



GLOUCESTER  
**400<sup>+</sup>**

OUR PEOPLE, OUR STORIES

1623 | 2023

# 400 STORIES PROJECT

[GLOUCESTERMA400.ORG](http://GLOUCESTERMA400.ORG)

**Mighty Joe Orange**  
WARRIOR, PROTECTOR, ATHLETE  
By Bruce Tobey

Photo Courtesy of Jason Grow  
© Jason Grow

# Mighty Joe Orange

## Warrior, Protector, Athlete

Roger W. Babson, a distinguished son of Gloucester, was an American entrepreneur, economist, business theorist, and the founder of Babson College. Through many philanthropic acts, Babson left a lasting mark on his hometown, but no gift surpassed the one he and his wife finalized on April 30, 1931. On that day, Babson and his wife, Grace, executed the deed confirming their grant to the City of seven parcels of land in the center of the island Gloucester shares with the Town of Rockport.

This land constitutes the island’s heartland and is home to rich forests and fields, vast quantities of fresh water, and the remains of Dogtown. The City’s Board of Water Commissioner had already taken the land to develop a reservoir that held a pure drinking water supply for the people of Gloucester. But it was a friendly taking, as the Babsons made clear, and their intentions

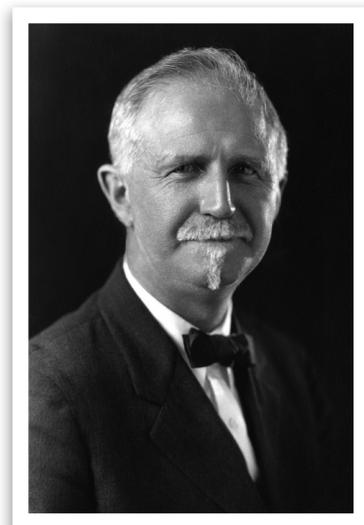
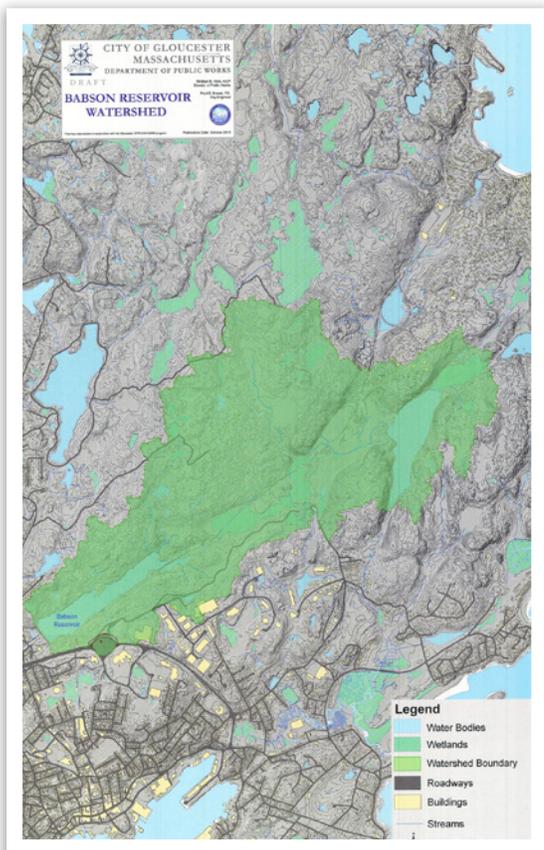


Photo courtesy of the Cape Ann Museum

Roger W. Babson  
An inspiration to Joe Orange

for the land were clearly stated.



Babson Reservoir Watershed

The reservoir, to be known as Babson Reservoir, was to be surrounded by a 150-foot buffer; the remainder of the gifted land was to be a park and sanctuary known as the Nathaniel Babson Sanctuary and enjoyed “on foot only.” In addition, the historic cellars of Dogtown were to be preserved unmolested. The Babsons made one other point crystal clear: if there was an abandonment of its use “for natural park purposes for the use and enjoyment of the public forever,” ownership of the land would go back from the City to the Babsons or their heirs.

Whether he knew it or not, a few years later, Roger Babson took at least one additional step to protect his gift. Joe Orange shared the story twenty-five years ago as we sat together in the Mayor’s Office in Gloucester City

Hall. He explained that as a young boy newly arrived in Gloucester, he loved to run in and explore the Babson Watershed and Sanctuary. "One day during such a run," Joe said, "I encountered a man."

*I stopped just before I ran into him. He was well-dressed and had a fine goatee, and he seemed to be overseeing his domain. "What is your name, young man?" he asked. "My name is Joseph, sir. What is your name?" The man replied, "My name is Roger Babson. What brings you to these woods?"*

*I did not hesitate. "I love these woods, Mr. Babson. I hope I can always protect them." "Well then, may I ask you a favor, Joseph?" he replied, and I said that he could. "Will you promise me that you will always watch over them?" Again, I did not hesitate: "I promise, Mr. Babson. I promise I will always watch over these woods for you."*

With that, Joe began a lifelong mission and became a local legend.

