



A "cottage" dining room

Northeast Harbor Delivered: Provisioning the Carriage Trade

Meredith Hutchins

“The war...was an equalizer. It put everybody more on the same basis,” said my friend Jim. He was telling me about his summer job in the nineteen forties and fifties, when he delivered groceries to the carriage trade in Northeast Harbor.

Jim worked at the Hillcrest Market, which was named for the family farm that provided the store with fresh vegetables and dairy products and advertised choice meats, fruits in season, a home bakery and “Delivery.” Even in 1950, the year fruits, dairy products and vegetables were deleted from its ad in favor of “Birdseye frosted foods” and the market announced itself for the first time as “the friendly store, cottage and yacht supplies,” the ad concluded with the magic word “Delivery.”

The Hillcrest Market, which was located in a gambrel roofed building on Main Street, vied with the Pine Tree Market, an S. S. Pierce emporium, for the patronage of Northeast Harbor’s summer people. “We used Dole and Stokeley,” Jim recalled, “but S. S. Pierce with its red labels was top of the line in those days. I used to go into the Pine Tree Market and I’d be impressed. It looked pretty classy.”

Nevertheless Jim took pride in supporting his employers. “I thought Hillcrest Market was the cat’s miaow and I would try my darndest to get people to do business with Hillcrest instead of Pine Tree,” he said.

Jim first encountered the grocery business the summer he was ten years old, when he stocked shelves at Jackson’s Market in Southwest Harbor, four miles from his home in Hall Quarry. “As kids we were lucky to get any kind of job. I worked as much as I wanted to. There weren’t any child labor laws then.”

Next he waited on table at a summer cottage. “I wasn’t too impressed with that job,” he said. “It was wartime and there was no help then, no help at all. I would work in the gardens in the morning, then change my clothes and wait on table. Mr. and Mrs. Underwood were from Boston. They had a little old lady cook and what I knew about

waiting on table you could put in a thimble. I practiced with Mrs. Underwood the whole nine yards, but the first time I served the soup it landed in Mr. Underwood's lap.

"I got the job at Hillcrest because there were so few people available to work. The first year I went back and forth with a man from the Quarry, who worked at the golf course in Northeast Harbor. But golf wasn't much of a business in those days, so a lot of mornings I'd get a ride down to Southwest Harbor and there would always be somebody going to Northeast in a boat, and I'd go that way. The second year I got a room and from then on I stayed over there all summer."



Hillcrest Market, Northeast Harbor (right)

Business at the market was generally conducted on a charge account basis and very few people walked in off the street. In those days there weren't many tourists in town and the cash sales usually came from the yachts in the harbor, the odd vessel cruising up the coast.

Bills were sent out at two week intervals and it was expected that they would be paid within that time period. A summer cottage bill could amount to a thousand dollars or more in a very short time and if a family departed before paying, there was a good chance they'd forget about the bill until spring.

In Jim's opinion the summer people were good managers of their money. They weren't rich because they were lucky at cards. Each month that they sat on their money meant more interest, and they were

not averse to taking care of themselves and letting the little guy take care of himself as best he could.

In an attempt to do just that, the local people shopped mostly at the IGA market, where prices were lower. An IGA ad for the period says, "Theconomy IGA store...a cash self-service food store with everyday low prices." Northeast Harbor's summer residents, however, were not really everyday-type people, nor was self-service a concept they wished to embrace.

In Jim's mind there was no doubt as to who was who in Northeast Harbor. "Even when the summer people wore blue jeans and their old clothes, they weren't disguising anything from anybody, except maybe themselves. Even today," he says, "you can tell a tourist from a summer person from a native, not as easily as forty years ago, but you can tell. There's still that Ivy League look to so many of them.

"Most of the ones I was associated with were very nice people, but it wasn't smart to bow and scrape. Anyone who was insecure would get walked on. I've seen some of the summer people jump all over the help, treat them like dirt, though I never got any of that. Someone who was on the ball wouldn't get much static.

