

Date: August 15, 2005
From: bbarrett@nytimes.com
Subject: My NY Times article on Wimbleberry 2005
To: dougfrank@yahoo.com, arome@savingtheworld.org

Greetings from the Big Apple and thanks for your hospitality this weekend. Attached is my article for the sports section of the times; I expect publication later this week once we have cleared the latest worm from our servers. Perhaps I can return to your island in fewer than twelve years although I am trying to move from sports to either the travel or food sections of the paper.

Sincerely, Ben Barrett

Wimbleberry 2005

Twelve years ago, as a fledgling sports reporter, I was ordered by my editor to cover an amateur tennis tournament on an island off the coast of Maine. Threatened with termination if I refused to complete the assignment - as I was the first time - I quickly packed my warmest clothes and headed for the subway. After two separate train rides and a second subway in between, I was only able to travel as far as Portland, Maine. Where is Portland, Maine, you ask? It is scarcely north of Boston, home of Democrat John Kerry (remember him?) and the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century (my editor requested some historical references - and "reliable narration").

Portland appears to be bustling from the perspective of the train terminus on its western perimeter. Vast shopping malls (where are the factory outlets?) and highway interchanges were clogged with out-of-state cars in which I could plainly see tennis rackets and luggage. Surely I was getting closer to my destination. A nice man with a Persian or Syrian accent asked if he could help me. There were a few other men with him who did not speak English, all clutching airline tickets. They had been on the train with me from Boston but were now flying back to Boston ("a sick relative" I was told). We all shared a short taxi ride to the airport and I arranged for a flight to Bar Harbor.

Gazing down upon the rugged coast of Maine I thought of Winslow Homer and the Wyeths, L.L. Bean boots and a colleague at the Times who graduated from one of the small colleges in the state: was it Bowdoin or Middlebury? I rented a car at the airport and, remembering the advice of my Persian friends, drove to Ellsworth for directions to Northeast Harbor. Ellsworth is a charming crossroads to downeast Maine and I enjoyed a sumptuous meal of local foods at a restaurant called Denny's. My waitress at Denny's was suspiciously friendly but knew the area well; she gave me directions to the northeasterly harbor. There, I secured overnight parking for a scant \$10 per night (what a bargain by Manhattan standards) and took the 'mail boat' over to Great Cranberry Island.

It was all coming back to me now as I exchanged business cards on the boat with a very attractive couple from Holland (in Europe, that is; Maine has many towns named after foreign cities). Pornographers by trade, they were scouting the Cranberry Isles for a film in a natural, rustic setting rather than an overly lighted small room in Amsterdam. Their pale skin contrasted with dark eyes and beautiful features; they knew nothing about the tennis tournament but said they might consider extra actors in tight white uniforms holding rackets.

Our boat stopped briefly at a scantily inhabited island named after the jazz pianist, Ralph

Sutton. Curiously, mail and packages were deposited in a garbage can on the dock. The stunning actress from Amsterdam touched my thigh with her hand to be sure I noticed the delivery; surely I had noticed her hand - and the disposal of U.S. mail. The boat whirled around amidst the rocks and we steamed on to Cranberry Island.

It was as I remembered it. Teeming with tourists, bicycles, old cars, lobster and sailboats, kayaks, wire crates piled high on the dock: I drew in a deep breath that smelled of sour cat food, seaweed and the ocean. A charming, toothless woman at the local convenience store (\$12 dog treats), where I purchased a day old blueberry scone for only \$2, gave me directions to the tennis court. A tall man in khaki work clothes named Beal, offered me a long-winded history of the island, its winter inhabitants and a deer hunting permit (he noticed my checked wool shirt and took me for a hunter).

The tennis court at the end of Mink Brook Road was vacant; a stiff southerly wind whipped the net. Where was the tournament? I retraced my journey up the island, picking ripe raspberries along the way and chatting briefly with a local, elegant, white haired woman with an English accent who called herself Aunt Sue. She mistook me for a relative who had borrowed some valuable antiques from her home.

I finally found the correct tennis court - on the main road - somewhat ashamed for my first effort and recognizing the practical joke played on me by the toothless, scone saleswoman at the store. I could tell the tournament was underway for gaggles of bicycles and cars blocked all entrances to the spruce enthroned facility.

Wimbleberry tradition encourages players to applaud themselves more than the sleepy spectators and the tenor of play in the early rounds must be described as pedestrian at best. I recognized the club president from my previous article although he was a shadow of his former self. Emeritus President Frank introduced me to a new acronym that I have never seen on the web, MILPTW's. "Mothers I'd Like to Play Tennis With; it's hard to pronounce" he chuckled. "We have lots of them. Check out Graven, Kehoe and Weibel for example." Clearly, the sins of typical summer communities are being visited upon Great Cranberry Island. I found the new president of the club, Abi Rome, who quickly dismissed Frank's comments as vulgar and inappropriate. "He hasn't spoken for this club in years and he parks his truck wherever he wants." She showed me the souvenir hat for this season's tournament, an off-white hemp and cotton cap with the "I" in Wimbleberry replaced by a spruce tree. "Eco-friendly, safe for the earth," she boasted.

Moving quickly through each women's draw was a recent Exeter graduate, Chloe Frank. When her father saw me interviewing her, he insisted that I mention she was captain of her squash team and an academic all-American lacrosse player. Frank is a beautiful and striking blond athlete who flashes a million dollar smile and two-handed backhand. She won the mixed doubles with a retired Washington state trooper named David Weibel who also won the men's singles and doubles draw with South Carolinian racquetball professional, Hal Newell. Women's singles and doubles were postponed by typical weather in the region, rain and dense fog, creating a cinematic backdrop more typical of a paranoid Hitchcock movie than a drop shot instructional video.

Conspicuously absent from winning the tournament this year were the families, Pierson and Roberts. However, more conspicuously absent from any participation as players or spectators were the Ward families who, I now understand, own the first court I visited by mistake. Surely that explains their insouciance and reluctance to participate. "Is Wimbleberry this week?" wondered Gigi Ward Garnett who, I was told, still has T-shirts from past junior tournaments in her Connecticut basement.

Perhaps in another twelve years I will report the outcome of the rain-delayed matches of Wimbleberry 2005. With my expense account monies dwindling and just enough left to purchase three live lobsters as a gift for my editor, I flew all the way back to New York this time. I congratulated myself for dressing warmly (I brought all the right clothes), conserving my laptop battery, and delivering three live crustaceans to my boss. I cannot help but wonder if Tiger Woods or David Ortiz had as much fun this past weekend as did members of the Great Cranberry Island Tennis Club.

-a satire by Douglas Alan Frank