



Steamer Lewiston at Bar Harbor, Maine 1870s

A Playground Contested: Bar Harbor Natives and Rusticators, 1875-1925

by Lynne Nelson Manion

By the late nineteenth century, resort communities had become popular summer retreats for wealthy Americans seeking respite from commercial pressures and crowded urban life. Most of these summer colonies shared common characteristics, but Bar Harbor was unique. More remote geographically, Bar Harbor was not always considered an attractive destination. In the mid-1850s, one visitor saw it as a "barren and almost worthless waste."¹ Thirty years later, when Bishop William Lawrence tried to get his city-bred wife to join him on the Island for a summer vacation, she refused. She wanted no part of what she considered a primitive, austere place "where girls from New York and Philadelphia walked up mountains 'swinging their arms'!" In just twenty years, however, this small island was transformed into the "most popular summer resort on the North Atlantic coast."²

One early summer visitor to the island, George Ward Nichols, suggested that it was the leisure pursuits that made Bar Harbor a worthy destination. Nichols admitted that while the food was quite inadequate, the crowds of summer people were willing to overlook the "shortcomings of the table" because of the "bounteous feast which nature spreads before them." The availability of fresh, clean air, according to Nichols, was a major selling point for this fledgling resort community.

The incentive to pass all day in the open air, either in lengthened pedestrian expeditions, in sailing or rowing upon the waters of the beautiful bay—gives them an appetite equal to any situation.

Mount Desert Island was different in this respect from the other summer resorts of the time. While it was not a fashionable place, as was Saratoga or Newport, it provided

a good deal of fun in the way of dancing in the evening, and playing of all sorts of games. . . .During the day parties of several persons, ladies and gentlemen, start off on walking expeditions of five, ten, and fifteen miles to one or another of the many objects of interest on the seashore or up the mountain.³

Bar Harbor offered its guests simple pleasures—canoeing, sketching, rocking (searching for rocks along the shore), and walking. It was these activities that made Bar Harbor so special. Even prior to the official formation of Acadia National Park,⁴ Bar Harbor's summer visitors "dutifully trod the hundred of miles of tortuous mountain trails which crisscross Mount Desert." These walks were considered so important that "at one time a person's social prestige depended on the number of pedestrian miles accomplished up and down hill each summer."⁵

A certain style of dress also reflected social prestige. Unlike other resort areas where the dress was much more formal and ostentatious, the summer people of Mount Desert Island dressed simply. Women wore wide-brimmed hats, ankle-length dresses of red and blue flannel, and sturdy walking shoes. Rough, warm tweeds "that were impervious to chilly fogs and could stand the strain of hill climbing" were the standard male outfit.⁶ This sensible clothing was necessary for active pursuits. Some potential Bar Harbor visitors were initially put off by casual, recreational dress, but they soon found that the pleasures offered on Mount Desert Island could not be had elsewhere.

Richmond Barrett described the effect that Mount Desert Island had on people as a "tonic quality about the air that acted on the blood like quicksilver; from the moment people got out of their beds, they were on tip-toe for adventure, and eager for strenuous exertion."⁷ In addition to hiking, visitors participated in sailing parties, enjoyed dances, and played games such as Blind Man's Bluff and Puss in the Corner. "In between times," as Cleveland Amory describes a typical day in Bar Harbor, "there were Germans, hops, tableaux vivants, thés dansants, tally-ho parties, horse shows,

and canoe tournaments."⁸ Diary entries from the youthful summer days of Miriam Lawrence Peabody suggest an endless array of enjoyable activities. Daily afternoon tennis parties were frequently followed by lively group games and dances.⁹

For Peabody and her Bar Harbor summer society, sports and recreational pursuits became an important part of their summer life, but they did not look to the locals for their enjoyment and recreation. Instead, they "devised their own amusements": golf, swimming, and yachting clubs.¹⁰ Through these clubs, summer visitors established a society apart from local life. Locals were effectively, if not intentionally, excluded from membership.

