

7-3-2018

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## Recommended Citation

Kennedy, Harris, "The Kennedy-Carter Family on Peaks Island" (2018). *Local Printed Material*. 11.  
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# **The Kennedy-Carter Family on Peaks Island**

by Harris Kennedy

Presented on July 3, 2018 at the dedication ceremony of the  
Kennedy-Carter Community Center & Branch Library

I have been asked to tell you about our family history on the island. That means turning a 90-year family saga of romance, heartbreak, terror, love and joy into a very short story. Challenging, but here goes – in seven short chapters.

## Chapter 1. “Introducing Our Main Characters and How They Separately Meet Peaks Island”

Our story begins with the origins of our Massachusetts parents, Malcolm Kennedy and Dorothea Lassell. He was from Milton; she was from North Reading, or as she liked to abbreviate it, “No Reading.” Dorothea’s family included her parents, her brother and her half-sister, Edith Banks. They all moved to Portland when she was a teenager. They took some day trips to the island and imagined how nice it would be to live there. After graduating from Portland High School in 1928, she followed her passion for painting and got a degree from the Portland School of Art.

Malcolm grew up in Milton, Mass. His great grandfather, Donald Kennedy, had emigrated from Scotland to Boston in the early 1830’s. He founded a company that, for many years, produced popular medical products based on old Scottish folk remedies. It lasted until World War I cut off the supply of essential imported ingredients. One summer in the 1920’s, my father went to Camp Winona in Bridgton, Maine. The camp specialized in outdoor experiences for boys, and they took a field trip to Peaks Island and slept in tents on the back shore. They crossed the bay in a rickety old boat with the leaky seams stuffed with cut up old jeans and canvas. It was operated by Peaks Islander Oscar Randall, the uncle of islander Cliff Randall, a longtime Casco Bay ferry captain.

So even before they met each other, both mom and dad had been separately introduced to Peaks Island and were quite taken with its natural beauty.

## Chapter 2. “Meeting, Mating, and Moving to Peaks”

During the Depression, Dad worked for an antique dealer in Ossipee, New Hampshire. Mom was working at a nearby guest lodge. On one lovely Saturday evening, they both just happened to attend the same barn dance. And that was the beginning of a lifelong romance.

They were married in Portland in 1935. Dad landed a sales job at Loring, Short & Harmon, the book and office supply store. The couple set up housekeeping in a small apartment on Grant Street near Deering Oaks in Portland. A year later, my older brother Donald made his debut. In another year or so, Mom gave birth to a second boy, but he lived only fifteen days. That heartbreak set off a life-changing chain of events. Needless to say, Mom especially was devastated by the loss of her second child. Dad tried to think how he could bring her out of her grief. He thought she would benefit from new surroundings, and he mentioned this to a co-worker, Maybelle Wallace, a Peaks Islander who lived on Greenwood

Street. That connection in 1938 led to their purchase of a large old house at 20 Oak Avenue, next to Greenwood Gardens (now the Lions Club property). It was a stroke of genius.

### Chapter 3. "Putting Down Roots"

The 1837-vintage farmhouse provided lots of room for a growing family. Mom was happy again – so happy, in fact, that a year later I showed up, and my sister Cindy five years after that.

Dad commuted daily to his sales job but got bored. He decided to strike out on his own and started a hobby shop, named Hobby Center, in Congress Square. He hired Mom's sister Edith as his only other employee. That store has an odd and unique connection to Portland Public Library – they merged-- at least in a spatial sense. After the war, he moved the store to 457 ½ Congress Street in Monument Square, on the second floor of a building that was eventually demolished to build the new main library. By then Dad had sold the store, but it still exists today as Ray & Robin's Hobby Center at the West Falmouth Crossing Plaza.

