

FISH TALES, HOOKS, AND CHUMS: FISHING THE ELIZABETH ISLANDS

SUMMER 2009

I am writing this greeting as I look out of my Cuttyhunk Historical Society office window, having arrived several days ago (mid-April) for the season. The day is cool and drizzly, the water a pale blue-green, white caps spreading over the surface in silent, changing patterns. Outside, the sounds of Bell Six are sharp and irregular. Spring has a distinct magic here. I hope this finds you well, your memories connecting you to the island and to others who have shared this 'parallel universe,' as I've come to think of it.

As a member of CHS, you have supported the endeavors of decades of dedicated volunteers who have created a meticulously cataloged record of the people and times before us. I am happy to participate by beginning the process of converting these collection records into a searchable database, complete with photographs. CHS received a modest grant that allows me to spend several weeks immersed in our storage areas with camera, tape measure, and computer.

The new exhibition for this summer, *Fish Tales, Hooks, and Chums: Fishing the Elizabeth Islands*, will be a true celebration of fishing. Shelly Merriam, Allie Thurston, and I have collaborated to showcase the joy and intensity of this livelihood and sport. There will be photographs—old and new, skin-stuffed fish, fish (in) art, island fishing guide history, trophies, tackle, bass boat information, real fish, plugs, lures, and jigs and much more.

To complement the exhibit, on several Saturday afternoons we'll host informal chats with local guides and other experts.

Shifting Sands, Rising Seas — *Barges Beach*, a photographic comparison of changing conditions on this Cuttyhunk barrier beach, will be on display in the conference room for the second summer.

SPECIAL CHS EVENTS

CHS will sponsor several public programs this summer, including a **DINE-AROUND** with silent



Fishing Guide Coot Hall in front of Cuttyhunk's Bosworth House.

Annual Meeting

The CHS Annual Meeting will be held Saturday, August 15, 2009 at the Church at 9:30 a.m.

auction. Still in its planning stages, this fundraiser will need volunteers willing to wear various hats. Contact Kathryn at the museum for details.

CHS is venturing in new directions with the sponsorship on July 18th of a **FORUM ON LAND PRESERVATION**. Participating organizations include The Coalition for Buzzards Bay, Trustees of Reservations and MASS Audubon.

Underwater photographer **ANDREW MARTINEZ** will present a slide-show lecture about marine life on August 6, an event for the whole family.

I hope to see you here this summer.

KATHRYN BALISTRERI
MUSEUM DIRECTOR

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The purpose of the Cuttyhunk Historical Society is to preserve the traditions, records, and history of the Elizabeth Islands for the benefit of present and future generations. The Society, launched in 1978, was incorporated in 1982.

All photos from CHS collection unless otherwise credited.

IN MEMORIAM

WE REPORT the recent passing of these island friends:

Dr. Benjamin Walker
Violet M. Porter
John C. Nemiah

NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT

I HOPE THIS NEWSLETTER finds you well and ready to visit us during the summer. Although the Museum is only open for 10 weeks after the summer solstice, our efforts continue throughout the year. The renovation of the apartment was completed with the painting of the kitchen and living area. Tom and Kathryn will be returning for their second season and were back in residence on Cuttyhunk on April 19th.

CHS has been awarded a grant from Mass. Humanities for researching the collection. Kathryn spent a month on this project with new computer software. This task will be a beginning of a computerized database of our collection, a long awaited goal! Kathryn, Allie and Shelly started working on our new exhibit, *Fish Tales, Hooks, and Chums* after the museum closed last Labor Day. This enterprise is very exciting and we anxiously await its opening, with the party on July 4.

At our recent board meeting we announced that the 2008 Annual Appeal has raised more than \$10,000 so far! David Warr reported that CHS memberships are tracking up to our expectations. Sukey Forbes Bigham has issued an invitation for the board to meet on Naushon in July. This is an opportunity for another connection between Cuttyhunk and the other Elizabeth Islands.

I anticipate another summer of soothing breezes, warm sunshine and renewed friendships. We can always use new volunteers. Please stop in at the Museum to learn about how you can get involved in our mission to preserve the history of our beloved islands.

ANN CONWAY

SPRING BIRDS ON PENIKESE

Toby Lineaweaver, Executive Director of Penikese Island School, writes a blog, Over the Bar. This delightful entry is dated May 9, 2008.


Of the many birds on Penikese, my favorites are the guinea fowl and the Leech's storm petrel. The guinea hen were introduced by the school for entertainment and tick control decades ago and live on the island year round. They climb down from their nighttime roost above the chicken coop each morning to squawk and scurry around pecking the ground for grain and small insects. In keeping with the season the guinea hen are now chasing each other around in amorous prelude to making adorable baby guinea hens that will be immediately devoured by the gulls once they hatch. Fortunately, they also mate and lay in the fall, too, a better time to raise their chicks with fewer gulls around.

The Leech's storm petrels couldn't be any different than the guinea fowl: migratory, nocturnal and elusive, they slip down the coast to Penikese from northern climes in late April and early May and then into their burrows between the cracks of the ancient rock wall near the leper gateposts. They mate and lay an egg or two before one of the mated pair will slip out at night to feed and fish while the other bird stays behind in the burrow, awaiting its chance to swap places. Only on moonless nights when the darkness provides perfect cover for these sooty, bat-like birds do we find out they have arrived this way: those awaiting their mates in the wall will emit their burrow call, a ghostly flutter and coo to

attract each mate back to its proper nest, a sound that that has spooked more than a few students wandering around unawares in the dark of night.

