



David Rockefeller in 1923. *Courtesy of the Rockefeller Archive Center*

An Afternoon with David Rockefeller

Kathleen W. Miller

KM: I'm Kathleen Miller, currently President of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society Board of Directors, and I'm here on Thursday September 9, 2010 with David Rockefeller at his home in Seal Harbor, Maine. We're here to interview Mr. Rockefeller and ask a few questions about his history on the Island here.

DR: Well, thank you, Kathleen. I'm delighted to have you and happy to do my best in giving you the kind of response you're interested in.

KM: Thank you, first of all for agreeing and for welcoming us to your home. We start this always by asking, for those who were not born on the Island, what it was that brought your family to Mount Desert? Of all the places they could have gone and established a home for themselves, how did they arrive here?

DR: My father went to Brown University where he met Mother. . . . He came up I believe during the winter of one of the years he was at Brown and with some friends, probably did some skiing, I don't know, but he liked it very much, and as a result when he married Mother, not that long afterwards, he brought her here. I believe that at least a part of their wedding honeymoon was in a house in Bar Harbor. I don't know which one.

KM: Well, they were brave souls to come up in the winter; most people come up in the summertime and fall in love with the place.

DR: Well that's right. Providence [Rhode Island] is not that far away, and I think Father thought it would be fun to see it.

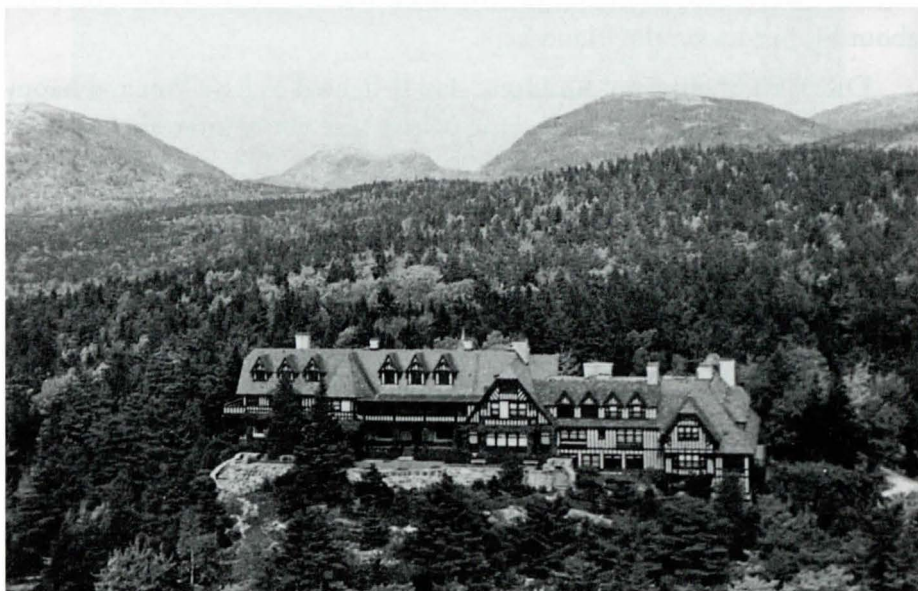
KM: And so, was it very long after they were married that they established a home here for themselves?

DR: I think it was fairly soon after they were married. Needless to say I wasn't around. But my recollection is that first they had, maybe for one or two years, a house that they rented in Bar Harbor, and then, whether they rented a house before there was anything at The Eryie, I'm not absolutely sure. In any case, very soon The Eryie became the focus, and remained the focus until we tore it down relatively recently. But it started out, I believe a small house was already here, and Father was very good at adding wings on it and expanding it, which he did in a number of places, and so the house

went out in three different directions. . . . He had a growing family, and so by the time that I was brought here, at the age of six months in 1915—needless to say I don't remember that—there was a house here and I believe we spent that summer here.

KM: Good. From your first summer on.

DR: Yes, in a much smaller piece of house than it became later.



The Eyrie. Courtesy of the Northeast Harbor Library, Sterling Haskell Collection

KM: Now it must have been fun having a large family. You're one of six children. Was it a fun summertime experience?

