



*The Coot Hunter* (Detail), Andrew Wyeth, 1941

## *The Legacy of Cyrus Rackliff*

*Amy Payson*

**E**ver since I was a little girl, I remember hearing stories about my family, but the story of my grandfather, Cyrus Rackliff, and his accident on Green Island was, to me, typical of life on the Maine coast at the time. Although I don't remember my grandmother, Emily, who was Cyrus's wife, my mother and father (Archie and Edna Rackliff) lived with Emily at Cyrus's homestead all of their married life. My mother and Emily shared their thoughts and feelings while they did the mountains of washing and the cooking for the family.

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Emily described her early life on the islands, especially Metinic Island, where she had been a teenager. There she met Cyrus, who was living on Green Island (Metinic was within rowing distance of Green, also the closest piece of land). Emily Foster was a striking, dark-haired beauty, a prize for any man, and Cyrus was “the boy next door.” When they married in 1861, Emily moved to Green Island and lived with Cyrus and his mother, Lydia. Then Cyrus and Emily, with two children of their own, moved to Dix Island in the Mussel Ridge, where they ran a boarding home for the stonecutters working the quarry.

Because the story of Cyrus’s accident meant a lot to me, I asked my mother to write it down. I kept this handwritten account safe with my choice possessions. One day I went to read the story and couldn’t find it. Embarrassed that I might have lost the treasured story, I finally asked my mother to write it down again, but I didn’t keep after her to see if she had done it. So, when she died I badly regretted all that was lost, including Cyrus’s story.

One day I was going through her things and came across a book, *Lighthouses of the Maine Coast*, which my oldest son, David, had bought for her. She told me that she wanted David to have this book back when she was “finished” with it. When I opened the book out dropped a folded copy of “Cyrus’s story,” handwritten in rough draft form that my mother had done following my request!

This is the story my mother told of Cyrus’s accident:

One particular day Cyrus and the boys were going seabird shooting on the ledges just outside Big Green Island. They wanted to be there to set their tollers before the birds came in about daylight to feed. In the morning when he woke, Cyrus told Emily that he didn’t think he would go sea ducking, since he had had a dream during the night that he was breathing shot. He had awakened choking. But a little later, it turned into such a nice morning that Cyrus decided he would go shooting anyway. As he got his leather boots out to grease them, an old clock on the shelf that had been silent for years struck. Cyrus’s mother was very superstitious, and, fearing something terrible would happen, begged him not to go. But Cyrus was bound and determined to head out for the ledges.

He put his gun in the dory, but as he got in, the gun, which for some unknown reason was cocked, went off. The heavy load of birdshot struck him below the knee. It was a bad wound, so Cyrus’s relatives sailed him across Two Bush Channel and up the Mussel Ridge to Ash Point, where an uncle took him to a doctor in Rockland.

Cyrus’s mother, Lydia, viewed the accident as an ill omen and told Emily, who was pregnant at the time with her first child, that the baby would probably be “marked” because Emily had to dress her husband’s gunshot wound. Imagine the worry to a young bride and the relief that her son, Elmer, was born without a blemish. Cyrus kept on farming and hunting even with his bad leg, which Emily washed and dressed daily. Sometimes, when she changed the dressing, scraps of his old pants leg would appear, along with an occasional piece of lead shot.

After 20 years of suffering, Cyrus finally decided to have his leg amputated below the knee. Had he not had such a strong constitution, he wouldn’t have survived. With a bottle of whiskey to kill his pain, the doctor took off the leg in the front parlor of the house where they lived. After this rough operation, Cyrus asked for a chopping block and performed an autopsy on the foot to see what had caused him such agony for those 20 years. I guess he expected to find sharp bone fragments that would account for the pain, but nothing was found to satisfy his curiosity.

1986

*Cyrus Rackliff*