



Bob and Helene Quinn

“It’s the Ancestors”

The Quinns of Eagle Island

Todd Cheney

Eagle Island lies in a string of islands fringing the deep waters of East Penobscot Bay. On the island’s northeast corner, the confluence of tide and current drive a timeless surge against 60-foot cliffs that rise black and sheer from the rockweed and water. At the top, the igneous rock wall curls back under a mat of soil crammed with the roots of stunted trees, their branches lopsided, growing away from the prevailing wind. Follow the cliffs to the west, and they subside to a beach that intersects the water at a gentle angle, in a sweeping crescent smooth as a curve of the moon. Spruce forests flank the beaches and cliffs everywhere, and the landscape is wild and primitive....

On Eagle for a long weekend, I walk up the hill on an early autumn evening to Quinn House and find, from the vantage of the high field, a show of sublime and contrasting lights. To the east, the sea, land and sky are fused in shades of blue and black; to the west, the water still shimmers with orange reflections of the sun, half-sunk in the Camden Hills and throwing shadows of the spruce trees across half the field. Imperceptibly these shadows thicken. The field and trees blacken as the night spreads over the great curve of the land, and the ancient light of the stars begins to brighten the sky. I find Bob in the kitchen shadows, peeling potatoes; while waiting for them to boil, he pours a bowl of Grapenuts and smothers them with coils of dark molasses. “I’m not one to cook much,” he says. “Get so hungry I can’t wait for things to get done.”

Robert Louis Quinn was born July 13, 1939, and so lived on Eagle only two years before his family



PETER RALSTON (2)

The Eagle Island school, abandoned in 1941.

moved to Camden. It was, finally, the problem of schooling that forced the fourth generation of Quinns to remove to the mainland. It was the practice for Eagle and other islands to send high school-age children to board with relatives or friends during the school year, but Erland Quinn, Robert's father, didn't like the idea of sending his children away to live with another family, and he made the decision in December, 1941, to take his family to Camden. With the closing of the school, the few remaining families had no choice but to follow the Quinns ashore.

Out of all the family Bob Quinn is the most intimately attached to the island and says, "I never had any doubt, from day one, that I would do anything else." And Helene, his wife, says, "For Bob, there isn't any choice." He spent his childhood summers on the island, staying with his grandmother Hattie, and after high school he moved there and made a few dollars trapping mink.

Helene grew up in Warren, Maine, where her grandfather, Charles Howard, had moved the family farm from Eagle, and where her father, Richard,

had been a successful dairy farmer. She first came to Eagle when she was eight to visit her Aunt Marion at the Howard Place, but by the next time Helene came to Eagle, Marion's house had burned and from then on families would stay "mixed up together" at Quinn House after Bob and Helene married in 1966....

Bob's first 30 years were a time of deep decline on Eagle. There was no economy, and, except for a cow and some chickens at Quinn House, even the farming had ceased. A 1972 photograph of the old homestead-hotel shows it sagging and gray. It hadn't seen a coat of paint in 40 years, the roofs leaked, windows were falling out, sills were rotting, the boathouse and wharf threatening to fall into the bay, and each year the fields shrunk and the spruce grew higher, shutting off more of the island world to which Eagle belongs.

A visitor to Eagle once characterized Bob as having "the hands of a fisherman and the mind of a poet," a mix of practical and visionary inclinations joined together with the ability to direct thought into actions. I once asked Helene how the

family managed to stay on the island when all the families on neighboring islands had disappeared. "It's the people," she said, "they hang on when there's no reason to hang on...."

There's little doubt that if not for Bob Quinn the whole family presence on the island would be gone by this time. His energy has rallied the extended family's interest and participation; many who once turned from the decay and isolation have turned back and now see the island and Quinn House as something solid and unchanging in their lives. Quinn House has received life-saving structural repairs, interior restoration and a new coat of white paint on the old clapboards. The barn has been roofed, and the march of spruce and juniper into the fields has been turned back.

The demographics of the Maine coast for more than a hundred years have followed a pattern in which the natives sell their land to people who live

where there's big business and big money. Set against that erosion of tradition is Bob's goal of keeping intact the property, the customs and the history so they will be here for generations to come. He spends a lot of time fretting this mission, and following through on means to carry it out.

For now, however, I can say that the Quinns are more thriving than threatened. There is yet the feeling that something wise and more powerful is close by, something warm and human and comforting of a sort the rest of the world holds in short supply. It has to do with the past, of being conscious of its presence, of its meaning for our lives. It's something to do with what Helene feels about the island when she says, "It's the ancestors. We talk like they're still here. Our being here keeps them alive."

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Eagle Island, looking north