

THE BUCHSBAUMS OF GREAT CRANBERRY, PART I

by Peter Buchsbaum

My wife Elaine and I have been going up to Mt. Desert Island since we were children, long before we knew each other. My parents had honeymooned there in 1941 before the great fire -- which we learned about when they took my brother and me to Acadia in the 1950s. Elaine and I had taken our first real vacation as a married couple at Blackwoods Campground in 1968. We continued to go to Acadia over the next 20 or so years with our children and ended up renting a house on Great Cranberry Island for a month each summer during the 1990s, after seeing a *Down East* magazine ad for a summer rental in 1993. Last year, our whole family had grown to love the island as a refuge, as a community, and as a place for the family to grow -- a place where our son, Aaron, has made lots of friends on the island while another, Matthew, who has a developmental disability, learned to ride a two-wheeled bike at age 21 on an island road on Elaine's 50th birthday. Finally, in the summer of 1998 we took the plunge and contracted to buy a house on Great Cranberry.

The day before the closing, December 3rd, we set out for Great Cranberry with Chuck Liebow of Cranberry Cove Boating, to shut down the house for the winter. Chuck had wanted to relax during the time we were going through the house but we successfully implored him to help us with the shut down. Even though the owner had said it would be straight forward, we did not trust ourselves entirely. We did it all together, following instructions to liberally use RV antifreeze in the dishwasher, etc. -- except, unfortunately, for one thing, draining the plug under the house, which Chuck did when he saw how slow we were with the other tasks.

We closed on December 4th and left the island in Maine, not to return until April 2nd. During the winter I had brooded about getting the house started again, but assumed that since we had followed the owner's instructions to the letter, we would manage it.

At about 2 in the afternoon on April 2nd, David Bunker of Beal and Bunker barged us over. This trip, on a somewhat rough day, was undoubtedly a unique experience for my lawyerly Buick and probably even for our Chevy Tahoe, but the barge trip and the unloading of the cars at the house went very smoothly. Nothing else did.

Following instructions, we tried to put the well pump back in place, but utterly failed. We called Arvid Savage, the owner's father, who had been caretaking the house and asked for his help. By the time we had barged our cars back to Northeast Harbor and returned to Great Cranberry, Arvid had managed to seat the long handled adapter into the well and we raised the pump into place. Then, however, it was getting towards dark. I looked at the next thing which had been listed for us and tried to find the drain plugs under the house that Chuck Liebow had removed in December. I thought I saw some openings in the pipe but could not believe how far they were in on the 2-foot dirt crawl space. Chuck really hadn't crawled all the way in there, had he? We looked at the other end of the house, Arvid and I, and found a panel that came off, but beneath the house on that side was 3 or 4 inches of water and ice. So I told my wife no running water tonight but Arvid was willing to give us a 5-gallon jug.

Oh well, we could do without water for a night and the house looks great. Let's get some heat in here, we said since the temperature had dropped below 50. We checked the circuit

breaker, turned on the thermostat and nothing happened. Arvid then told us, "Well I think you're out of oil because we could not get a delivery in here when the road was so muddy." We're on a side road locally known as I-95 -- it's a single lane privately maintained dirt road. He said, "Try the woodstove."

Being somewhat cautious, I just lit some paper in the woodstove because I could not find an opening to the flue. Nothing happened. The smoke just sat there and leaked into the house. By now, we were making calls to Chuck Liebow every half hour to ask him about the woodstove which he said had worked perfectly well and also about the location of the drain plugs for the water system. He told us we really did have to crawl 20 yards all the way catty corner under the house to avoid the heating ducts and then back out 10 yards to the wall again. He had left the plugs on a concrete pier. We also called the former owner's house several times, getting his wife, who, by 9 p.m., got tired of receiving our calls and gave us a friend's number where we could reach him. He confirmed the part about the long crawl to the water plugs but thought that the woodstove should work. I had found the damper when I was talking to him, opened it and thought that things would now be okay.

