

The Mohegan Bluffs Raconteur

Separating fact from fiction — maybe



Wallace Eddey, at right, with family in the backyard of his house on Mohegan Bluffs. The author, Gary Eddey, is the little boy in the center. PHOTO COURTESY GARY EDDEY

By Gary E. Eddey

There were three unequivocal truths about my father's uncle Wallace Eddey: He was born on Block Island (1891), died on Block Island (1963) and loved the island as if it were his own. Because his father was transferred by the U.S. Weather Bureau, he spent most of his adolescent years in Wisconsin and Texas.

Many other aspects of his life, however, were not so straightforward.

Asked if there was a sentence that summed his life, I would think Wallace would offer the following: "It's a good life here on Block Island ... if you can appreciate the solitude the winter brings, are resourceful in looking for work and enjoy being on the water."

Granted the sentence includes a few qualifications, but the intent of the message is clear — if you're willing, not only was island life quite satisfying, with it would come an unbridled love for a small place in the Atlantic 22 miles from Montauk and 12 from the mainland. Judge Oliver Holmes once wrote that Block Island kept him "centered down..." so that he would know what was important in life. The island was Wallace's life and it did its best to keep him "centered down."

Wallace's father had one of the longest tenures of any Weather Bureau Official on record at the Block Island Weather House, and although Wallace learned telegraphy there, no records exist to suggest he was ever an official assistant to his father. The first formal position Wallace may have held was working the night shift for the telephone and telegraph company located on Dodge Street. At that time the office was on the first floor of the building that was for many years the Gables II, now the Darius Inn. Records list a young Gladys Steadman as the day shift operator when Wallace worked the night shift.

Because telegraphy was something of a prerequisite for being a member of his family, it is not surprising that he sought

that position. His father's first job on the island decades before was to send telegrams off-island from the U.S. Signal Corp's Telegraph Station (the precursor to the Weather Bureau) when it was located on Water Street. And Wallace's aunt and two uncles were proficient at telegraphy as well — they were employed by New York's Grand Central Station. Occasionally Wallace would take seasonal work off island such as when he moved to Newport to work as a painter for a large shipyard, and where his new bride, Edith Murray, found employment as a seamstress. For many years he owned and operated fishing trawlers which he enjoyed immensely. But office jobs or other formal work, such as at the shipyard, may not have suited his personality, and that may have led him to other work, besides fishing.

It is this "other work" performed off the record that captured my interest, and his, and to this day, causes consternation for some in my family. Many of his stories involve Mohegan Bluffs, the Atlantic, his trawlers and the Hog Pen in the inner basin of the New Harbor. (Some of his stories were not from his lips, and that is a sure sign that they are true.) His favorite ocean going trawler was the 36-foot *Anna C.* that he acquired in the 1930s; his first boat, the 28-foot trawler *Billie*, was at the center of the action, as we shall soon see, in his rum-running tales of the 1920s. The re-telling of those tales, refined in various settings, helped create his persona, that of a consummate raconteur.

Home for the last four decades of his life was a small house he built on the edge of Mohegan Bluffs on land carved from his wife's family farm. He named his small home "Eddey's Shanty" and to make sure no one forgot the name, he bolted a porthole to the front of his house which protected, under glass, those very words. Wallace was fond of telling the story of how he built his home using wood from ships that went down with the

sea and collected from the beach 150 feet below his land, that he claimed, on a clear day, overlooked Spain. He told visitors the names of the ships whose wood paneled each of the rooms in his house. This was one of many stories that earned him the moniker raconteur.

The truth: The wood came not from the beach, but was recycled from the dismantled Union House Hotel on High Street, a hundred yards from the statue of Rebecca. The three-story Union House was torn down in the early 1930s, a task undertaken by Wallace with the help of a friend and his nephew, the late Bill Murray. Apparently, at least one other home on the island was built from the lumber of the small hotel erected in 1888

ered: Rum running and gambling junkets, both well off the island in the direction of Spain. Both, of course, illegal. I often wondered if he used the word Spain to not only identify the country, but as a metaphor, as in, "If one is far enough off the Mohegan Bluffs out toward Spain, then the laws of our country would not apply."

Rum running, Block Island and the State of Rhode Island have a history well known to any reader interested in that story.

To say that enforcement by the federal government pertaining to Prohibition on Block Island was minimal, is not an exaggerated claim. And there was good reason. Rhode Island was one of only two

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by Wallace's grandfather, Leander Ball.

"Eddey's Shanty" sat adjacent to the vast lawn of the Vaill Hotel. The owners of the hotel recognized Wallace's storytelling skills and would pay him a nominal fee to entertain guests with stories from the sea. And Wallace certainly had many stories. Dressed in a white sailor's outfit, he would walk out from the tall brush on his property, across the broad, closely cropped lawn to the Vaill's dining hall. When fog rolled in from the Atlantic, he would appear to roll out of nowhere, adding to the mystery of the "Raconteur from Mohegan Bluffs." (There exists a cartoon by Loring memorializing Wallace's stature as the Raconteur of the Mohegan Bluffs, but I can't find it!)

