Meant-to-be Moments
Fred Peterson’s Early Family Memories
by Terry Weber Mangos

Fred and Joanne Peterson, 1957, Rockport
FOREWORD

This story is partly derived from a 2018 interview with Fred Peterson conducted by Wayne Soini of the Cape Ann Finns and subsequent interviews by Terry Weber Mangos.

Fred Peterson proudly distinguishes the area he grew up in as “Pigeon Cove,” not Rockport. Technically, Pigeon Cove is one of the neighborhoods of Rockport, and had/has longtime friendly rivalries with Rockport’s other neighborhoods.

The term “Finns” is an abbreviated way to refer to anyone of Finnish descent.

Thank you to the Gloucester Writers Center for co-producing this story and for their continuing commitment to tell the stories of Gloucester and its people.
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If it weren’t for Fred’s father’s adventurous 1923 two week road trip from Pigeon Cove to Red Lodge, Montana, Fred Peterson would not exist. Fred’s father Carl was born in Pigeon Cove in 1900. By 16, Carl had a job as a chauffeur; at 18, he was driving electric cars; and in his early 20’s, he was driving buses for the Gloucester Auto Bus Company. In the summer of 1923, Carl’s older brother, Axel, an ordained Lutheran minister was called to Red Lodge, Montana to serve as a pastor in a small Finnish parish. As only a big brother could, Axel talked Carl into driving him to Red Lodge, over 2,500 miles away from Pigeon Cove!

Back row: Carl Peterson (Fred’s father), Carl’s sister Anna, Carl’s brothers: Axel and Altti. In the front row is Andrew Peterson (Fred’s grandfather) and Fred’s grandmother, Maria. Circa 1916.
“They left that summer in a 1917 Model T Ford, not knowing what lay ahead of them,” said Fred. But, off they went in their car, which they had customized to make it more like a pick-up truck.

Up to Chicago, the roads were mostly paved and passable, but west of Chicago the roads became mostly unpaved, and so were more like trails. A road trip across northwestern America in 1923 also meant several nights of camping wherever you could find a spot, as hotels, inns and official campsites were few and far between.

“I would imagine that this road trip was a great bonding experience between my Dad and his brother,” said Fred. “At night they camped in the middle of nowhere, in what was then the raw wilderness. But they were brothers, so they looked out for each other.”

Fred recalled his father talking about the “gumbo roads”- the muddy and treacherous and trails they had to conquer to get to Red Lodge. “They had to put chains on the tires to get them through the muddiest of spots,” said Fred. “They were able to patch up multiple flat tires along the way, as they had the forethought to bring emergency supplies.”
In the last sixty miles of the trip between Billings, Montana to Red Lodge, Axel and Carl experienced another flat tire. It was impossible to repair because the tire had been patched so many times. As a last resort, they filled the flat tire with rags and burlap and wobbled their way into Red Lodge.

On today’s roads, it is about 2300 miles from Rockport to Red Lodge, Montana with many hotels along the way. Not so in 1923 when a road trip across the northern United States meant driving on unpaved roads (trails) through mud and over rocks, through creeks and camping wherever you could find a spot.

Soon after arriving, Axel began work as a minister in the Finnish church, and Carl decided to settle in Montana for the time being. Carl sought work as a bus driver and thanks to his experience driving buses for the Gloucester Auto Bus company, he passed the Civil Service Examination for driving buses in Yellowstone National Park. Coincidentally, the manufacturer of Yellowstone’s buses was the same manufacturer of the buses that Carl had driven on Cape Ann, so Carl was already an expert driver!

Soon after settling in Montana, Carl met Lillian, his future wife, at the local Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, the same church where his brother had become the pastor.

“At that time, in a small town in the early 1920s, most social activity centered around the church,” said Fred. “As a result, my parents attended many functions together and took a shine to each other, as they say.”
In 1926 Carl and Lillian were married on June 16, with Axel presiding over the service. Axel also married a local Montanan, Helena, named after the state capital. After Yellowstone closed in the fall, the four newlyweds headed east in a 1924 Buick touring car. The return road trip to Pigeon Cove brought new challenges (and rewards!) as the men were now traveling with their wives.

Fred recalled one of his father’s favorite stories from the return road trip: “One night they were all bedded down in the tent, there were some rustling sounds - then a strange man poked his head in between the flaps of the tent,” said Fred. “The intruder found himself looking at the working end of a 38-caliber pistol. Uncle Axel was a pistol-packing Padre! Exit the intruder post-haste! Dad loved to tell that one.”

