

A Happy WHOI Story

by Barbara (Bobby) Atwood Colburn

I was born in Boston on October 22, 1926. My mother, Annie K. Atwood, was a housewife and a church organist. David Atwood, my father, was a graduate of the Massachusetts Nautical School, now Massachusetts Maritime Academy. He became a captain in the Merchant Marine.

We were living in Sandwich when my mother went to a meeting where she heard a presentation by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution describing opportunities for employment. I went for an interview and was hired in 1947 as a tech in the Underwater Sound group B-16 for Dr. George Woollard (who sometimes read Ogden Nash aloud at coffee hour).

Because we were doing government work that required secret clearances, entrance to the building was through a gate guarded by Harry Handy. We also had side projects that included numbering water sample bottles for Arnold Clarke and Dean Bumpus to use at Bikini atoll, and labeling Nansen bottles.

I first commuted by train from Sandwich, walking to the station from home. I had to change to the Woods Hole train at Buzzards Bay. Occasionally I was late getting home. The train had to wait at the Woods Hole terminal when the ferry was delayed by fog. Then it would be late getting to the Buzzards Bay station, where my train from Boston to the Outer Cape would have been held.

Soon I decided to move into WHOI's Challenger House, WHOI's dormitory for women, located

on Woods Hole Road, overlooking Little Harbor, with about eight other girls. My rent was about \$42.50 per month. We had use of the kitchen and worked in teams of two to provide our meals. Males were housed in The Barn at the top of the hill above Challenger. One enterprising young man, Bob French, asked us if he could cook our breakfasts if we provided the food. That worked perfectly for all concerned.

Social activities were plentiful. I was a member of the local Trysail Chorus, which produced several Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Our only professional was tenor Carl Fredensi from Hyannis. We had a "follies" with Sue Brainerd, Grace Crietz and me doing the Charleston along with other acts. I was also a member of the Ladies' Basketball team. We played a Women's Army Corps team at Otis Air Force Base and also a local townie team. Our coach was Betty Bunce, a scientist who was the first woman to go to sea on a WHOI ship. Noggie Eldredge also coached us at one point.

Further afield, we travelled to Concord, NH, to a home belonging to an aunt of Andy Bunker for fall hiking in the Presidential Range. We went to the peak of Mt. Lafayette for a marvelous view, and we hiked up Tuckerman's Ravine on Mt. Washington. When we went back for winter skiing, those of us who had hiked in the fall were surprised to see all that world now completely covered with snow.

Some of us from Challenger had spells of house-sitting. Once five of us stayed at Willem Malkus's

home on Salt Pond Road. Sue Brainerd, Shirley Raiche and I spent time at the house John and Joan Kanwisher built on Oyster Pond Road overlooking Trunk River and the Sound. We looked forward to reading Chuck Officer's collection of Zane Grey when we house-sat his home on Salt Pond Road in the winter. However, so much was going on we never did get to them.

In June 1954, we girls in Challenger were asked to be cocktail waitresses at the reception following the dedication of the new Navy building (now the Smith Building) next to Bigelow. There I met and later was invited to dinner by Dick Colburn, a mate on *Atlantis*.

As you might expect, several marriages resulted from all these gatherings. In addition to the Colburns, they included the Chutes, Dimmocks, Volkmanns, Davises, Knotts, Vaccaros, and Dows.

Dick and I were married Labor Day 1955, just before *Atlantis* sailed to South America on a cruise of several months with Dick as first mate. She was to stop for a few days in Bermuda, so I flew down and we stayed at the Bermuda Biological Station. The Bio Station had very close ties with WHOI and allowed WHOI people to stay there. Dick hired a driver, and we had a wonderful day touring the island and climbing the lighthouse at Elbow Beach. When the ship sailed, I flew back to Boston. On the flight back, I asked the steward if they allowed anyone in the cockpit. The captain okayed it and I spent the rest of the trip home with the pilots. As we passed the scalloped shoreline of Nantucket, the captain said they were on the approach to Logan and I would now have to leave the cockpit. How times have changed!

Bermuda became a second home for *Atlantis* over the years. Some ten or more years later, Dick and I went back for a visit to the Bio Station. We were walking along the street in St. George's when the

clerk at Gosling's came out and said "I'd know that walk anywhere." He had recognized Dick by his sailor's gait!

Dick's father was both proud and envious of his son's career. Sailing was a special part of Dick's childhood.

Our three children grew up loving the sea. A. D. (Arthur Dickinson Colburn III) graduated from MMA and is now captain of the present *Atlantis*, as was his father before him. Susan Colburn Nevler got an advanced degree in agricultural geography from U. of Hawaii, learning Thai in the process. She is now a wife, mother and world traveler, taking every available opportunity to go to sea, preferably at the helm. David is a seaman for the Steamship Authority.

About the Author

Barbara (Bobby) Atwood Colburn spent her childhood in Brooklawn, New Jersey, but because of her father's assignments during WWII she went to four different high schools in New Jersey, Alabama, Massachusetts, and Connecticut.

She has been active in the Woods Hole Woman's Club. Bobby is a docent at the Woods Hole Historical Museum's Bradley House, a member of the Altar Guild of the Church of the Messiah, and a faithful supporter of all music in Falmouth. She also knits hats for children living on Indian reservations.