

The Bluff

By Brooks Clark, 2nd place winner of the Knoxville Writers' Guild Creative Nonfiction Prize, 2007

Time stands still on the Bluff.

If you look at an aerial photo from the 1930s, the neighborhood and surrounding area look pretty much the same as they do today. The houses are still gray shingled with privet hedges between them. There's the circle of Wychmere Harbor and its straight, narrow channel to Nantucket Sound -- looking together like a bulbous lab beaker topped by a longish throat.

The channel is flanked on one side by the Clam Bar, a restaurant on a pier where diners ooh and aah as boats float by and sea gulls dive for dinner rolls. A short walk up from the Clam Bar to the top of the Bluff, a handful of *Untouchables*-era cars are clustered outside the Snow Inn, a gray-shingled landmark that has hosted summer visitors for all these years. On the other side of the channel sits the Stone Horse Yacht Club – a small gray-shingled house just big enough for a snack bar, sailing school chalkboard sessions, and teenage dances.

In a straight line across the top of the aerial photo stretches the white sandy beach, where piping plovers still scurry near the wash of the waves and chirp “peep-lo,” just as Thoreau described them in his 1844 book *Cape Cod*.

Today, as in that 1930s photo, you might see a wide one-sailed catboat plying the warm, gentle waters of the Sound near the shore. It might be preparing to anchor for a picnic, or to let passengers jump into the water up to their waists and wade up to meet friends on the beach and talk about what they've been doing since last summer.

Today, even the names you hear on the Bluff are much the same as they were in the 1930s. We talk about great grandfathers and great granduncles as if they were still alive, as in, “That’s Uncle George’s bench. He liked to sit there and watch the sailboat races.”

Uncle George’s bench consists of two gray, weathered planks for the seat and two more planks for the back. It sits atop the Bluff, looking out over the beach grass, rolling dunes and the blue waters of the Sound. Across the water to the left, near the horizon, you can see the white line of Monomoy Island, a long, thin bird reserve that shields the Sound from the chilly Atlantic waters. Just out of sight to the right and straight ahead, Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket complete the protective rim around the Sound.

Uncle George invented ceiling sprinklers. A genius as a mechanical engineer and inventor, he was also a successful entrepreneur. He believed in the idea of “capitalism: the creator.” Brought up on the Bible and self-taught in theology, he regarded many preachers he regarded as “damn fools.” In 1930, when he was 62, he sold his business and retired. He last sat on the bench in 1958, at age 90. But we speak of him as if he might come walking down the lane and— as he once did—introduce himself to a new neighbor by saying, “I’m George Rockwood. You’ll hear all about me. I married my wife’s nurse just six weeks after my wife died.”

Or we might point to the back of the house across the street and say, “That’s Mr. Huntington’s workshop.” Mr. Huntington, who died decades ago, helped invent epoxy glue in the Merchant Marine during World War II and afterward helped run the docks of New York. He trimmed his privet hedges in perfect, waist-high boxes and wished our family would do the same with ours. But our privets always grew upward above head height with rounded edges, and they still do.

Time stands still on the Bluff when young people fall in love.

They sail, jump into the surf and walk on the beach as the sun goes down. They are tanned, fit, happy, and far away from their regular lives. They go off, have their careers and raise their families. But years later, when by chance they bump into each other, perhaps sopping wet in their yellow slickers eating doughnuts after a sailboat race, they stand close to each other and smile a certain smile.

Sometimes they do something about it and sometimes it works out. At a dinner table in around 1940, Bruce Steere's mother looked down her nose at Ann Bullivant and informed her that, if she married her son, she would be required to bake him fresh bread every day of his life. Bruce and Ann adjourned to their respective spouses, children and divorces. One day in the late 60s they saw each other over doughnuts, courted, married, and enjoyed three and a half decades of summer love.

Sometimes, a moment of stopped time is snapped back to the present when a spouse sees the body language and reacts like a radar operator with a wing of fighters blipping across a screen. "We just always liked each other, that's all there is to it," explained my sister, Kathy, after she got a dirty look from the wife of her old friend Phil Kinnicutt. Though Kathy is a grandmother, what Phil saw was the brunette in madras shorts and bangs, with one hand on the tiller and the other trimming the main sheet of the *C Y'All*, a 16-foot sloop named for the lilting adieu Kathy brought with her from Tennessee.

Time also stands still on the Bluff when someone isn't nice. One woman once told us to move off their part of the private beach. That was 30 years ago, and we still avoid her.

Mr. Davis once wrote a letter to Tod Lee, his own cousin, informing Tod that his dump truck was an eyesore in his driveway that was making it hard for Mr. Davis to sell his house a few lots over. They never spoke again. “Tod showed me the letter,” says my older brother. That was 40 years ago.