Of course, Joe's long life involved much more than the protection of the Babson Woods. When he died at the age of 97 on March 31, 2020, most who had known him through it all, or during his younger years, had already passed. But Joe left many strong impressions among the longtime friends who survived him. Consider the following remembrances:

**From Anthony Burnham - mentored as a young man by Joe, and an adherent to his fitness and life principles:**

*Growing up, we all read magazines and comic books. We had that superhero that we each wanted to be, whether it was Captain America, Superman, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Alekseyev the weightlifter, whoever. But Joe, for all of us, was the actual superhero that we could touch, feel and see.*

**From Mike Cody – a Vietnam combat veteran, a fitness disciple of Joe's, and the father of Joe's godson:**

*Military service played a big part in Joe's life and the physical aspect of everything he did after he left the service. It directed him in what he was going to do and what he was going to become. The service changed everything – once you're in combat, everything,*

*the whole aspect of life, changes. He told me: "Mike, everything changed completely for me." That's a big part of why he didn't get married and have kids. He wanted to be Joe, and he was Joe. He would sit in my house all the time and we'd talk because, you know, we both went through it, and he told me things that he normally wouldn't tell other people.*

**From Emily Tobey DiMercurio – came to know Joe during the after-school hours she often spent as a child in Gloucester City Hall during the 1990s:**

*I went with fifth graders from Veterans School in the fall of 2011 to Blackburn Park to explore Dogtown to learn about plants and animals native to the area. We weren't in the woods five minutes when I heard a loud "hey" as someone advanced on us through the dense trees. We all turned to see who it was – it was Joe. His eyes met mine, and his stern demeanor melted away: "Emily, what are you all doing here?" And that is how our tour of the Blackburn Woods with Joe began. The students loved their time with Joe. He was totally in his element, sharing his knowledge with a much younger generation with a joyful light in his eyes.*

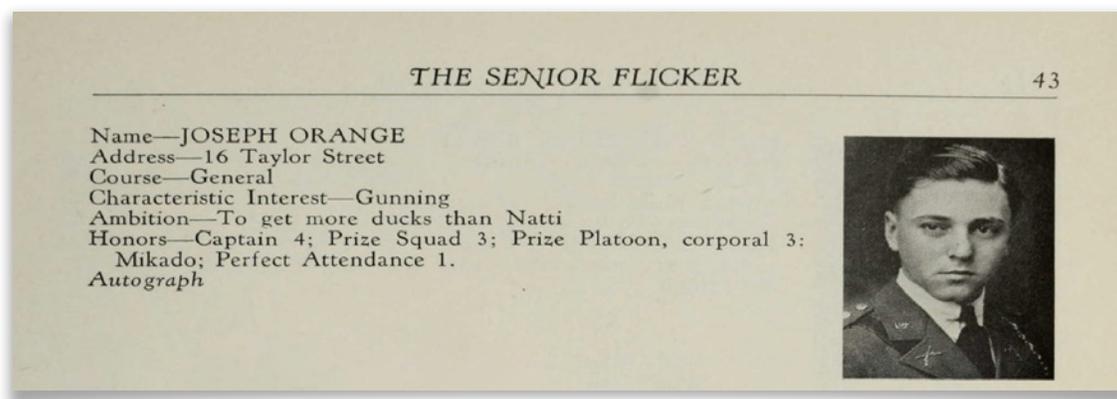
---

Little is known of Joe's earliest years; indeed, it is unclear how much of his origins even he knew. The clearest record of his birth date is, ironically, his death certificate. It recites a date of August 27, 1927, and a birthplace of Washington, DC, and states that his parents were unknown. He spent his first ten years in West Virginia, then moved to Gloucester with his adoptive parents, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Brooks. Their home provided his lifetime permanent address, 16 Taylor Street, and it was base camp as he discovered and explored the Babson lands.

But Joe shared a different story of his origins and last name with friends Bob and Virginia McKinnon. This is how Mrs. McKinnon remembers it:

*He was from the Azores, I think. I asked him why he was called Joe Orange. He said when he came from the old country, no one could pronounce or write his name, but there was a billboard outside with a picture of an orange on it. So, his last name was Orange. He said he was glad it wasn't a picture of a banana, or they would have called him Joe Banana.*

We know of Joe's graduation from Gloucester High School (GHS) with the Class of 1940 through his GHS yearbook, then called the *Senior Flicker*. It suggests Joe's involvement in the U.S. Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps program defined his high school years. His "Characteristic Interest" was Gunnery, and his first-listed "Honor" was achieving the rank of Captain, with others including Prize Squad, Prize Platoon, and being a Corporal during junior year. His class portrait featured Joe proudly wearing his ROTC officer's uniform. His competitive spirit makes an appearance: his ambition was "to get more ducks than Natti."



There is no record of Joe's activities after his high school graduation until his World War II life-changing experiences began. Mike Cody notes, "World War II shaped the Joe Orange we all knew." Joe and his circle of friends, including his workout buddy Bob McKinnon, got word of pending draft notices. Instead of waiting, they all took the plunge together. Virginia McKinnon recalls: "The whole gang, they all signed up together. They all thought, we're finally going to leave Gloucester, off to see the world. They were all excited. They didn't know that they were signing their lives over to the country."

