

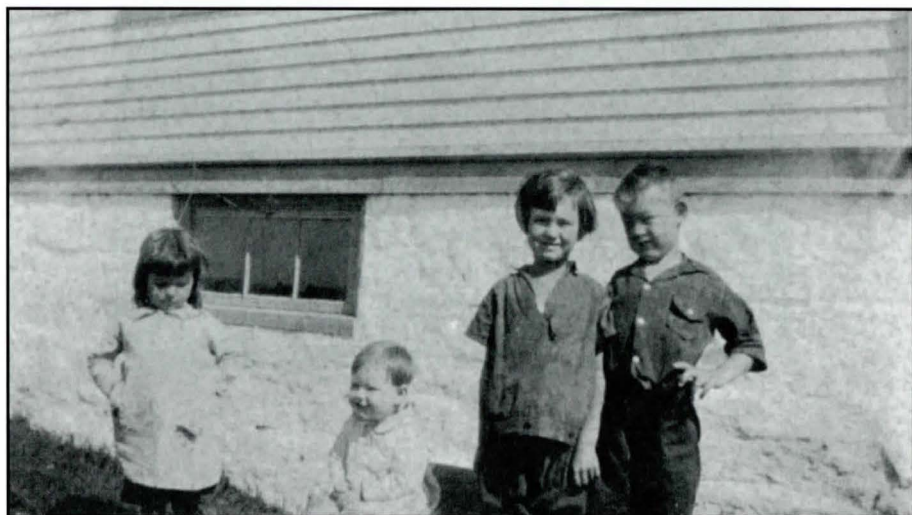
LYFORD STANLEY

A

MAINE

BOAT BUILDER

REMEMBERED



Maxine, Lyford, Charlotte and Perley Stanley

Lyford Leverett Stanley, who died at age 82 in November 2007, was in many ways the person every Mainer is thought to be. His life centered on work, family (and pets were family, too) saving money, and helping out his friends. He could be tetchy, but also generous. He'd take his time figuring out how to do something, but then it had to be done today – not tomorrow.

Lyford was an island man from birth, and in eighty years of life he steadfastly kept within the bounds of Mount Desert Island, Great Duck, Gotts and Swans Islands. Occasionally, but rarely, he would venture farther down the coast – to Vinalhaven or, just once, as far as Boston, to deliver a boat to a customer. Then he'd come right back home. “Why would anyone want to leave Bass Harbor, Maine?” he'd say.

He was at home on the sea, but he picked up land-based skills easily. If he could save money by doing something himself, he sure would – and that meant learning how to do the jobs that other people would charge him for.

Many people – especially families on Gotts Island – depended on him to make their lives easier. He willingly helped them out with their projects, some mechanical, some involving construction. But asking for – and accepting – their help made him uncomfortable. Oddly, it seemed to be easier for him to take help from friends than family. He worried a lot about his children's holding on to their jobs, and it made him nervous if they took time off to help him.

Friends and family gathered at The Old School House one afternoon in early 2009 to record memories of Lyford and the role he played in their lives and in the island communities in which he grew up, married, raised a family, and worked too many jobs to remember. The group included boat builder Jock Williams, restaurant owner Janet Strong, builder Scott Swann, and Lyford's daughter Roxanne Lewis. Their comments appear in italics.

GROWING UP ON ISLANDS

Lyford was born on Swans Island on February 4, 1926 to Albra Marion Staples Stanley and Coast Guardsman Leverett Stanley. Two months later, Leverett Stanley had a new job as keeper of the lighthouse on Great Duck Island, five miles off Mount Desert Island, and for the next fifteen years the keeper's cottage on Great Duck was home.

Lyford had one brother and two sisters, and they roamed everywhere

on Great Duck. Lyford never forgot the excitement of Christmas on Great Duck, when an airplane would fly over and drop a box of treats, including a turkey and candy.

Among the children, Lyford was known as the one who got into everything, including some bad accidents.

As a child he was hit by a truck and he was burned. My grandmother was constantly telling us about all the trouble that Lyford would get into. And the things he would do. And he was very badly hurt a couple of times so that my grandmother was right beside his bed [for a long time].