The Bar Harbor Reading Room, originally known as the Oasis Club, in honor of the Maine Prohibition law, was the first Bar Harbor club to be founded. Established in 1874 as a private men's club, its primary function was to provide a safe place to enjoy liquid refreshment while reading the newspapers of the day.¹¹ Its fees and procedures kept locals away. The entrance fee of \$150 was a large sum of money in the late nineteenth century, especially for the working-class population that called Bar Harbor its year-round home. A typical Bar Harbor local most likely would not have been able to afford this fee, nor the annual dues of forty dollars.¹² By holding its annual meeting on the first Wednesday of August, this social club catered to the schedule of summer people. Local people, on the other hand, were busy tending to visitors at this time of year.

Other private clubs more blatantly excluded locals from participation. The Bar Harbor Club, formerly known as the Swimming Club, included in its bylaws a number of criteria limiting membership. Not only did each candidate for membership have to be proposed by one member of the club and seconded by another; the candidate for membership had to be posted in a book for seven days prior to balloting. In the time-honored tradition of private social clubs, a single blackball against a person's name was "sufficient for rejection of a candidate." Each person qualifying for membership had to pay \$200 as an initiation fee and yearly dues of \$126.50. Out of a membership of 144 in 1931, only five were Bar Harbor year-round residents. The rest of

the 139 members hailed from New York, Boston, Connecticut, and Philadelphia.¹³

The Bar Harbor Club strictly forbade the use of its facilities by hired help. Not even a governess or tutor could use the tennis courts or swimming pool when not accompanied by a member of the club. Mount Desert Island residents could only be admitted as visitors once a year.¹⁴ Local Nan Cole vividly recalled an incident when a group of local boys were caught at this exclusive swimming club.

My brother Chet and four of his friends decided to sneak a dip at the pool at the Swimming Club, an exploit that called for planning, secrecy, and courage. They met outside the wire fence, scaled it, dived into the pool and swam to the float. Suddenly the night watchman appeared on the roof of one of the bathhouses, fired a shot over their heads and ordered them out. They obeyed hastily and read in the next issue of *Town Topics* of the unidentified marauders being evicted from the exclusive pool. The item closed with this sentence: 'Next day, under pressure, the directors ordered the pool to be drained because of any possible contamination of the water.'¹⁵

William Fenton, a Yale-and Harvard-educated attorney, was one of the few locals to be admitted into this club. He recalled merely that "It was a great place for summer residents to meet or talk socially."¹⁶

The Pot and Kettle Club, founded in 1899 by six members of Philadelphia's famous Rabbit Club, was similarly exclusive. The men who orchestrated the building of this club, all from Philadelphia and New York, sought to replicate the Rabbit Club in Bar Harbor.¹⁷ From its inception, it was seen as a gathering spot for the most wealthy and socially prominent summer people.¹⁸ On any given summer day, one could find upwards of 35 yachts tied to the Pot and Kettle float. The lore surrounding the Pot and Kettle Club claims that its membership constituted 85 percent of the wealth

of the United States. In Cleveland Amory's estimate, the Club "boasted as high a proportion of . . . marmoreally entrenched aristocracy as has ever been in evidence at any resort club."¹⁹

The Pot and Kettle Club was so selective that an in-house anecdote had Senator Harry Truman stopping by the Club on his way through Bar Harbor, but not being invited to sign the guest book because he was not deemed important enough. After Truman became president, the Club sent their guest book for him to sign at the White House. Members of the Eastern Yacht Club of Massachusetts, the New York Yacht Club, the Seawanahka Yacht Club of New York, and the Corinthian Yacht Club of Philadelphia were extended reading room privileges. While many accommodations were made for those individuals who held membership in other similar clubs, little was done to welcome local residents. Out of 111 early members, only five were from Bar Harbor.²⁰

The main purpose in creating the Pot and Kettle Club was to "encourage riding, driving, and yachting among its members by the maintenance of a country resort for meetings and athletic sports."²¹ Gambling and dining were also staples of this organization. At first the members were required to do the cooking, but they soon found it too difficult to do the cooking and serving and still carry on productive conversations. Servants were hired to take care of food preparation.

