



Growing up in Asticou: The Late 1940s to Mid-1960s

By Rick Savage

In the same tradition as the families of my father and his father before him, I experienced living and growing up in an area of Northeast Harbor called Asticou. Long before my time, this little hamlet had become a compound of year-round and seasonal homes, a hotel, and several small business establishments. My childhood

Above from the author: “I remember the day the photo was taken by Ken’s dad, Charles Savage. We were digging worms and getting ready to go fishing. The ‘soap box car’ was one of several dozen we built over the years. We were always on the lookout for baby carriage wheels.” Standing, Stuart Savage (holding shovel), Charles (Ken) Savage Jr. Seated are the author and his brother, John Savage, circa 1955–56. *Courtesy of the author*

The time frame of this essay is but a fleeting moment. I am especially thankful to my many friends and classmates, local residents, and family members who also shared the experience and lifestyle considered the norm of Northeast Harbor in the late 1940s to the early 1970s. Especially helpful were conversations with Durlin Lunt, Robert Pyle, Dana Haynes, Frederick “Buddy” Brown, and Ernest “Scudder” Coombs.

memories begin in the late 1940s. At that time, there were as many as twenty residents living in Asticou, all related to each other as uncles, aunts, and cousins, including my own immediate family of five.

By my era, this extended family were fifth- and sixth-generation descendants of John and Sarah Savage, who settled in Northeast Harbor on a large tract of land in 1798. By the mid-1930s, ownership of this original tract of land had been divided multiple times among the various heirs of the first settler, but the land was still principally owned by my father, an uncle, and two of their cousins.

The members of each subsequent generation used their land inheritance in ways that best suited their needs. The northern part of the original property was passed down to my branch of the Savage family and was more rural and undeveloped, while another branch of Savage heirs owned the shorefront portions of the land, transforming or building a complex of seasonal rental cottages and a large hotel known as the Asticou Inn. During my youth, individually operated businesses in our little hamlet included a garage-service station, a heating oil business, a photographer and mapmaker, a laundry service, an architect, and the Asticou Inn and associated cottages.



The Asticou Way gasoline station, circa late 1940s. The building was torn down around 1960. *Courtesy of the author*

My parents were schoolteachers, but they augmented their income by catering to the needs of summer residents and visitors. They owned and operated a small gasoline station, a large auto storage garage, and a seasonal limousine service. When I was thirteen years of age, my father left his teaching career and established a heating oil company. By the age of fifteen, the legal age to drive, I was often found behind the wheel of an oil truck delivering fuel to various customers. Our home and businesses were located across the street from the Asticou Inn. Dad was a car buff and collector of sorts, so his line of work seemed well-suited for this type of employment. During the summer season, many of the hotel guests would store their cars and limousines in father's garage, while others would call upon his taxi service for their transportation needs. A few of the hotel rusticators had their own private chauffeurs. The chauffeurs were required to dress in dark suits and ties with matching caps. This was also my father's attire when he was called to drive his taxi.

A strong work ethic was definitely part of my parental guidance. At a young age, I was considered old enough to be a helper with the cars stored in father's garage, seeing to it that they were vacuumed, washed, and wiped down with a chamois. For this assignment, I was



Richard M. Savage Sr., the author's father, built a storage garage in 1938. For his first paying job, the author cleaned and washed cars for ten cents each. *Courtesy of the author*

paid ten cents per car. Within a few years, I was given the added responsibility and freedom of driving the cars in and out of their stalls, on to the washstand, and then filling them up with gasoline at the pumps. Generally, these cars were late models of the era, mostly fine Cadillac, Packard, Lincoln, or Chrysler brands. I only remember a couple of mishaps while driving customers' cars. One day, when no one was around, I was brazen enough to take a high-powered Oldsmobile out of the garage and onto the main highway in front of the hotel. Little did I know, the car's owner happened to be standing on the front porch of the inn, and he witnessed my mischief. My father was not happy. On another occasion, while backing a large limousine out of the garage, I scraped the side of the vehicle along a doorway. Fortunately for me, one of the chauffeurs witnessed this minor accident and, without any fanfare, helped me repair the damaged door. No more was ever said.

