



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Penikese Island School and Cuttyhunk Island's People; “What are they doing over there, anyway?”

DAVID MASCH

I have always thought that history was a report of what happened—or at least that is what I wanted it to be—but with increasing age and experience, I have become disabused of this notion. Two people can witness the same event and have almost totally different memories of what they have seen and heard, both convinced that their memory is the accurate one.

When I was approached about writing for this historical publication, I was doubtful about my qualifications and unsure of what I would write about. I have spent more time on Penikese Island than any man or woman alive, and have been part of Penikese Island School since its opening in 1973 until I retired in September of 2002. It seems that this is what I must write about.

I am not going to attempt a history of the school, but I will discuss its early days and particularly the relationship of our school with the people of Cuttyhunk, who are our nearest neighbors.

Much of what I write will be anecdotal and little effort will be put into chronology. This may be anathema to “real” historians, but it is the way I see and recall the story of my history at Penikese. I say my history and story, because I know that each of us involved has his or her own historical memory and story.

I write a question and answer column in a New England fishing magazine *On the Water* called “Ask Pops” (my nickname from Penikese given me by the boys who could not bring themselves to call me Poppa as my own children did). In this column I promise 80% accuracy in my answers, but no more. I am going to ask you for at least this much credulity when reading this account.

Last winter's issue is a hard act to follow. I have nothing as provocative to report as a Native American phallic relic of dubious provenance, though we did find a giant squid tentacle on the beach once at Penikese. At first I thought it might have been part of the reproductive apparatus of a large porpoise or a small whale. I was wrong.

The Penikese Island School was founded by George Cadwalader in 1973. George was medically retired from the Marine Corps after being badly wounded in Viet Nam. After recovery, George became an assistant to the director of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. He soon tired of

administrative work and began looking for alternatives. He and I met on a shark fishing trip. The state closed down its traditional reform schools in 1972 and had money available to start alternative programs for dealing with juvenile delinquents. George saw this as an interesting opportunity to pursue.

This idea was to remove the kids from the environment in which they got into trouble and offer them a new start in a totally different setting, a near wilderness where their daily activities would have a direct effect on their own comfort and safety and that of those around them. In this framework he hoped the kids could learn new skills and develop pride and self-confidence that could lead them to a better, happier life.



Schoolhouse

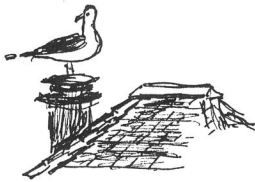
We would build our house and barns; we would garden, fish and raise animals; we would have school in one form or another. (Penikese became an accredited private school whose credits are as valid as those of the Phillips Exeter Academy, or Groton. We have been accredited for over twenty years). We would form an interdependent household where rewards and punishments would be predictable and fair. Crises would be dealt with as they occurred. We would use no locked rooms or mechanical restraints.

We soon learned that counseling and teaching in a residential setting for troubled kids was to be one of the hardest occupations possible, taking a large toll emotionally, and sometimes physically, on those so employed. The average

tenure of residential personnel was and is just under one year. The average tenure for our staff at Penikese was over four years. This faithfulness on the part of the staff was largely due to the dedication, foresight, intelligence and charisma of George Cadwalader, a man of remarkable character and strength. His qualities attracted quality staff members from diverse backgrounds: fishermen and women, carpenters, engineers, and teachers. They, along with George, deserve great credit for their dedication to helping kids.

Many citizens of Cuttyhunk did not greet our plan for a school at Penikese with enthusiasm. When the state forced them to accept a Leper Colony on Penikese early in the century, they were not pleased either. Most would have been happy to see Penikese Island remain unpeopled. Public hearings were held on Cuttyhunk where George presented his ideas and convinced some, but not all, that our effort was worthwhile. I think many feared that we were unrealistic, high-minded idealists who would abandon our efforts when the going got tough.

I remember a hearing in October of 1973 when one Cuttyhunker, whom George had not convinced that we would not damage Penikese, stated that we had only been there a month when all the gulls left. George responded by saying that this was true, but that the gulls had been leaving Penikese in August and September for 10, 000 years without our assistance. They still are doing so.



The boys and the staff lived in tents and ruined buildings for the first few weeks. We cooked outdoors and got by as we started repairing the foundations of what was to be our main house.

Dan Clark, Woods Hole's legendary marine construction honcho, barged the building materials for our house down to the island. He also loaned us his coastal freighter *La Chanceuse* to live aboard. She was anchored in Cuttyhunk Harbor, and we commuted to Penikese daily. Our presence at Cuttyhunk made some people nervous, but we had no trouble and appreciated the use of the harbor.

Though we had our house pretty much built by the end of November, it was still not habitable. We had no chimney, so we closed the school for three months. By spring the chimney was up, and we reopened in time to put in a garden, start raising animals and start getting our program underway.

