

West Falmouth - A Foggy Beginning 66 Years Ago

by Dana M. Hastings

A new chapter of my life began in 1940 when Grandpa Rice rented a cottage in West Yarmouth to get Nana away from the summer heat in their Framingham (MA) apartment. We all loved that summer.

So one evening the following spring, 1941, the phone rang and Grandpa said that he had "hired a house," sight unseen, from a bank which had foreclosed on it in 1938. It was in West Falmouth, on Buzzards Bay just north of Woods Hole, an area we had never visited. He insisted that we look at it the next morning before he paid the deposit. Despite Mother's protestations that she had obligations right after lunch, he insisted and as usual got his way.

Five of us – Mother, my sister, two friends and I, left Framingham early the next morning for the two hour drive (there were no superhighways in 1941!) Arriving in thick fog in West Falmouth on Rte. 28, now 28A, we, of course, went right through the little village and ended up in Falmouth. Eventually we found our way back and quickly located the town dock on the harbor. The fog was now so thick that we could hardly even see the water from the dock.

A man there gave us directions to the Bacon cottage as it was then known. We found the grey-shingled house quickly and went inside, racing around, counting bedrooms, bathrooms and finding out what we had to bring, all the time urged on by Mother's calls to "Hurry, hurry, hurry – it's a two hour drive home and we have to be there by two!" The place was completely furnished, just as the previous owners had left it in 1938.

Moving quickly, we dashed around outside and saw through the heavy fog some eel grass before us and what appeared to be some sort of marsh. We got in the car and left for home.

That night at dinner, Dad asked, "How close is it to the water?" I looked at Mother and she looked at me, and we said that it couldn't be far since there was a marsh out front and, after all, it was pretty close to the town dock. Anyway, Grandpa went through with the rental and we were due to move in for the summer in June.

We arrived on a beautiful, sunny day in mid-June in our 1938 Buick with Mother and Dad, my sister, Alyce, Nana, her housekeeper, and me in the car with Susie the cat. All of our luggage for the summer was in or on the car with two bicycles strapped to the rear. We had only one car at the time, of course, and everything had to be crammed in.

But what a surprise awaited us! Seeing the house for the first time at mid-day in June, the sun shining brightly, and the tide at full flood, we found ourselves not at the edge of some marsh but right at the edge of a beautiful harbor with the seawall and two feet of water thirty feet from our front steps. We were pleasantly stunned, having had previously only a quick glimpse of marsh grass through the fog.

The house itself was pretty typical of turn-of-the-century vacation homes but it also had a watermark 30" high around the first floor walls that was left by the Great New England Hurricane of 1938. Of

course, we didn't own the place then but the evidence of flooding was very clear.

We moved in and spent a wonderful summer on the waterfront. Clamming, crabbing and swimming were at our front door and we, with many others, walked to the railroad station every Friday evening to meet all the husbands and fathers coming down from Boston for the weekend. So there was not much to complain about, other than the icebox which had to be filled every other day, no telephone, and an otherwise pretty much uncared-for house.

In January or February, 1942 as World War II was just beginning, Grandpa found the bank more than willing to sell. Sixty-six years and five generations later, we are still here!

An interesting sidelight to this story is that in the 1930s, the house was a dormitory for the Silver Beach Players. Some who stayed in the house, according to our neighbors, included Henry Fonda, Jimmy Stewart, Joshua Logan and Margaret Sullivan. The latter apparently provided some entertainment for the boys in the neighborhood because it was said that she never pulled her shades down when going to bed and they all hid in the hedge and watched the show!

So what began as a hurried, harried trip to West Falmouth on a dreary and foggy day in 1941 has been a wonderful sixty-six year Falmouth and Buzzards Bay experience for our whole family.



Hastings house in West Falmouth in October 2007. The house has changed little since Dana Hastings spent his first summer there in 1941. Photograph by Janet Chalmers.