When the children came of school age, their mother moved with them to Manset for the school year. When Lyford was fifteen, his father became keeper at Bass Harbor Light. From then on, Lyford could be like other children, attending school near home, riding bikes along roads, picking up part-time jobs.

By the time he got to Pemetit High School, he had the idea that he wanted to build boats. He apprenticed at Sim Davis's boatyard in Bass Harbor and, after dropping out of high school, he worked for a while at a Portland shipyard.

He didn't graduate. He wanted to go in the war and he went up and lied about his age and they refused him because of his knee.

Lyford kept his eye out for other opportunities to make a few dollars. He ran the projector at the Neptune Theater in Bass Harbor, worked at the Underwood sardine cannery in Bass Harbor, joined the crews cleaning up after the Fire of 1947, and hired on at Frenchman Bay Boat Company and the Henry Hinckley Company.

In 1948 he married a Gotts Island girl, Norma Sprague. They had three daughters.

FROM WOODEN BOATS TO FIBERGLASS

The first boat Lyford built by himself was Little One. He had this idea of exactly what he wanted to do and he was living in a house that was right on the corner [of Route 102], right by Big Al's. And he decided to build the boat in the bedroom. So he moved out of the bedroom and he literally built this boat in the bedroom. He took the wall down to get it out.

Jock Williams: *I was running the glass shop [at Hinckley's] and we had just constructed a new building. Lyford's wife, Norma, came and looked for a job*

and she actually applied to tape bulkheads for me. So she was part of our fiberglass community. And we talked a lot all of the time and she kept indicating that she thought that the industry, particularly the fishing boat industry, was going to move from wood to glass and she thought that Lyford's models were great models and that I should go talk to Lyford about building a hull on one of his boats. We would talk about this on a coffee break or sometimes, and eventually I left Hinckley's and in the process was given enough time to really consider that and eventually I did. [But] Lyford did not [want to] have anything to do with fiberglass. Well, he did, but he didn't initially. He didn't want to understand it and he didn't like the smell of it.

Then, finally, the day came when he accepted the idea that fiberglass could be the material of the future.

He was building a 36-footer at the time. Norma and my wife and I laid that thing up [put on a layer of fiberglass]. We lay her over in the shop. We took rails off. It was a wooden one and was going to Massachusetts. We laid it up over the wooden boat and then we rolled it on the other side and laid up the other half and then we put a cradle under it and Lyford did help with that. He was incredible with working with wood. Then we had to take the boat out of the mould and Norma and I convinced him that probably the boat wouldn't be ruined. The worst he might have to do is chisel it out of the mould. It came out beautifully and that was the beginning of a long relationship.

Lyford's most popular design was the Stanley 36 fiberglass lobster boat. More than 100 were built at the Williams boat yard and other yards. He also designed the Stanley 28, 38, 39 and 42. He would begin



*Lyford
Stanley (left)
and John
Letcher*

by creating a half model for each new design, and this would guide him in the construction.

He was very focused. Lyford was a person that had a plan and usually we called him "Stan the man with the plan." He would have a pretty good idea of what he was going to do for three, four or five weeks even. He would have a plan for the day and when he would hit the point where he finished in his mind for the day, he would stop and do something else. And the next day he would have a plan for the end of the week and a plan for the end of the month. He worked very fast. He had the capabilities skill-wise to do very interesting finish work. He did a lot of models. We used to also call him "one-cut Stanley." He would go, look around, size it up and then he would go cut the damn piece of wood. And you know what, it was dead on. I mean it wasn't perfect but it was good enough and he would always sort of relate the speed and quality of the precision work to the job. It didn't need to be perfect. He put out a lot of product. A lot of work in a very short time. We finished a hull 36 in six weeks.

The *State of Maine*, a Maine Warden Patrol Boat and a Stanley 44, was another of Lyford's designs built at Jock Williams' yard. It was a job Lyford took on reluctantly. *He had a lot of anxiety on a lot of those big projects.*

I used to try to get him to spend time with customers because he was great once you got him to break the ice and got him started, but he was awful hard



*Petrel II, a Stanley 38,
- photo by Alison Langley*

to persuade. When we were really engrossed in a project and building a lot of stuff, people would come and they would want to meet Lyford, the designer, and the magazines would want to write articles and want to do interviews. But if he knew about it, he would go to Gotts Island. Once I got him trapped on the boat, he couldn't get away. He would loosen up, and they loved him of course. Once he loosened up, he was fine, but he was a bear. We used to have launching parties to christen a new boat and the owners would come and want to meet Lyford.