"Oh, I've been chewed out before, and for good reason. Once, during the war, this summer lady was having a big tea party and she asked the owner's wife if there was any way to get some cupcakes made. Well, it was going to take three pounds of sugar, or something like that, so at the market they scrounged around, they shorted everybody to come up with enough to make the cupcakes.

"This was the first summer I worked at Hillcrest. The cooks worked upstairs over the store making those cupcakes. They had them on these big baking sheets when they called for me to come up and take them downstairs, where they were going to put on all the fancy doodads and package them for delivery.

"I remember the last thing that was said to me as I started down the stairs was 'Jimmy, be careful, don't fall down.' Well, good night, folks. Down the stairs I went with four dozen cupcakes on top of me.

"They salvaged as many as they could, some of them I just plain sat on, and somehow they made more icing and fixed them up so that the

lady having the tea party was duly impressed. But it was an experience I never forgot. I guess anyone deserves a little flack for doing something like that.”

Often if a summer lady was planning a dinner party she would telephone the market and make an appointment to see the owner's wife. “She might say, ‘We're entertaining sixteen people Wednesday evening and I want to come in and review the menu with you.’ And they would fix up a time to sit down together and discuss what would be needed for the party.

“Then Madam would be chauffeured to the market with her shopping list, where the proprietor would welcome her inside with a bow. He would bow to those people when they came into the store. He would actually bow to those ladies. And I made up my mind then, whatever I did to earn a living, I wasn't going to bow to anyone.”

Jim was fifteen the year he began to work at the market. He would visit a dozen or so summer cottages on a regular basis, leaving in the delivery truck each morning at eight to make his calls on the kitchen help. At the first cottage, where there was likely to be a hot muffin waiting for him, he might say, “I was up country yesterday and brought back some beautiful raspberries,” and the cook would send him on to the cook next door, where he'd say that he had some lovely raspberries from the Hillcrest Market and was there anything else that was needed. “I'd get orders for a few items and, over a period of time, I'd pick up a lot of new cottages.

“I was the only one who did that. The produce would come in at seven, so I'd go out already knowing what we had a lot of that we needed to push. The rest of the guys stayed in the store and did the early morning chores before they started putting up the orders and delivering them, but I went out and took my own orders.

“When I started work at Hillcrest gas was rationed, sugar was rationed, coffee you couldn't get, and of course fresh fruits and vegetables you couldn't get unless they were locally grown, so it was a different situation from today. The delivery trucks were commercial and you had a C sticker on your windshield, which meant you got five gallons of gas.

“I remember one time I went to Orland to get fresh eggs and butter. A person might be able to get ten cases of eggs, but we couldn't get

*Jim and Carolyn
beside the Hillcrest
Market truck*



*Cast of Gilman senior
play, Jim Grant at
center, back row*

*1947 Gilman
High basketball
team, Jim Grant
second from
right; Coach Don
Coates, right
in back, helped
with his college
scholarship*



much more because it was all going for the government. Still it was a treat to be able to take that long trip.

“Back in those days the produce people came down from Bangor. There was this lady, Mrs. Lancaster, who’d come down about three mornings a week. She’d come into the market and say, ‘You don’t want to buy any potatoes today, do you?’ I always thought it was a great sales pitch.

“Once, oh boy, we got some bananas. Bananas were scarce. You just couldn’t get them. Well, we got in a bunch one day and I had taken them to some of my closer friends that I called on every day. I always took care of Percy Clark’s cottage. The first Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller was Percy Clark’s daughter and she was at the Clark cottage that morning when I brought in about five bananas, green as could be, and when she saw those bananas, she immediately called the Hillcrest Market and wanted to know if we had any bananas and could she get some.

“Mrs. Rockefeller was told no, there weren’t any. She said, ‘Well, I know you do have bananas because the boy just delivered some.’ But there were no bananas for the Rockefellers and she didn’t care for that too much. During the war you had this kind of thing that brought everybody down to the same level.

