PASSAMAQUODDY PAVILION

2021-2022
At Dickinsons Reach, the land that initiated me

MANIFESTING A DREAM TO MARK MY 60TH YEAR

RAISING
At Herons Rip, the creation of a 28’ round, open pavilion with reciprocating roof to be a gathering spot, summer kitchen and workshop. And open structure without doors to welcome all.

LODGES
Staging of cars, boats and building materials from Duck Cove in Roque Bluffs, Maine. Daily skill transportation from Duck Cove to Herons Rip, access limited by tides and weather. Great daily meals provided in exchange for your company and labor. Bring your camping gear, families and sense of humor. Your dog may not like our porcupine.

SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER 2021
Come for as long as you can!
- Sept. 22 – Oct. 1: Site Prep and Foundation
- Oct. 2 – 10: Raising of Pavilion
- Oct. 11 – 18: Brisk for Island Adventures
- Oct. 23 – 25: Clean Up

RSVP
peter@peterforbes.org

to let me know if you can make any part and to stay on the list for further information.

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A decade before making a life at Knoll Farm, I was exploring what life meant at Dickinsons Reach.

To get there always required a physical journey -- hours upon hours in a car and then on foot, later in a canoe or a skiff-- but also a journey of the mind to meet another human being in their place, a journey from wherever I was to a far-off place at the margins of my life. Shifting my life closer toward the center of Bill Coperthwaite’s life has always had great tensions and rewards. Dickinsons Reach is where I see and touch all these things that society doesn’t value: intentionality, skill, work, beauty, respect for people and place, and I’m reminded how valuable they are. Those of us who remain within the orbit of the place and that human, especially after his death, speak of it as “feeling the pull.”

The pull of the place began for me in about 1992 when I first visited Bill. I would go on to photograph two books about it (A Handmade Life and A Man Apart) and still I’m trying to fully understand why it means so much to me. For 30 years, I have gone west to present myself to the world. I went west to test ideas, to give talks, to meet with colleagues; to raise money for projects I believe will make change. And for those same 30 years I’ve also gone east on the back roads and through the small towns of northern New England along Route 2 to come here, to find myself.

Dickinsons Reach is the place to which I’ve always arrived. On my right arm is a tattoo of the trumpeter of Knoll Farm, a woman with long flowing hair offering a clarion call to anyone who will hear her. She represents all of my efforts to say something to the world. On my left arm is a map of Dickinsons Reach, of my own internal landscape, a map of the person I want to become without the need to say anything at all.

In about 2000, Helen started visiting Dickinsons Reach with me and my gaze focused on her and a
particular part of Dickinsons Reach that then was
called Proctors Point, which we now call Herons Rip.

We got to know that place by cutting trails through the
depth “pucker brush” and by establishing our own path
into Dickinsons Reach by paddling there from Duck
Cove. Those were years of sleeping in a tent with
young children and making the 1.5-mile canoe crossing
in all months of the year. In 2011, on my 50th year, we
honored ourselves and Bill by asking him to help us
build a yurt there.

Here’s the description I wrote in A Man Apart about
the well:
It is here, on this dynamic and storied spot close to the
tide rip, that Bill would help us to build a home. Thirty-
five years after Captain Proctor moved out of his
summer cabin at the point, Bill and I first started
talking about me one day homesteading there. And we
agreed that a good place for me to start a relationship
with this place was the old well.

Bill offered vague directions one late fall day, “The
well is somewhere there to the south not far from the
pond itself.” I wandered for about a half-hour

through alders as thick as my arm and was thrilled
to find something that might be a well. I shouted out
three times in excitement, “Bill, I’ve found it,” only
to hear my voice disappear amidst the seagulls. It
was nothing spectacular anyway: there was no sign
of a well casing or a cover, just a muddy depression
with dirty milk at the surface. I was elated.

But Helen and I were just starting our lives 350
miles to the west in Vermont at Knoll Farm, Willow
was just 6, Wren was a newborn, and it would be
three more years before we went looking for the
well again. This time it was much harder to find. It
was June, leaves were out, and the bank where I
thought the well had been was a cage of wire grass
and alders. Helen and I finally fought our way to
that rim of milky water and spent hours cutting a
perimeter around the well so it wouldn’t be lost
again.

Another two years passed, and I returned this time
with the spoken conviction that I would empty the
well, clean and restore it, and drink deeply from its
depths. It was August, and as we did every year at
the end of summer a good number of friends had
gathered at Dickinsons Reach.
Bill smiled wryly at my dream, but grabbed rope, pulleys, three shovels, and several five-gallon plastic jugs from his boathouse, and 4 of us set off across the tidal pond to Proctors Point. Scott and I eagerly attacked the first job which was removing all the surface water with the five-gallon jugs. Our enthusiasm swept us through the first hour and the second and by the third hour we were covered in mud, mosquitoes biting every part of our body, the sun blistering us, and the wooden walls of the well just beginning to appear.

