

Pioneer Days at Hinckley's Pond



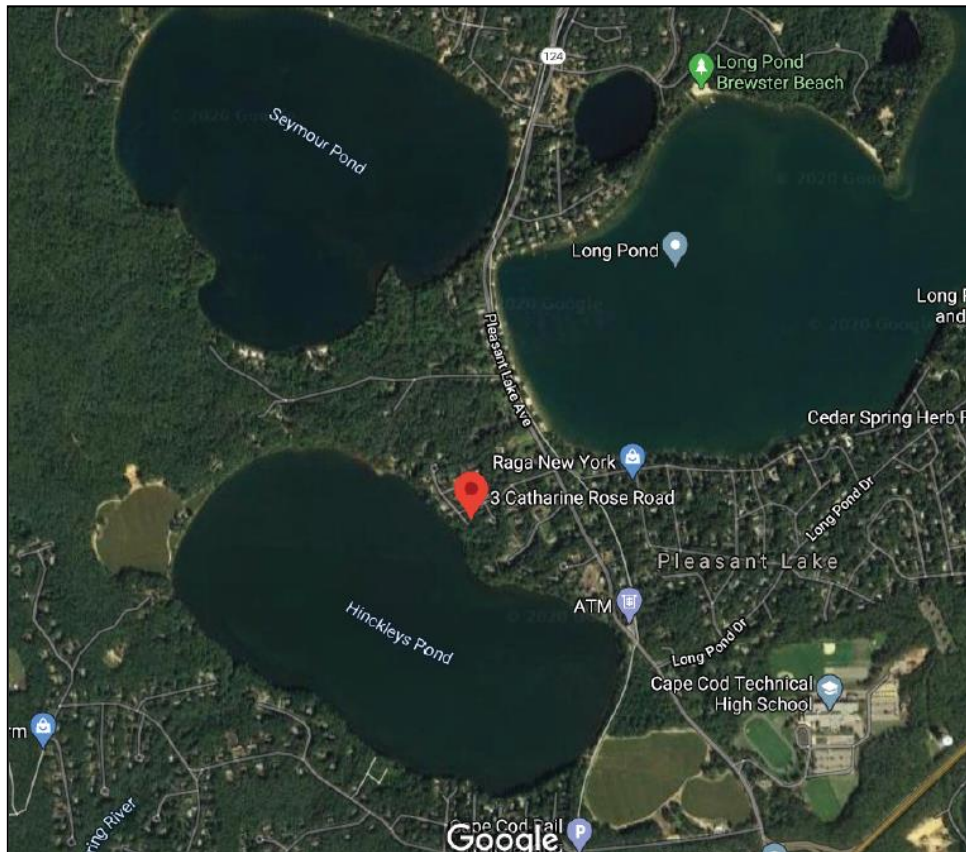
Ingrid M. Stabins
2020

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It was a dream come true to buy land at a pond on Cape Cod. I lived in New York City and had only twice visited the Cape while engaged to Aleks. I had visions to live on this quaint and charming New England island. It reminded me a little of my European background.

Aleks lived with his parents in Brewster. They had immigrated from Latvia in 1950 and built their home in Brewster around 1954. In 1957, Aleks looked for nearby land for our future home. He met Francis Nichols who offered three acres of land only three miles from the Brewster house in the adjacent town of Harwich. We split the parcel with Mervin Hill. Our one and a half acres had about one hundred feet frontage on Hinckley's Pond. The parcel was casually divided with Mervin by tape measure. It did not seem important to be so accurate at the time. Mervin and his wife Meriam were already retired and bought the land to build a summer home for their children.

The location was idyllic, a quiet section in Pleasant Lake village, a part of Harwich named



2020 aerial view of Pleasant Lake. Red marker shows location of the cottage.

after another nearby lake called Long Pond. Only a few houses sat around Hinckley's Pond and these were largely hidden behind pine trees and low bushes along the shore.

We were in the middle of the woods. The land rose from the pond gradually to a knoll where the boundary abutted Wilbur Crowell's property. Access to the land was almost non-existent. It was wooded right from the main road, Route 124 (called Rt. 24 or Pleasant Lake Avenue in those days). On the right side of the access path was the home of Calvin and Mary Eldredge and on the left Burleigh and Theresa Atkins. I think they were the parents of Mary Eldredge.

Across Rt. 124 were the railroad tracks which ran along Long Pond, crossed the street at the little red general store, and continued past several cranberry bogs next to Hinckley's Pond. In earlier times people disembarked the train in the winter to skate on Long Pond. Another activity was ice boating; the weatherman from Boston would come to race his boat.