As my folks settled into island life, my grandmother and aunt Edith also moved together to the island. They rented several places, eventually buying a huge house directly across Oak Avenue from ours but fronting on Greenwood Street across from Sandy Beach. Somewhere along the line, my grandmother and grandfather had divorced, but my grandfather also ended up on Peaks in a house he moved next to ours. He purchased one of the army barracks for \$500 dollars after the war and had it moved to a vacant lot just up the slope on Oak Avenue. So, for a few years, our family owned three almost contiguous properties -- with two of the owners barely speaking to each other!

### Chapter 4. "The War" (containing the "terror" part of our saga)

Dad was a little too old to be drafted into the active military during WWII, but he was nonetheless part of the war effort in Casco Bay. His most intense service lasted several years when he served full time on the "army boats," which supplied the military bases in Casco Bay, including the one on Peaks. He closed Hobby Center down for the duration of his duty. He was primarily the cook on one of the converted commercial vessels, but also filled in as a deckhand. On one cold, windy Easter morning, which fell that year on April Fool's Day, Dad almost became a war casualty. He normally did not have to handle the rope when the boat landed, but the usual deckhand was not there that morning, and the job fell to Dad. As the boat pulled into the wharf at Peaks, it was pitching and rolling. As Dad threw the rope for the piling, a large wave hit the boat. He lost his balance and pitched over the side into the 39-degree waters. Miraculously, he was able to climb onto a cross bar between two pilings just before the boat slammed into the pilings again, barely missing him. The men aboard were able to get him back safely aboard, and it took him less than 45 minutes to walk home, change into dry clothes, and return to the boat for the rest of his shift. For a cook, he was also one tough cookie.

### Chapter 5. "Paradise – Heavenly and Earthly"

After my grandfather passed, his house was sold to Jan Smith. After my grandmother passed in 1948, Aunt Edith sold their house to Doreen McCann's family when Edith's dream home at 2 Oak Avenue came up for sale. The lot was adjacent to ours but way down the hill on the shore next to the Greenwood Gardens. The house sat only a few feet from the water and was built about 1905 by a fisherman for processing his fish. There was also a garage situated behind it up the hill a bit. You may already own a picture of the buildings if you have one of those Casco Bay Lines refrigerator magnets with a 1930's

winter photograph of islanders walking out on the frozen bay to board the ferry from that property. By 1948, it was used as a summer cottage but still had a single, summer-only cold-water faucet in the kitchen. The bathroom was a classic outhouse 50 feet away. My parents were appalled that she paid \$4,000 for such an inadequate home when they had paid only \$7000 for their winterized, fully functional, 9-room house with year-round water and sewer. But Aunt Edith only had to look out through those old wavy-glassed, single pane windows to know that she had found her paradise on earth. As it turned out, that house was destined to become the family anchor to the island for at least the next 70 years.

#### Chapter 6. "Our All Too Brief Heyday"

What can you say about a kid's childhood growing up on Peaks? With its safe and beautiful environment, it is nothing but magical. My brother Don wrote a 90+ page memoir about it for our family. He credits the teachers at the Peaks school with inspiring his career choice of teaching, leading to many years as a school superintendent in Massachusetts.

As a retired librarian myself, I must mention our library experience growing up on Peaks. There was, of course, no convenient Peaks library branch in those years, just a small book selection housed at the Peaks school. But my family was very book oriented, and we made long, faithful pilgrimages every few weeks up to the wonderful old main library just beyond Congress Square. And it was up hill both ways, if you think about it. The children's library staff spread an ever-changing selection of wonderful books on low tables for browsing, and I was the kid in the intellectual candy store. I would take out as many as I could. So even if a blizzard snowed us in for several days on Oak Avenue, I could pick up the book titled *Smoke Jumpers* and be transported to a bone-dry western state heroically parachuting in to fight a forest fire. Islanders are so fortunate to have this facility now in their front yard.