“How deep is this well?”
Bill answered quietly, “It’s got to be at least fifteen feet down to the bedrock.”
It was a jungle scene: 85 degrees, slippery clay everywhere, clouds of mosquitoes in our eyes and ears, sweat dripping from our faces and backs.
“This is a lot bigger job than I expected,” I likely said testily. In truth, I thought the job of cleaning out that well was simply impossible. It was too much work. I couldn’t do it.

But it wasn’t my work to do alone, and that was the first lesson. Five of us worked nonstop for another two days, and Bill was there alongside us the entire time, encouraging, passing buckets. We removed by hand 12 tons of rock, half-rotten tree limbs, and finally hundreds of buckets of dense blue clay.

Of course, I thought about how that clay got in this well, slowly seeping in over 180 years through the narrow gaps in the well-made wood casing. This may have been a tough job, but it was also a job that would need to be done again. Imagine this if you can: me standing in a four-foot square hole in the ground digging up blue clay and hoisting it to the surface as I slowly sank a commensurate amount deeper into the well. My friends and family above ground got more and more distant with each back-breaking lug of mud to the surface.

This was lots of work, and I thought happily about the prospects of a great-granddaughter doing exactly the same thing in, say, 2080. By the end of day three, we were down to bedrock and from there, looking up, could marvel at the oak posts and boards that were set in place around 1862. We began scrubbing clean these wooden walls and reflecting even more on the lives of the
people who had made this well. How did they dig this in the first place? And how did they line it so perfectly in oak panels and posts? Where were those oaks growing, there are none here now? What were their names? What were they thirsty for? Did they live happy lives here? It was never lost on me that we are merely cleaning up their great work.

I’ve been drinking from that well for five years now, just a beginning. Thirst of the body is so simply and completely satisfied by a large glass of cold water. The thirst for meaning, community and love is not so easily quenched. What are you thirsty for?

Today by our well it is cold and foggy, and the air is wet on my face as I take my favorite walk down the path to the rip to marvel at the way the high tide fills this pond to the brim. It is slack high and, except for the fog that blows through, everything is uncharacteristically motionless. For just a second, the earth is not spinning; the ocean is neither spilling in nor spilling out. Then an osprey arches overhead, I look up, the world begins to turn again, and I walk home, past the well, and am grateful to be in this relationship.

I have always felt both held and challenged by this spot, and my greatest inheritance is the relationship that Bill has given me to this place. Its beauty holds me: the eagle taking flight above, the quail that rises up from the trail, the porcupine asleep in the outhouse bucket, and all the way that water shows up here as a flowing mass, as white ice on black stone, as fog on an August morning, as pounding rain on the roof.

For thousands of years the pulse of human life has been felt in this reach, ebbing and flowing, humans arriving, making camps, coming and going, settler culture building things, nature taking them away.

I’ve come to understand how my relationship to this place is magnified by a sense of longing and of betrayal.

The longing is for the touch and the smell of the place itself. I long for her. I fell in love with this place when I first arrived. Now, decades later, when I return (especially when I’m alone) I feel the isolation as grayness, as a woman turning her back on me. I never stop feeling the flush of strength and energy that is the tide. I walk down to the tide rip a dozen times a day to reconnect, to feel her there. I walk down and out on to the mudflats to talk with the clammers. I walk quietly on the perimeter trail that wraps around the Mill Pond. Sometimes fast, sometimes slow, the sense of isolation gives way to a deeper sense of strength and connection.

When I’ve been here for days that sense of relationship feels more like love, and then I see a vision of Bill Coperthwaite across the tide rip in his favorite frayed red shirt and brown thrift store pants and I recognize how he and I will always be connected through time by our love of this place.

I also know something, too, of the betrayal in the land that initiated me. I don’t think Bill felt this betrayal. Although Maine’s rivers and mountains still carry some Wabanaki names, the people and the stories that those names belong to have been
relegated to small reservations out of sight to most Mainers. After 350 years of colonization, racism and broken treaties, the Wabanaki now have access to less than 1 percent of the territory that once supported their place-based cultures. There are countless places of great importance to Wabanaki people whose burial grounds, memory places, and places of sustenance are now our second homes – our yurt homesteads- our nature preserves and state parks. Who holds the keys to these places of utmost importance to Wabanaki people?