Commuter service from Boston stopped around 1959. When I traveled on the train from New York to the Cape, the closest station to Brewster was Hyannis. For several years after stopping commuter service, a freight train traveled to Provincetown and struggled back with a heavy load of sand. Very little was done maintaining the tracks after the passenger trains stopped. It was not unusual to see a derailed train on the tracks.

The little red store was run by Jim White, who was helpful with information and a welcomed stop to buy the newspaper or a quart of milk. He also ran the Pleasant Lake Post Office which was a cubby hole in a corner of the store with a shelf and a row of boxes in the wall. I could call him to inquire if we had mail and he would check and tell me who had written. A single gas pump in front of the store was another convenience that we all appreciated.

The Eldredge's owned a large tract of land on the north side of their home, spreading across the main road and railroad tracks. They also had a sizeable stretch of frontage on Long Pond. They had given a parcel to their son Calvin who built a house farther behind the property, which also stretched across the road and railway to Long Pond. The daughter's home, Ruth and husband Edward Bearse, was up the hill from their home (now the home of Mary Catherine and Bruce Ring). The Eldredge's and Atkin's families had lived there for a long time.

From the Eldredge house to the Bearse's was a short, one-lane dirt road. The path seemed more like a driveway than a road, lined with scrub pines. It passed close to the Bearse's doorstep. We were warned many times to watch out for their three little girls when driving by.

After the Bearse's, the path turned grassy and descended toward the pond. Near the pond, the path split. One way went to our cottage and the other continued to a little



~1959 - The original cottage before any remodeling; front facing the pond.

cottage at the shore owned by Bob and Edy Lovett (now the Anderson home). They had a nice sandy beach. On the right was another cottage, which we dubbed the Yellow House since the shingles were painted yellow (now Robyn Michaels home). It seemed unoccupied at the time. On the right of the yellow house was the outlet of a little creek, which was sandy and shallow and wound its way through the woods from Long Pond. It connected Long Pond with Hinckley's Pond with the help of a culvert under the railway and Rt. 124.

Recalling the years from 1958 to the middle of the 1960s. In early spring the herring (also known as alewives) came into Hinckley's

Pond from the ocean via the Herring River to spawn. The herring used the little creek next to the yellow house to travel into Long Pond. The outlet of the creek was often shallow and the fish struggled upstream using their strong will to breed. With fish concentrated bank to bank in the shallow water, they could be picked up by hand. I took my daughter Martina one time and we both stood in the water with the fish swimming around our ankles.

A little farther down the shore was another creek inlet from a third pond in the area, Seymour's Pond. This tiny little creek allowed herring to travel and spawn in that pond. These three ponds, Hinckley's, Long, and Seymour's form the headwaters of the Herring River, an important ecosystem for herring and all the connected life, from the animals that eat them to the improved water quality that their young fry influence.

After the Bears's home, the path curved to the left through the woods, where hardly visible tracks led to our parcel. Our parcel with pond frontage rose up a knoll overlooking the lake. This neighborhood has also been called Harwich Heights at times.



~1959 - Karlis Stabins helping to build the cottage's kitchen door cement step.

On the low part of our parcel and near the pond was a small cottage where Francis Nichols and his family had lived. It was unoccupied for a time and the weather had not been very kind to the structure. The roof had caved in over part of the living room. There were two small bedrooms, each with a little closet. The living room had a brick fireplace. A big potbelly stove stood in the kitchen, likely for cooking. The fireplace and stove must have heated the house in the winter. The potbelly stove was next to a stone sink, containing a hand pump that supplied their water. They had no electricity and used kerosene for lighting. Wide pine boards covered the living room floor. I already pictured them refinished and shiny. A small

bathroom jutted out on one side and may have been a later addition. Every room had small windows, but in the living room a large window gave a great view of the pond. The pond side had an outside door as well as the kitchen side.



~1959 – Ingrid by the kitchen door. Remodeling has begun.

The discovery of an apple tree and peach tree overgrown with weeds and brush was an indication of a past garden. A large patch of loganberries, which we mistook for wild blackberries, was between the cottage and pond. We could already taste all the wonderful fruit. A big rhubarb plant had also survived and was welcome to see sprouting. A forsythia bush was ready to bloom. We had dreams and plans to make this a wonderful home. We both had grown up with gardens. This wild place did not look so wild anymore.