They loved him at the shop but he worked pretty much alone. For the most part, he loved a job with a specific goal. He would have that job and he would come and go as he wanted to.

He was a thinker. And he had to think things out. I think he liked working by himself.

THREE KIDS AND THRIFT

He could learn anything that would save him money. Anything that was going to cost him, he got thinking and said, "I think I could do that." Then he would do it.

Building boats by day, he ran the movie projector for a while in the evening at the drive-in in Trenton. He also decided to manage a band, for a good reason: One of his daughter's boyfriends played lead guitar in the band. In order to keep an eye on them, Lyford became the manager and followed them all over.

To the people of Gotts Island, he was the man who delivered propane and other supplies, and he was also the taxi driver, the mailman and the carpenter. He did some seining, some scalloping and clamming. He'd pull his traps after work. He did his own wiring, his own plumbing; he fixed engines: anything mechanical was a challenge he liked. He had a sawmill. He was Harbormaster in Bass Harbor.

But then there was his soft side. He took care of a lot of older people and some of the things he did were kind of classic. He used to cut people's hair. He did the elderly, the shut-ins.

He would always say, "Who cut your hair, dear?" The machine that he inherited from [friends] had a buzzer and he had to replace that buzzer in Brewer. He drove to Brewer and said, "I would like to replace this." And they said, "Do you have a license?" And he said, "No, I don't do it professionally, I just do it for my friends." And they said, "You have to have a license."

They had to call Captain Clipper in Southwest Harbor and Lyford said to the owner, "Would you mind telling these people that I don't make money cutting hair?" It was resolved, and he was allowed to leave with a pair of brand-new clippers. And he said, "I had more trouble buying these clippers than I did buying a gun."

And another thing he did was he got a kit and he made an impression . . . he made a set of teeth, false teeth. And they were pretty damn good looking teeth.

The first time I met him I think was in March 1989 or something like that. I was living on Gotts. And I just happened to see this guy coming in a speed-boat [from Bass Harbor]. No one else was out on the island, and he was digging clams. "I woke up and had a hankering for clams this morning," he said.

I would get these calls from Marden's: "Scott, you have to come to Marden's, they're having a sale on . . ."

I would say to Lyford, "Oh, that Home Depot drives me crazy." He would say "Janet, that's the best thing that ever happened." If you start thinking about it, if you are building a boat in 1960, where did you get your parts? You would have to wait for them to be delivered, half of them, by truck.

He wasn't good at waiting. When Dad was ready to do a project, the call came and you said, "How about tomorrow?" and he would say, "Well, I'm ready now."

Back when I barely knew him, he wanted to know about a backhoe that I've got. He wanted to know if I would help him dig a channel through the bar that goes to Bar Island [between Great and Little Gotts Islands] so he would get an extra 45 minutes of boat time without the bar. And I said yes, thinking he would never do it. And then about 4 in the morning he came and woke me up. Said he was ready. And we spent 4 or 5 hours and then I realized that this was all completely illegal. He did not have any permits to actually do this. If he got caught . . . Something like that was just something that has always been done . . . part of an old tradition.

He reciprocated. He gave, you gave. It was sort of a bartering of chores.

The last project I did for him was a half-year before he died. He was anxious about his roof and he asked me if I could strip the shingles. I wasn't sure or not if I could ever get around to it, but of course the next morning he called up and said, "I've got all the shingles here and I am ready." I put a tarp down and I shingled his roof. One of the things is that he was always very

thankful. The whole time that I was actually getting around to the shingling, he said, "I can't believe you are doing this."

He never forgot what it was like to be broke. He always had his eye on the dollar. He was frugal and inventive. And when he died, instead of flowers he wanted donations sent to the food bank, which . . . was totally fitting.

NORMA

Everything that Lyford was doing [his wife] Norma was involved in.