The content of those embellished stories almost assuredly had some grain of truth, but how much or what will never be known. Two topics his tales always cov-

states that refused to ratify this amendment to the Constitution. Due to lax enforcement by the feds, running rum from "supply ships" anchored well offshore — using the Hog Pen as a transfer site before shipping alcohol to points up and down the mainland — was occurring at the same time women on island were campaigning hard for enforcement of Federal Prohibition law. The dual reality of those two inconsistent events was well known for having lived side by side for the entire duration of Prohibition (1920 - 1933).

After explaining to the guests of the Vaill that his boat, the *Billie*, was equipped as a fishing trawler, an after-dinner story could very well have gone like this:

"The night before any thick fog was forecast for the island, I would fill up the *Billie* with fuel at the Hog Pen and make it known to all who would listen, that in

the morning I was heading out to sea to bring in a swordfish or two for one of the restaurants. If the Weather Bureau reports are accurate, I could leave by 4 a.m. out of the New Harbor channel and head directly south into the Atlantic." Wallace would bring an old nautical chart to show his guests the route he would sail, keeping the island to port.

"Beyond Dicken's Point near Black Rock I took a bearing south-south-east and sailed 12 miles to sea. The supply boats always lay drifting in the same region, reaching this destination from the Caribbean, Canada, and sometimes from European waters. Rarely did Coast Guard vessels travel this far to sea, even after they opened a station on the grounds of the Narragansett Hotel in New Harbor.

"Hailing the boats and taking on as much rum as I could afford was the easy part. I never had trouble with those sailors. I got to know quite a few of them, the ones that spoke English. After loading the rum or whisky, I would throw out a line and try my luck at fishing as I returned to the inner basin of the New Harbor, but this time anchoring in Trim's Pond. I would always bring in a few tuna and occasionally a big eye or the swordfish I coveted. I anchored in Trim's Pond, a short distance beyond the Hog Pen, in the safety of the lee of the Weather House.

"That night the hard part of rum running began. After a good meal, off I would go again, this time under the veil of darkness, rather than fog, to deliver my catch."

Around this time in his story, mostly true, the guests at the Vaill Hotel would pepper him with countless questions, and he answered them with as much intrigue as possible; it was Wallace's quick wit — on display with those answers — that added to his raconteur stature. Dressed in his sailor's outfit (appropriated from a sailor at the Coast Guard station) he would weave his tales and answer the question of where he brought the whiskey and rum. Where on the mainland he delivered the alcohol was the most frequent question he was asked by guests or visitors to the Island. (Islanders never asked that question.)

Wallace would not let the guests wait long for an answer. One night, because many guests were from New York City, he decided he would tell the story of a rum running trip to Edgewater, New Jersey, on the banks of the Hudson River. Located across from Grant's Tomb on Manhattan, the Edgewater drop, Wallace explained, had, up until now, been a safe location to deliver his goods.

"Topped with fuel, I headed back through the New Harbor channel into Block Island Sound, setting a course west-north-west towards Plum Island at the mouth of Long Island Sound."

He would show the guests Plum Island on his chart, mentioning the secret nature of the activities of this government-owned island. After telling a few tales of almost being thrown overboard by rogue waves, the story would continue uneventfully until it reached the treacherous Hell Gate where the Harlem River met the East River in New York City. He would tell the New York City guests of the difficulty of navigating Hell Gate in the East River estuary, an easy way to add suspense to his stories.

"I never got seasick, no matter how high the waves and, because of this, I was often oblivious to large waves, not infrequently being knocked to the deck and more than once being washed overboard. Once past Plum Island, halfway to New York City, the trip down Long Island Sound that night was uneventful. I saw a few Coast Guard patrol boats and I would sail close by them when possible and yell out a greeting to the boys, always



This postcard of the Hog Pen contains, to the left in the foreground, what the Eddey family believes to be one of Wallace's two trawlers. PHOTO COURTESY GARY EDDEY

mentioning the name of the Captain stationed on Block Island. This tactic always worked. I was not boarded once in my years running rum along the coast from New York City to Canada.

"Most of my trouble came when I was confronted by foul weather and local, land-lubbing police. Such was the case in Edgewater where I took a few bullets to my *Billie*." Wallace pulled out a photo of a similar boat with bullet holes to show the crowd, a crowd that had now reached about thirty people. "Yes it wasn't easy unloading that treasure that next morning. I was lucky to leave New Jersey alive!"

The gunfight that erupted in Edgewater Colony may not have been documented in *The New York Times*, and it may not have even occurred. I am not sure where I heard the story. If it happened, I am sure Wallace was well out of harm's way. Edgewater Colony in New Jersey, was a private community best described in the 1920s as a camp, and did not have a police department (and surely wanted it that way).

The trips to deliver alcohol were true, the gun battles not so much.