Father also taught my sister, brother, a cousin, and myself to drive a 1947 Jeep we called "Sugar Baby." He was a patient teacher, and once each of us could reach the clutch and brake pedals, we generally were allowed free range to drive and travel on our own, going about the many back roads and fields that comprised the Asticou neighborhood. The only stipulation I remember was that we were supposed to use the Jeep for something productive, such as hauling firewood, trailering loads of gravel, or plowing the driveway after each snowstorm. Father had a way of utilizing our "free labor," and most of us became very proficient with our driving abilities long before we were of legal age to drive on the highway. My cousin Ken Savage would often commandeer the hotel's old Ford pickup truck. We often gave in to the temptation to test our driving skills while we traversed the woods roads and fields in the back forty acres. Once, when father was away, my sister Marcia took a Jeep-load of her friends for a joy ride up the old tote road to the big field. This road was very steep with twisting curves. She apparently got scared when trying to turn the Jeep around on the side of a hill. Unable to manage this maneuver, she most humbly requested my assistance, and I most happily obliged, in front of her friends.

In 1953–54, my father began construction of our new home. In order to save money, he had a foundation trench dug by hand, allowing only enough space to pour a concrete footing and build



Richard M. Savage Sr. in his classic '59 Lincoln. His home in the background was built from materials salvaged from the Stotesbury estate, circa 1965. *Courtesy of the author*



Richard M. Savage Sr. obtained lumber, fixtures, and other materials from the Stotesbury estate. The Bar Harbor mansion, also known as Wingwood House, was torn down to make room for the Bluenose ferry terminal. *Postcard courtesy of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission*

a four-and-half-foot-high wall for the foundation. His plan was to remove all the dirt in the middle of the basement area at a later date when money was more readily available. Over the years, digging out the basement became a most dreaded task. Long after the house was built, the thought of hauling out the dirt bucketload by bucketload was enough to make my friends and me scatter out of sight whenever the topic was brought up. Now, some sixty-odd years later, I know that only half of that basement area has been excavated.

All of the lumber and bricks, as well as the doors and windows, were secondhand, salvaged material. This building material came from the contractor who was hired to tear down the Bar Harbor Stotesbury estate. At that time, the Stotesbury mansion was being torn down and the site transformed into what became the new Bar Harbor Ferry Terminal for the *Bluenose* ferry. Cleaned bricks cost one cent each; doors and windows with brass hardware sold for one to five dollars apiece. We made many, many trips to haul trailer loads of building materials from Bar Harbor to Northeast Harbor. I well remember stacking hundreds of bricks and pulling bent nails from piles of framing lumber, all of which were eventually used to build our new home. I don't remember any power tools used by the construction crew on the site, but I once observed a man cut off his thumb with a handsaw. Ouch!

The Asticou Azalea Garden did not exist prior to 1958. The present-day pond was surrounded by an alder swamp and was a popular place for many of my friends and cousins to romp and play year-round. In the spring and summer, we fished in the brook and pond. As we got older, we also built a large tree house in the big pine that still overlooks the site. Attached to a branch on the pine was a rope swing that allowed us to swoop down onto our homemade floating rafts. Throughout my youth and into early adulthood, the townspeople gathered there as soon as the ice was safe to skate on. We were often able to skate by early December, occasionally as early as Thanksgiving Day. The pond ice was kept plowed and free of snow all winter, and the local fire company would flood it as needed to keep the surface perfectly smooth. There was outside lighting, and music was played over loudspeakers, with cookies and refreshments around a bonfire, all provided by Katherine and Charles Savage. Skating parties were very popular. This added to a very festive



The white pine at right that now adorns the Asticou Azalea Garden once held a tree house and a rope swing where the author and his friends would play. *Courtesy of the Land and Garden Preserve*

atmosphere for the large nighttime gatherings of both children and adults during the winter months. When we were not skating, the long, sloping hill south of the hotel provided the perfect spot for snow sledding and toboggan rides.

My fifth-grade class photo, taken on the front steps of the Stetson Grammar School in Northeast Harbor, shows classmates from the villages of Otter Creek and Seal Harbor, as well as those who lived in Northeast Harbor. Students from the Somesville area joined us at the seventh-grade level. The Stetson School was a large, two-story brick building on Summit Road. It accommodated grades one through six. All seventh- and eighth-grade students were transferred to the newer building known as “Mount Desert High School.” Students who lived out of town were bused to school on a daily basis; however, bicycling to school was much more popular during the warmer seasons, fall and spring.