If we asked Tod if his Power Wagon pick-up and a thick rope could pull our heavy, keeled *C Y’All* in its wooden cradle onto the shore of the harbor for the winter, he would reply, “Ae-yah,” in the accent of an old salt, which he most certainly was. When my brothers and I needed to dig a new cesspool for our house, Tod showed us how. “They can wuhk pretty well once they get stah-ted,” he commented.

During the 60s, when my brothers and their college friends made leather belts, multi-colored candles, and large pots of spaghetti, Tod was a quiet ally. He had rejected the white-collar world for fishing, contracting, and calling his own shots. “Tod was 10 feet tall to me,” said my older brother when Tod passed away last year.

Time stands still on the Bluff and keeps our memories and our family history in a safe deposit box, ready for us whenever we want them.

I walk by the Maduros’ front lawn. They haven’t lived in the house for four decades, but we still call it that. I see myself playing hotbox, a variation of hide and seek, in the dark. Then we’re called in to watch, on the one TV in the neighborhood, as Neil Armstrong jumps down onto the Moon. I was 12, but still child enough to be playing hide and seek.

Walking along the harbor, I see a stretch of brown sand that reminds me of where we once left our long, sturdy flat-bottomed wooden rowboat for the winter. On a very hot June day I had painted its insides battleship gray, as my transistor radio reported about

Robert Kennedy clinging to life. I still remember the way that gray paint felt and smelled as I spread it in that hot sun.

I rowed that boat all around the harbor and explored marsh creeks in it. At about 12 feet long, it was big enough for my whole family—10 of us including a brother-in-law and baby niece—to fit in it for a Christmas card picture in 1971. Not too long after, with my siblings out in the world, putting the rowboat in a boathouse seemed like a needless expense and, let's face it, the family's attention had drifted from boats and childhood summers. The rowboat – my Rosebud -- rotted away.

Near the water, a patch of green algae swirled atop the black muck reminds me of walking home from a dance along the harbor shore, seeing the orange lights of the Clam Bar across the harbor, with the music still ringing in my ears. What was the feeling? Not quite disappointment. Maybe hope. Not too far beyond hide and seek, I hadn't found true love that evening, but maybe the dance put me a step closer.

My siblings and I share an identical *déjà vu* when we wake up before everyone else on the Bluff. We see the bright blue of the sky outside the window, smell the salt air, and hear the Bob White in the back yard break the silence with his low and slow "Bob" followed by the higher, quicker "White!"

It's the same feeling we had when we were the first ones up in what was then our Grandmother Backie's house. We'd walk into the garage apartment, where Backie would serve a soft-boiled egg with butter and salt and pepper and toast with marmalade. The breakfast bowl was silver, with a gold eagle coin inset in the bottom. Backie would give her crusts to our beagle. "Here you are, Yogi," she'd say as his jaws snapped up her

offering. This memory is as permanent as if it were carved in marble across the top of the Pantheon in Rome.

Because our father was a preacher who every few years moved to a new church in a new town, the Bluff, in Harwich Port, Massachusetts, is our hometown. My siblings and I, and our cousins, and the next generation of cousins and their spouses and soon-to-be spouses still convene there, in Harwich Port, where our memories and our family history walk with us, making crunching sounds down the dirt lane the way Uncle George did on his morning constitutional, after eating his daily serving of stewed prunes.

Main Street of Harwich Port is part of the same winding trail along the south side of Cape Cod that the Wampanoag Indians used 400 years ago. Main Street looks much as it did 100 years ago and 50 years ago. It's an easy walk from the Bluff to George's Pizza, Bonatt's Bakery, the convenience store that sells New York and Boston papers, and the CVS that used to house the A&P. The new supermarket is a little further out of town, past the go-kart track my Mother, 89, never approved of. "Still don't," she says.

Wychmere Harbor started out as the "Salt Pond." It was probably formed when a hunk of ice lodged in the sandy moraine as a glacier melted a few thousand years ago. It was about a half-mile around, and for a few years in the 1880s the locals raced horses around it. The racing ended in 1887, when fifty men with shovels dug a channel to the Sound, creating a perfect, picturesque harbor for fishing and pleasure boats alike.

Year-round inhabitants of Harwich Port—the Cahoons, Snows, Paines and Eldredges—have always made their living from the land and the sea. They were farmers, growing corn, tomatoes, squash and cranberries just as the Wampanoags did. The bogs

still turn bright red in the autumn and send their berries to Ocean Spray. Of course old Cape Codders were also fishermen and mariners, as many still are.

For many years there was a large plant at the end of the Salt Pond where a retired sea captain named Freeman derived salt from the ocean water. Because this process used massive amounts of firewood to evaporate the water, older pictures show landscapes denuded of trees.

Like New Bedford and Providence, Harwich has a population descended from the Portuguese sailors and fishermen who came to New England from the Cape Verde Islands off Africa. These Gomeses, DaSilvas and Raneos are industrious, prosperous, and largely invisible to summer people.