Most of Joe's friends, including Bob, joined the Navy, but Joe took his own path, enlisting in the Army and serving as a paratrooper in the 504th and 508th Parachute Infantry Regiments of the famed 82nd Airborne Division. Little is to be seen of Joe until the *Gloucester Daily Times (GDT)* reported, "After VE Day, he served as a physical instructor in one of the most difficult military schools in the world - the U.S. Army Jump School." Thereafter, Joe was honorably discharged from his military service as a Private First Class on May 19, 1946.

Joe shared only a little of his war experience with me. On several occasions he brought to the Mayor's Office a large, battered cigar box. It contained wartime memorabilia: his service pistol, his medals, his ribbons, and other insignia of his service. He said he saw combat and mentioned "jumping behind enemy lines," but he gave no details; instead, he would transition to talk of the hard battle to clean up the watershed and the Blackburn Sanctuary.

A partial overview of Joe's parachute units' combat experience in Western Europe in 1944 and 1945 can be found in the "Further Reading" section at the end of this story. It gives an account of their major roles in the D-Day landings, Operation Market Garden, and the Battle of the Bulge, and it was all tough and deadly. Their effectiveness was recognized by an immediate post-war assignment to guard General Eisenhower in his role as the commander of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force during the initial occupation of Germany.

Joe would only fully share his memories of combat with a small circle of veteran friends with similar experiences – Mike Cody, Bob McKinnon, and a few others. And each held the other's stories close. The only hint of danger, and a modest one at that, comes from Virginia McKinnon recollecting that Joe had broken his leg on one jump. Joe's military service to his country did not end with his discharge, as the *GDT* reported:

*In late 1954, Orange was chosen to demonstrate American parachute methods for Marshal Zhukov, Marshal of the Soviet Union. Orange was part of a small team which jumped for Marshal Zhukov in Berlin, Germany. General Eisenhower was among the spectators. Later in the same year, Orange was part of a team of instructors which demonstrated American methods of pre-jump training for top ranking brass of the Russian General Staff in Frankfurt, Germany.*

To be selected for these demonstrations was a big deal. They occurred during a particularly tense period of the Cold War as the power struggle played out in the Soviet Union to identify a new national leader in the aftermath of Stalin's death in 1953. Zhukov was a key figure in this struggle. It mattered that this exercise was a success, and Joe helped ensure that success.

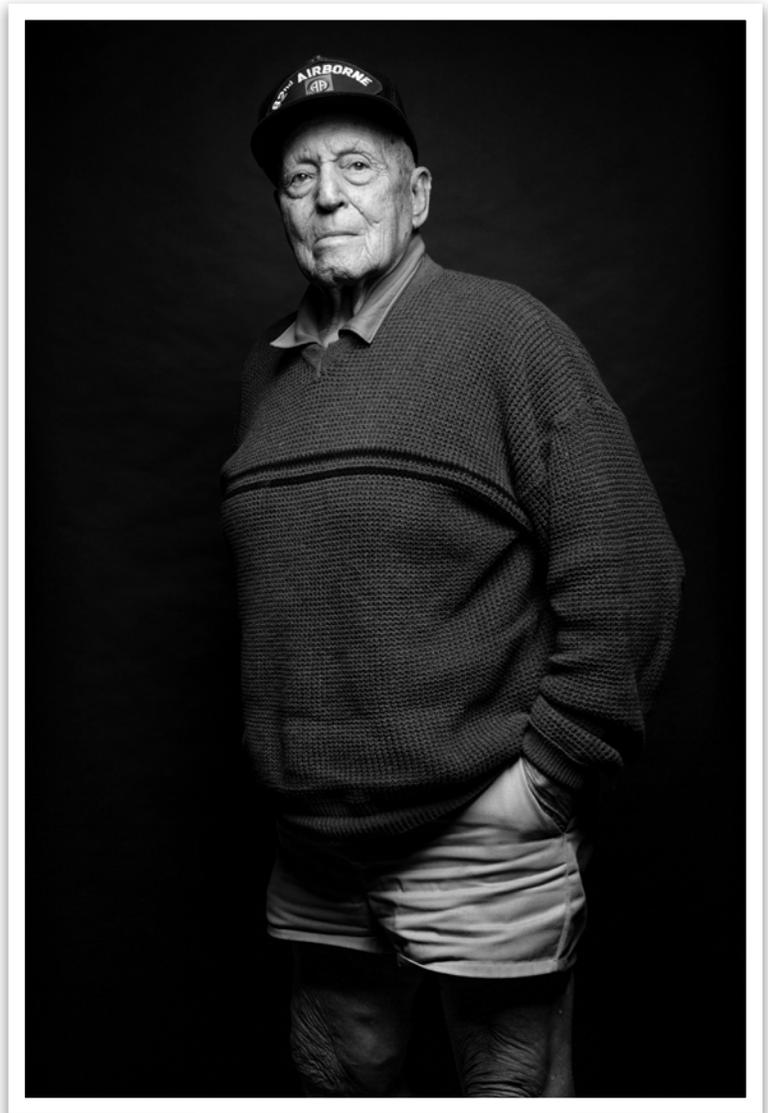
I have found but a single instance where Joe reduced to words his feelings on his service and his paratrooper brothers:

**From the GDT, August 28, 1956**

*Back in early 1946, I stood on a platform and muttered some words of farewell to fellow hard-bitten paratroopers. Paratroopers are members of an exclusive fraternity. They know the awful feeling of falling through space in the dead of night, comforted only with the thought that others are falling close nearby. It is little comfort. Some reach the ground only to stay there. Standing on that platform, saying goodbye, was a difficult chore.*

Jason Grow encountered Joe's private pride in his military service when photographing his acclaimed Cape Ann World War II Veterans Portrait Project. In a Facebook post on the occasion of Joe's passing, Jason noted the role Joe played in the project.

