

# TWO MIDNIGHT CROSSINGS

by Peter Buchsbaum

In mid-July, 1999, during our first summer as homeowners on Great Cranberry Island, we returned to the island after a two week work period in New Jersey. Due to various distractions, we could not get up to the Northeast Harbor, Maine, ferry dock until close to midnight on a Friday night.

We also invited my cousins, the Weismans from Providence, to visit. They intended to stay at the Red House B&B on the Island starting the next day. We told them why spend money on a motel; come over with us at midnight, stay over Friday night, and then go over to the B&B on Saturday.

We met at the Northeast Harbor Ferry Dock at about 11:30 p.m. Somewhere around a quarter to twelve, Scott Bracey came over to pick up his mother, Lorraine Bracey, the Northeast Harbor Police Dispatcher, and bring her back to Great Cranberry. They offered us a ride. We were tempted, but had already arranged with the water taxi for a lift over, and did not want to cancel him suddenly at 11:45 p.m.

However, when twelve o'clock rolled round, the water taxi did not appear, we began to wonder.

Then, after about a 15 minute delay, the water taxi did appear and took us over to the Island. No crisis after all.

When we reached Great Cranberry, we got off the dock and walked to the parking lot looking expectantly for the old truck of ours that we had asked the caretaker to leave down at the dock for our late arrival. No truck. After a fruitless 15 minute search round and round the small parking lot, I borrowed my cousin's bicycle -- it was now about 12:30 a.m. - - and rode approximately a mile and a half to our house. This included about a third of a mile on our rutted, unlit private access road, sometimes known as I-95. There is no known reason for this name.

The truck was not at our house either. Nor was it at the caretaker's trailer, nor at the caretaker's house. By now it was getting close to 1 in the morning. We still had no way of getting all of us to the house.

On my way back to the dock the second or perhaps the third time, I spotted a car driving slowly. I hailed down the driver -- this was the only car on the island's road of course, and begged for help in bringing my cousin, his wife, my wife and myself and our luggage up to our house. The person driving looked rather doubtful but then said she would help us after she went home to get her dog.

After this response, I went back to the dock, sure we would never see the person again and that we faced a mile and half walk with lots of luggage at 1 a.m. back to the house. I was also sure my cousins were wishing they had followed their initial inclination and stayed in the motel.

But, sometime after 1, the person reappeared. However, she told us she was not feeling well. With true island hospitality she said we could drive her car as long as we dropped it at her house. So we drove her car, the luggage and bicycle to her house, dropped off the

bicycle and made it home. I then had to drive the car back to her house, pick up the bicycle and return on those deserted, rutted, unlit roads at about a quarter to two. But we finally made it.

The next morning, the truck miraculously appeared in front of the caretaker's trailer next to my house. I kept asking myself -- I know it was dark on this road the night before, it was hard to spot anything, but could I have missed the truck parked right next to the road?

Later, I spotted the caretaker at the dock and asked what had happened, "Where was the truck last night; I saw it in the morning?" He replied, "Sorry, I forgot, but the truck was right behind the plumber near my trailer." Not wishing to appear stupid, I said, "Oh, I guess next time I'll know where to look for it." I thought maybe a plumber was some kind of island equipment.

About 20 minutes later my curiosity finally got the better of my not wishing to seem stupid and I asked the caretaker, "What is a plumber?" He said, "I don't understand what you're talking about." "Well," I said, "I thought you told me to look for the truck next to the plumber." He said, "No, I said behind the Plymouth."

I suddenly realized that even though my family and I have been coming to Maine for decades, we still don't speak the language. I also realized that a better command of Maine English could have helped us out of what nearly was a bad spot.

## A MIDNIGHT CROSSING II

In the fall, our family's schedule kept us from visiting our new island home in October, when flatlanders would usually come. So we decided to make it for Thanksgiving. However, my son Andrew, who works for a congressman in Washington, could not leave until mid-afternoon. We again decided to try a midnight crossing. This time, however, having seen Scott Bracey pick up his mother, we determined to call them and see if they would be going over to the Island on the Wednesday night before Thanksgiving at around midnight. We really had no choice, since there is no water taxi in late November.

