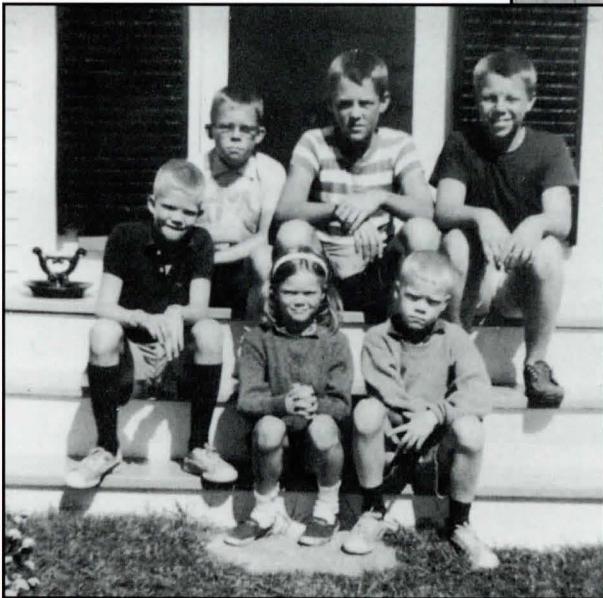




The Cobbler's, 1947



Rosie Dresser



*Rosie's nieces and nephews,
early 1960s*

THE COBBLER'S: A SOMESVILLE HOME FOR THE GENERATIONS

THOMAS DRESSER

During its heyday in the mid-19th century, when five mills operated in town and the pier bustled with coastal vessels, Somesville was a busy hub at the head of Somes Sound. Today Somesville might receive only a passing glance from tourists and laborers journeying from the hectic eastern side of the island through the quieter environs of Mount Desert.

In the late 1940s Somesville was the epitome of a small village. In the year of the Great Fire, 1947, my aunt, Rose Dresser, a recent Red Cross veteran of World War II, purchased a run-down, Greek Revival house on Main Street for \$5,000. Built in 1852 by Daniel Somes, Jr. for his shoemaker brother, Lewis, both of them grandsons of Somesville's founder Abraham Somes, the house proved a salvation for my aunt as she sought solace after the war, as well as an investment in her future.

The house, even in its dilapidated state, afforded a scenic view of the Sound. Yet the restoration of this aging abode, nestled on a corner of hilly hayfields, was an audacious effort for an unskilled, single woman from out of state.

Rose Dresser was self-supporting and fiercely independent. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1909, she taught drama for decades at the Winsor School in Boston. Once she bought the house, which she appropriately named The Cobbler's in honor of Lewis Somes, she made the trek to Somesville whenever possible, enlisting family, friends and neighbors to assist in the renovation of the aging farmhouse.

As my cousin, Jock Herron, recalled in his book, *Summer Restoration*,¹ "In many respects, 1947 was a liberating year for her – a chance to move forward and backward at the same time. In restoring The Cobbler's, she moved back to the Maine of her childhood summers, but on fresh terms as a single, well-educated woman striking out on her own."

To christen the house, neighbor Frances Manning, daughter of New York Episcopal Bishop Francis Manning, donated Somes' original cobbler's bench, which sits at The Cobbler's to this day. Rosie carefully nurtured friendships with other key personalities in the community, enlisting their advice and assistance when necessary, then rewarding them

with drinks and praise at her frequent cocktail parties.

Renovating the house was a challenge, but local craftsmen proved a salvation. John Fernald was Rosie's primary source of support, both physical and psychological. Through his efforts, the sagging barn was razed and the front porch removed. He proved a skillful carpenter.

Rosie did much of the interior reconstruction herself, plastering, painting, then planning her next move. She was methodical, first restoring the basics of the living area, then attacking the upstairs, and finally the back attic. Once done, she repeated her efforts, upgrading the paint, plaster and trim throughout. Rosie loved *The Cobbler's* and was constantly rearranging furniture, pampering her pleasure in home decor. Though in residence only for the brief summer season, she managed to make the house both habitable and handsome in a short time. Her labors have survived several generations.