“Cigarettes were very hard to get during the war. I remember when we would get a couple of cartons above our allocation and there were a lot of summer people who would come to see me, a kid of sixteen, and say, ‘If you can get any extra cigarettes, we’d be glad to take care of you.’ That kind of situation would never have existed prior to World War II.”

Beef was another commodity in short supply and its value and scarcity were never more evident than the time Mrs. Carroll Tyson asked if there were any way the market could get some filet mignons for a dinner party she was planning. “That’s the way those people always put it, ‘Is there any way you could manage to get so and so for me?’ or ‘Could you possibly get me some sugar?’

“We called all over the place trying to get filet mignon for Mrs. Tyson. We even called the meat packing companies in Chicago until finally we managed to get a commitment from one of them to send the steaks.

“They arrived the day before the party. Four fillets, beautiful things, and I was sent to deliver them to the Tysons.

“I set out in the delivery truck. In those days the family lived over on Harborside Drive, way up. I remember you drove up a hill and then it leveled off and you had to get out of the truck and climb this mountain to the kitchen where you delivered everything to the butler. It was quite a strain, even for a kid fifteen, sixteen years old, to carry four or five baskets of food up there to the pantry.

“Now the butler had a little porch right next to the kitchen and the Tysons had a Great Dane dog that stood five feet high at least. I came round the corner toward the pantry and that Great Dane came galloping around the corner toward me. He smelled that red meat and gave a lunge and down I went. I didn’t have a split second to prepare, he knocked me flat, sent those baskets of groceries flying and ripped open those packages of filet mignon, and I can tell you, he inhaled two and a half steaks before the butler could get outside and pull him off.

“Finally he nailed the dog and then Mrs. Tyson heard all the commotion and made an appearance. She didn’t care for what had happened at all, not at all, and it had to be my fault. I was the one who caught hell. I really did catch it that time. There was no more filet mignon to be had and everyone was very disappointed in me and in the fact that the delivery didn’t get made. I don’t know what they served at their dinner party. Probably tube steak.”

Although many accounts of Northeast Harbor rusticators stress the unsophisticated, bucolic type of summer holidays enjoyed by college professors and their families, who favored activities such as sailing and mountain climbing, Jim is convinced that making money was the sport of choice among the men of the summer colony. “The men weren’t here that much, especially during the war, and a lot of the time you dealt with the women. The purpose of the summer places was to keep the wife and children happy and out of the men’s hair, so they could concentrate on making money.”

Summer families brought many of their household servants with them. They were usually Irish and Friday was a big fish day, though sometimes the governess would have a young black girl to help with the children.

Local men and women would be employed to open and close the cottages in the spring and fall, and the men hired by summer people as carpenters, gardeners and caretakers would often be retained on an annual basis. "The town didn't have any industry. There was nothing except the summer cottages, a handful of fishermen and a little construction."

Most of Jim's contemporaries had summer jobs at the hotels, grocery stores and garages. A few, sons of local people who had done well financially, would get to know people in the cottages through delivering the mail or laying fires in the cottage fireplaces. Then they would learn to sail and play tennis and they would crew for people and teach sailing to the little ones. "Sometimes these guys were kind of frowned on by the local people. They wanted to be fish in the summer and fowl in the winter."

After the war the *nouveaux riches* began coming to Mount Desert Island in larger numbers. It wasn't easy for these people to get accepted into the existing social circles. After all they hadn't been summering on the island for four generations, they hadn't gone to school with the regulars, and they didn't live on the Main Line.

"Of course Northeast Harbor has a lot of new rich people now, but then they were not well accepted. The war changed that. Some of the new people could be obnoxious and were not above throwing money around in order to buy their way into acceptance. This did not endear them to the existing summer colony, though it could go over great with the locals."

During the summer of 1948 Jim's girlfriend and future wife, Carolyn, worked as a chambermaid at the Kimball House, where ladies who had stayed there for years would leave her a five dollar tip every week, just like clockwork. These ladies were quite a contrast to the *arrivistes*, who wanted to make a big impression, and would leave a twenty dollar weekly tip.