We also invited my mother, my brother, his wife and their two children. We planned Thanksgiving for ten on the island.

The scheme of getting of us all there sounded like a James Bond plot, said one of my law partners when I described it to him. My mother flew to Boston to join my brother in Beverly, Massachusetts a week before Thanksgiving. My son arranged for an 8 o'clock arrival at Bangor. We would meet him at the airport. In the meantime, my brother would set out from Beverly around dinner time, with the turkey and the fixings, and plan to get to Northeast Harbor around 11 p.m. where we would meet him. The division of food was an intense part of the plotting that went into this weekend since we were not sure the Island Store would be open. My brother, the vegetarian, had to purchase the turkey -- that was part of the deal. All of our arrangements depended on the weather being good enough for a crossing for Lorraine and Scott Bracey. We were also concerned about my 85 year old mother, and my brother's two young children. We made backup plans to rendezvous at a motel if the weather was not good. I told my brother to call us on our car phone for updates, and we promised to call the Northeast Harbor Police Station to make sure a crossing was possible.

So off we went on the day before Thanksgiving. One thing we noted, that in Maine the Thanksgiving traffic was a lot better than at the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. We did get to Bangor in plenty of time. Our son's flight, however, was delayed. He came in about 9 o'clock, still enough

time to get to Northeast Harbor. He had had a narrow escape. His flight had been canceled and then he had suddenly been shifted to another flight in another part of the Washington, D.C. airport without really being informed as to what was going on. Yet no harm, no foul, and he was there.

We went to dinner in Ellsworth, having called Northeast Harbor and found out that the weather while foggy, was passable. But still no word from my brother. After dinner, at about 10 o'clock, we finally heard from him. He was at the Thompson Island Visitors Center. We were at that point approximately two miles away from him on Route 3 in Trenton. That was great.

So we rendezvoused at Thompson Island and actually made it to Northeast Harbor at about 10:30. We checked in at the Police Station. Fortunately, the foggy night was warm, and we could walk around comfortably. However, I did wonder about our luggage. There were 10 of us and enough luggage for a normal summer vacation, together with the turkey and other food and drink. I also wondered how my mother was reacting and clearly one of my brother's children, his three year old, was a bit nonplused by this whole strange sequence of events.

The lobster boat did come at midnight. I had never realized how big a lobster boat -- this one is named the Crustacean, what else -- really was. The 10 of us and the luggage and the turkey all fit comfortably. The rain held off so we stayed relatively dry. The fog even lifted so we could see Great Cranberry as we approached it. But all I could keep thinking was "You're so lucky." We could never do this again. Maine is not likely to be this kind to us a second time.

When we got to the other side at about 12:30, this time our truck was exactly where it was supposed to be. We quickly loaded it up and then debated who would first go to the house. Having full faith in the strength of my 85 year old mother to wait on the dock, I asked someone with a strong arm to accompany me so that we could unload the truck as quickly as possible -- it was so full of luggage, there was no room for anyone in the cargo area, and there was a concern that the rain might start again.

Fortunately, Scott Bracey, being the gentleman that he is, brought the rest of the party round in his truck, so my churlishness towards my mother did not delay her coming to the house.

Needless to say we had a very good night's sleep, woke up refreshed on Thanksgiving morning and had a great Thanksgiving dinner. The weather for the weekend was a bit chancy. Yet, for me, it was an absolutely wonderful getaway. During the whole time I could not get over how lucky we were that we survived the trip up, that all the gears of our intricate travel and arrival mechanism had meshed. Once more, I thought, I'd never do anything this chancy again.

But we were fortunate with this trip in more ways than we dreamed when we were there. Two weeks afterwards, my mother had a disabling stroke. By the end of January she had died. The trip was the last we ever took as a family, and all of her children and all of her grandchildren were present. We took numerous pictures during the weekend so that we have a wonderful record of my mother, us and the grandchildren she so loved.

Carpe diem. Seize the day. I'm so glad that we, as a family, seized upon this improbable scheme for a unforgettable Thanksgiving weekend. For reasons I did not think about during that midnight crossing, we really can never do this again. My wife's parents and mine are now gone so that there are no grandparents left. This Thanksgiving was truly the last of its kind for us.