People who look like me, raised like me, do. No, I need to be more honest, our community holds a set of those keys. Bill and the people he trusted with this land hold the keys to a place that belong to and has always been Passamaquoddy homelands. They came here first, fished here, raised their families here, thrived here, right up until the very moment that settler culture forced them off it, that moment of domination likely being the early 1800’s just before settlers built the dam at the rip. And, yet, Passamaquoddy are still here. When I lie alone in bed at 18 feet above sea level, I can hear the drumming that floats like owls on the wind from centuries ago at Picture Rocks just a few miles away. I know Passamaquoddy who are making trips every week to Jasper Beach. They are going to places where they feel safe, where they can connect with their ancestors. As I’ve made friends with Passamaquoddy people, I’ve come to understand better how their presence and heartbeat is still here and how I am joined to them, as I’m joined to Bill, by a love and commitment to this place. I don’t aspire to be Indigenous, but I long to be naturalized to this place, which is a passage I believe I cannot make without relationships of integrity and responsibility with the Passamaquoddy. Now that this history, story and its consequences are within my awareness, I have a responsibility to make amends.

A grateful part of me was raised in the white culture of Outward Bound and National Outdoor Leadership School under their philosophy that human beings when in nature should leave only footprints, take only pictures. In my 20s and 30s, I started to meet individuals, Native and non-native, who lived lives I admired and who believed in a different philosophy. Their way included more of themselves in connection to nature; their relationship didn’t stop with recreation but included daily life, sustenance, love, spirituality, art, marriage, life, and death. They were confident in their own ability to live well within nature and to leave a beautiful trace. They didn’t just take from nature but give something very important of themselves to her.

Slowly, I came to see that “Leave No Trace” is a philosophy that arises from a consumerist culture deeply rooted in growth that needs to admonish its children to not touch because they as parents have mostly known destruction. Leave no trace is instructions for a generation that has few skills other than for consuming and destroying nature. It arises from reverence for nature, yes, but also from a kind of fear that includes self-loathing, which wants humans and nature to be separated.

Imagine saying “leave no trace” to a Wabanaki child whose been taught all her life to tie medicine bundles on the branches of trees or to a Wabanaki kid who knows how to drop a birch tree and make a canoe or how to spot the right Black Ash to make a
basket? For me, there’s now a great sadness around Leave No Trace.

I want my culture to learn how to leave a beautiful trace.

To mark my 60th year of this life, I chose to honor two relationships, an old one with that place and a new one with the Passamaquoddy tribe. I wanted to build an open structure without doors, walls or locks to be used by all, and to make the effort to bring people here and to signal to them through sincere invitation that I know that they belong here. Bill and I had sketched out what a pavilion might look like back in 1992. But 30 years later we built it in our own way with our own purposes in mind.

A big bow of gratitude and respect to the friends, old and new, who came together made the Passamaquoddy pavilion possible. To Josh Jackson who designed her and to Ariel Schecter who cut the timbers and helped us to raise her. To Tim Beal, Chase McGough, Luke Beeson, Eddie Merma, Johno Landsman, Ryan Flanagan, Marija Draskic, Lawrence Barriner II, Jeff Schoellkopf, Sara Stewart, John Porter, Josh Wehrwein, Dan Neumeyer, Helen Whybrow, Leo Stevenson, Lisa Fitzpatrick, Dale Mitchell, Allison Forbes, Claire Abbott, Riley Abbott, Jamie & Glenn Forbes, Reilly Lawrence, Kayla Barrs, Otto Pierce, Christina Hassett, Avery Briggs, Ella McDonald, Zoe Myers, Tom Crisp, Steve Tatko, Melanie Wehrwein, Peter Howe and Tessa Sylvatica.

Thank you.
Our invitation
to the
Passamaquoddy Nation
to use and enjoy
Dickinsons Reach
April 15, 2020

Donald G. Soctomah
Historic Preservation Officer
Passamaquoddy Tribe
Indian Township, Maine

Dear Donald,

We are the current stewards of 425-acres of land surrounding the tide rip at Little Kennebec Bay and adjacent to your nation’s lands at Moose Snare Cove in Machiasport, Maine. We are writing to you with our invitation and encouragement for your community to use and to enjoy our land. This invitation arises from and affirms our respect for your community.

The land we speak of, which we call Dickinsons Reach, was cared for and lived upon for 50 years by our mutual friend, Bill Copethwaite. You and Bill met on several occasions and you are familiar with how Bill lived and the care he gave to this land.

The rugged beauty of this bay encompasses 4.5 miles of intertidal mud flats teeming with
"We invite your use and enjoyment of Dickinsons Reach because we believe your peoples' ties to this land are deeper than our own. We feel your presence on this land and we invite your use to help restore your relationship to this place, and also to kindle a positive and healthy relationship with us."
THE TINKERER OF DICKINSON'S REACH

How Bill Coperthwaite influenced the world from remote Down East Maine.

BY WAYNE CURTIS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARAH RICE
Trustworthiness
Mentorship
Determination
Love + Kindness
Service