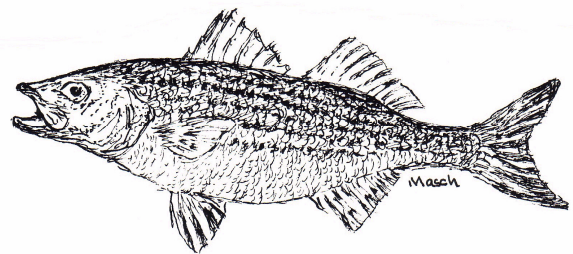


Retired Bishop Loring of the state of Maine now lived in Padanarum and came to Cuttyhunk constantly. He was very interested in our program and spoke well of us at Cuttyhunk as our first ambassador. We held open houses that summer and many Cuttyhunkers came to visit. Our policy has always

been that anyone can visit at anytime so people will not think we are doing anything weird out there.

Last autumn, 29 years after the fact, I learned of a scare at Cuttyhunk involving our boys. The story came from John Christian, Woods Hole's leading striped bass fishing guide and admirer of the many legendary guides of Cuttyhunk. He said that during the gasoline crisis in the early seventies the fishermen at Cuttyhunk had filled every available container they had with fuel in the springtime fearing a summer shortage would have kept them off the water. The fishing shacks on the dock were full of stored gasoline. Somehow a rumor started that one of our kids planned to burn the dock and cause a massive explosion. This caused a minor panic. Nothing came of this; our kids had no idea that the fuel was there and voiced no animosity toward the citizens of Cuttyhunk.

Coot Hall, one of Cuttyhunk's best-known fishing guides, spoke in favor of our project at an acrimonious meeting attended by Congressman Studds. I think Coot persuaded many of the old-timers that we should at least be given a chance to try our experiment. Coot was our strong, year-round resident supporter in the beginning. He told me once that Scoters (sea ducks from which he got his nickname Coot) tasted like flying mackerel. Good if you liked mackerel.



Our second good will minister was Norman Gingrass, pilot extraordinaire and a fine, generous human being. He not only spoke well of us at Cuttyhunk, but he also delivered the Sunday papers. We had to ask him to stop dropping them on the deck for fear that a heavy New York Times would come right through the roof. Norman also evacuated people for us in times of emergency. I remember clearly his taxiing up to *La Chanceuse* in Cuttyhunk Harbor to tell me of my father's death in 1973. He flew me back to Woods Hole for free. We were all saddened by Norman's death in 1987; he has become a legendary figure.

By 1975 the citizens of Cuttyhunk had accepted our presence on Penikese. I remember one late afternoon when we were burning a large pile of accumulated trash in our burn-pit which was in a line of sight leading from our house to the dock and over to the village on Cuttyhunk. This was a particularly smoky fire. I stepped out onto the deck of our house and noticed also a line of boats racing over from Cuttyhunk. They thought our house was on fire and were coming to help, despite the fact that they were not all totally in support of our efforts. This underlying willingness to help has added to our feelings of security on our isolated island.

Alan Wilder was reluctantly convinced by his friend Dan Clark that we were alright and deserved some help at Penikese. I will never forget his impatience with me to make my first cut to geld a piglet. He had shown us how to go about it. I soon became a hardened pig fixer. George Cadwalader and I are perhaps the only graduates of those two bastions of the Ivy League, Yale and Harvard respectively, who are qualified, experienced pig gelders, thanks to Alan. He has become a friend.

The following excerpt from one of my journals from 25 years ago shows how one Cuttyhunker—I am not sure who he was to this day, probably Don Lynch—put himself in danger to assist us and our kids. I thank him. I might not have been here to present this account if it were not for his efforts.

Oct 24 Journal Excerpt

“I made a bad call this afternoon and underestimated the intensity of the wind. It was calm and rainy all morning. We would have had no trouble getting down here if we had left at 11:00 a.m. We didn’t.

Tom Buckley and I gave a talk on the history of Penikese Island and of the nature of our school to the Woods Hole Historical Society that lasted from noon until 1:30 p.m. We didn’t leave for the island until 2:00 p.m. The wind had freshened out of the North but still didn’t seem too bad until we came through Quick’s Hole into Buzzards Bay. The wind had come up to 40 to 50 knots, and the tide was running against the wind. The seas were steep and close together—some were 8 feet or more high. It was too late to turn back and too dangerous to run until we were nearly at the lone rock buoy. The kids were becoming frightened and queasy. A new student, Lisa*, had never been on a boat before. I had only seen it this bad once in ten years of making weekly trips to the island.

Francis Doohan, the skipper, suggested that we get out the life preservers in case someone was thrown overboard. The life jackets were tied in a box on top of the cabin. The boat was pitching wildly. I climbed up on the cabin and untied the line holding the lid on the box. The wind nearly carried it away as I lifted it. It was a one-hand-for-the-boat-and-one-hand-for-the-sailor situation. I handed down seven jackets, secured the box and carefully climbed back down to the deck. The appearance of the life jackets had further frightened the kids. The seas, if anything, were steepening. Francis managed to get the *Coolidge* around to where the seas were on our quarter and we were heading toward the #5 buoy off Gull Island, which was out of sight in the spray. It was a sleigh ride with Francis fighting the wheel to keep us from broaching.