In 1975, Rosie was justifiably proud that *The Cobbler's* earned recognition and listing on the National Register of Historic Places. It was cited for its "chaste lines and double gabled facade [which] make this dwelling a pleasing element of the Village landscape."



When her brood of five nephews and two nieces arrived each summer, Rosie showed off a freshly painted room and provided a pillow present of a book such as *Blueberries for Sal* or *One Morning in Maine* and a pack of Pall Mall candy cigarettes.

Each day of our vacation was meticulously planned. We decided whether to climb Flying Mountain in the morning, then go for a sail, or vice versa. When we "three good boys," as my two brothers and I were euphemistically called, had no plans, we liked to poke about *Somes Harbor* in Rosie's rowboat, exploring *Bar Island*, discovering "Lewis and Clark Island," or rowing up the Sound. More than anything, *The Cobbler's* was the staging site for hikes and swims and boating adventures.

As I recalled in *Beyond Bar Harbor*,² "Memories of Mount Desert begin when I was five or six, walking to the post office with my grandmother, talking with neighbors along the way." Ga, as I affectionately called her, would take me to Fernald's (more recently *Port-in-a-Storm*) for a loaf of *Pepperidge Farm* bread or an *S.S. Pierce* can of soup, and catch up on the latest gossip. One visit stands out because the butcher berated

me for picking up a six-pack of beer for my father. As a lad, I was blissfully unaware of stringent liquor laws.

Back at The Cobbler's, the flower man would bustle in with an aromatic basket to discuss whether asters or daisies would best brighten the china vases which adorned the parlor mantel. Rosie might prepare tuna-fish sandwiches (with crusts removed) and pre-shell hard-boiled eggs for a picnic at Ship Harbor. My father would consider the wind for an afternoon sail.

"On Sunday afternoon," I wrote, "we would walk across the street to the Somes House and enjoy tea with the yachting crowd as they discussed the afternoon race in the harbor. During the week, Aunt Rosie would lead us on a hike along a carriage road around Sargent, with the requisite sweater tied around our waist, even in the warmest weather. 'You never know,' she warned. 'Maine weather can change just like that.'"

One of my grandmother's friends, the author Margaret Ayer (Peggy) Barnes, was often her companion at The Cobbler's. Besides John Fernald, Aunt Rose befriended townspeople such as June and Julia Smith, postmaster and postmistress respectively. I often wondered how a man could be named June; I remember a friendly balding man behind the counter of the tiny office. Bob and Norma Fernald ran Fernald's Market and Arthur Bunker, with his gray motorboat, was Harbormaster. Rosie knew them all, and considered herself one with them.

Lucille Grant did the laundry, often returning with clean linens before we realized she'd picked up the soiled. In later years, Don Smith replaced John Fernald in tending the grounds at The Cobbler's. Rosie often expressed admiration for the locals' capacity for work.

Poet Betsy Alexander claimed Rosie caused her to become an author. Cycling home from the post office one day, Betsy feared she would veer into the picket fence in front of The Cobbler's. In her angst she took a spill, missing the fence but breaking a leg. She spent the summer incapacitated, but able to write. Her novel was a tribute to Somesville summers.

When the Somes House was sold in the early 1960s, harbor access was restricted. Rosie joined forces with Bob Patterson and Reggie Allen and prevailed upon the Strauses to form the Somesville Landing Corporation, which allowed townfolk down to the harbor. When my brother George built a float for the harbor, Rosie was quite involved, even con-

tacting the police to close the road so the float could be moved into the harbor. Rosie loved the drama of the moment and often embellished her adventures for her admiring audience.

