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## Boothbay Region Historical Society News

**June 2020**

*Researching and preserving our history*

*It will not be forgotten*

*Photograph: Barters Island class in the 1950s*

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## From Our Archives

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*The Friendship sloop, Wilbur A. Morse, leaving Boothbay Harbor with the Newcombs.  
No steeple on the fairly new Catholic Church puts the photo between 1917 and 1924.*

## Fishing with the Newcombs, Part I

By Ruth Newcomb Begin

(first published in the Boothbay Register)

Ruth Newcomb Begin, born 1922, wrote down her memories about her family and its fishing experiences for the benefit of family members. Her father Oliver (born 1878) married her mother, Ina Belle Kelley (born 1888), about 1903. Her six brothers, Harold, Oliver "Buzz," Ernest, Malcolm "Mac," Lowell "Bud," and Philip were born between 1905 and 1926. Ruth kindly consented to let parts of her text appear in this column; it appeared in the Register in 1999.

Barbara Rumsey

My father, Oliver R. Newcomb, whom I called Papa (pronounced "Puppa"), was a fisherman. As the third youngest of eleven children, my memories of Puppa center on his ever-ready grin and the fact that he singled me out for special attention, perhaps because I was frail and sickly. I would creep downstairs in the early morning when Papa was getting ready to go out fishing and cooking up a big breakfast, he would share a piece of pie with me. Sometimes he would save a doughnut or a cookie from his lunchbox for me. He went trawling at the time I was growing up and the shed on the

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"demon rum" while they were baiting up) but I was always sure of getting a nickel for candy from Papa if I sometimes broke the rule and sneaked down there.

Papa went fishing all his working life. In his younger days he and his brother Fred went lobstering in rowboats. Papa later acquired a decked-over dory and then a little "peapod" with an old "one lunger" for an engine. He and Fred were very close. Their mother died when they were very young and they were drawn together because my grandfather, Lowell Newcomb, remarried and the new wife was not very kind to them. At the time my father wed my mother, when he was twenty-five and she fifteen years of age, he was living on Damariscove Island where he went lobstering. He continued to lobster fish for some time thereafter. Lobsters were plentiful but there wasn't the market for them that there is today. Wholesale prices were low and Papa had a growing family to feed. He wasn't above bringing in a few "shorts." He and Mama lived on a hilltop on Spruce Point and Mama kept an eye out for the warden. If the warden was spotted anywhere in the vicinity, Mama hung a red tablecloth on the clothesline as a signal and Papa quickly disposed of the evidence.

Eventually Papa was able to buy a Friendship sloop, the *Wilbur Morse*, one of the first of its type, which is now a classic. He later sold her and had a boat built by Walter Robinson. Walter Robinson lived next door to us on Spruce Point with his son Maynard and daughter-in-law Nora. His boat shop was adjacent to their home. Papa and Maynard were close friends. They both belonged to the Knights of Pythias and Maynard always called Papa "Damon." The Robinsons were always called Aunt and Uncle by me and my brothers and sisters.

In early summer when the haddock went into the warmer waters of the bays to spawn, or when the dogfish struck in our area, Papa would go "downeast" to fish. Mama would be bustling about the kitchen, frying doughnuts, setting bread and baking pies and cookies for Papa to take on the boat. He would be gone for several days. Two of my brothers, Mac and Ernest, went with Papa on some of these trips. How I envied them when they would tell how they went into Tenant's Harbor to buy a whole pint of ice cream a piece to eat on their apple pie. I wished I might be allowed to go along but there was no place for a girl. In her younger days, my mother sometimes went fishing with Papa. Oft times when Papa took the family on outings in the boat, Mama would take the wheel and she was in her glory.

Mama could always recognize the sound of the engine in Papa's boat. I remember the thrill of excitement as we watched from a kitchen window for the boat to come in sight. If there were a lot of gulls circling overhead, we were sure Papa had a

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purse seiner. This boat was equipped with a net that was set around a school of mackerel or herring and then gathered up and "pursed" so the fish could be dipped from the net into the hold of the boat. One of my most pleasant memories is going on a trip to Portland in the seiner in the late 1920s, along with my mother and six of my ten brothers and sisters. My older brother, Ernest, told me confidentially that the diving birds we saw were "shitpokes" (cormorants). Of course that was not to be repeated in front of my mother, who condoned no swearing or "bad language."

I disgraced myself by getting seasick and this same brother, pretending to be very sympathetic, told me that the way to cure it was to tie a piece of salt pork on a string and then swallow it. He demonstrated with his mouth open wide, "Then you draw it up real slow." With this I ran for the rail and heaved until I thought the soles of my shoes would be coming up.

In winter, when Papa couldn't get out to fish, he sometimes rigged trawl in our big kitchen, which ran the full length of the house. Originally it had been two rooms, but Mama had the partition taken down to accommodate our large family, which in depression days often also included married children and their husbands and offspring.

