



Peter Ralston (3)

Come Together

Island teachers, students and parents make new connections to strengthen schools

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FRENCHBORO

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November is a risky month to go island school visiting, but the ferry to Frenchboro runs only once a week, and you have to take the invitation when you can get it. I boarded the boat at Bass Harbor, bound for my first visit to Frenchboro's one-room school, which, in November 1987, boasted a healthy population of nine students, ages five to 14. The ferry made its way past Black Island and Swan's before heading down the long passage into Frenchboro Harbor. The sky was gray and the wind cold; snow and ice covered the town in patches. I walked up the hill to the school, unmistakable with its new cedar-shingled, pyramid-style roof and prominent elevation.

Inside, teacher Annie Pye and children were competing with one another to answer trivia questions, ranging from geography to American presidents. Soon each "class" was busy working on math assignments while the teacher huddled with the kindergartners to test their counting skills.

After a busy day which included practicing the songs for the Christmas program, I took a walk over to see the home sites which would soon house seven new families. The families will live year-round on Frenchboro under a creative "homesteading" program, started by the Frenchboro Future Development Corporation. Their goal was to strengthen the year-round population and safeguard the future of the school by guaranteeing a steady supply of children for years to come. The year-round and seasonal residents of Frenchboro recognized that without a stable, ongoing school population, the community would die within a few years. The risks were great—would the newcomers find satisfactory jobs; would they fit in; would they accept the isolation; would they support the one-room school, and be willing to send their children to the mainland in the ninth grade? It will be a few years before these questions are answered, but in the meantime, Frenchboro serves as a model for other island communities looking for ways to grow.

I woke the next morning and looked out the window of the Parsonage where I was staying. The wind was howling. It was starting to snow and the radio stated that ferries up and down the coast were not running. Like most mainlanders, I was anxious to return to shore to get on with my "normal activities." As luck would have it, we were able to locate a boat going ashore. A father needed to pick up a birthday present for his son and figured that since it was too nasty to go fishing, he would take a run into Bass Harbor. I signed on, and for the next hour "rode" that lobster boat like a contestant in a rodeo. I kept my eyes glued to the horizon whenever I could find it, while the captain lounged against the wheel and carried on a conversation with his crewmen and a variety of voices on the radio. We bounded into the wharf. I wobbled up the steps to uncover my car and steered it through a gathering blizzard.

The experience taught me my first lesson about working with island communities: Nature keeps her own schedule.

Maine island communities have not escaped the repercussions of today's transient society. All over America, the traditional community is a vanishing phenomenon. Today people

live, work and play in different communities and are willing to pick up and move every three or four years following career or school opportunities. Like most other rural areas, the stability of an island community is directly tied to economic opportunity and diversity.

Just before World War II, most of the year-round islanders were self-sufficient, grew vegetables, raised livestock, fished and provided for education and recreation within the community. After the war, and as families began to recover from the Depression, island communities began to turn more consistently to the mainland for their services. Boats became larger and faster, designed for longer distances and equipped with technology to provide for safety in any weather. Basic necessities could be brought from the mainland, reducing the dependence on local suppliers. Outsiders bought homes, slowly reducing the number of year-round residents to maintain mail service, stores, schools and churches. As the economic diversity was reduced to one or two occupations, families began to move off the island, affecting school enrollment.

The population trend today is different for each island, but achieving a stable economic base so that young families can settle on the island and find permanent housing and productive jobs is a critical issue for most islands.

