

Boyhood Years at the Quissett Harbor House in the 1920s

John E. Sawyer

To the excellent, comprehensive review of the history of that remarkable institution, the Quissett Harbor House, which Virginia Francis has provided, I can add only a few first-hand recollections of boyhood years spent there in the 1920s.

And they will be “partial” in both senses—incomplete glimpses of parts of the whole that embedded themselves in a small boy’s memory; and partial in the lasting affection for the place that comes over me on every return visit to the scene over more than 60 years.

Somehow even as children under the age of 12—my older sister and brother and I, all within three years in age—we sensed that the Quissett Harbor House was not simply another seaside hotel. The total absence of bellboys or the frills and polish and ponderous

opulence of more fashionable 1920s resorts, along with the open run of rolling and sometimes rickety porches, conveyed from the first a distinct institutional identity.

All involved seemed to take pride in its simplicity and informality and—with what social psychologists today might identify as a kind of inverse snobbism—in its primitive facilities: the iron beds with straw mattresses, the lack of running water to the rooms, the reluctant displacement of most kerosene lamps by electricity well after its general use elsewhere, and then typically by a single bulb hanging from overhead.

The admirable description of the physical plant that Virginia Francis provides prompts a single question—whether one bathtub was not added in the second floor central bath area of the connector in the



Page from a family photo album—fun and games on the Harbor House lawn. Lower right, Cornelia Carey (in center) out sailing with friends, ca. 1914. Courtesy Cynthia Coffin.

1920s—and one additional memory still lingers. While small boys living in the “bowling alley” were encouraged to use the nearby woods for lighter business, they had to share the central bath area for more serious needs. There one rough board door would not properly close for hooking, yet was at or beyond the limit of reach of some under eight.

I can only confirm her picture of events in what for a child was the most important room in the buildings, the central dining hall, a cavernous space (as it then seemed) in which all meals were taken at stated and strictly limited hours. Family table assignments advanced slowly toward the westward windows according to seniority earned by successive years of attendance. Missing a year didn’t send you back to the starting line but required delicate negotiations with management, and the resolution was carefully observed. Neither here nor elsewhere was there visible influence of money, nor differentiation between people of fairly modest means and those of large wealth.

Morning messages about daily plans could most conveniently be left for friends on their tables, readily identified by each family’s particular array of jellies, jams, peanut butter and fancier condiments purchased in town to brighten a steady fare of good plain cooking. Our regard for the kitchen was high.

But my most vivid memories were of events outdoors, especially the games played with those “loads of children” already mentioned: morning games of “kick the can” on the grass in front of the bowling alley, climaxed by Katie’s appearance from the south door of the kitchen with a pan of cookies; building in the sand and catching hermit crabs and other creatures of the changing tides on the harbor-side beach, with its wonderful long sandy peninsula; and colder, braver swimming in Buzzards Bay over the rocks and boardwalk beyond the weather-beaten, mildewed bath houses whose scent (like Proust’s madeleines) still stirs remembrance of things past.

Perhaps because our family had no boat and I was too young for competitive sailing, the major event of the day was the after- supper softball games played by fathers, older adolescents, and numbers of smaller boys and girls on the gentle slope between the Harbor House porches and the roadway. Looking at the area today I marvel that all that fun could be had on a “diamond” that began with homeplate backed up against some lilac bushes a ways down from the Jenkins House porch, first base close to the road, second a large stone toward what is now Carey Lane, third on the uphill slope toward the Hammond house, and then downhill to home.

That it worked at all was a triumph of adult good humor, adolescent indulgence, and some crucial ground rules: any ball, fair or foul, hit over the first base area into the water was an automatic out. While a non-player went to retrieve that ball in a dinghy, amidst vociferous spectator comments, play went on with others. Pitchers adjusted speed, delivery and numbers of balls and strikes to need, and bigger and better batters were suitably handicapped. Lefties had to bat right-handed, or one-handed, or declared out for excessive slugging. Though these evening games never developed an important farm team for the major leagues, they provided a happy scene for all ages on long summer evenings before darkness closed in.