Aunt Rosie, ever the actress, was involved in local theatre and always seemed to be on stage, whether recounting the drama of a local fisherman whose boat was stranded at low tide or drawing attention to herself practicing Italian while making beds. One favorite gag was to dangle her bare leg through a second-floor ceiling register, waiting patiently for the amazement of her guests below. She was rumored to have played bridge holding her cards with her toes.

Rosie's habit of calling the mountains by their original names lingers in the family to this day. Thus, Robinson, Brown and Jordan were familiar climbs. Although the names had been changed nearly a half century earlier (1919), Aunt Rose reared us on their earlier appellations. Mountains were her passion, and she hiked the highest peaks, even in her late seventies leading my daughters up Beech or Pemetic.

One youthful memory was of the Sargent-Jordan climb, when Rosie casually let herself fall into Sargent Pond, fully clothed, and splashed about to our amazement. She always put herself at center stage, gamely playing whiffle ball with her nephews if the occasion warranted it.

She shared her home and her opinion with all who crossed the threshold. My daughter Jill penned a thank-you note twenty-five years ago which read in part: "Dear Rosie, Thank you for letting us bring our friends to Maine. We had a great time. Thank you for the candy. We have a little bit left over. Your great niece, Jill."

Liquid refreshment, for young and old, is plentiful now, as it was in our youth. I recall the thrill of drinking ginger ale, with the bubbles fizzing up my nose. We were allowed a canard, a sugar cube dipped in grandmother's coffee or, on occasion, a cup of tea considerably watered down. And now, of course, we have graduated to more adult libations.

As a self-styled grande dame, Rosie hosted innumerable cocktail parties in the Shed Room, where gin and vermouth flowed freely. One youngster recalled he felt lost among "walls of grownups." Rosie had a flair for knowing her guests, always including a person of interest to bolster conversation. She loved to put on a show, mimicking the Downeast accent to her guests' amusement.

Rosie never married, though she had a number of friendships with

dashing, wealthy or well-connected men. One summer my brother Richard used a Ouija board to try to find a match for Rosie, but it only elicited a few chuckles from her. She was too busy to ever settle down.

The Cobbler's with its stately stare has overlooked Somes Sound for a century and a half. It houses a host of memories, which presages well for the future. What Rose Dresser, the quintessential doyenne, set in motion in 1947 has linked the generations, who carry on a tradition of happy family gatherings, expansive cocktail hours, generous dinners, and the house as a hub of adventures leading to many Maine memories.



The Cobbler's, 2007

A tradition, which flourishes to this day, is signing the guest book. The original book, initiated in 1947, is still extant, and we often verify when we were here in years gone by. Seven cousins, with a dozen progeny ranging in age from three to thirty-three, now frequent The Cobbler's, and the guest book, as well as the house itself, is well-used.

Rosie's influence flourishes nearly two decades after her death on the first day of 1992. She truly forged The Cobbler's into a positive environment that still welcomes her nieces and nephews, their children and friends. This past summer, another generation held court as my daughter Amy, her husband Brian, and new daughter Molly Rose (named for the great-great aunt herself) summered at The Cobbler's. Aunt Rose would most assuredly approve.



FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Herron, Jock. *Summer Restoration*. Tide Pool Publishing, 2004.
- ² Dresser, Thomas. *Beyond Bar Harbor*. Acadia Publishing, 1996/2008.

To savor the charm and glimpse the history of The Cobbler's, built in 1852, take a guided tour through this Greek Revival home:

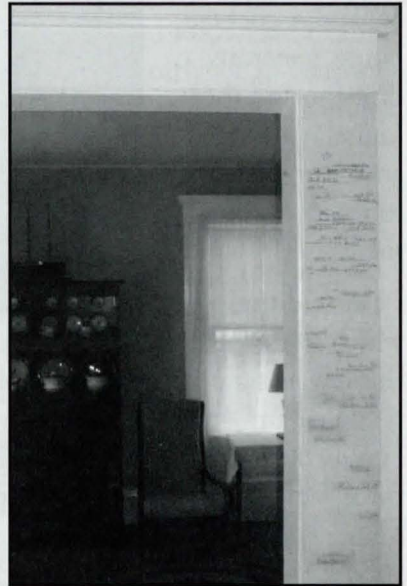
When one enters through the front door, framed by Greek Revival panel windows on either side, the first room is the front parlor, or mourning room, an elegant place to take afternoon tea and watch the pinky glow on Sargent Mountain. The austere window lintels and panels project gravity, but with the walls now a distinctive lavender, the room offers a welcoming station for formal gatherings.