SWAN'S ISLAND

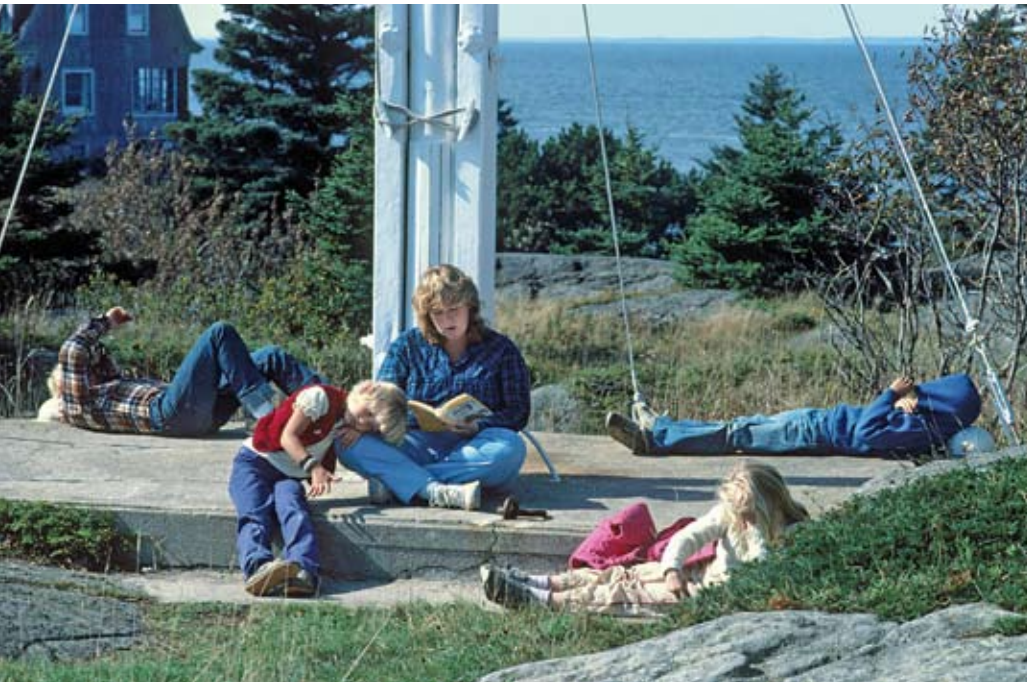
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My first impression of Swan's Island was how welcomed I felt—everywhere. With 50 students enrolled for the 1989–90 school year, Swan's is one of the largest K–8 island schools. There are three teachers for the eight grades: Kim Colbeth, Janice Staples and Helen Sanborn, along with a special education teacher and aides. Colbeth, who is also the school principal, works with the third, fourth and fifth grades. She explained some of the more exciting projects, including the whole-language reading and writing program, and the new home economics and woodworking classes. All three teachers cooperate on integrating units with each age group.

The Swan's Island Fishermen's Co-op is a major player in providing long-term stability for the community. Co-op manager Bruce Colbeth, who doubled as selectman until this past March, is also looking into affordable housing requirements on the island. With morale riding high, the community has embarked on building a \$1.5 million school, scheduled to be finished in August 1990. The new school will also provide recreation and social space for islanders.

Before I retired for the night, I was treated to a videotape about the history of Swan's Island, written and performed by students in Helen Sanborn's sixth- to eighth- grade class. It made a strong impression. These students will always remember with pride the story of the island and the people who settled there. The next day I walked out to Burnt Cove Harbor Light and took in the view from the point. As I turned to go, a lobsterman, returning from a haul, leaned out of his boat and waved.

The Island Institute became involved with island schools in 1985. The issue then was communication—and it still is. Each school is part of a consolidated school district, school



union or community school. Most of them report to administrative offices on the mainland. Two of the schools, Matinicus and Monhegan, are part of the Unorganized Territories of Maine, and are served by state agents. The three high schools in Penobscot Bay are organized into two School Administrative Districts and one community school.

Until the first island school conference in 1985, most of the island schools did not communicate with one another. When a few parents, teachers and superintendents expressed a desire to meet with their counterparts on the other islands, a conference was scheduled on North Haven. From that experience, the conferences have continued each fall and spring, bringing teachers, school board members, parents, administrators and students together.

In doing so, the conferences have sparked yet another form of communication—school exchanges. During the past two years, students from Frenchboro, Great and Little Cranberry and Isle au Haut have traveled to one another's islands for classes, games and overnight fun. These exchanges have been facilitated enormously by the SUNBEAM, the mission boat of the Maine Seacoast Missionary Society.

STONINGTON AND ISLE AU HAUT

JUNE 6–7, 1988

I am not a morning person, so meeting a 7 a.m. departure time at the Stonington dock requires a big pep talk at about 4 a.m. The mailboat didn't look large enough to accommodate 15 Cranberry Isles students, four teachers, plus me and any other passengers bound for Isle au Haut that spring morning. With all the gear piled three feet high in the center, and people arranged port, starboard and stern, we headed for the island.

Upon arrival, we walked the short distance to the school and dropped our gear. The children were assigned to silent reading and journal writing, while the adults quietly exchanged news about students and staff concerns. The rest of the morning we spent with the older children touring the island with

a visiting geologist, while the younger children played games at the ball field.

Getting right into the spirit of the thing, Isle au Haut parents set up a sumptuous potluck supper at the community building and extended the invitation island-wide. The beautiful June evening ended with a bonfire on the beach behind the school. The fire provided just enough light to find a comfortable spot to sit and watch the last of the sun, sing familiar songs and listen to a few stories before dividing up for bed. The younger children camped down in the school, while a few of the adults and older children made their way back to the community building and a couple of rented movies. I fell asleep before they figured out which to show first.

Island teachers are never without resources and generally earn their stripes by learning how to adapt everything in the universe to serve their goals. However, teachers turn over at a rapid rate in these isolated schools—on average every two years. Innovative units for teaching science, math, history, writing or geography to a class of 10 children, kindergarten through eighth grade, are often put in boxes and stored in the attic after the teacher leaves, never to be shared or developed.