DR: Sure it was. Although, in all honesty, all of my brothers and sisters, with the exception of Winthrop, who was just three years older, all had very much their own lives and I don't think they were terribly interested in their youngest brother. Not that they were unfriendly, but I wasn't important. They lived their own lives. . . . And in retrospect, I think that my early years as a young boy were not that happy here. Just because we had tutors, usually a French tutor, who was a nice person, but they didn't know anything about the area and . . . my family didn't sail—neither of my parents. I don't think my father ever went out on a sailboat. He was very interested in horses and lots of other things, but not sailing. . . . So my early years here started to be more interesting when I took a course in

natural history with a remarkable and very gifted lady named Mrs. Herbert D. Neal, who was the wife of the then Director of the Mount Desert Island Laboratory. And she was just generally well informed as a naturalist and she was extremely good at explaining things in a way that was interesting, so that we would go out, for instance, a small group of people, children of families like mine who had places in Seal Harbor. One of them was Edsel Ford and his son Henry, who's been running the company for the last few years. . . . She would take us around to ponds, and we'd take a net and dig up what was there, and see lots of things wiggling, learn that some were beetles; some were bugs, and other things. But it gave me an initial start and interest in natural history, which I think in retrospect was important in my having become much more deeply interested at a later time in my life.

KM: And would you have been in elementary school years then?

DR: Yes. Around ten years old.

KM: What a great introduction to the Island. And did your siblings . . . you seem to have had the greatest, strongest connection to the Island of all your siblings. Did you spend more time here than they did?

DR: I think over the years, I did more, although my brother Nelson was deeply interested in and was very active in the Island and played an active role in the formation of the Harbor Club and in sailing. Laurance, less so. John, the eldest, did do some sailing and the family had bought a lovely little sloop which belonged to the Atlantic Class sloops. I think it was Atlantic, 36 feet long, no engine, and he and most of the children learned a certain amount about sailing there. I think, in retrospect, it was probably a mistake that I didn't go into the sailing classes in Northeast Harbor. . . .

KM: At the Fleet there.

DR: Yes, I really didn't. And it was not until I was married and Peggy and I started doing a certain amount of racing in the Northeast Harbor Fleet and became more involved.

KM: Did she have any resistance moving here, spending a considerable amount of time here?

DR: I think she came to love Seal Harbor as much as I did. It's true that most of her family had spent most of their time in Mount Kisco, the village in Bedford Hills, and they went, to the extent that they went away for the

summer, more to New England, [and the] Cape Cod, Massachusetts area.

KM: But she did come to love this place.

DR: Oh, I think my wife came to love it every bit as much as I did and we really learned to sail together. For many years we were allowed to use what was called the *Jack Tar*, which was a 36-foot sloop, with no engine, no head. A day-sailor. But she sailed beautifully, and fast, and we even did some racing in the August cruises. So we got some experience with that. There was a very nice young man who ran the yacht club, the Northeast Harbor yacht club, named Jimmy Ducey, and he was a very good sailor himself and he sort of took an interest in Peggy and me, even though he was younger than we, and he was a hunchback, quite deformed, but wonderfully brave and a good sailor. So we learned that way, but really more by just doing it ourselves than taking formal lessons. . . . [And eventually,] we would go off for a week at a time.

KM: And where did you go?

DR: Mostly east from here, along the coast to places like Roque Island and others along the coast. And we would have a very nice captain who had a small motorboat, and he would follow us on our cruises, at a respectful distance, but then at lunch or at night he would come up and tie up alongside, and that worked very well. So my early sailing was that kind, and I've just continued it ever since. And I still think I enjoy it as much as anything I do.

KM: And, I understand you have picnic boat.

DR: We do. That's a recent acquisition. The Hinckley Company has built wonderful boats and recently they built a series called Picnic Boats. The one we have is a little bigger than most, it's fifty-five feet long, and can sleep six people and can cruise at about 30 knots, which is quite fast. And we've enjoyed it very much. . . . We've recently had a visit from Mayor Bloomberg from New York and took him out for a sail.

KM: And what are your favorite islands to visit?

DR: Well certainly Roque Island is one. It's a beautiful island owned by a family in Boston and they have one of the best bays in the area. And so that's a lovely place to stop, but there are many other small islands and lovely places.

KM: Such as Frenchboro?