And in 1946 when new cars began to be available again, chauffeurs in full regalia reappeared on the scene, driving their ladies up from the city in brand-new automobiles, which were still scarce items in Maine showrooms. The summer people's cars, Cadillacs, Packards, Rolls, were kept at the local garages and the chauffeurs, who were always on call,

were very particular about their machines. They polished them constantly and saw to it that they were kept in spotless condition.

One year Jim came close to entering the chauffeuring profession himself when Mrs. Hopkins decided it would be a good idea for him to become the family's chauffeur. She told Jim that when Mr. Hopkins arrived, they would have a talk about it.

The interview took place on a Sunday in August on the front porch of the Hopkins cottage. "Mr. Hopkins thanked me for coming down and then he said, 'What did you say your name was?' and I told him it was Grant and he said, 'You any relation to Ulysses?'"

"Not that I know of."

"It's just as well," Mr. Hopkins said. "He wasn't what I call a good president. He never did anything that was well thought of. Well, there was one thing he did. President Grant was a great one for leaving the White House and going over to the lobby of the Hay-Whitney Hotel to meet his cronies. These were men who were trying to get special favors and Grant would get out of the White House so they wouldn't have to go through all his secretaries. That's where the term 'lobbyist' came from. It's the only thing Grant ever did that will make him go down in history. I'm glad you're not related to him.

"Now look," he said, "Mrs. Hopkins would love to have you come down to Baltimore with us for the winter, but what could you do down there? You don't want to do that. You want to go to college."

"And when he went that fall, he left an envelope for me with one of the waitresses. In it was a note wishing me good luck and telling me to finish school and with the note was a hundred dollar bill, first hundred dollar bill I ever saw. That was a lot of money then. I would work three weeks to get that much money. Mr. Hopkins was a nice man. Like a lot of the summer people, he could be very helpful.

"I'd made up my mind that I wanted to go to college. There was little work in the quarry during the depression. The last of the paving business was in 1932, 1933. They still quarried coping stones for the sides of the roads, like up Cadillac Mountain, but other than that there wasn't anything.

"Don Coates, my high school basketball coach, got me a good

scholarship at his college, and through delivering groceries, I got to know a Mr. Matthews, who came from Alton, Illinois, close to where I was going to school. He would have me drive his car from Northeast Harbor to Illinois and pay me an astronomical sum to do it. He would find excuses to have me do something, so he could give me money to help me through school. He was a real nice guy. He helped a lot of people...quietly.”

World War II accelerated the disappearance of the old way of life on the large summer estates. The income tax had fueled the change. The war delivered the *coup de grace*. “You couldn’t get help and you couldn’t afford to pay people anyway and with the draft it didn’t make any difference whether you were a fisherman from Northeast Harbor, a banker from Boston or a lawyer from Philadelphia. Uncle Sam wanted you.

“And after the war was over, people who’d never had any intention of going to college went to school on the G. I. bill. So after the war, even though things returned to the way they’d been for a little bit, it wasn’t the same. The class structure in Northeast Harbor was never the same again.”



James Grant, age 78, died October 23, 2007 at his winter residence in Columbus, Ohio.



Author Meredith Hutchins is a native of Mount Desert Island, where her family has lived for over 200 years. A former director of the Southwest Harbor Public Library, she now volunteers as curator of the Library’s old photograph collection. Her essays, short stories and poems have been published in numerous magazines and newspapers. Two of her poems appeared in the 2006-07 issue of Chebacco. A shorter version of this piece was published in Portland Magazine Summerguide 1991.

Photographs:

Page 60: A "cottage" dining room: Mount Desert Island Historical Society Archives.

Page 62: Photograph of the Hillcrest Market on Main Street in Northeast Harbor is used by permission of the Northeast Harbor Public Library.

Page 63: Photograph of Jim and Carolyn Grant was provided by Carolyn Grant. The photographs of the cast of the Gilman High School senior class play and the basketball team were provided by Robert and Jean Fernald and Robert Niffie and Helen Smallidge. Both photographs appeared in the 1947 *Gilmanac*.