After looking at the bylaws and structure of these clubs, it is no surprise that when asked to remember what life was like during Bar Harbor's heyday as a summer resort, locals and summer visitors had quite different responses. As a local, Sylvia Kurson vividly recalled how her brothers spent their summer months employed at Kebo Golf Club "caddying and getting rich on summer people's tips." They were unable to "hang out with the family on the weekend" because they were busy earning money.²² For summer people, however, the Kebo Valley Club provided momentary respite from work. At the Club, they took advantage of a theater, restaurant, race track, baseball field, several tennis and croquet lawns, and a golf course.²³

Marion Peabody, who had spent the majority of her childhood summers on Mount Desert Island, reminisced about the summer days of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as gay times of "beautiful parties in the galleried ballroom in the Kebo Valley Club." She distinctly remembered the beautiful flower parades where the female summer visitors would drive "their own phaetons completely covered with flowers, from the horse's ears to the groom's seat on the back—including the lady herself who wore a dress to match or contrast with the flowers she had chosen for decoration."²⁴ The canoe parades held in front of the Canoe Club on the bay side of Bar Island also left an indelible imprint on Peabody's memories.

While exorbitant costs and regulations kept locals out of summer clubs, Sylvia Kurson, Nan Cole, and their families did have a club where they could participate in leisure activities. It was the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.). From the day it opened its doors on June 1, 1900, the Bar Harbor Y.M.C.A. became a favorite site for locals to exercise, relax, and learn about important issues of the day. Bowling, gymnastics, swimming, and basketball were popular activities housed in this building. The big difference between the Y.M.C.A. and the social clubs of the summer people was that the Y.M.C.A. was open to everyone. For a nominal fee of \$2, one could be a member and have access to the reading room, game room, parlor, and various entertainment that was provided.²⁵

Although the Y.M.C.A. provided a leisure niche for year-round people, residents intent on maintaining Bar Harbor's status as a summer colony were responsible for directing some of the locals' leisure pursuits. In a *Bar Harbor Record* editorial of March 31, 1920, the editor implored residents to enjoy the snowy trail system through Lafayette National Park. In asking residents to use the trail system, the editor suggested that one would not only obtain personal pleasures, but would "acquire information of great value." According to the *Record* editor, the principal business in Bar Harbor was the "selling of the scenery and if we do not know our own product, how can we sell it?" The editor went so far as to say that

in every home and business establishment of Mount Desert Island there should be a good map of the national park and

men, women, and children should study these maps in order that they may at all times be able to give the tourist information that will direct him to the places where he may see the best that we have to offer.²⁶

Even the leisure pursuits of the locals had to be tied to summer people.

Holiday festivities also seemed to be organized around the summer colony. The *Bar Harbor Times* reported that though there was some dissent amongst townspeople over whether or not to have a Fourth of July celebration, in keeping with what the rusticators wanted, it would be a low-key affair. Apparently, certain local officials believed that summer visitors came to Bar Harbor to get away from the boisterous Fourth of July antics more commonly found in urban areas. Town officials felt that Bar Harbor must do its part in keeping its summer guests happy and content. This meant confining holiday cheer to an intimate tea social at the Kebo Valley clubhouse. "At this tea will be found society assembled and it will be a season of greeting among those who are newly come and others who have been here since May."²⁷

The contented pleasures of Peabody and others of her social standing were at odds with Kurson's memories. Thinking back to her days as a Girl Scout, Kurson remembered an impending meeting between the local troop and some rusticator Girl Scouts. "Whether my uneasiness ever got beyond concern about accents, I do not remember, but in general we village girls were uncomfortably aware of the immense difference between our family's bank accounts, houses, cars, boats, and style of recreation and theirs."²⁸ The leisure activities that Peabody engaged in were foreign to most locals. Kurson most likely would not have had the opportunity to spend a day-long excursion on Mr. Fairman Rogers' beautiful steam yacht, as did Peabody, mainly because the people with whom Kurson and her family associated would not have had the monetary means to afford such luxuries. Nor would they have had the connections to watch boat races from an Admiral's gig as was customary for Peabody's family. "It was a perfect day and the harbor was full of yachts, launches, and canoes," Peabody wrote. "The band on

our ship played all the time and the races were great. The crew were so excited. They climbed up in the rigging and even were on top of the mast."²⁹

