

# **DAMARISCOVE: A DAZZLING DIAMOND**

*by Chip Griffin*

Damariscove is a dazzling diamond in our Boothbay Region diadem: a glistening jewel which sparkles at the ocean's entrance to our Boothbay Region crown. This island is a remarkable place to simply gaze upon or to explore and picnic or to bird-watch. Its splendid surface hides an amazing treasure trove of archaeological artifacts and masks an even more fascinating story of our past. We are fortunate to regain some more local control of this isle through its transfer from the Nature Conservancy to our local Boothbay Region Land Trust.

## **My memories**

As a kid who grew up in Boothbay Harbor in the 1960s, I frequently ventured out with friends or family to roam about and camp on the island. One night we evaded the mosquitoes by moving ourselves and our sleeping bags out of the soft grass and onto the hard rocks; we woke up in the light of day and discovered ourselves amidst an incredible amount of seagull dung. We explored the ancient harbor features, desolate house foundations, and abandoned granite quarry. We visited the overgrown cranberry bog, stagnant ice pond, and desolate beaches. We followed the winding paths, stone walls, and screeching seagulls. We probed the old Browney Cottage, high watch-towers, and mammoth Coast Guard Station. We marveled at Damariscove's expansive and treeless terrain and its grassy landscape against a sea and sky of blues and grays.

As a teenage sternman for Bud Brackett during the summers of 1969 through 1972, we hauled lobster traps daily around Damariscove. I learned the lessons of inattention as we plowed through the fog and narrowly missed the Motions, dangerous shoals at the southwest side of the island, near its harbor entrance, which caused many shipwrecks and deaths. I gazed at Damariscove from the southern Bantam Ledges, where we would haul rust-colored lobsters, caused by crawling through all the wrecks on the ocean floor. What I remember most from those years was my sense of wonder about this intriguing island.

Not until I left Boothbay and went to Bowdoin College (rarely returning home; my Colorado roommate went home more often than I!) did I learn more about my roots. I, too, am not a native – we moved here when I was turning 6 years old, but I deeply believe that our roots are our chosen place more than our genealogical heritage; community and history are, by nature, placed and shared by all of us who choose to call this home. I majored in American history and obtained a Ford Fellowship Grant to help teach Maine history at Bowdoin, where I worked on many local history projects, including an independent study paper, “Damariscove Island: An Island That Made Waves.” This was well before the age of computers (unlike today, when I have not laid a finger on a pen or pencil for this piece), and I used the “note card” method of research taught to me by my favorite grade-school teacher, Terry Leighton; I organized and stacked a pile of note cards three feet high and typed my final draft by pulling two “all-nighters.” I truly lost myself in my work and had a ball. This paper later became a book, Coming of Age on Damariscove Island, Maine, co-authored with archaeologist Alaric Faulkner and published by the Northeast Folklore Society. (It's still available at the Boothbay Region Historical Society and at Sherman's Bookstore).

During the past two decades, my wife, Denise, and I (and now our two teenage girls, Emily and Betsy) and friends have frequently visited the island for a day away and occasionally have stayed overnight aboard the boat. Twenty years ago we sailed in our O'Day, "Damaris," and towed our dinghy, "Cove." Now we motor in another boat, but still tow the same "Cove" or just borrow one of the tenders at the dock. Every trip to Damariscove remains rewarding and renewing.

### **The 1600s: A pioneer port**

I discovered a phenomenal 17<sup>th</sup> century history: Damariscove, due to "King Cod," was a bustling fishing center and the first permanent, year-round community in Maine. In 1622, there were at least 30 fishing vessels, 13 year-round occupants, and a spruce palisade fort. Damariscove fishermen in May of that year freely fed the starving Pilgrims, and they danced around a maypole, perhaps the first May Day celebration in America. Just as that green island, Damariscove, graces our ocean entrance, the Latin phrase, "Pelegrinis Cibum Dedimus" (We Fed the Pilgrims), graces the "Welcome to Boothbay" sign at the Route 27 entrance on the Edgecomb/Boothbay town line. The Damariscove fishermen were not so generous in 1624 when they refused to give away more free fish to the Pilgrims, but they did help the hapless Plymouth colonists rebuild their ship, which foundered in a storm, probably in Newagen Harbor, with the loss of lives and supplies. By the mid-1600s, Damariscove remained a leading Maine port, rivaling Monhegan and Matinicus in the number of boats and taxes. In 1674, Damariscove even petitioned and acquired from the Puritan-controlled Massachusetts General Court a constable for the island and a liquor license for its house of public entertainment.