Norma would do the fiberglassing on the boat that he was finishing. One time she put her back out and the doctor made her stay in bed for 10 days, and I remember him running to the window, asking her questions, running back, coming to the window again. Like Lyford said, fiberglass was not his thing. She said, "If I could just get out of this bed . . ." because it would have been so much easier because he didn't understand what she was trying tell him.



He fell off the roof of his shop once and got his foot in a rope so he was hanging off the roof, and he was telling us kids about it, and saying, "You'd think your mother would look out the window. I was hollering and hollering, hanging upside down, the tide's coming in, she's paying no attention" . . . you know how he goes on. She finally noticed him hanging upside down. "Good thing you got here before the tide come in and I drowned," he grumbled.

THE GULL, THE CHICKADEES AND LUCY

The Seagull: *He had a seagull that would sit on the porch and if dad did not send him out a cracker every once in a while, he would walk up and tap tap tap on the window.*

Chickadees: *When I was in his shed picking up my tools, there were all of these chickadees around and they kept coming up to me and I realized that Lyford was feeding these chickadees from his hand. I could just tell that they were so domesticated . . . in his old age he had a lot of time on his hands so he just went out and taught all of the chickadees how to eat out of his hand.*

Lucy the Labrador: *I remember when he got Lucy, our Labrador. As for his training animals, you just couldn't believe what that dog could do. When he trained her on ducks, well, it was my job to make Lucy stay until Dad actually got up and shot the duck. He was going out on the point and I was behind with Lucy and Dad got down on his belly and was crawling so the ducks wouldn't see him. Dad would put his hand down and crawl, and Lucy thought that's what that meant so she would get down on her belly and crawl behind him.*

That dog never left his side. He took her to Hinckley's with him to work. He took her to the store. "Lucy, you have to go pick out some dog food, if you want to eat. And she would go around to get the dog food, bring it out, and he would say, "That's not the kind that you picked last week, you sure you want that kind?" And he talked to her just like a human being and she acted like a human being, and she'd go back and get the right bag.

When he was working, Lucy wanted supper between four and five. She would get up on the staging by the boat with his coat in her mouth. And he would say, "Lucy, is it suppertime already? One more minute." And he would keep working, and she would start barking. And if he didn't take her in for supper, there was hell to pay.

He had the door fixed in the house so when Lucy batted it with her paw, it would close. And she could open it. I remember being down in the kitchen

and Lucy would come in and the door wouldn't close. Mum was upstairs and she would yell down, "Lucy, how many times do I have to tell you to close that door?" Lucy turned around and hit that door and bang. They talked to her just like she was one of the kids.

But he got sensitive to killing of the animals with age, so no more duck hunting, hardly any deer hunting, occasionally

TEACHING AND TEASING

I remember him teaching navigation. When all the grandkids were on the boat, especially in fall, he would turn the motor off and say, "Listen, do you know where we are?" He was very in tune to the things that you could see or hear in the thick of fog. If you were in fog, you wanted to be with Dad.

He had the driest sense of humor. A classic would be that he would be going across Blue Hill Bay out to Gotts in his little skiff on a choppy day with someone that had never been in his boat before, and he staring ahead through his glasses and no expression on his face. A little spray would come over the hood and he would look over and say, "I have never seen it this rough." And you would see the passenger turning white. Or if it was in the fog, he would say, "Does anyone know where we are?" Teasing people like that, very dry.

BRIDGING THE GENERATIONS

A traditional boat builder, Lyford still loved the latest gadgets: He had a cell phone before anyone did. He loved his camera. And then he recorded everything with his video recorder. He recorded himself doing his will around the same time as the shadow on the lung.

Lyford Stanley belonged to a generation of Mainers that believed you could figure out almost anything if you put your mind to it. Like others of his age, Lyford firmly believed that doing a job yourself was a lot smarter than paying someone else to it. Moreover, if something was worth doing, it was worth doing *today*.



Thanks to Roxanne Lewis, Janet Strong, Scott Swann and Jock Williams for sharing their memories and stories of Lyford Stanley. Jada Clement transcribed their conversation, an arduous task for which the Historical Society is grateful.