While locals viewed the water as their livelihood, primarily as a place where they could fish, summer visitors spent an inordinate amount of time enjoying the water and the recreational opportunities offered in Bar Harbor. Throughout the season, the bay would be filled with sail and steam yachts. The *Bar Harbor Record* kept meticulous records of when each yacht arrived, and provided detailed information about the races between the various knockabouts. Yachting was so popular that the summer colony decided to incorporate the Mount Desert Racing Association and have semi-weekly races.³⁰ Clearly, though, these races were composed solely of summer people. As the *Bar Harbor Record* recounted, "The boats left Boston several days ago and should soon be here."³¹ If these knockabouts had been owned by locals, they would have originated in Bar Harbor. While days were spent racing, moonlit nights would find young summer visitors cavorting in canoes and rowboats. "The young men paddled or pulled with a slow strong rhythm; the girls dipped their paddles a bit tentatively, or reclined on a deerskin in the bottom of the boat."³²

Not only did the rusticators differ from locals in terms of leisure pursuits; the rusticators' outlook on life was also different. For the most part, the summer residents did not feel there was anything wrong with how they treated the locals. In fact, some summer residents felt that they had a positive effect on local life. George Street, a turn-of-the-century clergyman and temperance lecturer, thought that the summer residents raised the standard of living and introduced luxuries that were previously unknown to the locals. While he admitted that class distinctions were emphasized when the summer colony was in full swing, ". . . on the whole, their influence was healthy in matters sanitary and social and religious."³³

While introducing certain luxuries into Bar Harbor, rusticators also thwarted the arrival of some amenities they deemed inappropriate. For instance, summer residents felt strongly that the automobile had no place in Bar Harbor. To maintain the natural, pristine state of this island getaway,

rusticators fought to prevent the automobile's arrival. Locals, however, had a more realistic view of life on the Island. They saw the automobile as a means of attaining a better quality of life. In the summer of 1906, it appeared that the rusticators had won; legislation was passed "which completely prohibited the importation of cars to Mount Desert." Their victory, however, was short-lived; that winter Leslie Brewer, an enterprising local, used a motorboat engine and built his own car. The law was soon changed.³⁴

Unfortunately, summer residents did not learn a lesson from this early-twentieth-century automobile fiasco. Kurson detailed more tension between these two groups when she described a particular town meeting in March of 1920. This meeting was called to discuss the concerts that occurred on a weekly basis at the bandstand. The rusticators decided that the local music was not satisfactory. The locals, on the other hand, saw the summer people as "meddlin busybodies out to do away with our own band concerts in the village green and put a piece of the Boston Symphony into the Bandstand where it don't belong and never will."³⁵ Moderators defused this controversy with a compromise that allowed the local band to play four nights a week and the Boston Symphony to perform three nights a week. Cole nostalgically remembered the band of local musicians, which was started in 1898, and how proud they were to be entertaining their friends and family.³⁶ It was a defining moment for the town when local musicians "stepped aside in deference to talented visiting professionals."³⁷

Thus did summer people make sure that their retreat to a less urban place did not mean "a loss of high culture." In one case, their concern for maintaining distinctions of social class even meant changing a local's name. An islander recalled an incident when her grandmother sought employment as a maid at one of the cottage estates.