DR: Oh, of course. We'd sail there regularly. I've been out there two to three times this year. That, of course, is much nearer, and is certainly a fun place to go. We know some of the people that live there. Yes, that we can do in a motorboat and get there in a couple of hours from here.

KM: Now, do you ever spend much time here—or did you in your younger years—in all the different seasons? Did you spend much time in the winter here?

DR: We'd come here on and off in the winter, more perhaps in the late fall to see the fall colors. We've done that particularly since we've brought horses here because it's beautiful driving then. But essentially, with the boat, the time we spend here is in the summer.

KM: And what are some of your favorite places on the Island, or favorite things to do?

DR: Well, if you start with sailing and dealing with boats, a lot of the favorite places relate to sailing, and there are beautiful small bays along the coast of the Island, as well as off. We bought an island, called Bartlett's. We bought it, probably thirty or forty years ago now. And we thoroughly enjoyed that. For a time we built a little a log cabin there, and we'd use it even off-season. . . .

KM: Now you had cattle, or your wife had cattle out there?

DR: Yes, we did have, we do have cattle on Bartlett's, [which was the island my wife Peggy] was very much involved in buying. But now we still own [it], and my son Richard, who is a medical doctor and lives in Portland, comes here a lot and in a sense he has taken over looking after and running the island. But I was out there last night and spent the night. We have a house there and we love it. Yes, we've brought the horses up here this summer and, perhaps we've done that two or three times altogether, but we did this summer and we took the horses to Bartlett's and drove them there.

KM: Do you do much riding around in the Park?

DR: No, not much riding, a lot of driving. I used to ride horseback a lot, and Peggy also at a certain point, but we both got interested in driving horses, and so now we have a really top-flight coachman who has worked for the queen of Holland and is really tops in the field. So we're lucky to have him and we brought up four horses, and drive four or five days a week



The livery stable was located on Main Street in a building that no longer exists.

Courtesy of the Seal Harbor Library

. . . as a team. And so I've come to enjoy driving, particularly after my wife died, because she was a very good driver and when she was here she would almost always do the driving. When she died I took it up and now enjoy it.

KM: That's where the carriage roads, that your father built, come in rather handy.

DR: Indeed they [do]. Father started building carriage roads after he came here and I think the first of them must have been built right after World War I. And altogether, he's built about fifty-five miles of gravel carriage roads that he used to drive on, and now I drive on. But many other people use them.

KM: And his work to form Acadia National Park, which was so essential, must have been going on even before you were born.

DR: Yes, I think that's true. The first person he worked with . . . George Dorr . . .

KM: Yes, I have a picture of Mr. Dorr here.

DR: Yes, George Dorr had been coming here for years, got to know

Father well, and I would say that between the two of them, perhaps particularly Mr. Dorr, Acadia National Park was a product of their efforts. And he was a fine man. Of course, together they created the Park, which today is still one of the great landmarks of the country.

KM: Yes, it is—a gem for the whole nation.

DR: Yes, it certainly is.

KM: As that was going on, you were rather young. Was it part of your daily existence up here? Was it always in the background of conversations?

DR: Yes, and in those days I was doing more riding here than I have been lately, and Father also rode as well as drive. And I would sometimes ride out and see the work being done, or go in a carriage. But I was very much aware of it right from the beginning. And Father also liked working in the woods, chopping wood himself. Sundays, in particular, I remember coming out and taking on a project of clearing out a particular section of woods and each of us would—actually in those days we didn't even use a chain saw, [though] we did later on.

KM: Just hand tools, handsaws?

DR: Axes.

KM: So you had a real part in it yourself, hands-on?

DR: Oh, yes, I did. And of course we did the same on Bartlett's. There, more with saws, handsaws, but some axes as well. I've always enjoyed working in the woods. Still do.

KM: Well now, with roughly three million people coming to the Park every year, had you any inkling that it would evolve into such a treasure for the country?

DR: Well I don't think I thought it would attract as many as it has. But I think it's been very well handled. The road system in the Park is where most [visitors] go, and there are well-organized tours, and I think the tourists, by and large, don't use the carriage roads, so that, from my point of view, the driving is ideal. You often see people walking or sometimes driving carriages, but visitors to the Park as a whole, generally speaking, don't use the carriage roads. They're welcome to, of course, and they do to some extent, but they are more apt to use the . . . car roads.