*In no uncertain terms he let me know that he was glad I was doing the project, and he had absolutely no interest in being a part of it. He became my white whale. Thankfully he had a soft spot for my wife Sarah, and I'm 100% positive it was she who softened his resolve over the next couple of months. He wouldn't talk much about the war – wouldn't tell me much of anything actually, but what a great god-damned photo he made.*



Courtesy of Jason Grow © Jason Grow

It is a fine photo indeed.

Joe's assignment as a physical instructor at the U.S. Army Jump School with the cessation of European hostilities in May 1945 was further testimony to Joe's deep personal commitment to fitness training. He was to spend many more years training generations of Gloucester youth in the science of physical education. Some of his work occurred in formal positions which he held. For example, the 1959 GHS *Flicker* noted that "Mr. Joseph Orange is the instructor of the boys' physical education program. A varied sports program is offered, which includes calisthenics, volleyball, basketball, and others."

John Bichao, one of the older students who helped with GHS gym classes, one day worked with substitute teacher Mr. Orange. John recalls Joe beginning class by asking the group of boys whether any of them questioned the manhood of someone who played tennis: numerous hands promptly went up. They did not know Joe was an avid tennis player at the time. "All who raised your hands, please step forward. Now drop and give me twenty-five." Mr. Orange's control of the class was quickly established.

But it was with his work at the Gloucester (now Cape Ann) YMCA that Joe found his premiere platform. He was introduced to the community in his new role of Physical Director in the *GDT* in September 1956 through an article reciting a resume of athletic achievement. One was as a hockey player: "Orange played with the power-packed Gloucester Hockey Club for many seasons. He barnstormed all over New England."

Competitive weightlifting was also a noteworthy arena. "Orange has been very active in New England weightlifting circles, winning many honors for the YMCA," the *GDT* reported, listing as proof an impressive array of trophies from top finishes at several years of statewide and regional events. Then there was swimming: "Orange has achieved an excellent reputation as a swimmer, participating in many long distance races. Over the years he has taught swimming to hundreds of young people." Going forward, Joe was to teach many hundreds more.

Cindy Dench, who worked as a teenager at the YMCA during the summer, remembers Joe's Camp Spindrift swimming lessons:

*Lots of kids learned from him. I helped him in "Learn to Swim" week when he had the pool drained down low. I can hear him now: "Arms out in front, face in the water, and*

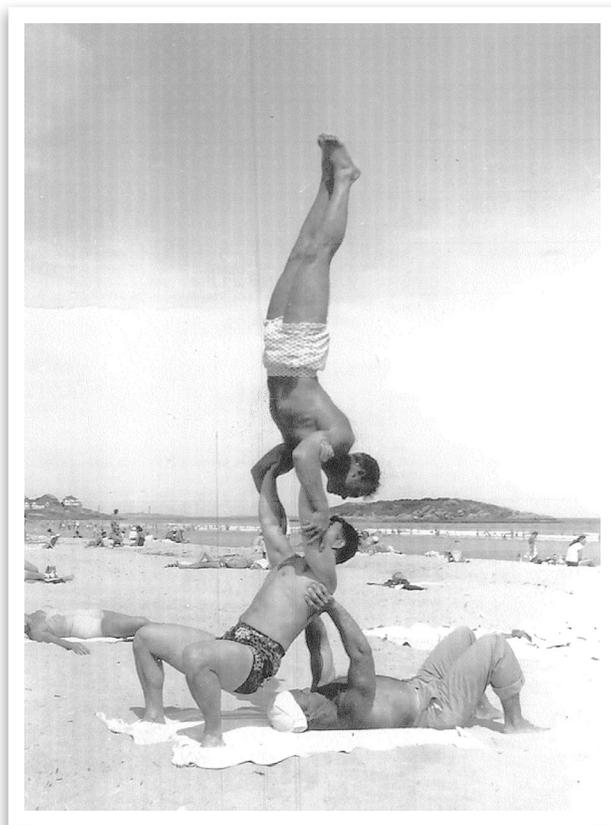
*kick." I remember him as Uncle Joe at the YMCA and Camp Spindrift, both locations, and he was the master of the buddy call.*

It was not for nothing that the Camp Spindrift swimming pool was named after Joe in the early 2000s as part of a celebration honoring the years of service Joe and his friend Willie Gouzie gave to the Gloucester and Cape Ann YMCA.

