

Remembering Mary Louise Cole Smith

by Judy Stetson

John Hough wrote an obituary for Mary Lou Smith that recounted her great contributions to the town. This introduction to excerpts from that obituary adds some details about the launching of *Spritsail* in 1986 by the Woods Hole Historical Collection. Mary Lou was the guiding editor and chief navigator for its first twenty years. She wrote:

The spritsail is a small boat rig of respectable antiquity used around the world. Its name comes from the sprit, a spar comparable to a gaff but attached much lower on the mast. The sprit crosses diagonally to the uppermost corner of the sail, which it extends and elevates.

Slimmer, deeper, and with more freeboard than a catboat, it was fairly easy to row and was a good boat in the fierce tides of Woods Hole. The spritsail rig was certainly influenced by the stone bridge built across Eel Pond Channel in 1878-1879. The mast of the spritsail was stepped far forward and held at the bow by a pinned bracket. When approaching the fixed bridge, the boatman removed the pin, and mast and sail dropped into the boat, allowing the spritsail to enter Eel Pond.

As we launch this new *Spritsail*, A Journal of Falmouth History, we hope it will prove to be as useful and "handy to have around" as the old spritsail boat. We want it to be jaunty and trim, good for all weather, fun

to use, and valuable to year-round and summer residents alike. To this community of Falmouth, with its splendid maritime past, we offer this *Spritsail* for pleasure, adventure and exploration of the currents of local history.

Excerpts from the obituary by John T. Hough, Jr. printed in the *Falmouth Enterprise* Friday, July 19, 2013. Reprinted by permission.

Mary Louise Cole Smith of Woods Hole, Falmouth's Grande Dame of historic preservation who fought successfully to save Highfield Hall and the Mullen-Hall School, died on Wednesday at age 91, after a long illness.

She leaves her husband of 70 years, Paul Ferris Smith.

Mrs. Smith, an admirer said, had an eye for that richness and an ever-deepening love for it. She found it in every corner of Falmouth, above all in Woods Hole, her home for more than half a century.

"There comes a point," she wrote to *The Enterprise* in 1985, "when people who care about a village say, 'Enough!' We must preserve what we have left of the past and protect it against greed and lack of taste in the future."

It was Ms. Smith's credo in a nutshell, and typical of her eloquence.

On December 6, 2005, following her retirement as editor of *Spritsail*, Mary Lou was honored at a party at the Woods Hole Museum. Judy Stetson wrote the following for the occasion: Mary Lou, we honor you tonight for your vision, your leadership, your courage and your spirit. You have made many outstanding contributions to the village of Woods Hole, to the town of Falmouth and to all of us, your friends.

You dedicated *Woods Hole Reflections*, "To the people of Woods Hole who have worked hard through the years to create a village in which we can enjoy one another as much as we do the splendor of the place."

Well, this evening and all day tomorrow are dedicated to you, Mary Lou.

Without your vision and your initiative, there would be no written history of Woods Hole, no history of Falmouth, no *Spritsail* journal. Thanks to you, we have superb books that honor our past and will delight the future. And the *Spritsail* is wonderfully seaworthy!

You have an extraordinary ability to inspire others. Writers, photographers, editors, proofreaders all answered your call and produced their best work for you. The Foreword you wrote to Woods Hole Reflections expressed beautifully *both* your vision and your achievement:

This book is not in the usual sense a "History of Woods Hole." The Woods Hole Historical Collection did not want to write a traditional town history but preferred to create a mosaic of written and photographic reflections that would allow us to share with one another, and



Mary Lou, 2009. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

with those who may not yet have discovered Woods Hole, what it is that makes it such a special place. We have tried to capture the essence of the village, using the best writing and the best pictures we could find.

Woods Hole is a unique community. Those of us who live and work and vacation here hope to preserve the qualities of life that make it so appealing. We want this book to honor the people who contributed to the growth of Woods Hole in the past. We trust *Woods Hole Reflections* reveals in text and pictures the spirit of Woods Hole as we know it today.

That was your vision and your achievement in 1982. And as soon as WHR was launched, you started the next project, *The Book of Falmouth*. You called on your old crew and enlisted whole new crews to create a town wide "mosaic" for the town's Tercentenary in 1986. And once again you succeeded. This time you wrote the Foreword in



Judy Stetson, Chair of the *Spritsail* editorial board, and Jennifer Gaines, Executive Director and Curator of the Woods Hole Historical Museum, flank Mary Lou and Paul Ferris Smith at the gala party honoring Mary Lou last December. Photo by Susan Pennington. (Vol. 20, No. 2. Summer 2006, p. 3.)

the name of the Falmouth Historical Commission. Once again your words capture perfectly your vision and your achievement:

The Falmouth Historical Commission is proud and happy to publish this book in celebration of Falmouth's Tercentenary.

From 1686 to 1986 generations of Falmouth families have cleared the land, tended sheep, hunted whales and fished the sea, harvested cranberries and strawberries, explored oceans, built churches, schools, houses, laboratories and businesses. For 300 years the people of Falmouth have lived together, creating a town with a rich diversity of ethnic groups and varied traditions. The editors of this tricentennial book believe that the separate villages of

Falmouth combine to create a unique and splendid town. We want this book to portray through its words and photographs the special esteem we feel for our home town as we celebrate Falmouth's 300th birthday.

My hope, and the hope of all those who have worked on the *Tricentennial Book of Falmouth*, is that we can keep the diversity of our town alive, continue to respect one another's differences, and preserve the beauty of Falmouth before it is lost to uncontrolled growth and pollution of its clear air, sparkling ponds, and shining sea.

Mary Lou, you have earned our praise and admiration. We gladly give you our hearts and hands as well!