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Boothbay Region Historical Society News

September 2020

Researching and preserving our history

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Photograph: Barbers Island class in the 1950s

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Richard J. Nunan in Boothbay Harbor

Fishing with the Newcombs, Part III

By Ruth Newcomb Begin

This is a continuation of the articles on the Newcomb family. Author Ruth Begin, born 1922, wrote 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.

Barbara Rumsey

Hard Times on the Richard J. Nunan

Mac quit school in his junior year and was fishing with Papa. He was down at the wharf one day in mid-September when he ran into a friend, Weasel Sargent, who told him that the *Richard J. Nunan* was in port and looking to take on a couple of hands. Weasel said that the crew shared \$105 the previous week, a small fortune in those days.

Mac was at the age when he didn't want to take orders from the "old man," and he was eager to be on his own. He went home and told Papa that he had a chance for a site on the *Richard J. Nunan*. "Go if you want to," Papa said, and then added prophetically, "but you'll be sorry."

A couple of days later Mac packed up what few clothes he owned, some personal belongings, and some "Wild West" magazines in a cardboard box and went aboard the ninety-foot, two-masted fishing vessel that carried eight double dories (two men to a dory), an engineer, cook and of course,

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	<div data-bbox="724 174 898 210">Limping Home</div> <div data-bbox="248 245 1373 575"><p>Nothing was heard from the seafarers, but about two months later, Mama was standing at her usual spot at the kitchen window, knitting potheads, when she spied Mac and Coonie coming around the corner. They both were limping. "God in heaven," Mama said as she hurried to the door to greet Mac with open arms. Mac didn't like to be fussed over, but this time he didn't seem to mind. He and Coonie looked like tramps, dirty and unshaven. When Mama asked Coonie to come in, he shook his head. "If I set down now, I'll never get up again," he moaned. He went limping off down the road toward home.</p><p>Mama made Mac sit down while she put water on to boil for a pot of tea. My two younger brothers rushed to help him take off the rubber boots he was wearing. He and Coonie had one pair of boots and one pair of shoes between them, so they swapped off every so often on the long walk from Cutler.</p><p>Mac yelped and swore loudly as the two boys tried to work the boots from his swollen feet. He shooed them away and gingerly worked the boots off himself. Mama got a look at the bloodstained socks where blisters had broken and right away put on a kettle of water to heat so Mac could soak his aching feet in Epsom Salts.</p><p>After wolfing a plate of Mama's doughnuts, washed down by great gulps of hot tea, Mac launched into his tale of the hardships he and Coonie had endured. To hear him tell it, the <i>Richard J. Nunan</i> was a regular "hell ship." The captain was a womanizer who liked his "tea." The grub, what there was of it, wasn't fit to eat. (Of course Mac had been spoiled fishing with Papa and eating Mama's home cooking.)</p></div> <div data-bbox="776 1241 846 1276">Adrift</div> <div data-bbox="248 1291 1373 1969"><p>When the captain ran into Cutler for supplies, as well as a trip to the bootleggers, the engineer told him that they needed oil for the engine. The captain paid no attention and they left Cutler without the oil. They were fishing off 'Tit Manan and ran into a spell of bad weather. Because of the lack of oil, the engine seized. The <i>Nunan</i> drifted for four days before another boat sighted it and towed it into Cutler.</p><p>"Goddamned fool," Mac blustered about the Captain, "he was so bull-headed, he wouldn't h'ist the sail, all he did was jog back and forth. We could have sailed into Cutler."</p><p>About that time, Papa came home from the wharf and Mac repeated the tale for him and added a tale about the big halibut he pulled in while hauling trawl in a dory by himself. His dory mate slipped from the gunwale while waiting to jump into the dory that had been lowered into the choppy sea and hurt his knee. "Goddamed highlander wasn't much use anyway," Mac said. "I might just as well been by myself."</p><p>"I didn't know you set any halibut gear," Papa remarked. (The hooks used for halibut were much larger than those used for haddock, about an inch and a half across the bite of the hook and were</p></div>	

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That son-of-a-bitch was so big it almost swamped the dory. Weighed damn high onto two hundred pounds. I went ass-over-teakettle into the bottom of that dory with that big halibut right on top of me."

All the time Mac was telling his story, I was watching Mama to see if she was going to say anything about his salty language. She hadn't said a word until Mac said, "Well that bastard of a captain . . ." Mama just gave him a look and he started over again.

"Well, after me and the crew got my halibut h'isted aboard, that scimey captain nailed down the cover of the fishbox. He knowed that halibut was supposed to belong to the crew."

"That's right," Papa agreed, "always been that way."

"We fixed his wagon," Mac crowed, "afore we left me and Coonie crawled down in the hold and sawed up through the bottom of the box. We carved up that halibut and divvied it up with the rest of the crew."

Papa laughed fit to kill himself. "You're a dog, Mac, you sure are a dog." It was his supreme accolade. Not once did Papa say "I told you so." After two months of hardship and privation, Mac and Coonie each shared \$22. They had nothing to show for their time and hard work but blistered feet.

Privately Mac told Ernest how he and Coonie made a trip to a bootleggers after they sold their share of the halibut and then went to a dance at a hall on the outskirts of Cutler.

"Why I hardly got through the door when some big fat gal grabbed me and hauled me out on the floor for a waltz. I was wearing my rubber boots, but that didn't bother me none after a few snorts of whiskey. When the fiddler got into the square dances, though, I had to pull off them boots and dance in my stocking feet. Boy, that fat gal was some light on her feet. Why, I'd almost walk back to Cutler just to dance with that gal again."

For more articles by Barbara Rumsey about the Boothbay region check our website
www.boothbayhistorical.org/out-of-our-past

Maine History Celebrated

Maine Historical Society Bicentennial series

[Maine Historical Society](#) (MHS) is relaunching its Bicentennial public programming with a new virtual series, MAINE AT 200, beginning September 2020 through March 2021. The series will feature live conversations and panels on topical issues with prominent speakers, historians and authors, including **Earle Shettleworth Jr.**, **Colin Woodard**, **Dr. Kate McMahon**, **Pulitzer-prize**

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MAINE AT 200 (broadcast via Zoom) will explore how Maine became a State in 1820, what that has meant to Maine people, and how 13,000 years of history shape the issues that matter to Mainers today. The series reflects MHS's work to preserve and share Maine's story, and to recognize experiences, perspectives, and contributions of all Maine people.

For the complete schedule of programs with details and how to register, viewers are urged to visit www.mainehistory.org/programs or call (207) 774-1822. Early registration is recommended as it is expected these events will fill up quickly. Unless otherwise noted on the MHS website, programs are free and open to the public. Programs run 6 to 7 p.m. on the dates listed.



Boothbay Center High, January 1938

Museum Reminders

Due to Covid-19, the society has been forced to cancel most 2020 fundraising and social events. But even though we will not be selling cheese or offering any fabulous boat trips, we hope, even cheese-less and trip-less, you will consider making a donation. Thank you!

We are still hoping to be open in time for our annual open house in December.

The museum is open for research and each member of our loyal staff

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We are open 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.

To make an appointment to visit the BRHS museum, contact Claire at brhs@gwi.net or 207-633-0820. Please check our website or Facebook page for updated information.

In these difficult times we thank ALL of you for your support, be it comments and likes on Facebook, subscribing to enews, shopping at our museum store, or memberships and donations.

Thank you!



Barters Island School c. 1898 (detail)

Let's celebrate our cultural heritage together

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

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