We started from the bottom up and felt like pioneers. We knew it would be hard work. When walking around the land, we made a puzzling observation; the ground

was rippled between the trees in places. These ridges did not seem natural. We found out that at one time asparagus had been grown here. Much later, my children would find lone asparagus stalks growing among the pines. Between the ripples in one area I found and picked strawberries. This land must have been a large garden or small farm without any trees at one time.

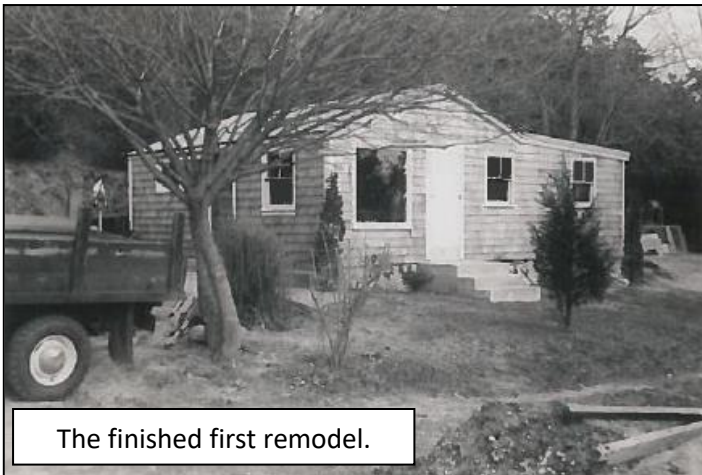
Between the Hill's and our lot was a small swamp with an opening to the pond. We did not know if it was man-made or natural. Francis Nichols was a hunter and as we cleaned-up we discovered a blind at the edge of the swamp. He may have hunted ducks as these ponds were stops for migrating ducks in the fall.



Aleks & Ingrid working on the roof.

It was spring 1958 when we decided to tackle the cottage and rebuild it. But first we had to establish ourselves with jobs and address other needs. I worked in the bank in Harwich Port and Aleks worked with Charlie Owens when he first arrived in this country. Later he took care of a private estate owned by the Jenkins but he wasn't satisfied with the position. It was not what he dreamed of for a career. He met Tony Marini who was landscaping and working alone. Tony and his father had come from Italy as immigrants,

possibly jumping a ship to stay here. Aleks and Tony decided to partner and in a little while Tony focused on installing underground irrigation while Aleks did the gardening and landscaping. This was a wonderful start. For Aleks it was a smooth transition. They worked well together and after a year, both formed their own businesses. We had existed with very little before and knew we might have a slow start. Aleks took over some of Tony's customers and hired students in the summer to cut lawns. With his architectural training he was able to design and lay-out landscaping plans, which was advantageous right from the beginning. It was the time when developments started to expand. My contribution was the business bookkeeping.



The finished first remodel.

We did not have much time in the summer of 1958 and needed to plan and examine the walls and floors. Besides that, we had no electricity. The first step was to clean up the outside. At times, Aleks' elderly father, Karlis, came along and helped. We made many trips to the town dump; there were piles of old windows, doors, and all sorts of old lumber. The debris was hiding places for snakes and



little critters. We had the impression Francis Nichols built this little house. I am sorry we never asked him about it.

The major work began in the spring of 1959. Our aim was to remodel the house ourselves. We lived with Aleks' parents in Brewster while we worked. Aleks' mother, Anna, cooked for us. Any free minute outside our bank and landscaping jobs we spent working at the little house. We started to call the house our "cottage."

The foundation of the structure consisted of a small collar of cement

mixed with tin cans, metal, and other objects as fillers. We knew the foundation was the first thing that had to be replaced. The house had to have a more solid foundation. Some of our new friends offered help. They came with rolled-up sleeves, lots of advice, and jack lifts. With cement blocks and mortar, a new foundation was formed. Since the house had no basement, only a low crawl space, it was easier to lift it up gently in places to do the work. A generator provided power for electrical tools and a cement mixer, a task which I could perform.

We hired a carpenter to replace the windows and the roof. The inside walls were removed so we could insulate them. A well was dug and a pit was made with cement blocks inside the entrance door for the water tank and pump. The kitchen floor was removed for piping a gas line to a floor furnace. I remember mixing mortar and carrying it in buckets for Aleks to make a pit with blocks. This floor furnace had to heat the whole house.

