

CHRISTINE

PORTRAIT OF A MAINE LADY

Christine Miller isn't part of America's mobile society. She has lived all her life in the house where she was born (Oct 12, 1917) 74 years ago in the little coastal village of Cundy's Harbor, Maine.

... The piece of waterfront property also included a store that was struggling along until they took it over and renamed it Holbrook's store.

"There weren't any other stores around," Christine muses. "Supplies came by boat from Portland. I can remember the big barrels of molasses and salt pork and the sides of beef. No one had cars in those days, so you couldn't get around like you can now."

Besides the local customers, people came by boat from Sebasco and Phippsburg across a broad stretch of the New Meadows River. They didn't have automobiles either, so shopping by boat was more convenient. The original store burned some 60 years ago and the present building replaced it. The sturdy white clapboard structure is utilitarian, its lines simple and unadorned. In the summer, flower-filled window boxes brighten the front of the store. The barrels have been replaced by canned goods and boxes and plastic containers.

Christine works in the store seven days a week, a total of about 50 hours. The fun part for her is the people and the store is a sort of community center and meeting place. Early birds stop in when she opens at 7:00a.m. for a hot cup of coffee and conversation.

A little inside the door is a heavy post, support both for the ceiling and all sorts of advertisements and announcements. Phone numbers and dates. Things lost and things found. The life of a small town hanging from thumbtacks.

Halfway down the left side of the one-room store is a low counter with a pile of daily newspapers with subscribers' names penned in on the top, some candy and odds and ends, a cash register and Christine at her chair.

Customers lean or pull up a metal folding chair to chat a bit. When conversation tends toward a controversial topic like a marina down the road, she says she prefers to stay away from it

because she hears a different story from everyone. For much of the year her customers are local residents, but in the summertime a whole array of people tromp in and out. Rubber-booted lobstermen. Tanned boaters needing supplies and a cold drink. Children in search of a treat, clutching sticky coins. Neighbors gossiping. Summer folks picking up their mail and commenting on the weather.

Many years ago, Christine remembers her father running a stage between Cundy's Harbor and Brunswick and bringing back the mail. Then, a corner of the store was set aside for a full-fledged post office, but the government closed it when people became part of a postal star route. The cluster of brass mail boxes is still there with a grilled opening in the middle. Through it you catch a glimpse of a cluttered office. Christine sells stamps and hands out the mail to those residents who have it sent to General Delivery in care of Holbrooks Store, Cundy's Harbor, Maine.

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There is no gaudy commercialism in Cundy's Harbor. Tourists do visit in the summer, but few stay because there are virtually no rental places. Summer residents from the nearby

islands come in for supplies and mail. About the only difference in the summer folk that Christine sees is that there used to be more wealth than now. “They used to have servants and chauffeurs.” She notices that some island cottages aren’t always opened each year because the grown children have lost interest or find the maintenance too costly in terms of both time and money.

The one summer “hot” spot in Cundy’s Harbor is the Snack Bar, located behind the store out over the water. ...

Day in and day out, the ordinary and extraordinary. The ebb and flow of the tide, events, and people. The door of the store opens and slams; the telephone rings.

(noted at the end of this article: “edited at Christine Miller’s Request by N.A. Meikle)

from Elsa’s interview with Christine in January 1989

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The original store burned 60 years ago. It was bigger than this store is. That’s the house. There used to be horse chestnut trees in the front; they rotted. One of the hurricanes took one of them down; he had to take the other down....Old wharf used to be back of the old store. All a lot different from the way wharves are today.

note from Elsa’s conversation with Judy Briggs, June 2005

When the store burned, it was rebuilt in the same place.

from Elsa’s interview with Sid Watson Feb 21, 1989

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Storekeeper’s joke: Crackers were kept in an open barrel. A woman came in to complain, “I think there are mice in your cracker barrel.” “No, there can’t be; the cat sleeps there all night.”