

THE STRONG MAN OF RAGGED ISLAND

This is based on a story told by Williams W. Gilcrest to Frederick C. Packard in the program of oral history recordings collected as part of the Harpswell bicentennial celebration.

My family were Philadelphians but I was born here in Casco Bay on Cliff Island. Later, my parents bought an old home in East Harpswell where I grew up and went to a local one room country school with 16 children in 8 grades. I got to know the local people and was with them possibly more than with my family.

One day I met this exceptionally strong man, Walter Wallace, who was the stepfather of Clayton Dunning, a boy of my age in school. I first saw Walter moving a huge stump that 3 other men couldn't budge, so he became my hero as a small boy. He had many children and lived on the new Meadows River.

Walter used to shoot herons and bitterns and salt them down for the winter. I asked Clayton to see if we could hunt with him. Walter had this 10 gauge, double barreled shotgun that later had to be outlawed because sometimes both barrels went off and broke men's shoulders, knocked them down and injured them severely. But Walter was a commercial duck hunter and commonly shot both barrels at the same time.

One time he was hunting birds and he'd shot two or three by dusk. There was just a little twilight left over the trees on the far side of a cove. A Squawk flew in the shadow between the trees and the cove where you couldn't see a thing. Following the sound he fired both barrels into the night, then went out through the mud and picked it up by the light of a match.

When I was sixteen my father died and I moved 500 miles from Maine. The second year I got so homesick for Maine that in the middle of the winter I took my 50 cent allowance with a pound of raisins and hitchhiked 500 miles in two nights and a day and found my old friend Clayton Dunning and together we moved into my summer home.

We got a job at the Dingley Island ice house, big as a city block, that supplied the Gloucester schooners. For many years 50 men would work on the ice. I was up on the top of the runway leading to a huge room being filled with 300 pound blocks of ice. We started at 7:00 AM. Walter Wallace was at the switch where the blocks of ice came down a steep ramp. Usually they slowed them down by turning screws under the blocks of ice but Walter didn't do this. He and a young black fellow by the name of Lyn Tripp, who was a bundle of muscle and had been a professional wrestler, were showing that the two of them could stow away as much ice as 8 other men in the next room. At near zero degrees I saw Walter, stripped to the waist and arms like a Michelangelo sculpture, sending those 300 pound blocks of ice across the room and this other fellow scrambling after them, keeping up with those eight other men. I was so awed that I got one of these big blocks stuck and it held them up. Instead of putting his shirt on to keep warm Walter tied one arm behind his back and said "Come on Lynn, let's see if you can get both my shoulders on the ice." I never saw an equal to that wrestling match. Lyn was fast and nimble getting Walter down but he could not get both Walters shoulders on the ice. Walter with one arm tied behind him, got both of Lynn's shoulders on the ice.

It was shortly after this, nearly 50 years ago now, that Edna St Vincent Millay bought Ragged Island for back taxes of \$800 from Mr. Pennell who had a lot of lobster traps and sheep on the island and people would steal them. (Note: Millays husband, Eugene Boissevain, bought the Island from the Brunswick Fidelity Trust Co. for \$900, which bought it from Brunswick Savings Bank, which foreclosed on a mortgage from Isaac L. Dunning. Not sure who Mr. Pennell was but maybe he was the caretaker.) So, she and Mr Pennell agreed to hire Walter to live out there unknown and to scare the thieves without hurting them. Walter had a shack in the woods, a bear skin coat and, late in the fall, a long beard and long hair.

Officially, Edna Saint Vincent Millay had a caretaker, But no one associated him with this mysterious giant on Ragged Island about whom a lot of stories got around. Finally, someone pulled the wrong trap and Walter, (they bought him a telescopic rifle and he had been a sharpshooter in the first World War), safely shot a jug out of the mouth of the man while drinking. Well, since this man thought someone was trying to hit him, he didn't say anything. Later on someone else pulled a trap back nearer the shore and this time Walter put a bullet through a cup from which the man was drinking. He just kept scaring the life out of any man by pulling bullets near him.

The men finally called Billy Edwards, the chief of police who was a Teddy Roosevelt type of hero around these parts. He called Coast Guard which was the only sensible thing to do since these men insisted the mad giant was trying to kill them . Coast Guard landed with 110 men and found Walter in the Millay House and, thinking he was the caretaker, they asked him if he had heard any shots and Walter said he thought he had but he never had never seen the man. So, Walter spent all day with these 110 Coast Guard men hunting for himself. The Coast Guardsmen called Billy Edwards back and said he's not on the island, we've combed it. Billy Edwards said, you darn fools, he saw you coming and he got off. And then he said I'll get him.

Walter, knowing that someone else would come, and being a practical Joker who loved to do things to embarrass people, went down to the shore at dawn the next day. He saw Billy Edwards landing his men, with tear bombs, rifles and ammunition ready. Foolishly they landed all in one place so it was easy for Walter to see them and he smacked some bullets close to them so they couldn't move and the story is that they hid behind a rock, waving a white shirt on the end of an oar. Walter came down wearing his bear skin coat, with a beard flowing and a hot rifle and frisked them all and took their rifles and put them in a pile. Then he put his own rifle on top and said "if you all can put me in the boat I'll go with you." And, of course, remembering the wrestling match that I had seen, I didn't doubt the result . What happened was the surprise of their lives and they couldn't do a thing. Couldn't get him anywhere near the boat. He said "I'll go with you anyway."

The courtroom was packed with standing room only, at his trial. Walter was quite a wit and got everyone laughing. The Judge, finding out he had no police record, dismissed the case.