The trawl line was treated with tar and its strong scent permeated the whole house. It came in a skein, like yarn, and before it could be used, had to be stretched, as did the "gangens," the smaller lines that were fitted with hooks and attached to the trawl line. In our house a "gangen board" was as common as a rolling pin or breadboard. The line for the gangens was wrapped several times around the board and then cut across the middle so that the gangens were all the same size. Added to the scent of tar was the smell of sulphur when Papa scratched a wooden match on the seat of his heavy, gray, twill trousers that he wore in winter, with heavy woolen underwear underneath, as long as I can remember. He would set fire to the ends of the gangens to keep them from fraying and then slap the lines on his pantlegs to put out the flames. Mama would grumble throughout the whole operation since it was impossible to move about easily in the kitchen with trawl line stretched the length of it. To make the situation even worse, my two younger brothers would be running around, either ducking under the line or tripping over it.

Another familiar item in our house was the "heaving stick" that was used to guide the coils of trawl from the tub when it was being set. In winter weather it could also be used to pry apart frozen bait. Made of hardwood, tapered and sanded smooth, these sticks were anywhere from sixteen to twenty-four inches long, depending upon the height of the man who was using it. The one at our house was used by my mother to lift clothes from the hot water in the copper washboiler.



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[www.boothbayhistorical.org/out-of-our-past](http://www.boothbayhistorical.org/out-of-our-past)



*Custom House Square, 1941*

## Museum Update

Dear Friends,

Based on CDC recommendations, state mandates, and limitations on building capacity, **beginning this Thursday, June 11, the BRHS museum will re-open for researchers only and by appointment only, Thursdays through Saturdays.**

Anyone wishing to do research at the museum should first contact office manager Claire Rittershaus to schedule a time to work alone or with local historian Barbara Rumsey.

Once at the museum, visitors are asked to follow requirements based on COVID-19 guidelines for health and safety. These include wearing a face covering, maintaining distance from others, and signing in with contact data should we need to get in touch later. In an effort to eliminate extra cleaning, files and other resources will be brought to a specific area set aside for research.

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we have and we hope to be open for general visits in early, depending on public health information. If you have any questions, please contact Claire at the museum.

**On behalf of the board of trustees, thank you for your patience.**

To make an appointment to visit the BRHS museum, contact Claire at [brhs@gwi.net](mailto:brhs@gwi.net) or 207-633-0820.

For research inquiries, please contact Barbara Rumsey at [bsr@gwi.net](mailto:bsr@gwi.net).

Please check our website or Facebook page for updated information.



*A crew of Chester Farmer's clammers, all Back Narrows men, check over their hods in the 1930s. Left to right: Will Hutchins, Carl Dougherty, Darrell Bryer, Gordon Bryer, and Harold Bryer. The man among the barrels in the stake truck is Shirley Cunningham. Photo courtesy of Doris Bryer Smith.*

**Thank you so much for sending in your membership!**

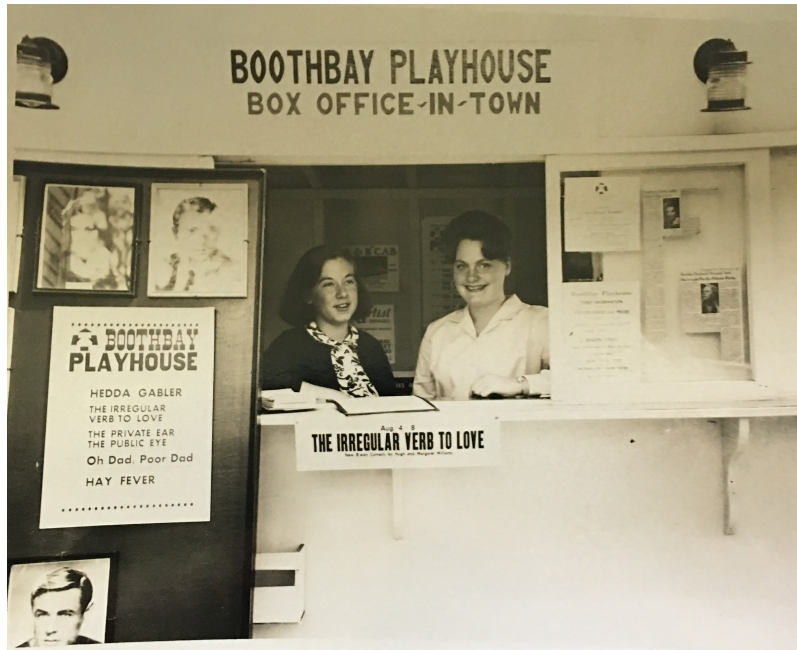
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*Boothbay Playhouse box office, 1964. On the left, Claire Warren, on the right, Deborah Hammond.*

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### *Boothbay Region Historical Society*

72 Oak Street

Post Office Box 272

Boothbay Harbor, Maine 04538

207.633.0820

*We're (normally) open year-round,  
Thursday through Saturday, 10 am to 2 pm.*

***Please check our website for COVID-19 restrictions.***

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