

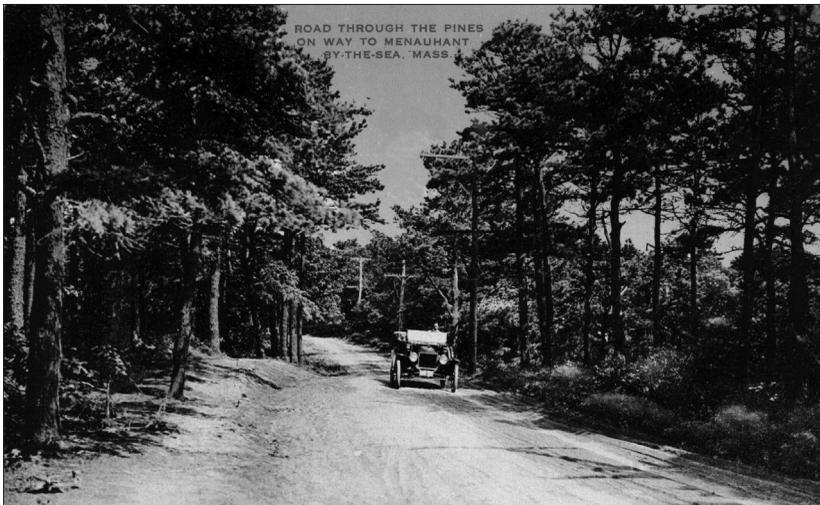
The Summer Cottage: A Memoir

By Rene Dillingham Washburn

When my father was a boy in the late 1800's, his family spent their summers on Cape Cod, in a Universalist Campground called Menauhant. His father, the Reverend Frederick Augustus Dillingham, brought his wife, Carrie Alexander, and their six children, Leslie, Mabel, Alex, Paul, Sydney and Edith, each year to the same old summer house, which is still there today. On his boyhood explorations my father rambled along the shore to a village on the other side of Bourne's pond, a farming village called Davisville, a half mile inland. Near the beach sat a solitary old Cape Cod cottage. It was this house he bought years later for \$600.00, to be his honeymoon house and a summer house foreverafter.

Dad was a mathematics professor and could spend four months each summer doing what he pleased. After his wedding in 1910 to Alveda Frances Greenwood, my mother, they left Boston by train for Falmouth, where they hired a horse-drawn wagon to make the five mile journey to their honeymoon hideaway.

The sandy road to the shore was hidden by low-hanging tree branches, which they ducked and pushed aside. The cottage was a typical Cape Cod style known as a three-quarter Cape, with low eaves, two windows on the left side of the front door and one window on the right. A full Cape has two rooms of equal size either side and a half Cape has



"The sandy road to the shore was hidden by low-hanging tree branches."
Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green

only the front door with a room on one side. These three styles never varied, and each had a kitchen wing attached to the back. Our house was built in 1820 by one of the many Davises of Davisville, and a later untraditional porch was added across the front and one side. Dad bought it completely furnished – rope beds with cornhusk mattresses, a marble-topped Victorian table with an old kerosene lamp in the living room (the lamp was of shiny nickel with a frosted white shade and a glass chimney), a platform rocker with a seat of carpeting, a large dining room table with several small caned-seat chairs. In the pantry, shelves held a full set of old-fashioned china, white with a brown border of oak leaves and acorns. This included platters, kidney-shaped bone dishes, small butter spats and a celery dish. There were cut glass sauce dishes with serving bowls of matching button-and-daisy [pattern] from the Sandwich glass works on the other side of the Cape. My parents never bought anything new as long as I lived there. We slept on the lumpy mattresses, ate off antique china and Sandwich glass and used the original kitchen utensils. We lived in a time warp. The back wing was a low-ceilinged kitchen with a fireplace and wainscoting in a putty color decorated with trompe l’oeil knot-holes in a deeper shade, made by an artistic painter. The low ceiling was plastered with crushed clamshells. The plastered walls above the wainscoting were gritty with beach sand reinforced with goat hair. I sometimes pulled out a stray hair to see what a goat hair looked like.

