigarette landed in the debris-filled gutter along the freight shed, smoldering until it reached the 15 layers of roof shingles. Norton suggests it may have landed inside a spile, or piling, which at that time were frequently rotted at the top and hollowed out.<sup>2</sup>

In 1965, the Steamship Authority wharf was L-shaped, with a freight shed behind and to the left of the ticket office, roughly where the fast ferry now comes in. A wooden walkway ran down the right side of the pier and was connected to the ticket office. Although the freight shed was equipped with something called a dry sprinkler system, it needed water pressure to blow out the air before water could reach the fire, and the blast of air actually fanned the flames.<sup>3</sup> However the blaze began, it ran hot and was hard to extinguish because of the creosote-soaked condition of the entire structure.



I WAS REMINDED of this dramatic bit of Oak Bluffs history when, a few months ago, I was looking through the photographic archive of the Martha's Vineyard Museum. Opening folder 205B, I drew out a handful of snapshots of the Oak Bluffs wharf on fire, and the firemen dressed in street clothes, some with helmets, some not, one with a Scott Air-Pak, many with no protection at all, fighting the blaze. Photographer Tony Van Riper had captured the scene in dramatic black and white.

Here in a file drawer, each in its own protective sleeve, were pictures of Oak Bluffs men — much younger versions of men that I recognized from town meetings, the post office, local businesses. Don Billings, Dennis Alley, Nelson Amaral, Ed Bugbee. I looked hard, but couldn't find a picture of my late father-in-law, Frank Gibson, although I know he was a volunteer fireman in the '60s and that, for him, being a member of the all-volunteer department was both a civic duty and a privilege.

What I saw in these filed away, half-forgotten photographs was the skill

1 *Vineyard Gazette*, July 23, 1965.

2 Today, pilings on Steamship Authority docks have plastic caps to protect the wood from degrading.

3 *Gazette*, July 23, 1965.

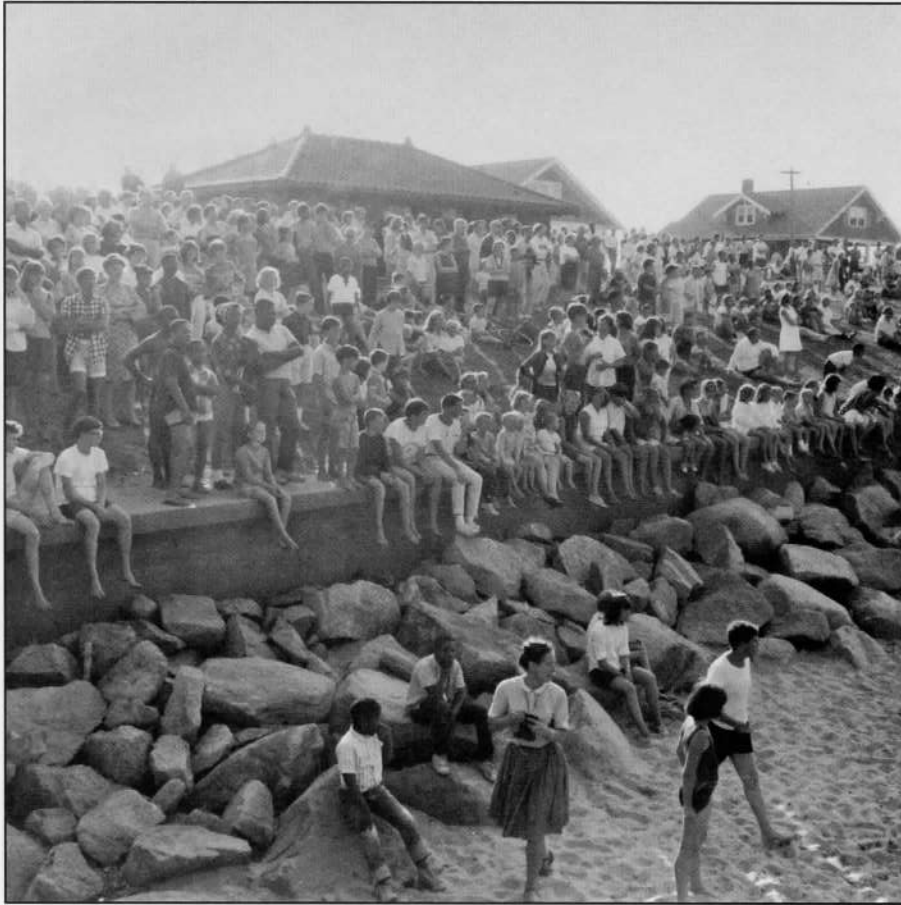


All fire photos by Tony Van Riper/Martha's Vineyard Museum  
Fire engulfs the wharf. Note the fireman perched perilously atop the ladder.

and dedication of ordinary men performing extraordinary feats. If fire-fighting has become more professionalized in recent years, back in the early- to mid-20th century joining the department was a rite of passage and a family tradition.