KM: From your perspective, with this deep involvement with the creation

of the Park, how do you feel the communities, the year-round communities, have contributed to the ongoing survival and upkeep of the Park?

DR: I think, really, the relationship between the Park and . . . the local Maine people and visitors has been good. I don't sense that there's been any significant problem between people walking or driving, I've never seen any cars trying to drive on the carriage roads, and I think it's worked well. I think people respect what they are, and the fact that they are available to the public, and I think, generally speaking, it's a good relationship.

KM: Now, you were also instrumental in creating the boundaries, the legislation that helped define the Park; is that right?

DR: That was mostly Father, really. It had been done during his lifetime. He owned the land, much of which was turned over to the Park, and he presently dealt with the Park. Not that I wasn't aware of what he was doing, and often talked to him about it, but he enjoyed it, and it was very much his relationship that created the Park boundaries.

KM: Well, you have worked yourself on climate change issues, haven't you?

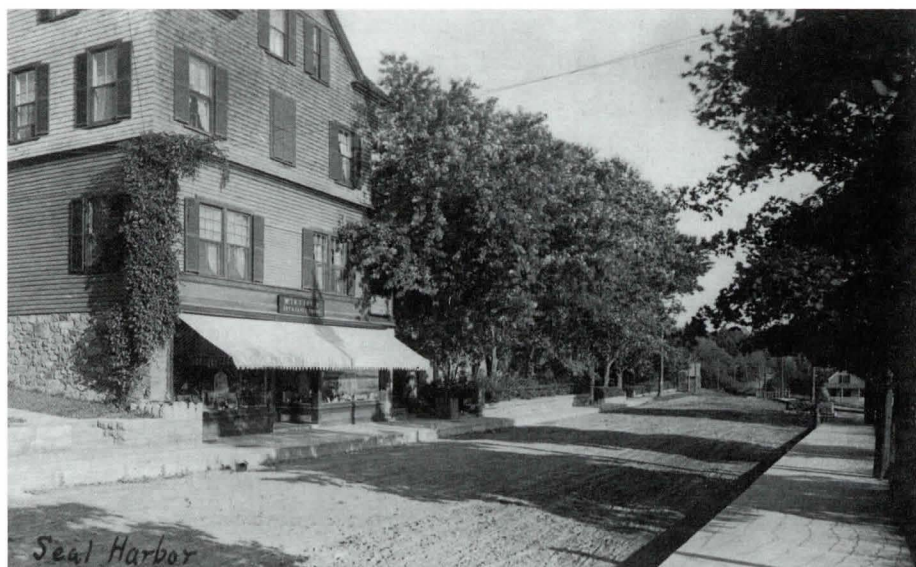
DR: Yes, although on that score my son David, and my son Richard . . . have done a lot. David, Jr. has traveled extensively, from the North Pole to the South Pole in planes and boats, and is very involved in trying to save the seas. He is a serious participant in what's being done. I'm happy to support him, but I haven't played an active personal role.

KM: Do those issues raise concerns for you, the care or conservation of this Island's Park?

DR: I think that the management of the Park here is very good, and that even though there are large numbers of visitors, I don't sense any hostility between visitors and the Park, or people going to the Park. I think it's a very good relationship. Maybe it's surprising, but it's a fact.

KM: The village of Seal Harbor; have you seen many changes in your time here?

DR: Yes, but happily not an awful lot. Partly because of our family, and a few other families such as the Ford family, whose land is now taken over by Martha Stewart, who is a very thoughtful owner of the land. I think our relationship, by and large, with the community has been very good. We support local causes, and I think they respect what we do, and I think the community feels, with few if any exceptions, that we love and enjoy the



Main Street, Seal Harbor, year unknown. *Photo by Charles Townsend,
Courtesy of the Rockefeller Archive Center*

Island as much as they do, and are interested in preserving it. I don't sense conflict. That might have existed at some point.

KM: And I understand you have a granddaughter who just married one of the local boys here.

DR: That's true. Very nice young man.

KM: Yes he is.

DR: Do you know him?

KM: I do know him. In fact, his younger brother was in school with my daughter.

DR: Well I just think he's an extraordinarily nice person. We're happy to welcome him into the family.