I lit a larger fire in the woodstove. Within a few minutes smoke -- not warmth -- started pouring out of the damper's opening in the front of the stove, into the house. "It can't be", I said, after my wife implored me to put the fire out. "I'm not sure I can put it out now." The smoke continued to pour out into the cold house. Finally, I grabbed the fireplace tongs and took the 3 burning wood logs out on the wet ground where they smoldered for a while and then went out. The house was filled with cold smoke. No heat, just smoke. In the midst of all this, Elaine had somehow managed to put a decent dinner on the table which we had enjoyed. We also left the smoke for a little while and went out, down I-95 into the marsh which it crosses. The sight was exquisite. The sky was star-filled and the moon along with planet Mars rode over the whole scene. Cheered up, we returned to the house, tucked ourselves and our son Matthew into lots of blankets which we fortunately brought with us, pretended we were camping, and slept very well that night.

We got up Saturday morning, still cold, but resolved to right the world's wrongs. Since the prior owner, as well as Chuck Liebow, had confirmed the long crawl to the water plugs I decided to do it. I made my way through the mud catty corner from the back to the front of the house and then, with about 1 1/2 to 2 feet of clearance, to the front to the openings in the water pipes coming up from the well. For 5 minutes I could not locate the plugs which Chuck had left there the previous December. Under the house, muddy, disconsolate, I wondered how we would ever get water. When, desperately, I finally found the plugs I inserted them with my hand and then with a wrench. I retraced my yards of crawling, returned to the house triumphantly, switched on the well pump.

But, the house was not ready yet. Nothing happened. After a half hour I made the first of many calls to Northeast Plumbing. The very nice woman on the phone asked what kind of pump I had -- jet or submersible. I was not sure. Holding the phone, I walked into the utility area where the expansion tank for the well was and leaned on the mechanism adjacent to the tank. I was in the process of telling the woman I thought it was submersible, when all of a sudden the pump came to life and water started flowing out of spigots. (Later, the prior owner explained that my leaning had probably jarred loose a stray piece of ice and allowed the pump to begin functioning.) I was greatly relieved by this -- the nice lady at Northeast Plumbing had told me that no plumber could come out until Monday, since I had called too late Saturday for anyone to take the 7:30 a.m. ferry over and she was reluctant to send someone over on the 11:00 boat because that meant waiting around many hours for the only return boat, which was the 3:45. Also, there was no way of getting extra parts over to the island if the plumber came at 11 and found that he needed some additional equipment, the plumbing company's boat not yet having been put in the water.

For about 10 minutes there was water and bliss, even though still no heat. Then the dishwasher appeared spontaneously to go on. Water started pouring out from beneath it. We opened it up, saw no water inside, realized it was not on. Meanwhile, the whooshing sound continued. I quickly turned off the main circuit breaker to the dishwasher but the sound continued, so I dazedly turned it back on again. Water was pouring over the kitchen linoleum which the prior owner had beautifully installed per our contract, and then onto the living room floor which he had repainted, and creeping towards the hall which had a rug. I turned off the circuit breaker a second time. A few moments later my wife announced that the water had stopped coming in. We threw some old blankets on the floor which sopped up most of the water and the rest drained under the house. That crisis passed.

As this was going on we had made multiple further calls to the oil burner people who were off for the weekend, it being Easter Sunday weekend. I had also made multiple calls to the Northeast Plumbing lady and become instant best friends with her, as happens with a total stranger calling every 5 minutes to ask about the pipes, water plugs, and pumps in the strange house he had just bought.

Shortly thereafter, Arvid came over along with his lady friend. We relayed the sad stories to them. More constructively, I mentioned that his son had said something about removing the stack pipe from the stove to the flue and holding a hand mirror up to see if the chimney was clear. With his encouragement, I, who had used fireplaces, but never a woodstove, took the stack pipe out. As I was bringing it out of the house, I heard Arvid say "Ah hah!" That sounded encouraging. He had found about a foot and a half of cinders blocking the flue. Apparently, during the months the house had been unoccupied, the cinders had either been washed down or somehow come down from the chimney and blocked the flue just where the stack pipe met the chimney. I opened the damper, lit a fire and voilà it worked. However, it was not putting out much heat.