The petrels used to be much more numerous on Penikese but gull predation almost eradicated them back in the 1970s. The presence of the school, built in 1973, helped shoo away the human-averse gulls from the petrel's vicinity and, along with other efforts, preserved the scant remaining petrels, the ancestral thread of which somehow manages to make it back to the island every year, barely. Over my tenure, the petrels have become representative of renewal and affirmation, for the island and, especially, the school itself, also small and always working so hard to survive. Every year about this time I start worrying whether they make it back, whether this will be the year we don't hear them, and if so what that will mean. Each week I ask the staff returning from the island whether anybody has heard the petrels, and when I spend nights on the island I always make sure to get up in the wee hours to walk outside, to strain and listen for them as if by doing so I can will them back.

Last week one of our students, Anthony, got up and left the house to take a pee outside. It was pitch black, a new moon whose fingernail crescent had gone down hours ago, and as he walked outside and into the darkness to do his business he heard a strange noise coming from almost under his feet. "What the heck is that?" he asked himself. Then he thought, "The petrels! I've heard about those."

They are back, and we are good for another year. 

FISHER KIDS

KIDS WHO WANT TO FISH on Cuttyhunk have always had plenty of places to give it a try, from either the Fish Dock or the Main Dock, or from a boat. And there are many experts to be consulted.

Fritz Goodrich reminisced in *Notes from the Mesozoic*, his 1993 memoir:

“In retrospect it seems that during our early years on the island the sea was richer in marine life. How many today have seen a white cyclone of terns and gulls whirling above a vast school of baitfish clustering into a defensive ball just beneath the surface in a futile attempt to escape attacks from the mackerel below and the seabirds above? . . . Once I held an open gunny sack over the side of a dory as Wye rowed us past a baitball. In one pass we bagged enough shoners to feed two large families. . . . We had our little business of selling stiffened fish to our mothers and their friends who really didn’t need them but bought them to stimulate our nascent entrepreneurial instincts.”


Howard Cornell, father of Kathryn Olsen, purveyor at the island shop Sea Girl, offered these bottom-fishing tips in 1971 to eight-year-old Ben Garfield, future fisherman in the Gulfs of Mexico and Maine:

“Green crab or conch make the best bait. Conch is best sliced in a continuous strip and beaten with fish tenedrizer or, better still, chewed.” Whale Rock was always a reliable spot to drop the line. Other places included the Ribbon Reef buoy, Canapitsit,



Youngsters fishing from Fish Dock, with lines, net and pole, summer 2008.


the “Leper Laundry” off Penikese, and the big rock at the West End.

Howard claimed that his father could easily catch 200 pounds of tautog in Canapitsit, fishing from pre-dawn until noon. The going price was 4 cents a pound. 

ANDREW MARTINEZ, DIVER & PHOTOGRAPHER TO SPEAK ON MARINE LIFE OF NEW ENGLAND



FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS, Andrew Martinez has been diving in New England waters. His work has been published in most nature, travel, and dive magazines in this country and abroad. He has led science and travel groups to the Galapagos Islands, Cayman Islands, and the Bay Islands of Honduras. His photos are used in books or displays in many of the country’s aquaria. His book *Marine Life of the North Atlantic* is considered the best guide to this region.


Martinez will offer an enticing presentation on August 6 which “will show the beauty and color of the animals of our waters.” Join him on this armchair tour of the fascinating creatures of this region. . . . from Torpedo Rays and Goosefish to tiny colorful shrimp and anemones. “I will explain the interesting ways animals feed, reproduce, and defend themselves.” 

THEN & NOW



THE DECKING AND PILINGS of Cuttyhunk's Ferry Dock were replaced this past spring.

Anchored at the Pond end of the channel on the spot once called the Narrows, the dock has been called variously the Main Dock, the Town Dock, the Ferry Dock and the *Alert* Dock (after the several ferries named the *Alert*).

In the Hurricane of 1938 planking was swept away in the 90 mile-per-hour winds, which demolished the nearby bath houses and buildings around the adjacent Coast Guard station. Today the dock is the locus of daily ferry arrivals and departures in the summer, gas fill-ups for boaters, the occasional dance party and one wedding! 



The dock at the Narrows has not changed much over the years. An unidentified child poses at the dock, c. 1935 (top), and the dock is shown midway through major long-overdue repairs over the winter and spring of 2009 (left) Photo: Seth Garfield.

SEEKING HISTORY KEEPERS

CHS has ongoing projects, interviews, and transcriptions to record the islands' stories for now and the future. We are looking to entice writers of the popular monographs, editors of occasional books, photographers and filers to work—any time of the year! Suggested topics are always welcome. Please direct queries to your editor, Weezie Garfield, by email weezrock52@yahoo.com, mail: 18 Shagbark Hill, Putney VT 05346 or phone: 802.387.5548.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

(right) An unidentified fisherman and his catch in front of Russell Rotch's fishing shanty on "the Point" where the Fish Dock now stands. c. 1914.

DURING ONE YEAR in the 1970s, when Alan and Anne Wilder were caretakers of the farm and gardens on Nashawena, Anne canned 800 jars, of "tomatoes, shell beans, jams and jellies."