Joe's strong swimming skills had also led him to take summer jobs in the 1950s as a lifeguard on Gloucester's beaches. He was a fixture on the public side of Good Harbor Beach and also saw duty as a guard on the private Brier Neck end of the beach. It was probably inevitable that Good Harbor Beach became a stage for Joe's athleticism. Dave Curley shared his father's memory of Joe as a lifeguard in the 1950s as a "big, big swimmer."

*He'd go into the water and pull a couple of life jackets behind him. Or he tied a rope around his waist, and he'd swim the beach towing a five-gallon bucket. And then he'd come out of the water and do gymnastics with his pals like at a California muscle beach.*

Virginia McKinnon had a name for Joe and his performing gymnast friends: "the beach clowns." It was a regular summer event: "Every Saturday afternoon, there was Joe Orange, the Dickman twins, Bobby Bruce, and my husband Bob. They all met at the beach and put on their show. I took my camera with me one day and took pictures of them. They were really a riot."



Courtesy of Virginia Frontiero McKinnon

Joe was very engaged in other athletic endeavors as well: skiing, tennis, and golf. He went on regular ski trips to New Hampshire for many years with Greg Swinson, Kevin O'Maley, Don Riley, Dave Curley, and other friends. Mike Cody remembers that "Joe always did his jump

squats for his skiing.” Joe was always a sight to behold – he would ski harder and longer than his companions, who had strong legs of their own and relative youth, too. Bob Gillis is quick to make a key point: “Though Joe said many times that he loved the mountains for skiing, hiking, and their beauty, he could never leave the ocean and Gloucester.”

Joe’s tennis past, on the other hand, is rarely discussed. Avis Murray, the longtime tennis professional at the Bass Rocks Golf Club, had many opportunities to watch Joe play tennis doubles over the years. Her judgment is emphatic: “He was a good player and loved the game.” An important part of his devotion to the sport was his friendship with his doubles partner, Arthur Myett. But with Arthur’s sudden death in 1975 came the end of Joe’s tennis days. Instead, he took up golf: “I’ve got to do something different. I can’t play tennis if Arthur’s not with me,” is what Bob remembers Joe saying. And, as one might expect, Joe proved to be a fine golfer.

It is noteworthy that Arthur Myett and Joe were also professional peers – Arthur was the circulation manager of the *GDT*, and Joe held the same position at the *Daily News of Newburyport*. Many are surprised to learn that a portion of Joe’s life was spent in a shirt and tie behind a desk. A 1985 Bates College graduate working a new job in Boston, Anthony Burnham, would often lift weights after hours with Joe. They would talk about the daily routine of business life, and Anthony kept track of Joe’s reputation at the *Daily News*: “He was very successful as the circulation director for many years.”

---

The components of Joe’s life discussed up to this point – combat veteran, instructor, athlete, friend, and even businessman – show his life was active and fulfilling and that he made many valuable contributions to others. But there were additional layers to Joe that made him one-of-a-kind, larger than life, and, ultimately, a Gloucester legend. Three are typically discussed: his sometimes over-the-top personal weightlifting habits, the unorthodox uniform in which he lived his daily life, and his dedication to the commitment he made as a child to Roger Babson.

---

Weightlifting for Joe was a drill in consistency, strength, and discipline. Regardless of his age, his goal was unchanging: to work as hard as he could so his body and spirit were capable

of peak performance. It was not a coincidence that he destroyed not one, but at least two leg presses in the course of his life.

The first casualty occurred in John Bichao's garage gym on Trask Street. The popularity of Gloucester's garage gyms in the 1970s was spurred by the demolition of the old YMCA on Middle Street. It was there, in the lower basement, that Joe had his private weightlifting club, featuring only old-style equipment for the use of him and his brotherhood. That tradition continued in the garage gyms, and John's gym included a leg press. Dave Curley was a witness:

*It wasn't a self-standing leg press. It was one of the ones that you climbed underneath. You pushed it straight up, and it wasn't bolted to the floor. It had just two small support rods, and they didn't get bolted into the wall. Joe had 500 to 600 pounds on it; that's a lot of weight. The whole thing crumbled – he's doing twenty reps and gets to about fifteen when, all of a sudden, the stanchions start to buckle. He somehow rolled out of there just before the thing collapsed.*

Anthony Burnham later learned from a sheepish Joe of the second episode:

*We left Bichao's gym when it closed, and Joe started going to the new Middle Street Y. I saw him at Dun Fudgin', and I said, "How's the Y working out?" He said, "I can't work out." "What do you mean?" "They don't want me for a while." "What happened?" "Well, I was down there and had 500 pounds on the leg press and I broke it. They told me I had to take a break."*

Carolyn Stewart, who worked with Joe on Blackburn Industrial Park issues, also has distinct memories of his presence years later at the Y. "Hugging him was like hugging a tree, solid muscle. My personal trainer and I used to joke when we approached the leg press at the Y and it was set at 400 pounds: 'Joe was here.'"

His workouts always ended with a run, and not just any run: "I'm going to Ravenswood now for a 10-mile with the 10-pound dumbbells." The bottom line was that Joe was going to push the limits even if it seemed excessive or came with a risk – his priority was to stay as strong and fit as possible so he could fully engage the tasks that defined his life.