Other activities engaged other families more than ours. Costumed charades in the dining hall were a hazard my brother and I tried to avoid but others entered into with zest. A quieter and more elegant game was played mostly by older women in the parlor of the Jenkins House—Mah Jong—with its beautiful tiles carefully arranged on racks, and those colorful four Winds conjuring up the mysteries of China.

In the first years our family stayed in the bowling alley—bare rooms with those iron beds, washstand, pitcher, and potty, and a white smaller pitcher of hot water outside the door each morning. But later, after

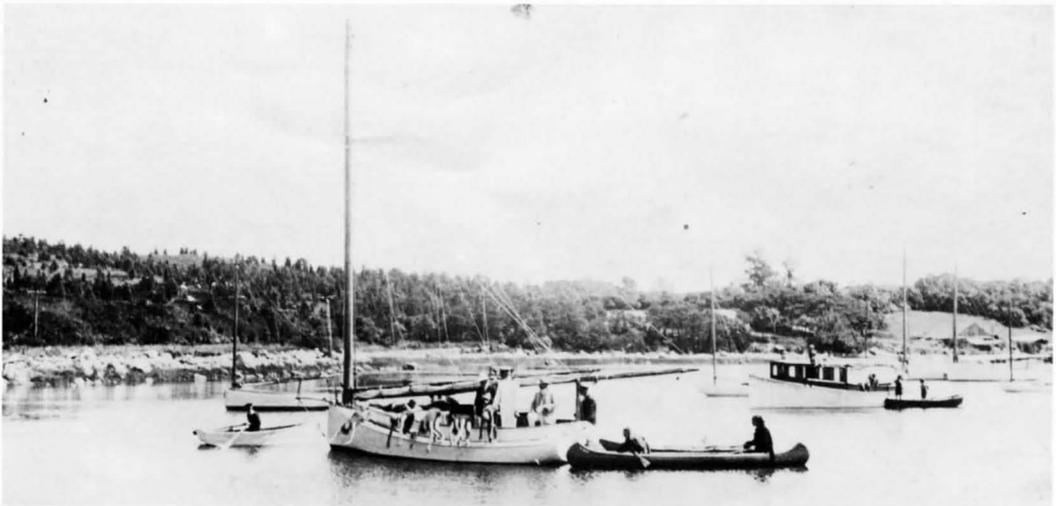
the Janney family had moved out en route to Gansett, we advanced to the relative luxuries and space of the Victorian Cottage at the southern end. It had its own bath and even a partial kitchen, as I remember. We were there when I had my first exposure to a near-hurricane (1927 I think) which moved the cottage on its foundations. I recall all who could help going down to pull on lines to sailboats torn loose in the harbor.

But in these later years my brother and I had, alas, grown into fractious behavior that distressed our mother and no doubt others, especially during the weeks when father was away. On his weekend returns our behavior was duly reported to him. Though a kindly and loving man for whom I've had lifelong affection, he had been raised and believed in the beltstrap school of discipline. After a single session had made evident the way sound traveled through those lightly constructed walls, the scene of such discipline was shifted to what is now called The Knob. The two of us walked out ahead of him for what seemed like miles, knowing what was to follow. No part of my Quissett recollections seems to have so delighted our

own children as this account of what they have always called, and now taught their children to know as Spanking Point.

But no reflections on the Quissett Harbor House should close without noting what was perhaps its most important and certainly its most lasting role—that of staging-area introducing families to the beauty of its shores, the pleasures of its warm water, sailing, and other activities, and the simple charms of living here. The total number of those and their progeny who have moved into Quissett and Woods Hole and other Falmouth communities *via* this route is not easy to count; but for the vistas it opened and the values it fostered, those of us who benefited from this passage can take pleasure in a bow to the Quissett Harbor House and the Careys who sustained it.

John Sawyer's family of five were guests at the Quissett Harbor House most summers from 1922 or 1923 to 1928. His subsequent life has included marriage into the Falmouth whaling family of Swifts (Anne in 1941), World War II service with OSS in North Africa and Western Europe, a Junior Fellowship and teaching economic history at Harvard and Yale (1946–1961), President of Williams College (1961–1973) and of the A.W. Mellon Foundation (1975–1987).



Water sports at Quissett Harbor House. The *Margie*, Edward DeWitt's catboat, with young divers starting a swimming race, ca. 1915. Courtesy Cynthia Coffin.