Don Billings joined the department as a boy of 14. As a substitute fire-fighter, he began with putting out fires in the State Forest. By age 16 he was a regular volunteer, paid a princely sum of \$20 per annum, \$10 at Christmas and \$10 in the spring. Billings' uncle, two sons and his brother all served for many years in the department. He remembers being a student during the Oak Bluffs School fire in 1949 and watching his older brother going up a ladder with a hose over his shoulder when the water pressure from the charged hose began to push him away from the side of the build-





The whole town turned out to watch the fire.

ing. Very slowly and carefully so as not to drop the boy hard against the building, fire truck operators lowered the pressure.<sup>4</sup>

Being a volunteer fireman was not only a sacrifice of time; it was a financial sacrifice, too. At the time of the wharf fire, Billings was a young married man, owner of the Western Auto business. His store was located on Circuit Avenue in the Rego Building; he remembers looking up when the fire horn went off and running from his store, hoping to arrive first because the "first guy there got to drive the truck."<sup>5</sup>

Amaral, a 65-year veteran of the department, 36 of them as chief, owned a plumbing business. Many of his staff were also volunteer firemen, so a

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Donald Billings.

<sup>5</sup> Billings.



Battling flames inside the freight shed. Firemen arrived at the scene in summer clothes, and went to work.

daytime fire often meant closing his business, and no one got paid.

THE DEPARTMENT THEN was made up of four separate companies, each with its own firehouse. The barn on Dukes County Avenue held Number 4; Highland Hose on Wayland Avenue housed Pumper Number 3. The Town Hall barn was home to Number 2 pumper, and the Lake Avenue "Steamer" firehouse had Pumper Number 1 and the town's only ladder truck.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the difficulty in fighting this stubborn fire at the wharf that day, there was no call for mutual aid. Vineyard Haven sent a truck,

<sup>6</sup> Now Highland Hose is a private home; the Dukes County barn is the gallery of photographer Alison Shaw; the Town Hall is Cottagers Corner, and the Lake Avenue barn is a T-shirt shop. Built in 1980, the Nelson Amaral Fire Station, at the corner of Wing and County roads, contains all five engines.



The freight shed collapses. It seemed to "settle gracefully," the Gazette said.

but only as a precaution should another fire break out in town. Chief Amaral stationed the ladder truck so that a hose could be trained on the roof of the ticket office to keep that building from catching fire. Apparently the temptation to climb the ladder was too much for one of Giordano's cooks; firemen were astonished to see the cook at the top of the ladder, kitchen knife in hand. No one knows why he did it, but they got him back down and turned him over to police for his own protection.<sup>7</sup>

Creosote smoke burns like a sunburn and it was fortunate there was no wind that day, and the smoke went up and not into the firemen's faces. As each spile was extinguished, the next one would "pop up." Get one out and the next

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Amaral, Alley, Norton.



Pouring water on the ticket shed. Pictured from left to right: Donald Billings, John Silvia, Bill Francis. Atop the ladder is Bert Combra; Denny Alley is halfway up.

one started, and to the firefighters it seemed like the fire was following them.<sup>8</sup>

The biggest challenge was not in putting out the fire, but containing it. Once the massive wooden freight shed caught fire, the only hope was to keep the flames from progressing to the ticket office and the walkway. "The skeleton of the shed, a black lacework of charred rafters and beams, seemed to remain standing for an impossibly long time, and when it did go, it seemed not so much to collapse as settle gracefully, much of its grid-work of timber still intact."<sup>9</sup>

Once the building collapsed, the planking began to blaze. The speed and

<sup>8</sup> Amaral, Alley, Norton.

<sup>9</sup> Gazette, July 23, 1965.

intensity of the fire and its tenacity required different tactics. One method employed to stanch the fire required the use of dangerous "cellar" or clay-pipe nozzles. These devices are inserted through a hole in ceilings or floors to aid in fighting fires in inaccessible places. Once charged, they spin like a lawn sprinkler, or "an upside down windmill,"<sup>10</sup> but the force of the water makes them spin dangerously. The firemen utilized these contraptions in order to get underneath the planking because it was impossible to stand on it.

Necessity is the mother of invention, and the firemen began a relay of dropping hose from one of the pumpers into the water to a waiting boat, which then ferried it to the north end of the pier. Once the fire hose was charged, the firemen aboard the boat aimed the nozzle at the underside of the decking, spraying the high-powered jet of water as they were motored back to shore to pick up another hose. As the Oak Bluffs firemen continued this relay, a 22-foot workboat equipped with a water pump and hose arrived from the Martha's Vineyard Shipyard. Former Shipyard owner Tom Hale recalls grabbing David Drew, one of the young men working on the pier pumping gas, and racing from Vineyard Haven harbor to Oak Bluffs. "...There was not much we could do except...get very close to the base of the fire on the pier itself....The fire department were the obvious heroes of the day and did a superb job. I guess we helped a little; certainly we tried hard," he now says.<sup>11</sup>

At the top of the pier street-side was David Vincent's fish store. In the freight building, a tank contained his live lobsters, and outside of the freight shed there was a 275-gallon diesel tank supplying the pumps for that tank. The good news was while the tank burned, it did not explode or leak, but "Oh, man, those lobsters were cooked."<sup>12</sup>