The later 1800's and early 1900's brought the idea of developing seashores as places of refuge for the fancy people from Boston, New York, and even the Midwest. Flyers from the 1880's show the rail route from New York to New Haven to Providence to the Depot in Harwich Center. From there stage coaches carried travelers the last two miles to Harwich Port.

In 1927, with his wife in declining health, Uncle George Rockwood was looking for a clean, cool place to bring her during the hot summers in Worcester, Massachusetts, where they lived. Because he and my Great Grandaunt Ellen had no heirs, he always treated his niece, Elizabeth Tucker, my Grandmother Backie, like a daughter.

Backie married Frank Cushwa, an English teacher at Phillips Exeter Academy. One fall Cushwa read a student's essay about his summer vacation in Chatham, one town over from Harwich Port. The essay mentioned sailing, sea breezes, and the warm waters of Nantucket Sound.

Uncle George and Aunt Ellen investigated Chatham but found it “too fast,” an expression bringing to mind Gatsby and Daisy and idle wealth, to which, of course, the enterprising capitalist Rockwood would say “Pshaw.”

They found Harwich Port more down to earth. Uncle George bought his home and several years later made it possible for my Grandfather and Grandmother to buy a house nearby. (Our family story tells of a \$5,000 check that was never cashed.)

Uncle George had always admired and liked his brother-in-law, Backie’s father. The Rev. William Tucker was one of a small circle of clergymen Uncle George did not view as damn fools. As so many do today, they enjoyed heated discussions about Darwin and faith. As head of Andover Theological Seminary, Tucker had been sued by his Trustees for teaching that science did not conflict with belief, but rather offered a new opportunity for the renewal of spiritual life in the modern, industrial age.

Tucker had won his suit in 1892 in the Massachusetts Supreme Court, but Rockwood, always an engineer, liked to debate the fine points of scripture. Soon after the start of the 20th Century, as president of Dartmouth College, Tucker started the nation’s first business school, the Amos Tuck School of Business Administration. I often wonder if Rockwood’s advocacy for free enterprise helped Tucker see the need for the Tuck School.

Our family story tells us that Rockwood and Tucker wanted our families to always remain close. Call it a coincidence that, three and four generations later, we still are.

Aunt Ellen, sickly for a number of years, dearly appreciated her nurse, Anna Outhouse from Nova Scotia, and even invited her to accompany the Rockwoods on

travels near the end of Ellen's life. When Ellen died, Uncle George did marry Anna just six weeks afterward.

Uncle George had purchased annuities. Unlike life insurance, which pays off when you die, annuities pay each year that you live. My Father liked to explain that "The insurance company is betting you'll die." But Uncle George didn't. He lived past 91.

He copied classic paintings with engineer's precision. "He used to like to tease the men at the Worcester Museum," said Aunt Anna, pointing to a painting of clipper ship cutting through the waves. "He dared them to figure out which was the original, and they couldn't."

Uncle George loved to sail—always wearing a suit and tie, in the manner of a gentleman—and started the Yacht Club. It was through the picture window of the Yacht Club, at a wedding reception in 1940, that my Mother first saw my Father, just a few minutes before they were introduced by Mom's brother, Bill, who had told Dad that he wanted to introduce him to his sister. "I don't want to meet anybody's sister," Dad replied.

In the years after World War II, the Clam Bar grew from a quaint spot on a pier into one of the largest seasonal restaurants in the country, and the Snow Inn added out-buildings and a beach club.

In the 60s and 70s, Harwich Port simply filled up to and over the brim with Baby Boomers. Our family, with six children, went unnoticed among many Catholic families with 11.

Each summer the Clam Bar, Snow Inn and Beach Club employed hundreds of college students, as waiters, chamber maids, car parkers, busboys and dishwashers. The Bluff bustled with car and pedestrian traffic, even along our dirt lane.

In the 80s, a pharmaceutical baron bought the whole complex, in part because he had to do something with his millions. The Inn and Clam Bar were silly enterprises – a couple of months a year to make money—compared to the potential of shoreline real estate. Dr. Fennell turned the Clam Bar into a rarely-used private club and built large condo buildings where the old out-buildings used to be.

Now, the Bluff is as quiet during the summer months as it's been since the 1950s. There are no lines of cars waiting for the Clam Bar and no college students rushing to their jobs. Some families have small children, but these are commando units compared to the armies of the Baby Boom.

This peace and quiet fuels our belief that time truly does stand still on the Bluff.

But Uncle George's bench serves as a nagging reminder to all of us that sometimes things do change on the Bluff. A couple of years ago Uncle George's family had to sell the lot behind our house, including the bench and a lovely beach path. An investment banker bought the land and built the perfect gray-shingled home on it, so now the bench is no longer accessible to us.

But our family story – told and re-told – always will be.