The dirt path from Rt. 124, after passing our house and crossing Mervin Hill's lot, ended at the home of Biddle and Mary Thompson, farther down the pond shore. Their home had started as a retreat for the Thompson Family who owned property in Harwich Port, guesthouses, and the Thompson Clam Bar, a well-established restaurant on Wychmere Harbor. They were our only neighbors and we developed a wonderful neighborly relationship. They also provided much help and advice. The Thompson's already had electricity and access from another road now called Hinckley Road. We soon coordinated with Mervin Hill and hired an electric company to connect to the Thompson electric line. Having power was a big plus. We now concentrated on remodeling the inside of the cottage.

We wanted to be in the cottage by summer of 1960. After we bought all the necessary items for the kitchen, a gas stove, and hot water heater, we were ready to move in.

Propane gas was delivered in tall cylinders. All summer I was painting walls and cabinets. It really felt like a home after we moved in furniture. We refinished pieces that were given to us and were ready to move in by August 1960.

The outside was slowly taking shape, too. The area across the path in front of the house was flattened, and on the sloping side toward the pond I planted ivy, which I brought from the abundant supply at Aleks parent's home in Brewster. By the kitchen door was a little patio which we cleaned up, and with a little imagination and of course work, made into a little garden.



The two small rooms had been made into bedrooms and the heat turned out to be sufficient. It was a snowy winter and traveling in and out on the path to Rt. 124 often became impossible since the path wasn't plowed. The gas man had to leave the tanks at the edge of Rt. 124 and Aleks picked them up with his truck.

In the summer of 1961 Aleks met a man walking in the woods. He was the owner of the land we drove through on the way to our cottage. Housing developments at that time were just starting.

Surveyors appeared one day, placing stakes in the ground and we knew the land had been sold. Our little oasis surrounded by large pines and oaks was now exposed. We cherished our little spot and did not wish for changes. We lost some of our privacy but we gained easier access. We had achieved much in a short time and were happy. It was a good beginning.

Bulldozers started on a road into the development working in from Rt. 124. The new road (Duke Ballem Road) pioneered through the woods and did not follow the old path we had used. A second road was built following the shoreline of the pond and ended at our cottage (Catharine Rose Road). The lots along this road had water frontage. Part of the old path from Rt. 124 became another short road (Captain Jack Road). All in all, three connected roads were constructed making a rough "U" shape in the development.

Robert Kelly, the developer who had bought the land, informed us that the back of our patio was on his land. We were surprised but wanted to wait and see what would happen. The layout of the land showed that there was one lot between us and the new



1961 – Work on the cottage addition.

road, a corner lot. The lot was narrow and long and we thought no one would ever want to buy that. It was not until the early 1970's, when the Russell's (now the Lee and Kimberly Ellis home) purchased the lot above ours, that we decided to collaborate with them to buy the corner lot. We split the lot with them; the bottom portion became ours and the upper portion theirs. Now our land extended to the corner of the new road. It meant no one would live next to either of us. It was the best decision we made.

The lot across from our new corner lot was sold first and the owner, the Quilty's, started building. Soon after that the lot closest to us but on the pond side, was sold to the Snow's who also soon built a house (now Deb Bisson's home).



1994 – Cottage showing addition of back bedroom.

These two couples were our first neighbors. With the new roads which had opened the area, everything was and looked different. The electric company installed poles and wiring, connecting our electric line from the Thompson's into the system.

The need for more space became apparent as our family expanded. An addition to the cottage was the chosen option. The only flat area was behind the two little bedrooms, but a perfectly grown large silver maple grew there. I

loved to see the breeze stir the leaves of this beautiful tree. We reluctantly removed it ourselves. It had a thick trunk, which Aleks cut with a chain saw, and then we started to dig out the root ball. Of course, the Cape sandy soil made it easier to dig and to our surprise, the tree did not have deep roots. The roots were large as I remember, but spread more horizontally, so it was not as hard as we had expected.

Aleks went to work and dug the trench for the addition foundation since we planned to do that part ourselves. We used all the level space up to the edge of the road to

maximize and create a large room. Bud Thompson, a young carpenter in the Pleasant Lake area, was recommended to us and he agreed to build the addition. Aleks created a blueprint with all the measurements. The two little bedrooms had to be separated with a hallway to reach the new bedroom in back. The result was a wonderful new space that allowed us and the children to spread out.

The neighborhood and surrounding ponds, woods and streams were a child's haven. Martina, Henning, and their friends had many opportunities to explore, learn and have endless hours of fun. When they were small and we lived in the cottage, I worried about the pond and its hazards for children. It was a relief after they learned how to swim. The pond was great for fishing. Henning loved to go out on our rowboat and enjoyed the rhythm of the oaring and learning how to fish. He explored every nook along the shore

fighting the wind and waves.