When I was five, Dad had a porch built off

the kitchen facing the sea, and this became an outdoor living/dining room. The house had no electricity nor running water and, without a sink or appliances, the kitchen didn’t look like a kitchen. The fireplace mantel held a ship model made by my great-great grandfather, a three masted square-rigger with hinged cannon holes. This was the *Harriet* and looked like the *USS Constitution* (this model is now in a museum). Either side of the “Harriet” was a row of candles. Some were stuck in large clam shells, and two were thin brass with handles. Each night, a candle lighted our way to the bedrooms. First we cleaned our teeth by candle light in the woodshed, then carried the candle upstairs, where our shadows towered over us on the sloping ceilings, moving as we moved. As a small child of six or seven these shadows seemed threatening and, even now, seventy-five years later, I am not happy when the only source of light is a single candle. The kitchen had a window and door on each side, the north looked over the meadows to the village, and the south faced Vineyard Sound. Behind the kitchen was a woodshed with a beehive dome which enclosed a Dutch oven behind the fireplace. It looked like an igloo, and we children could climb on top. Above the kitchen, an attic reached by a ladder held old china wash basins, matching pitchers and slop jars.

Dad contrived a dumbwaiter using a wooden box, which we raised and lowered with a rope and pulleys. This carried the milk and butter to the cellar below. A typical Cape Cod cellar is round with a brick wall, to withstand the



Very early Green Pond bridge. Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green

pressure of the sand, but ours was square with a rock wall and was ten degrees cooler than the kitchen above. This was our refrigerator. Mother cooked on a three-burner kerosene stove, blue enamel with a glass jug at one end for the kerosene. The three burners had tubular chimneys below, each with a door of transparent mica. The oven was a removable metal box set over two burners. Mother was not a born cook, but she was a wizard with sour milk recipes: gingerbread, Johnny Cake, blueberry pancakes and doughnuts. Sour milk recipes always include baking soda. When the soda is stirred rapidly into the sour milk, it foams dramatically over the top of the cup, a phenomenon I always stopped to watch. Without refrigeration, there was a steady supply of sour milk, and a common sight in the pantry was a cheesecloth bag dripping whey into a bowl

for another batch of cottage cheese. During World War I, the local farmers planted cabbages and turnips in the meadows around our house, and after the war these became hay fields filled with wild strawberries, daisies and Queen Anne's Lace. As a child, I didn't know that our lifestyle was primitive.

We accomplished, without electricity, what other families did with equipment modern at that time. If there had been a stream nearby, we might have washed our clothes there. Instead, Dad pumped pails of water and heated them on the kerosene stove. He was a dignified professor eight months of the year but was not above helping on summer washdays. My parents were early risers, and by the time we girls awoke, the wash was half-finished and hanging on the line. Mother scrubbed on a washboard

in a large galvanized tub set on a stool behind the woodshed. Dad stood near and rinsed everything in pails of cold water and hung the clothes on the line. I accepted the washday scene as a child, but as my horizons widened, I noticed that no one else washed their clothes by hand outdoors. I became self-conscious about it. As soon as we were old enough, we girls were responsible for our own laundry. By then the pump was indoors in the wood shed, and we washed in a basin in the large sink. As for ironing without electricity, we heated three heavy irons, marked one, two and three, over a kerosene burner. They were called "Sad Irons" and worked well except for a little rust on the sides. Occasionally someone sandpapered the rust off. A separate wooden handle could be clamped onto each iron as one cooled and others heated. I remember the legless ironing board – one end rested on a table, the other on a blue stool (actually a chair minus its back), with a large brass-colored flour tin on top. My parents never replaced anything if it worked.

In the early years, the only house in sight was a yellow one, half-hidden by trees on the other side of the north meadow. The Pearse family lived there with three sons, Temple, Shelley and Herbert, known as "Bunny." Dad told us

that Mr. Pearse used to walk over for a visit in his underwear because there was no one to see him except us. We were usually barefoot, but it was daring to call in your underwear.

My earliest summer memories include the many house parties my parents had. They invited their old college classmates in Boston to come with their children for a visit. They arrived in their open touring cars, a novelty for us girls; we didn't have a car. With only two bedrooms upstairs and one small one off the dining room, I remember mattresses on the floor. We ate many picnics on the beach and spent most of our days there. The women cooked in quantity, the men dug clams for steamers and chowder, and the garden behind the house provided enough vegetables. After we children were bedded-down in odd places, we heard the men singing their old glee club songs. Our lifestyle must have been a novelty for all who visited. As years passed, friends wanted their children to experience our simple life, and after the house parties ended, we often had sons and daughters spend a month with us.

Other episodes from the memoir can be read on the website of the Museums on the Green: www.museumsonthegreen.org/archives/untoldtalesoffalmouth.

About the Author

Rene Dillingham Washburn (1915-2006) was a lifelong summer resident of Falmouth. This piece is excerpted from her unpublished memoir, found in the archives at Museums on the Green.