Main Street in Northeast Harbor was a far different place in activity and spirit than we see today. During my childhood in the

1950s to early 1960s, on a short walk down the village streets, one could find three hotels and lodging establishments, two jewelry and watchmakers, two real estate-insurance agents, three gasoline stations, two auto repair garages, four grocery stores, a pharmacy, barber shop, hairdressers, a movie theater, hardware store, cobbler shop, a bank building, dry cleaner and laundry service, a haberdashery, and several plumbing, building, and electrical contractors. These enterprises seemed to remain profitable on a year-round basis. The local business communities were supported by the needs of the year-round residents, and of course, they really thrived with the influx of summer rusticators. In the summer, on many occasions, we biked into the village, stopping for an ice cream soda



The author with his first new bike, purchased from F.T. Brown Hardware in Northeast Harbor, 1955. *Courtesy of the author*

at the drugstore and/or attending a matinee movie at the Pastime Theater. Youth tickets were priced at twenty-five cents for the three o'clock matinee, while the early evening show, which began at seven o'clock, cost fifty cents each. Bunny Sullivan operated the candy counter with her two sons, Bucky and George, in tow. Her boys assisted with some of the building and equipment operations. I once got caught skipping my weekly afternoon piano lesson at Mrs. Joy's, having decided to spend the money on the self-indulgence of a matinee movie. That was the end of my music career.

For a young teenager, securing certain summer employment was considered a badge of honor and envy, whether it be as part of a grounds crew at a particular noteworthy summer home or one of the local hotels, caddying at the golf course, working on the town's garbage trucks, as gas station attendants, restaurant and hotel staff, or as staff in the local grocery stores. Everyone in my age group held some type of summer job. Obtaining one's driver's license was essential for delivery jobs at the local markets. Wages and tips were

considered generous, and upon graduation from high school, most classmates would go on to higher levels of education, having been able to save enough money to pay a good portion of higher education tuition expenses. For me, employment at the Pine Tree Market, Asticou Garden and Thuya Terraces, and DeRevere's Garage would go on my résumé as the result of my employment experiences during my high school years.

The standard workweek was between forty and forty-eight hours depending upon the employer. We were encouraged to work overtime for an additional hourly rate. I don't remember the work schedule being considered a hardship or burden, nor did I ever hear a complaint from my classmates. The long days of summer offered plenty of spare time for recreation. Popular swimming spots were the Seal Harbor beach, Little Long Pond, and Pond's End. Teenage



In January 1954, a stone-walled bulkhead was built across Frazier's Cove. *Courtesy of the Northeast Harbor Library*

dances were often sponsored at the hangar in Trenton and the Seal Harbor Neighborhood Hall. Organized functions for those in my age group included a very active scout troop and competitive high school basketball. I have to say that almost every one of my friends and classmates participated at some level in all of these activities.

Our local Boy Scout Troop 96 was the envy of many communities. All our adult leaders were skilled outdoorsmen, and



Silt and rock dredged from the harbor was pumped in behind the bulkhead to form the land used for today's marina. *Courtesy of James W. Sewall Company*

as scouts, we experienced many memorable overnight camping trips, game watching, snowshoeing, and mountain climbing excursions. Once, during a wintertime overnight trip, a fellow scout left his rubber packs too near the campfire. We all awoke to the smell of burning rubber. Don McPheters, our registered Maine guide leader, soon fashioned some footgear from several woolen scarfs, which served the fellow well for the remainder of the weekend trip.

The waterfront in Northeast Harbor was a far different place in my youth than we have grown accustomed to seeing today. Prior to the mid-1950s, public deepwater access to docking facilities within the harbor was limited to a flimsy string of town-owned floats beginning at the foot of Sea Street, or summer season access at

Clifton Dock and the Asticou Terrace Landing. Summer yachtsmen and sailing fleet members used the facilities at Gilpatrick's Cove. Very few summer yachts were moored in the harbor. The year-round fishing and lobster fleet numbered fewer than a dozen boats. My cousins and I enjoyed many hours of entertainment at the Asticou Landing, which provided two nice rowing skiffs for public use. We often rigged these skiffs with homemade masts and bed sheets for sails, cruising around the inner harbor in tandem. Flounders and mackerel were caught off the edge of the docks, and in the fall, winter, and spring, we dug clams at the head of the harbor.

The harbor area was dramatically changed in 1954. Visionary leaders in our town had laid the plans and preparation to enlarge and dredge Northeast Harbor as early as the 1930s. The area that today accommodates the roadway, parking lots, tennis court, and harbormaster's building was known as Frazier's Cove. At low tide, it was all mud flats. Beginning in January of that year, a stonewall bulkhead was built across the mouth of Frazier's Cove. The silt and mud dredged from the harbor floor was pumped in behind the man-



Bucky and George Sullivan, beloved Northeast Harbor characters, circa 1955–1975.