Then there was Joe's unconventional everyday garb; rain or snow, summer or winter, day or night – it didn't matter: khaki-colored shorts, one of several often-frayed signature sweaters, knee-high socks and sneakers, and, in his only concession to season, ankle-high boots in the winter and sneakers the rest of the year. It made Joe one of the most immediately recognized individuals in the City of Gloucester.

Little about this outfit was left to chance, as Joe's longtime friend Bob Ryan learned during Joe's convalescent stay at Seacoast Nursing Home in 2020. Several pairs of shorts had been lost, and Joe, with concern in his voice, called Bob for a favor: that Bob go to Nelson's clothing store on Main Street in Gloucester and purchase two new pairs of Joe's signature Dickies shorts. The final detail was critical: "Please have them hemmed to a 7-inch inseam."

There are countless tales of Joe and his uniform – two should suffice. One comes from Bob Gillis, who remembers well his first cross country skiing jaunt with Joe on the Ravenswood Park figure-eight on an early February morning. He was a bit concerned about the frigid temperature – two degrees above zero. They met at the entrance to Ravenswood, ready to go – Bob in his winter garb and Joe in his shorts.

I have one, too. During the endless snowstorms of 1996, people hunkered down at home. Foot and vehicle traffic was minimal, especially on the weekends. One Saturday, I gingerly drove to yet another City Hall snowstorm planning meeting. Though visibility was terrible, I saw a pedestrian boldly striding down the Post Office stairs to the sidewalk. I drew nearer, realizing it was Joe, lowered my window and called out: "You knucklehead, go home and put some pants on!"

A dark look shot from his eyes, ceasing only with his recognition it was me. Joe grinned ear-to-ear, waved, and wished me a good and safe day. I smiled and waved back, happy to have emerged unscathed. But my survival was not a privilege of office; it was the fruit of long and serious work done in the name of defending the Babson Watershed.

---

Joe Orange first hit my radar screen was when I was a City Councilor in the late 1980s. He made several appearances before the council during those three years under "Oral Communications,"

a block of time set aside for folks to sound off briefly on concerns that were not on the agenda. One at a time, people would approach the podium, introduce themselves, and struggle to make themselves heard through an inadequate microphone in an acoustically-challenged auditorium with a forty-foot high tin ceiling.

On each occasion that Joe came to the podium, he stated his name and address for the record, recited his longtime commitment to protecting the Babson Reservoir, and proceeded to orate. He needed no microphone – his voice filled the room. And he certainly needed no script because he spoke from his heart of the peril to be found at the Babson Watershed: trash dumping, drugs and booze, and tent communities hosting all manner of activities. The council president would thank him and refer the concerns to the Office of the Mayor for a response. Having taken note, we councilors all moved on to the next agenda item.

That changed in the late spring of 1991 during my first year as Mayor. Buried in budget documents alone in the office, I was relieved when the intercom buzzed – it was the stalwart gatekeeper of the Mayor’s Office, Gaye Clark: “Mr. Orange would like to see you, Mayor.” After exchanging a handshake and words of greeting, he took charge – he didn’t walk into the office; he marched and downloaded. He paced the room, speaking passionately and in precise detail. While his intensity captured my attention, I reviewed where all the exits were.

His message was simple: Dogtown and the watershed faced an unprecedented threat. The Dogtown Advisory Committee was about to recommend to me and the Fire Chief, Barry McKay, that a controlled burn be conducted in the Babson Woods to remove excessive brush and young tree growth. The goal was to create breaks to confine future fire. But Joe saw the phrase “controlled burn” as the ultimate oxymoron:

*Mr. Mayor, there is no controlling a burn, and the damage that may be inflicted upon the natural state of the woodlands will impair the rich productivity of our watershed. Our greatest asset as a City is our bountiful water supply. Without water, there is no life. Without water, there is no Gloucester.*

Those last words still ring in my ears: “Without water, there is no Gloucester.” I promised to confer with others with an interest in the matter, make my own decision, and get back to him with a

follow-up meeting before anything else happened in Dogtown. I could be wrong, but I think he knew I was not blowing him off and that he had got me with that last sentence.

Thus began my education in fire prevention and controlled burns. I met at length with Fire Chief Barry McKay, who shared his vast knowledge; I had a long session with the advisory committee's chair, Peter Anastas, one of Joe's many great friends as well as his frequent foe on Dogtown management issues; I gained the insight of the DPW staff with knowledge of the City's mixed legacy in the care and custody of the Babson reservation; and I read more than I ever imagined I might about controlled burns and forestry management.

About two weeks later, Joe met with me again in the Mayor's Office. I proposed an alternative approach - let's take the controlled burn off the table and start instead with an intensified program of brush removal, growth management, and fire road cutting. It would provide summer jobs to local school kids and potentially address the concern about the need for fire breaks and emergency access. There was one catch – it would need oversight from someone who knew every square foot of the woodlands. "Joe, will you help?" He agreed without hesitation. A problem was solved, and a friendship was born.