This mystery was solved about midday Saturday when we again reached the prior owner, who happens to be a very good teacher and explainer of things, and who then talked me through the operation of the woodstove. I never would have guessed, but the stove was designed to work with the damper closed since it has a catalytic converter to recycle the smoke. Therefore, some time early in the afternoon, we finally figured out how to get heat in the house. By then, however, we had decided to beat a retreat to Bar Harbor for a night, both to buy tools and other necessities for the house and to regroup. We also wanted to have breakfast with our friend from New Jersey, David Einhorn, who relocated to Bar Harbor and worked at Jackson Laboratory.

Refreshed, showered, shaved, well-breakfasted and otherwise put to rights, we returned to Great Cranberry on Sunday with David Bunker on a special 12:00 noon boat he was running after having dropped off the minister, who had officiated at Easter services in Isleford, Little Cranberry. The water was rough, although the sunshine and the day were brilliant and David remarked that he would not have been barging us this day. So we had at least done one thing right in making sure we got up on Friday when barging conditions were good.

Upon our return, on Sunday, we had several chats with both of our neighbors who were very helpful. Richard Beal, the Cranberry Island constable, had provided us with several dozen fresh eggs from his farm. Tony Frazitta, on our other side, turned out to be from Long Island, where Elaine and I grew up. He provided gasoline for our truck which was running low, several large pieces of wood for the woodstove, an additional 12 gallons of water so we could flush the toilet -- what luxury -- even without the water system being in operation. On Easter Sunday night, with the guidance of all people mentioned above, I had finally gotten the woodstove to work so the house was acceptably warm. Elaine managed to get another

dinner on. We dined in reasonable comfort, and slept well, except I got up at 6 a.m. to get our woodstove going.

Monday morning started cold but beautiful. We were awakened by a call from Island Plumbing, asking where on the island we were located so they could deliver oil. Wonderful.

Both they and Northeast Plumbing arrived about 8:00 a.m. having taken the 7:30 a.m. ferry from Northeast Harbor, and they proceeded to fill our oil tank and investigate the water system. Life was getting practically easy.

The gentleman from Northeast Plumbing told us that we could run our water system and get cold water, because the broken pipe was under the dishwasher which had a separate shut off valve. Now we had heat and cold water. He gave no guarantees on the hot water, since he was unsure that was working, given that I had carelessly turned on the element without water in the system. We never did get hot water that week since the hot water heater never began to function -- either circumstance or I had done it in.

However, we did have enough leisure on Monday to talk again to Richard Beal, who was also harbor master, about a mooring for the boat we had bought the day after we closed on the house, and to Junior Bracey, lobsterman, about installing the mooring. We were so optimistic that we also invited a visit from Vic Mercer, who had done our home inspection, about some work we wanted done on the house and spent a few hours with Polly Bunker, owner of the Whale's Rib Gift Shop, who told us the incredible story about the evacuation of Northeast Harbor during the great fire in 1947.

Monday night I walked again to the heath. The sky gleamed with stars as if modern lights or pollution did not exist. The Little Dipper, which usually is an almost invisible constellation except for the North Star, could easily be seen - more clearly, than I had ever observed it, even in trips out West. Also, for the first time in my life I saw the second star of the double star Mira, used by native Americans, I once read, to check their children's eyesight (I would have failed even on this clear night -- I needed my glasses).

Best of all, we still love the house, which was hand built, and sits on about an acre and a half of beautiful spruce fir woods about 10 minutes walk from the water and next to one of the most beautifully preserved salt marshes on any island anywhere. By Memorial Day we will have everything up and running and, as I write these lines upon my return home to New Jersey, my family and I look forward to returning to Great Cranberry Island. Besides, we had so many friends on the island to share the experiences with -- somehow the entire island knew of our travails as soon as they happened and we have a reputation to maintain.