Embellishments aside, voyages to that community on the Hudson River occurred frequently; this is known because Wallace's oldest brother Erwin (my grandfather) lived in a nearby community and Wallace would often stay overnight with his brother before returning to Block Island. Erwin was not pleased his younger brother's occupation was what it was, although that is a story for another day.

The circumstances and details of the raconteur's rum-running tales changed, depending on where the Vaill's hotel guests were from. For example, if from Maine, the tales would include complications of sailing to Nova Scotia to pick up alcohol, rather than obtaining the contraband from supply boats off shore. If guests were from Massachusetts, Wallace would focus on dropping his cargo in the narrow Menemsha Harbor located at the far western end of Martha's Vineyard. This small, ancient, shallow harbor was worth the risk of a dropoff because it was as isolated a spot on Martha's Vineyard as any. Menemsha Harbor also was interesting because a small spit of an island in Menemsha Pond was named Edy Island. Wallace changed the spelling to coincide with the spelling of his last name, and gave more importance to this tiny island than ought to have been.

Unfortunately, Wallace's dropoff loca-

tions along the Connecticut coast are unknown to me. And again, when in the New York City area, besides Edgewater Colony, he would unload his cargo near Marble Hill on the Harlem River, where his father lived as a teenager.

But one tale that never changed, regardless of where visitors were from, involved the intrigue of offshore gambling junkets that operated out of the Hog Pen, shortly after Prohibition ended.

These overnight sailing trips started at the Hog Pen and took place due south of Eddey's Shanty, far enough off the coast to avoid detection and prosecution. They hove-to not nearly as far off Mohegan Bluffs as where the supply ships delivered their cargo to the contact boats during Prohibition. Strangely, he apparently prefaced all these stories with the statement: "These junkets did not occur." To this day only one member of my family was privy to his involvement in that endeavor.

In Wallace's stories, 'members' of the gambling junkets included some very prominent people, and it is highly likely his disclaimer directly related to those individuals. Numerous lawyers, a high ranking judge for the state of Rhode Island, other rumrunners, and a great many anonymous men. It is interesting that tales of gambling off Block Island have never been chronicled in any source that I am aware.

Guests on his junkets would board the *Anna C* around 4 p.m. and head out to sea through the New Harbor Channel, but only if the weather and the seas were calm. Landlubbers would not gamble amid high seas. While offshore, Wallace kept the Montauk Light and Block Island's Southeast Lighthouse in view at all times. It must have provided comfort to him to see these two familiar lighthouses that he could see from his home on the bluffs. He was carrying precious cargo, and by that I mean men from high places.

One of those men, according to his stories, was the Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court. That could not possibly be true of course, but it made for a great story.

It turns out there was a high ranking judge from Providence that lived on the Mohegan Bluffs. Wallace's home was located in-between the judge's home and the Vaill. Who just might be the caretaker of the judge's home? Wallace.

Perhaps these tales of gambling junkets by the Mohegan Bluffs raconteur had significantly more basis in fact than meets the eye, perhaps as much as the rum run-

ning tales, or perhaps not. But they have been passed down to me, that Wallace indeed captained the boat for the judge's gambling activities, raising the question for me: did these junkets fund the *Anna C* more than his role as a fisherman?

My parents were teetotalers and would not share a drink with Wallace. This may have caused him a bit of sadness, since he did like various alcoholic beverages. In fact, Wallace may have drunk a bit too much, as suggested by one of his favorite phrases: "I only drink by myself, or with people."

It was evident that not only did he run the rum, he drank the rum, fighting the island's positive influences to center him. A good, caring person for sure... but certainly not holier than thou. For example, I suppose it unlikely Wallace attended church services regularly like his father and step-mother. When a stained glass window was erected to honor his father after he died, I would think it reasonable to assume the son enjoyed the memorial window most from the outside looking in.

As a 10-year old, I remember Wallace guiding us in the process of clamming in Cormorant Cove. My family would meet him in the morning at low tide and dig for clams until Wallace was satisfied. Clamming was pretty easy back then, the clams plentiful and quite large. After collecting a bushel, my father and Wallace would head back to Eddey's Shanty to start the process of making Block Island Clam Chowder, while my siblings and I would head off to the beach. In the early afternoon we would return to his home to find the clams removed from the shells and Wallace boiling the chowder on an open fire in his backyard. He added seasoning to the milk and clams, and appeared to enjoy the process of slowly cooking on an open fire. I remember it all quite well and, in retrospect, even to a young boy, Wallace seemed as centered as he had ever appeared. One of the fondest memories I have with Wallace and Edith was making clam chowder overlooking the ocean.

Wallace is buried in a grave in the Island Cemetery with his infant son, and was joined by his wife, Edith, many years later. The grave is adjacent to his in-laws' marker and about 75 yards from the large gravesite of his father and grandparents. His mother died when his father was assigned to the Abilene, Texas Weather Station, and she is buried there.

Gary Eddey is the author of the novel, "The Weather House," which is set on Block Island.