The huge crowd of onlookers enjoyed a stadium-like perspective from the bank of the town beach. The pay phone outside Vincent's fish market was kept busy as people queued up one after the other to call friends about the blaze. Police Chief Richard W. Blankenship had his men re-route traffic away from the scene, so the audience arrived mainly on foot.<sup>13</sup>

It took all night to extinguish the fire; it was finally declared out in the early hours of the next morning. The fire truck from Vineyard Haven was sent home. Weary men packed up the hoses to take them back to their individual fire barns to be hauled up for draining and drying. A new set of hoses needed to be packed onto the trucks to be ready for the next emergency. And so it was Thursday, another work day for the men who spent the night at the fire at the Oak Bluffs wharf.

10 Amaral, Alley, Norton.

11 Interview with Tom Hale.

12 Amaral, Alley, Norton.

13 *Gazette*, July 23, 1965.

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## THE RITUALS OF SPRING:

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# In Which Mrs. Hough Says No To a Prospective Summer Intern

## 'We Are Sorry, But We Must Proceed as Before'

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**I**N APRIL 1955, a young high school student wrote to Henry Beetle Hough, seeking summer employment at the Vineyard Gazette. The following letter and reply (page 44) are in the Hough files at the Martha's Vineyard Museum:

21 April 55  
Milton Academy  
Milton, Mass.

Dear Mr. Hough:

I would like to apply to you for a position as a writer for the 'Gazette' this summer. I will be a senior at Milton next year, and I think would be fairly well qualified to write for you. I am the Editor of our literary magazine at Milton, and am the news editor of our newspaper. My experience in putting out a newspaper, though not prodigious, is fair. I am enclosing a copy of our third issue, which just came out today. I wrote the article on the Korean War Memorial Scholarship and the lead article on the second page. The editorial entitled 'The Forward Look' is also mine, and I composed most of the headlines.

I think I could be of use to you this summer in such departments as covering the Edgartown Yacht Club races. I take an active interest in this, being the vice-commodore of the Junior Yacht Club. It would surprise you to know how many of your readers look at that article before anything else, and I think in the past it has been inaccurate, since the reporter usually got the news second hand when it could have been reported first hand. Naturally, I would be glad to take any other assignments.

Thank you for your consideration, I am sincerely yours,

Jonathan Hufstader



April 29, 1955  
Mr. Jonathan Hufstader  
Milton Academy  
Milton 86, Mass.

Dear Jonathan:

Although your note was to Mr. Hough, I am answering since I do most of the handling of our staff as well as the hiring — we never fire. We are glad to know that you are interested in writing for the Gazette but sorry to say there isn't a chance this summer, since naturally we have to make our plans far ahead. There are a couple dozen applicants ahead of you, but even so, we engaged Sam Potter, a relative of the Welches, way last fall. He will cover yachting for us as well as many other stories.

We have been publishing the Gazette for many, many years and we have done so to the best of our ability and to fairly general satisfaction, we believe. However, I am sure excepting the younger yachtsmen of the Edgartown Yacht Club, who have criticized everything that we have ever had. We run the stories as a favor to the club. I don't believe it gives us one new subscription and I am sure it does not give us one line of advertising. Our last summer's reporter raced at Vineyard Haven and he found, as we could have told him, that he knew only what went on in his one race. This would be your difficulty too, I am sure. We have had top-flight reporters devoting a great deal of their time to the yacht club race reports. They are now working on such papers as the Providence Journal and the New York Herald Tribune, not to mention Life and Look magazines. We have been forced to the reluctant conclusion that we simply cannot satisfy the junior members of the Edgartown Yacht Club. We are sorry, but we must proceed as before.

Sincerely yours,

Mrs. Henry Beetle Hough

*[Jonathan Hufstader is today an associate professor in the Department of English at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. He says he remembers writing his "incredibly tactless letter" to the Gazette, "although I have done my best to forget it." He begs Intelligencer readers not to confuse him with his "more Vineyardly famous brother, Peter, who would never, even at age 15, have committed such a blunder." — Ed.]*

## POSTSCRIPT:

### A Long Run for the Cock of the Walk



**F**OR MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS one of the most dedicated responders to any Oak Bluffs fire has been the "Cock of the Walk." A brass rooster always sits on the front of Engine Number 2, as it has since Number 2 was a horse-drawn vehicle. The rooster was the first prize awarded in firehouse competitions during which the horses would be backed up, harness dropped and the trucks raced to a goal.

The 1927 Maxim pumper, housed in the Town Hall firehouse, proudly carried the brass bird to all of the most significant fires in Oak Bluffs including those at the Metropolitan, the Boston House, the Oak Bluffs School, and the Ocean View Hotel. Today the bird rides, as it always has, on the bumper of the current (1980) pumper. "He always arrives first," says retired chief Denny Alley.

For more on one memorable Oak Bluffs fire, see page 35.

— SUSAN WILSON

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