My grandmother's room, known as the Rose Room, is also on the first floor and is an elegant throwback to the nineteenth century, with a stalwart bureau, an impressive four-poster canopy bed, a closed-off fireplace and an adjacent bath. The room's color mirrors my grandmother's name, listed on the door.

Just outside the Rose Room, carefully etched on the door frames, are marks that denote the height of each nephew or niece over the past half-century. A signal ritual of growing up was "getting heightened," which was a personal embarrassment as early on I proved shorter than my younger brother.

The cozy living room houses a desk with innumerable compartments, a treasure for youngsters. The banjo wall clock hasn't worked in a half-century and some of the books in the bookcase still have uncut pages, evidence of the house's undisturbed history. The prime focus is the Franklin stove around which we gather on a cool August evening. A small blue bedroom is nestled off the living room.

With access to the yard through a back door, the kitchen is the prime gathering spot. In my youth a great wood-burning stove stood out, but that has made way for a conventional range. My brother George constructed a counter and cabinets decades ago. On the wall hangs Rosie's pre-school diploma, dated 1914.



"Getting heightened"



Main Street entry



Front parlor



Dry sink



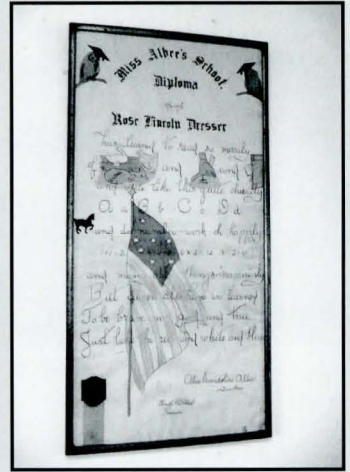
Lewis Somes' cobbler's bench

The most engaging room in The Cobbler's is the Shed Room, farthest from the street, with rough hewn boards, uninsulated, but a haven for friends and family to dine, converse, drink or relax. Centered by the cobbler's bench and furnished with a funky organ and a convenient dry sink, the room stands as testament to rustic charm.

Upstairs are three compact bedrooms, two with dormer windows overlooking the Sound, a bath (originally a fourth bedroom), and an attic hallway with a washer and dryer. Over the Shed Room is a spacious, but unheated, bedroom, with 19th century furnishings, including a china pitcher.

One memorable summer brought a horrid stench to the second floor. Rosie summoned John Fernald to investigate the cause. He nosed around and suggested a critter was stuck in the wall. Before he took hammer to plaster, we admitted that my younger brother, Richard, had secreted some mussels in his bureau. Aunt Rosie soon removed the source of the odor in "the smelly drawer," but the story lingers in family folklore.

In recent years The Cobbler's has been repainted, reshingled, chimneys relined, and the furnace and storm windows upgraded so the house withstands the rigors of rugged winter weather.



Rosie's Diploma



Thomas Dresser recalls his excitement, well over a half century ago, at being "alone, in Maine, in June" with aunts Rosie and Weezie. After growing up in central Massachusetts, he taught eight-year-olds, then worked with eighty-year-olds as a nursing home administrator. He now lives on Martha's Vineyard with his wife and childhood classmate, Joyce. Semi-retired, he drives buses and writes. In addition to Beyond Bar Harbor, he has written Mystery on the Vineyard (History Press, 2008).

All photographs provided by the author.