Later he had a sailboat and taught himself to sail.



1997 – Cottage patio in full summer

Hinckley's Pond was such a focal point for us. In the 1970's, we noticed several fish kills in the pond; our beach was covered with fish carcasses. We believed it was due to the spraying of the cranberry bogs abutting each end of the pond. Cranberries are grown in low lying areas and require wet soil conditions to

flourish. Ditches crisscross the bogs to

bring water to the roots and in the winter the bogs are flooded to cover the plants and protect them from freezing temperatures. Fertilizers and insecticides were sprayed by helicopter several times during the spring and summer growing seasons. Chemicals drifted dangerously over the surrounding area, including over and into the pond. The bogs had connections to the pond by way of a sluice to allow for water flow between the two, keeping the bogs moist.

We believed the helicopter spraying and contaminated water from the bogs draining back into the pond killed the fish and had dangers for humans. Aleks found out that the pesticide they used was prohibited. I tried to call the owners of the bogs to talk about this. I wanted to have answers. The owners never returned my calls. Later, when the railroad tracks that ran on a dike between one bog and the pond were converted to a paved trail, I saw children and bare-chested men riding their bicycles while the bogs were being sprayed. I was furious. I finally brought this to the attention of the State and a chemist from the Cranberry Experimental Station came to my house. I also invited naturalists from the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History to the meeting where I



2020 – Cottage in spring.

explained the situation. Perhaps this was the turning point for the end of aerial spraying. The next year sprinklers were installed in the bogs and we had no more fish kills.

Mervin Hill, our neighbor, built a summer house in the early 1960's for his daughter, Holly and husband Bob Norum. Every summer the Norum's, with children Scott and Wendy, came on vacation. Scott and Wendy were

about the same age as Martina and became best friends. Only my whistle and Holly's cowbell, the sign to come

home, could tear them from games or digging for treasures at an old dump near the pond. Another set of friends were Brian Snow and Henry Diltz, who went to school with Martina. Brian always came up with great ideas. Catching herring in the spring during their spawning run was one of them. They positioned themselves with a large net at the mouth of the creek, where the herring tried to go upstream to Long Pond. One of them startled the fish and they darted into the waiting net. There were times when they took the roe from the female herring and sold it to Mr. Lovett who lived nearby (now the Anderson's home). He told them that it was like caviar to him.



The neighborhood children's fort, circa 1970's, overlooking the pond (across from Dave and Sandy Robinson's home).

They spent hours exploring the untouched woods and making up stories as they discovered a small shack. The roof had caved in and a wall lay crumbled on the ground. The wooden floor was broken up and they did not dare step inside. Knowing the folklore, that the Indians had summered here at the lake, they imagined an Indian Princess lived in this place. On the outside was a soft, green, mossy spot, a carpet that nature perhaps had provided for the Princess. It was so different from the surrounding forest floor. More stories about the Princess were made up. Part of the moss carpet had an indentation and that became

her imagined burial place.

Another mystery was an old eerie shell of a house on a hillside. The windows were broken and it had nothing inside. They made up stories for this and called it the "The

Haunted House." The children scared each other and had to call up all their courage to go inside, fearing angry and grizzly ghosts around each corner.

It was not unusual if we dug at sandy spots around the pond to find turtle eggs. The pond was the home of snapping turtles and there were many of them who scuttled around in the spring to lay their eggs. Brian and Martina found one nest just as the eggs were hatching. Some were still in the eggs and some were ready to head for the pond. Brian, as usual with a great idea, had the kids gather and mark them on the back with a dot of red paint. Perhaps, one day, they hoped, someone might come across a snapper with a red dot looking for a nest site and would wonder how the red spot arose.

These are just a few stories of how this beautiful area became a part of our family's lives. It was a wonderful place to make a home and raise a family. Over the years, more homes were built and neighbors grew in number. Later we built a larger house farther up the hill and still enjoyed a view of the pond. Change is inevitable but for the most part, this local area has retained its special qualities. The herring still swim up the Herring River to Hinckley's Pond and then follow the little creeks to the other two ponds. The ducks still stop in on the pond in the fall. Families continue to enjoy boating on the pond and biking or walking on the converted rails-to-trails pathway. Neighbors still care for the pond bringing hope for a sustainable future for Pleasant Lake.



Ingrid Stabins, May 2020

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