We had discussed turning around to run back through Quick’s Hole and return to the mainland, but Francis had

* In the early days of the school, a few female students attended the program.

wisely decided on continuing for we would have been on a lee shore and would have had trouble getting past South Rock. We were past #5 buoy and abreast of Gull Island when the engine began to sputter. We were not yet out of trouble. By throttling back and playing the controls Francis kept us going. It sounded like we were running out of fuel. The wind was freshening but we were picking up a lee from Penikese when we rounded #3 buoy and the engine quit for good.

The kids were frightened, seasick, and cold. Anne was holding up well. Lisa was praying and saying, “never again,” and Joe was stretched out on a pig food sack looking very unhappy.

We had to quickly anchor and hope it would hold while we sought a solution. I crawled out to the bow with the anchor line to secure to the cleat. Francis came forward to help, but we were drifting rapidly and losing our lee. We put the anchor over—paid out its line, and it held.

We checked our fuel tanks and found that the port tank was dry but that there was fuel in the starboard tank. I crawled below the deck to see if I could tell why the fuel was not crossing over. The valves were open so the line must have plugged up. Francis also went below, but we couldn’t fix the lines.

We called the Coast Guard to tell them of our situation and our location. We would check with them every half hour. Cuttyhunk Marine called us—they had been monitoring Channel 16—and I told them we needed fuel. He answered that he couldn’t help us with fuel but could tow us into Cuttyhunk. Wanting to get the kids and supplies ashore, we called Cuttyhunk Marine again and convinced him to get us some fuel. He thought we were near buoy #3 South of Penikese. He said, “I knew this wouldn’t be easy. It will take me about twenty minutes to get some cans together.”

It was now 4:15 p.m. Night was coming on, and the wind was blowing hard. We reported our situation to the Coast Guard. The anchor was holding.

Cuttyhunk Marine called to say that he was leaving the dock. We could soon see him coming out of the Cuttyhunk Pond entrance into a heavy sea. He tried twice to come along side of us to pass us a plastic can with ten gallons of fuel—both times he had to veer away because of the wind. He knew to come up behind us, backing down our lee until he could throw us a line. He then threw the can overboard, and we hauled it aboard.

The wind was blowing hard enough that we had to improvise a wind break to pour the fuel into the deck pipe. Now the question was, “would it start without bleeding all the lines?”

The engine turned over, coughed and took hold to the relief of all of us. Now we had to haul back the anchor, which meant going up on the bow and leading the line back



amidships. Although wearing oil-slickened boots, we managed to accomplish this without incident.

The next problem was to get to the dock and unload with the tide low and the wind blowing the boat against the dock. After a couple of tries, Francis got me onto the dock with a bowline. We then got a stern line over. By using the bow line as a spring, Francis could work the boat close enough to the dock for Joey—our strongest kid at 6 ft, 230 lbs—to hand me up our 7 boxes of groceries and two 100 lb bags of pig and chicken food. Anne helped me haul the stuff from the heaving boat onto the dock. Now we hauled the kids up. We almost dropped Troy.

I released the stern line and then the bow. I heaved the line into the boat. The bitten end stayed aboard, but the bight was in the water where it might get in the wheel, which would have meant the *Coolidge* would be driven into the rocks of Penikese.

Francis maneuvered close enough for me to jump back aboard and haul in the line. He came up to the dock again. I grabbed the tire fenders with one arm around a piling and my legs hanging down. I yelled for Joey and Troy to help me. They did, and we were all safely ashore. Francis was heading for Cuttyhunk Harbor where he would have to spend the night.

Now the problem was to get all the stuff over the catwalk. The wind was blowing hard enough that Anne and Lisa were afraid to cross. I told everyone to crawl and drag or push luggage or a box.

Roger, the lightest kid, decided to be cool and walk across carrying a carton containing our meat and cheese for the week. Midway across the wind caused him to lose his

balance and fall off the dock into the water banging his hip soundly as he fell. My first thought was to hope he wasn't hurt because I didn't want to go in after him. He stood up and waded to shore while two pot roasts, a smoked shoulder, two pounds of bacon, two pounds of Italian sausage, hamburger, hotdogs, and various cheeses started floating toward the beach. I rushed ashore, waded waist deep in the water and retrieved them all.

Later that night Lisa said, "Nobody told me about these boat trips. I thought it would be like a boat trip to Nantucket. You know, a snack bar and all that good s__t. Nobody told me nothin' about boat trips!"

Like Lisa, nobody told us about the storms, both physical and emotional we would face at Penikese, nor did anyone tell us of the joy we would feel when a boy began to change his life and accept hope."

This is part of one person's account of early dealings with Cuttyhunkers in the history of our school. Things have grown only better between our islands in ensuing years. These years, like the early, contain a thousand stories, some of which will be told.

Last year Penikese Island School celebrated thirty years of operation. As the school begins its thirty-first year, we too celebrate by sharing David Masch's recollections of the school's early years in association with George Cadwalader. We are especially grateful for his drawings, which many of you have enjoyed over the years in the school's newsletter.

