



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Winter House

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Winter House, with its many chimneys and impressive fieldstone facades, has long been a commanding presence on Cuttyhunk Island. Its history dates back to 1917 when William Madison Wood, President of the American Woollen Company, built it as a wedding present for his son Cornelius after his marriage to Muriel Prindle. Wood had previously bought up the substantial land holdings of the Cuttyhunk Fishing Club, now a popular island Bed and Breakfast, and in 1909 built his own summer home, the nearby, rambling shingle house known as Avalon.

While Avalon no longer remains in the Wood family, William Wood's granddaughter Oriel and her husband Piero Ponzecchi still return to Winter House each summer to enjoy its spectacular views and spacious interior. The architect of the "summer cottage" is not known. Because the house was fully equipped for year

round living, it was given the name Winter House. However, during the late 1930's, because of concern about contracting polio, the family did spend an autumn there. Mrs. Ponzecchi and her brother Cornelius, Jr. attended the one room Cuttyhunk school. She recalls that her much loved and respected teacher was Louise Taylor, who later became Mrs. George Haskell. Mrs. Haskell taught on the island for 23 years, and after retiring, served as librarian.

While the Fishing Club, which opened in 1864, instituted the first major building endeavor on the island, the construction of Winter House seems even more ambitious. Wood purchased a tug boat to carry building supplies for the project and later for all the furnishings. The tug, named the *Alert*, subsequently became the island ferry until it was retired in 1987. All the materials were brought over from the mainland as were many of the workers, most of whom were men from

Wood's own mills. The foundations were dug by hand. Mules and probably some oxen drew the wagons which did all the hauling. While it is possible that Wigwam Hill, located near Winter House, is the residue of dirt from digging the foundations and leveling the surrounding property, Mrs. Ponzecchi says there are some who feel it might also be an Indian burial ground. She also confirmed that her grandfather built the nearby tennis court and bowling alley as part of the Avalon property.



Early stage of construction of Winter House, 1916. The sign reads "Pierce and Kilburn, General contractors." CHS collection.

While the exterior of Winter House is definitely imposing, the interior presents a comfortable and welcoming area for family and visitors with furnishings and decor which recall the style of another era. Its roomy first floor includes a large living room surrounded on two sides by porches, one of which is covered, a dining room with a table which can, and often does, seat a dozen people easily, a music room and spacious front hall where the cantilevered stairs climb up to the second and third floors. The music room and living room each comfortably absorb a Steinway grand piano, both of which are still kept tuned despite the idiosyncrasies of seaside weather. The kitchen had originally been in the basement along with the

laundry but is now near the dining room and thoroughly modernized. The two upstairs floors altogether contain eight bedrooms, all but one with its own bath and fireplace. The Ponzecchis have kept all the original furnishings – large sideboards, a huge Chinese urn, ornate tables, formal straight-backed chairs and, best of all, a Tiffany stained glass frieze in the dining room. But now recent photographs of family and friends blend happily with old formal family portraits on almost every surface as do favorite mementos purchased during their many travels. Perhaps the greatest changes have been the rearrangement of the living room into more comfortable seating areas and the new fabrics for the sofas and chairs. These blend well with the furniture of the era.



A favorite part of the living room is the blue Delft tile version of Rembrandt's "Merchants Guild" over the fireplace; to the right is one of the grand pianos. Other handsome additions to the dining room are the Tiffany glass frieze and sideboard and large Chinese urn. Photographs by Dave Twichell.

Can one imagine the family's consternation when in this orderly and handsome room, an outside door blew open during Hurricane Bob and floated a good portion of the huge rug like a magic carpet.

The Ponzecchis say that they prefer to sleep on the third floor as the view is best from there. Mrs. Ponzecchi laughed to recall that her parents put her and her brother up there so they could hear when they might be coming in at night. She claims that times have changed now and she'd rather not know about such matters.

Of course a home the size of Winter House and its surrounding grounds needed a staff to manage and maintain it. Because the Woods wanted to keep in touch with the local community they used mainly island help for cooking, cleaning, and serving meals. There are those who still remember Doris Jenkins who was the housekeeper, and Florence McKay the cook. Florence was nicknamed "Sunshine" by the children as she apparently never smiled – probably because she still had to prepare meals in the basement kitchen. Adding to her woes was the dumb waiter, which periodically broke down and was unable to carry her hot meals upstairs.

The maids lived in nearby Rose Cottage which is now rented to visitors during the summer months. Mrs. Ponzecchi also had a French governess, Lindy, to whom she was devoted. Perhaps the best known and most loved of those who worked for the Woods was Francis Jenkins, the husband of Doris. He managed the

estate, supervised the power house installed by William Wood and even in the early 50's would deliver milk, in bottles of course, to summer residents. John Stubbs maintained Wood's boats and taught many of the island youngsters how to sail in the 1920's and 30's when Cornelius Wood invited families to come as summer visitors.



The annex is the square building in the foreground and to its left is the Creamery. In the background, at the edge of the lawn, is Rose Cottage where the servants stayed. Behind it is a large barnlike building used for major storage. CHS collection.

In addition to the main house, there is the Annex, a small building which William Wood used as an office after he turned over Avalon to his daughter Rosalind in 1918 and moved into the third floor of Winter House. The Annex also housed a private barber shop where his own personal barber, whom he brought with him to the island, shaved him every morning and kept



The growth of ivy over the stone façade and chimney and the barren landscape probably date this photograph in the early to mid 1930s. CHS collection.

his hair and moustache properly trimmed. The barber chair is presently kept at the Cuttyhunk Club. There still remains an enormous standing globe, now unfortunately in bad repair. But the roulette wheel that Mrs. Ponzecchi remembers seems to have disappeared. Continuing her grandfather's tradition, Mrs. Ponzecchi now uses the Annex as her own office.

Next to the Annex is a little shingled building called the Creamery. Mrs. Ponzecchi recalls that butter, cream and milk were kept there when cows were housed in a nearby barn. While not exactly a building, the Woods old wooden beach wagon was certainly an island institution and was for many years one of the few island cars. For a less-informed generation, the beachwagon was the forerunner of the station wagon, which in turn will be forgotten as SUVs take over. Now Piero Ponzecchi is often seen in a golf cart with its special decoration that reads "Piero's Ferrari."

For many island folk, both winter and summer residents, Winter House has been a focal center. Cornelius and Muriel Wood were generous and hospitable hosts, a tradition the Ponzecchis have continued. Until the Moore family took over the annual all-island Fourth of

July party at the Fishing Club in the early 1950's, the Woods had held the gathering on the lawn at Winter House. The Ponzecchis continue to offer their porch and lawn for the annual end of August party for the Cuttyhunk Yacht Club. Until recently they also hosted the yearly Musicales directed by Jim Lovell, often starring Piero Ponzecchi. Several generations of island singers and instrumentalists of all ages have performed before standing-room-only audiences during these festive evenings. Their home has been the scene of many wedding receptions – those of Becky and Leighton Scott, Lexi and Duane Lynch, Becky and Dan Okrent, Brian and Judy Shortsleeve, Debbie and Brian Jones, to name at least a few. It has been as Mrs. Ponzecchi says, "a happy and welcoming house." What better words could be found for a house that despite its name as Winter House has offered so much hospitality to Cuttyhunk for so many summers.

The Cuttyhunk Historical Society is most grateful to Oriel Wood Ponzecchi for the historical information and family stories she has provided for this account of her family's summer home.



Winter House in 1999. Photograph by David Twichell.