My parents owned their Oak Avenue home about 15 years, long enough for my brother to graduate from the island school and for me to go through five of the eight grades, but barely enough time for Cindy to get started. By that time the daily commuting to town was becoming burdensome for Dad as he tried to nurture a business, and for Don, participating in after school activities at Portland High School. And it would only get harder in the coming years. Another critical issue was the lack of emergency medical services. Both Cindy and I had health issues, and after losing her second child, Mom wanted to take no chances. So after the one Peaks doctor moved away, my parents reluctantly decided to move off the island too, finding a house in Portland's Rosemont neighborhood.

#### Chapter 7. "We Are Tougher to Uproot Than Bittersweet"

Our departure to the mainland left my aunt Edith as the last of the family living on the island, and only as a summer resident. During the winter months, she became a Florida snowbird with a full-time job running the newsstand at the Hotel Ponce de Leon in St. Augustine. During the summers the cottage became a magnet for family visits and cookouts.

The rest of the family visited Aunt Edie as often as they could. My parents and Cindy lived in Portland, so they could come frequently. It was harder for brother Don and me. After college and the Air Force, Don worked for several Massachusetts school systems, and visits with his wife Jean and their two girls, Kim and Christie, could happen only during vacation times. Alice and I lived in Connecticut and Massachusetts until 1985. Because Aunt Edie's cottage was so small, at first we had to stay with my

parents intown and make day trips to Peaks. When our children, Andy and Sheri, came along, Aunt Edie gave us permission to clean out the old garage and create some sleeping space. By then Cindy had married Ray Carter and had their children, Kevin and Greg, and they lived in Portland. With the extra sleeping space, we were all finally able to visit the cottage and Aunt Edie for more extended periods of time.

After we children were grown, Mom came into her own creatively. She went back to painting, took some education courses at USM and became eligible to substitute teach in the schools. But what she really loved was teaching art in the Portland Recreation program. She taught senior citizens in several locations, including the island. She became involved in the island art gallery, which I think was located at that time in the space now occupied by Lisa's Café. She also exhibited and sold her work at the art fairs in Portland and South Portland and at several area galleries.

Cindy worked for Portland Recreation, pioneering the creation of programs for senior citizens. But in 1984, life took a tragic turn. Cindy died suddenly at age 38 when her heart failed while she and her boys were visiting Aunt Edie. Kevin was 12, and Greg was 4 years old. Her husband Ray shouldered his sudden and heavy load of grief and single parenting. Fortunately, he was able to take over her Recreation Department job and worked there for 30 years. As Kevin and Greg got older, they both got summer jobs in the Portland Recreation program.

Cindy's death also motivated Alice and me to move from Worcester MA to Portland to help out wherever we could. I found a rare opening for a reference librarian at USM, and we found a house in the Riverton neighborhood where both Ray and my parents lived.

Aunt Edith passed away a few years later but handed along the cottage to the family, which we have improved and shared over the years. One by one, the older generation moved back permanently to the island—to a family plot in Pond Grove Cemetery.

Then in 2002, fifty years after I moved off the island, I moved back, to a year-round house near the family cottage. For the next eight years, on into retirement, Alice and I were an active part of the island community, especially in the Brackett Church and Children's Workshop. In 2007 our daughter Sheri married Gary Brock in a ceremony on the island. They soon started their family in Massachusetts, where Gary is a Cambridge-based architect, and we wanted in on the grandchild-spoiling action. Since we couldn't convince them to move up here, we moved down there to a house near theirs in Watertown.

As for the cottage, it is now in the hands of the younger generation, owned by Kevin and his family but still shared with the rest, and he has been rebuilding it to last another hundred years or more.

So that's about as short a version as I can give you of our family story on Peaks.

Given our Kennedy and Carter history with both Peaks Island and the Portland Recreation Department, it should be easy to understand why Kevin was moved to honor the family by making a major gift to the renovation of this building. With the help of great island amenities like this one, the whole Peaks Island community has every reason to live happily ever after.

Not "The End"