At the conclusion of her interview, which had proved a successful one, she was asked what her name was. "Helen," she replied. Her employer looked distressed. "Oh dear" she said gently. "I'm afraid it would make me self-conscious to call you anything as aristocratic as that. I think we had better call you Hilda."³⁸

Echoes of this tension between rusticators and locals could be heard long after the summer colony passed its zenith. In October 1947, *Le Figaro*, a newspaper in Paris, France, did a front-page story on the great Bar Harbor fire. According to *Figaro*, the town was "half destroyed by a fire which had been set by local peasants as a means of protesting the long-continued occupation of their territory by America's landed aristocracy."³⁹

In becoming a playground for socially prominent Americans, Bar Harbor was molded to meet the needs of a diverse population. These needs included the leisure pursuits of native Bar Harbor residents as well as summer rusticators. Frequently, the one conflicted with the other.

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Notes

¹ W. B. Lapham, *Bar Harbor and Mount Desert Island* (Augusta, Maine: Maine Farmer Job Print, 1888), 5.

² Marian Lawrence Peabody, *To Be Young Was Very Heaven* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 19.

³ Skip Whitson, *Maine 100 Years Ago* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Sun Publishing Company, 1977), 10-11.

⁴ Acadia, the first national park established east of the Mississippi River, began in 1916 as Sieur de Monts National Monument—a 6,000-acre tract of land. In 1919, President Wilson signed the act establishing Lafayette National Park, and in 1929 the park was officially named Acadia. Albert C. and Mariam F. d'Amato, *Discovering Acadia National Park: Mount Desert Island, Maine* (Winthrop, Maine: Professional Editorial Service, Inc., 1985), 9.

⁵ Cleveland Amory, *The Last Resorts* (New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1952), 272.

- ⁶ Richmond Barrett, *Good Old Summer Days: Newport, Narragansett Pier, Saratoga, Long Beach, Bar Harbor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952), 295-296.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Amory, *The Last Resorts*, 295-296.
- ⁹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Random House, 1931), 261.
- ¹⁰ Ruth Ann Hill, *Discovering Old Bar Harbor and Acadia National Park: An Unconventional History and Guide* (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1996), 43.
- ¹¹ Amory, *The Last Resorts*, 307.
- ¹² *Mount Desert Reading Room, Bar Harbor, Maine* (Bar Harbor, Maine: W. H. Sherman, 1881), 3, 11.
- ¹³ *The Bar Harbor Club* (Bar Harbor, Maine: 1931), 19, 26.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 25, 28.
- ¹⁵ Hill, *Discovering Old Bar Harbor*, 90.
- ¹⁶ Catherine Ivey, "Town's Treasure in Jeopardy," *Bangor Daily News*, July 25, 1997, A1.
- ¹⁷ Technically, the club was built in the village of Hull's Cove, but everyone associated it with Bar Harbor.
- ¹⁸ *Bar Harbor Record*, May 30, 1900
- ¹⁹ Amory, *The Last Resorts*, 308.
- ²⁰ *Bar Harbor Reading Room*, 19.
- ²¹ Amory, *The Last Resorts*. 309.
- ²² Sylvia M. Kurson, *My World on an Island Growing Up in Bar Harbor* (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1982), 58.
- ²³ Ibid., 43.
- ²⁴ Peabody, *To Be Young*, 23, 25.
- ²⁵ *Bar Harbor Record*, May 16, 1900.
- ²⁶ *Bar Harbor Record*, March 31, 1920.
- ²⁷ Ibid., June 27, 1900.
- ²⁸ Kurson, *My World*, 48.
- ²⁹ Peabody, *To Be Very Young*, 23, 25.
- ³⁰ *Bar Harbor Record*, July 23, 1900.
- ³¹ *Bar Harbor Record*, July 13, 1900.
- ³² Barrett, *Good Old Summer*, 300-301; Lapham, *Bar Harbor*, 13.
- ³³ Barrett, *Good Old Summer*, 321.
- ³⁴ Amory, *The Last Resorts*, 322.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 22.
- ³⁶ *Bar Harbor Record*, February 28, 1900.
- ³⁷ Hill, *Discovering Old Bar Harbor*, 80.
- ³⁸ Amory, *The Last Resorts*, 323.
- ³⁹ Amory, *The Last Resorts*, 263.