Courtesy of the author



The high school marching band turns the corner onto Summit Road, 1962. The fire of 1966 destroyed all the buildings shown here. *Courtesy of the Northeast Harbor Library*



In December 1966, a fire destroyed Wallace's Garage, the Pastime Theater, the Hillcrest Market, and Mrs. Flye's Sandwich Shop. *Courtesy of the Northeast Harbor Library*

made bulkhead. This was a dramatic transformation to the harbor area. It enlarged the useable space of the harbor by several-fold. It took several years for the silt and mud to settle, as well as the addition of massive amounts of fill, before the land could be adapted to its present condition.

During the first few years that the mud was drying out, we, as village youths, held contests to see who could make the biggest splash in the mud by throwing large rocks out into the soupy mess. We also took part in contests to race our bikes down Sea Street, then see how far out into the mud we could go. Not really very far, but it seemed like fun at the time.

One local prankster caused quite a stir in town when he embedded a pair of hip boots upside down, far out in muddy silt. An unnamed caller to the town office said that they thought someone might have drowned in the mud. The local rescue team was dispatched, and after wallowing out to the site, found only an empty pair of old boots. This was good for a few laughs on the street corner. In those days, it seemed that there was a fairly large contingent of individuals who could really be called “town characters.” Now, we fondly remember the shenanigans that can be credited to the likes of persons with the monikers Toad, Buster, Aby June, Bunny, Bucky and George, Skill Haskell, Fish and Doc Iveny, Joe Green, Coke and Ira Bob, Flicker, Snicker, Bussy, Scudder, or Stoop, just to name a few. The nicknames, once applied, could never be erased during one’s lifetime.

In 1963, I graduated from Mount Desert High School, one of seventeen classmates. A year before, the Seaside Inn was torn down, and by 1965, the hotel known as the Kimball House had been demolished. My parents said that the economic prosperity of the community looked very dim. I well remember the strong advice of my parents and teachers to prepare myself for a future that would be centered in a more metropolitan and financially viable environment than could be found here on Mount Desert Island. In 1965, a major structure fire in Northeast Harbor destroyed a large storefront building. Soon after, in the winter of 1966, I witnessed a second Main Street fire. It consumed five additional buildings and businesses, including a gas station, the local movie theater, a grocery store, and a restaurant.



The author aboard his motor vessel *Asticou*, 2015. *Courtesy of the author*

Heeding the advice of my parents, I left Maine to begin my first college experience in the metropolitan New York area. This was a real eye-opener for me. The contrast between growing up in the setting of Mount Desert Island and attending college in metropolitan New York made a lasting impression on me. I did note that my college classmates got great pleasure out of my funny accent and would often ask me to “speak Maine.” Dormitory mates also anxiously awaited the arrival of the hometown newspaper, *The Bar Harbor Times*, so they could read aloud the scripts in the “Police Beat” and “Hometown Happenings.”

Upon graduation from college, I eventually returned to Northeast Harbor, and by 1970, I was a proprietor and small business owner. The local economy was still depressed, but year-round housing and commercial properties were readily for sale, and they were inexpensive when compared to more urban areas along coastal Maine. Local banking institutions were anxious to lend funding to prospective buyers, with the hope of reinvigorating the severely declining business community in all areas of Mount Desert Island. It is my observation that the mid-1980s marked the beginning of a new period of change and economic transition. The influx of a new

generation of summer residents began to greatly impact the cost of our local year-round housing and the market valuation of properties. The adverse impact of this change has been the decline of year-round village residents.

It has been my good fortune to experience and participate in more than a half century of changes that have affected Mount Desert Island. These cycles of social and economic transformation are a major part of the true history of this beloved place we call home.

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Rick Savage is a graduate of the University of Maine and a lifelong resident, community leader, and business owner in Northeast Harbor. He is a sixth-generation descendent of John and Sarah Savage, who were 1798 settlers at the head of Northeast Harbor. Their property was described as Lot 67, a 100-acre tract of the original de Gregoire land grant. Members of the Savage family still reside on portions of that property. He has been a devoted caretaker of historical photos, documents, and historical transcripts, and has shared his interests with contributions to several publications in periodical and historical research projects.