Beginning in 1994, a summer clean-up program was launched, and DPW's Ed Parks as the Watershed Administrator and Rick Gonsalves as the Working Foreman jointly led it for its first five years. For three months each summer, with Joe as their working guide, they and a crew of eight summer workers worked on various watershed projects. "They were trained to use chain

saws and a chipper," Rick recalls. "Emphasizing safety was of the utmost importance." To this day, Rick is justly proud of the work the team accomplished under Joe's careful and constant guidance. "No other crew in the City of Gloucester had ever done so much work to improve the environment as we did."

During the first five years, the crews built new fire roads, cleared dense growth from the dams, reservoirs, and streams, cleaned



Joe Orange surveys the Babson Reservoir from atop the dam with Bruce Tobey on left and Rick Gonsalves on right.

up trash in the woods all over Gloucester, and broke up camps and drug labs deep in the woods. I've checked state records: out of the 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts, Gloucester was the only one to complete a project like this. There would be no finer monument to Joe than for the City to commit to continuing this program in perpetuity.

The matter of securing public safety, however, gave rise to a troubling concern. Joe's activities were not welcomed by everyone, such as those who resented his interference with parties in the woods or other illegal activities. Too often potshots were directed at Joe, and inappropriate verbal complaints and threats were too frequent. This was not acceptable, and it is why, under the provisions of state law, I appointed Joe the Constable of the Babson Reservoir in 1994, empowering him as a law enforcement officer carrying both a badge and a firearm. Although this action was not initially unanimously praised, it came to be. It enhanced Joe's ability to make the woods safer and cleaner. Joe thanked me as I handed him his commission as the Constable, which he proudly accepted. I never knew him not to have it in his possession.

Joe also drove the effort to correct an oversight in the design of Dory Road, the roadway providing access to Blackburn Industrial Park. The road begins at Blackburn Circle with a tight and potentially hazardous S-curve. Because it was very close to the watershed, the curve posed a serious threat to the Babson Reservoir: should a tanker truck jack-knife and spill its contents, the pollutants would run straight to the reservoir. An engineered containment area was needed to capture such a spill. Through his tireless advocacy, an effective facility was designed, funding was secured, and construction successfully occurred.

With that issue resolved, the door opened to revisit whether an expansion of the Blackburn Industrial Park might occur. For two decades, growth of the industrial base located in the park had been stymied by fierce opposition from environmentalists and protectors of the Babson Watershed which bordered the existing park. As you might imagine, one of the most vociferous of those protectors was Joe Orange.

Carolyn Stewart was then the Executive Director of Gloucester's Economic Development and Industrial Commission, which oversees the City's public industrial parks. She reached out to Joe to explore what might be possible, and both an unlikely friendship and an important breakthrough were achieved.

*I remember the first time I met Joe, quaking in my boots. Boots, because it was probably February or March. He was wearing shorts, of course. I found him, frankly, scary. But in the spring we went walking in those woods together, woods he knew like the back of his hand. He pointed out the stone animal pens left over from earlier settlements, the glacial moraine, the vernal pools. Slowly, I became less afraid of him, and he began to trust me. A bond was formed that made a huge difference as we went forward. He was proud, in the end, of what we accomplished together for the good of the city he loved. He was a gentleman and a scholar. And I loved him.*

Their collaboration, joined by Carolyn O'Connor, Dick Josephson of Varian, John McNiff of McNiff Properties (both then and now major tenants in the park), and Council President Abdullah Khambaty, delivered. It forged an agreement whereby an access road, now known as Great Republic Drive, was built far away from the watershed and created lots for development that were similarly distant. It was an engaged conservationist named Joe Orange who helped parent expanded industrial development capacity and job growth for Gloucester.

In future years, Joe weighed in on numerous other issues concerning the Babson reservation. One involved discussions that a bypass roadway be built to Rockport through the watershed so drivers could avoid Eastern Avenue and its traffic lights. With typical energy and zeal, Joe directly lobbied Gloucester, Rockport, and state officials and mobilized broader opposition. With his unique single-mindedness and discipline, he pointed out the direct violation of Roger Babson's deed that such a road would constitute, and thundered at the monumental threat it would pose to the rich supply of water that flowed through those lands. Discussions of a bypass road quickly ceased.

Joe also advocated in 2005 and 2008 for the establishment of a curfew in the Babson Watershed from one hour after sunset until one hour before sunrise. "Most people living there are harmless, hopeless, and helpless," he said, "But not all are, and problems still remain." Joe's point was simple: "No one should be in the Babson woods after sunset. A curfew gives us another tool to combat this challenge." Joe did not prevail in this quest: a search of City records indicates that a curfew has yet to be established, although an ordinance bars the public from its parks after 9 p.m.

Nevertheless, armed with his physical strength and steadfast courage, his inextinguishable tenacity, and his keen intellect and powers of persuasion, Joe Orange delivered with unsurpassed success on the commitment he made nearly ninety years ago: “I promise, Mr. Babson. I promise I will always watch over these woods for you.”

---

Joe Orange was brought to Gloucester by adoptive parents as an orphaned ten-year-old with no siblings. He neither married nor had children, and hence the documents which accompany the judicial processing of his will indicate he had no survivors.