King Philip's War erupting in 1676 in Maine and Indian/settler hostilities continued for fifty years, until 1725, and decimated the Maine settlements. Damariscove and its fort, in 1676, attracted over 300 area residents, who fled to the island and took refuge from the Indian attacks, before fleeing to Boston and other points south. Damariscove, unlike most of the mainland and other island communities, remained inhabited throughout this period, as can be inferred from numerous newspaper and other primary source accounts of Indian attacks on Damariscove, pirates careening around the island, and the only area home left standing. During this era, in 1689, Richard Pattishall, the owner of Damariscove, was killed by the Indians while he was in his sloop in Pemaquid Harbor; this historical fact became cloaked with tales of his headless body washing up on Damariscove, where his headless ghost and faithful dog still stalk the island, over 300 years later. History and tradition seep through us in mighty and mysterious ways.

### **The 1700s and 1800s: A family-owned settlement**

Throughout the 1700s and 1800s, eclipsed by the emergence of the mainland communities, Damariscove became a family-owned and operated farming and fishing community. The Pattishall heirs owned the island until 1755, when Daniel Knight acquired the island, and Damariscove stayed in the Knight hands until around 1845. The British burned the Knight house and carried off 78 sheep and 3 hogs during the Revolutionary War. During the War of 1812, island residents watched the battle between the British Boxer and the American Enterprise, and tradition (which is likely accurate) has it that the mast from the British brig washed up on Damariscove and later became the flagpole, which was still standing in the early 1900s. Granite

was quarried on the east side of the island, and the Stone Wharf in Damariscove Harbor was constructed with that granite in the mid-1800s.

### **The 1900s: A melting pot and meltdown**

By the early 1900s, when the Poole brothers, Isaac and Chester Poole, brought their families to the island, there was a bustling community of year-round and seasonal fishermen and farmers, coast guardsmen, and summer rusticators. The island boasted an elementary school of up to 18 students. There were a dozen houses on the south end of the island and many fishermen's shanties around the harbor. The Coast Guard Station was active with military drills, lifesaving exercises, and dances for the whole community. Summer tourists also frequently visited the island. The *Boothbay Register* contained a weekly "Damariscove News" column. Isaac "Ike" Poole's daughter, Alberta, spent her first ten years on the island, the best years of her life; her father had no such nostalgia about the rugged island life as he daily plied the ocean waters and sold the fish and other supplies to Squirrel Island and Boothbay Harbor residents. Later, in the 1920s, Ike Poole returned to Boothbay Harbor with his family and established Ike's Fish Market, employing as many as 30 people, at the present site of Fishermans Wharf. Chester Poole, the farmer, returned with his family to Pemaquid, where he continued the name, Poole Brothers, derived from their Damariscove venture, in his successful lumber business, which still bears the name a century later. Fishing declined, farming ended, the Coast Guard station closed, and most of the houses burned during the ensuing decades.

### **Final thoughts**

Last month I visited Alberta Poole Rowe, the subject of most of my Damariscove book, in a Bath nursing home. She had been a school teacher for many years in the East Side elementary school on the corner of Bay Street and Atlantic Avenue (across from my Griffin Law Offices). Although she remembers very little today, she at 93 still recalls with fondness her times on Damariscove Island from 1910 to 1922. I hope that my last memories can be so wonderful. And I trust that all of us will enrich our own lives and view Damariscove from Ocean Point or Newagen, sail or motor into Damariscove Harbor, explore the island's surface splendor, and probe its hidden secrets. Enjoy the night aboard your boat in its snug harbor. Savor more of Damariscove's legacy. Discover why Damariscove is a dazzling diamond in Boothbay's diadem.