KM: And I'm sure they're happy to welcome your granddaughter into their family as well. I hear she's a lovely girl.

DR: Yes, that's true.

KM: So Seal Harbor has had some constancy. Northeast Harbor has had a lot of changes lately, in the way the buildings have survived or not survived.

DR: Well, the fire three or four years ago was a terrible blow, and I

think it really did set Northeast back quite a lot. . . . But we [still] have a very good hardware store and also a clothing store.

KM: Yes, there are—the Holmes Store and Brown's Hardware.

DR: Yes, exactly. And both of them I go to probably several times a year.

KM: Yes, they have been the mainstays of Northeast Harbor for a good long time. Good advertising for The Holmes Store.

DR: Just about everything I'm wearing has come from there. They have nice things, and good taste, so definitely use it.

KM: Do you know Anne Funderburk? She's a resident of Seal Harbor, a descendant of the Stebbins, [granddaughter of] George Stebbins.

DR: Stebbins. Henry Stebbins was a contemporary of my older brothers and I knew him. We did some things together, actually, and I liked him.

KM: Well, Henry and Rebecca Stebbins' daughter is Anne Funderburk. She is now a year-round resident of Seal Harbor and is concerned about how to keep the year-round community going, especially with the loss of the little variety store and gas station recently. Any words of wisdom on how to keep thriving year-round communities?

DR: It's very difficult, and I'm not sure there's a complete answer. On the other hand, there is still a store that sells quite a lot of things, a food shop, here in Seal Harbor. So it hasn't disappeared completely, but it's more difficult. We try to support them in every way we can. The owners are people who are friends of ours. But it's, I have to say that the strength of the business community in Seal Harbor is diminished, there's no question. Whether they'll come back I'm not sure. . . .

KM: I was looking through some photos at the Mount Desert Island Historical Society, and here is an old photo of some of the Stebbins, George and Henry, and we noted how formal the dinners were.

DR: Well that's just true, there's no question. I think, when my father and mother were still alive they'd put on black tie every night.

KM: And was it required that you all dress likewise?

DR: Basically I would think so. Now bear in mind, he never drank a glass of wine in his life, which is unusual today. But I was brought up not having anything to drink. And he never in his life served wine at any dinner. So bearing that in mind, that already changes things.

KM: The tenor of any social engagements—sober.

DR: Right. [My parents] used to give very nice dinner parties, and they had very good juices, and things like that. They were very good meals, and they had a wonderful chef. But they never served liquor of any kind. Which is thoroughly different, and it inevitably meant a different style of life.

KM: Isn't that true at the Harbor Club still?

DR: It is. Which Father, and Mr. Edsel Ford, and one other person . . . from the beginning they insisted that there be no alcohol in the Harbor Club, and I think it's still true.

KM: Now, thinking of their social life, and your own, you've had quite a number of people from around the world visiting you here.

DR: It's true.

KM: And what is their reaction to this place?

DR: They love it. The Mayor of New York was here this year, and we've had numerous people from virtually every country—Europe, Latin America. Some of them have settled here, for instance the Edwards family from Chile now have a beautiful place here and they're very active here. And I would dare say half a dozen families have places.

KM: Families that you've introduced to this place?

DR: In many cases, yes. Or they just heard about it. And they love it, and I think have fitted in very nicely.

KM: Since you have also traveled throughout the world, and have homes elsewhere, what special meaning has the Island had for you personally?

DR: A very happy place to come back to. I still consider it my summer home, and I don't have better times anywhere else than right here. And I hope that will continue as long as I do. And to me that doesn't in any way interfere with traveling myself or having lots of people from around the world come. They all love it.

KM: Do you have any hopes or fears or concerns for this Island going forward?

DR: Well, my hopes are that people with some similar interests in nature and a modest kind of community will continue to come, and honestly, I think generally speaking that's happened. I mean, a number of the people

we've had a hand in encouraging to come here, like the Edwards, love it because it is what it is, and they don't want to see it change either. But I think the way they live and what they do with the community is fully supportive. So, as of this moment, I am very hopeful that it will continue for a long time, with the same spirit that it's had from the beginning.



Steamboat "Mount Desert" leaving Seal Harbor. *Photo by Henry Roland, prior to 1905, Courtesy of the Seal Harbor Library*