But he left a vast family of his own construction – veteran friends and their families; Maurice Dench and his family who welcomed Joe into their home and listened to jazz recordings with him, and all the other families which did the same over the years: gym buddies; children, now adults, he had taught to swim; his crew of Bobby Ryan, Tony Bertolino, the late Dr. Neil Mann, and others with whom he would regularly meet at McDonald’s on Fridays for coffee to discuss the state of the world; all who contributed in many ways to this essay; me and mine; and many others too numerous to name.

Like Carolyn Stewart, we all loved him. And we all miss him.

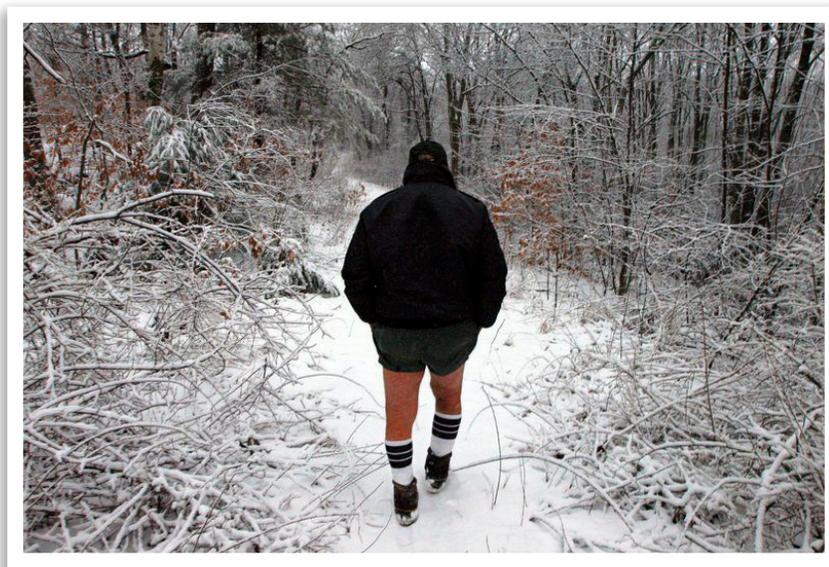


Photo Courtesy of the  
*Gloucester Daily Times*

# Acknowledgments

Many contributed to this essay, sharing their warm remembrance of Joe with their stories, photos, and reflections. The following acknowledgments are offered in lieu of footnotes, which I, as a lawyer, would otherwise insert liberally, but to no good end.

- All quotes from Anthony Burnham, Michael Cody, David Curley, and Robert Gillis come from their participation in a group interview conducted on May 29, 2021, at the Cape Ann Savings Bank. I am grateful for their participation as well as that of Chris McCarthy, a later-in-life friend of Joe's, and of Cindy Dench, who prepared email recollections of Joe that were shared during that group session.
- All quotes from Avis Murray come from her participation in an interview held on March 24, 2021, at the Cape Ann Savings Bank.
- All quotes from Virginia Frontiero McKinnon come from an interview at her home conducted on August 11, 2021. She has also graciously shared her photograph of the "Beach Clowns."
- All quotes from John Bichao were obtained from his interview at the Fitness Zone in Blackburn Park late in August 2021.
- All quotes from Carolyn Stewart were extracted from her written remembrance of Joe which she shared with me on August 8, 2021.
- All quotes from Robert Ryan were extracted from his written remembrance of Joe which he shared with me on September 17, 2021.
- All quotes from Rick Gonsalves were extracted from his written remembrance of Joe which he shared with me on September 20, 2021.
- Although not quoted, Anthony Bertolino, Esq. shared keen insights with me through his September 2021 written remembrance of Joe's deeply held environmental commitments; they are embedded in the text of this essay.

Others offered critical research support to this effort. Thanks go to Trenton Carls, Librarian & Archivist at the Cape Ann Museum for his search of archival records of the *Gloucester Daily Times* contained in the museum's collection and to Jacklyn Linsky, Local History Librarian for the Gloucester Lyceum & Sawyer Free Library.

My gratitude also goes out to Jason Grow for allowing use in this essay of his portrait of Joe from Jason's magnificent "Cape Ann World War II Veterans Portrait Project." Thanks go as well to Andrea Holbrook, Managing Editor of the *Gloucester Daily Times*, for granting permission to use photos of Joe on duty in the Babson Watershed from the newspaper's archives.

Finally, I will always be deeply appreciative of the effort and patience my daughter Emily Tobey DiMercurio expended on this project. She helped in innumerable ways, working on research, helping with important interviews, and keeping me organized and focused against all odds. Most critically, she possessed the wisdom to tell me to stop with the research and get on with the writing.

## FURTHER READING

To learn more about Joe's the combat experience of Joe's parachute units in Western Europe in 1944 and 1945, visit:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20091129192048/http://www.bragg.army.mil/4bct/1942-46.htm>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Tobey is a third-generation member of the Gloucester community. He and his wife, Patricia, are the proud parents of their four daughters, Emily, Dana, Melanie, and Pamela, and their seven grandchildren, Lilliana, Stella, Emilia, Jackson, Henry, Mia, and Michael. He was privileged to be Joe Orange's friend.