The most recent program to benefit the staff and curriculum development of island teachers was initiated by the University of Maine, College of Science Education and the Island Institute. The first Summer Island Teachers Institute was held on Islesboro from June 24 through July 1, 1989. This program was made possible by grants from Title II Funds for Science and Mathematics, the Innovative Grant Program of the Maine Department of Educational and Cultural Services and the Clarence and Anne Dillon Dunwalke Trust.

ISLESBORO

JUNE 24, 1989

It had been raining for a week—not unusual for Maine in June. As I boarded the ferry in Lincolnville, I watched the clouds fight for position with the sun. The prospect of a week of rain for the 18 teachers about to start the first Summer Island Teachers Institute was not auspicious.

The ferry landed and a caravan of cars headed for Dark Harbor. Just as I turned down the driveway to the Clason home, our headquarters for the week, the sun came out and bathed the house's long wraparound porch in brilliant sunlight. Almost at the same time, early arrivals emerged from indoors to spread out on the porch and welcome the newcomers.

The next few hours were spent learning about one another as we met, chose bedrooms, rearranged furniture, checked out where the showers were, poked around the kitchen and discovered the beer and soft drinks. By dinnertime we had a pretty good take on the situation and headed out through the woods toward the school for our evening meal.

We were met by Superintendent Bill Dove and some of

the Islesboro teachers, who were also attending the institute. Picnic tables were set up outside the cafeteria door and dinner was served buffet style.

Back at the house, everyone gathered in the living room to hear Dr. Michael Brody and Dr. John Peterson outline the program for the week. The schedule didn't leave much time for goofing around, with lectures in the morning, field research in the afternoon and curriculum design class in the evening. Confident that things were off to a running start, I left the next day with plans to return on Friday, the program's last night.

Driving up to the house on Friday afternoon, and after a week of sunny weather, I noticed a very different feeling on the porch. People were lounging, reading or writing, but the pairings were different. The living and dining rooms looked well used, with piles of books and papers everywhere.

I was given a tour of the science lab at the school, where I inspected rows of saltwater aquariums, each filled with marine creatures resting on the bottom or climbing up the sides. Pride of ownership was evident as each teacher showed me his or her aquarium.

The evening session back at the house was very different from the first one, with people joking and teasing one another mercilessly. After concluding remarks by Dr. Brody, I asked the teachers to tell me why they had come, what they had learned and suggestions for the next time. Some common threads in their remarks were:

- It is good to study with other teachers who work in the same environment.
- It was great not to have to commute and to stay in one place and focus on the course.
- It was a chance to get to know people while not in a teaching role and to be with peers.
- It was a chance to work things through, follow through on ideas, and reality-test with other teachers doing the same thing.
- I thought I might leave teaching. This made me want to stay.
- It's all right in front of me. I don't need a bag of tricks, just the confidence to use simple things to expand my students' knowledge—and my own.

The Summer Institute will be held again in 1990. Teachers will once again get to work on a science curriculum focusing on the environment, or they can take a two-year course to develop a core curriculum of Maine Island Studies, from 1880 to 1980, including history, family life, music, art, literature, rites of passage, legends, architecture, immigration and the military.

What is the future for Maine island schools? Ask, rather, what is the future for the year-round Maine islands?



In the mid-1940s, Criehaven Island slowly disintegrated as a year-round community. The lobstering was exceptional, but the focus was no longer on the island; it was toward the mainland. Family houses were sold to outsiders. The store and mail service were offered only seasonally, then not at all. Finally, the island could no longer afford to hire a teacher and the school closed. The mothers moved off the island to put their children in a mainland school, and eventually the fathers followed. A once-vibrant village was turned into a seasonal fishing station.

That was more than 40 years ago, and from then until now the 14 year-round islands remaining have managed to keep their heads above water. But the specter of community collapse remains a real one, and many Maine islands are grappling with the complex questions it raises.

How can these islands provide enough housing for young families to come and settle? Some islands have an abundance of unfilled jobs and no workers. Other islands need to provide additional—and more diverse—job prospects. Once a commitment is made to provide options for growth in an island community, the school then becomes the means for perpetuating the vision.

By its centrality in the community, the school has a major influence on children's values and expectations, and can play two important roles. First, it can recognize the profound worth of the community and commit itself to the community's preservation. Second, it can help students clarify their values, expose them to options in the outside world, and support their choices either to leave the island, or to stay.

Teachers at isolated island schools need ways to interact with each other. They need an educational support system that validates their unique teaching assignment, and provides continued training for those who choose to work in small, multi-grade schools.

The great philosophical debate over the quality of America's educational system will go completely unnoticed by some of the country's tiniest schools. The 14 island schools of Maine are engaged in the simple task of teaching children—about their community, their world, and themselves. And they do it well.

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