Upon returning to Pigeon Cove, Carl and his new bride lived on Hillside Road in Pigeon Cove, where they stayed for a few years. Right after the market crash of ‘29, Axel was reassigned to a parish in the suburbs of Jersey City, NJ, and Carl and Lillian went with him as there wasn’t much work on Cape Ann.
Enter Fred Peterson

Fred was born in 1936, not long after his family arrived in New Jersey and four years after his brother Robert was born. After living in Jersey City for about two years, the family planned to move to Brooklyn for better work opportunities.

“Dad had already paid one month’s rent in Brooklyn,” said Fred. “For some reason – he never could explain it – when the movers loaded the truck and slammed that back door, he said, ‘We’re not going to Brooklyn! We’re going back to Pigeon Cove, Massachusetts!’”

Fred describes that moment as a “meant-to-be-moment,” one of many in his life. “Some things cannot be explained logically,” said Fred. “He had work in Brooklyn waiting for him and a place to live, but in that moment, he felt the calling to come back to Pigeon Cove. It turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me.”

20 Hillside Road in Rockport where Fred and his family lived for many years. The street numbers have changed since then. Circa 1930s.
First Memories – Hurricane

Not long after Fred and his family settled in Pigeon Cove, the Hurricane of ’38 hit New England. It left over 500 people dead across the region and thousands of people homeless.¹ Fifty-foot waves were reported in Gloucester.² The hurricane and its aftermath remain as one of Fred’s earliest memories. “At the intersection of Curtis and Granite streets, a large tree was uprooted,” said Fred. “After the storm, I was standing in the back seat of dad’s old Pontiac looking out the rear window and was awed by the height of the roots.”

Despite the bad luck of the hurricane, Fred’s family made a life for themselves on Cape Ann and kept some of their Finnish traditions alive.

The Sauna

While proudly talking about Finnish traditions, Fred proudly took a minute to relay the history of the Finnish sauna and its prevalence in Pigeon Cove and other parts of Cape Ann. According to Fred, many of the early quarry workers in Rockport came from Finland, many of whom meant to return to Finland but settled here. Along with the “Finns” came a way of life that included the sauna, pronounced “sow-nah,” as Fred corrected me repeatedly.

Fred recalled that in the late 1930s and 1940s, his family had a granite sauna and their own ice rink in the backyard of their property. At four years old, Fred was already on single-blade skates. The sauna was detached from the main house and kept warm by firewood.
“We used to take a sauna, even as kids, and then dive into the snow afterward,” said Fred. “Nowadays the doctors say that taking a sauna followed by cold water is good for you. Not only is it good for you, but it was also great fun as a kid.”

According to Fred the sauna his family had is now a storage shed, but it still exists on his family’s former property on Hillside Road.

In addition to diving in the snow after a sauna, Fred also fondly recalled swimming in the quarries after a sauna and ice skating at the quarries in the winter. “We Finns didn’t call them quarries; we called them pits,” said Fred. “Quarries are for tourists.”

The granite from the Rockport quarries of course was used around the country, but it was also used in quarry workers own homes.

**Resourcefulness of Finns**

The cul-de-sac driveway that encircled Fred’s house was made of “rotten stone” from the land where his grandfather had a “working motion.” A working motion is a small 1-2 person quarry. To help maintain the driveway, a neighbor, Avo (Hockey) Martin, would loosen the driveway with dynamite normally used in the quarries.

“I remember riding in the back of a pick-up truck my dad fashioned out of an old car by removing the roof and back seat, with Avo cradling the dynamite charge sitting in the front seat,” said Fred. “I even got a chance to push the handle on one blast. I was about 5 or 6 years old. I am pretty sure that having kids anywhere near dynamite is frowned upon now.”

As we talked about the resourcefulness of Finns, Fred took out an unusual pair of mittens. They were made in 1939 when Russia invaded Finland. The women of Fred’s family would gather and knit these mittens by the
dozens. Each mitten had a separate trigger-finger, and a little blue band for the Finnish flag on the wristlet.

“The intention was to do everything they could to keep Finland free in 1939,” said Fred. “No one thought that we couldn’t do anything. The attitude was, let us help. You use your own resourcefulness. You become part of something. You’re rooting for them. Similar things are happening now.”

Resourcefulness and the ability to adapt to challenging situations seemed to be a theme in Fred’s childhood recollections.

Outhouses

Fred describes the indoor plumbing where he lived at Hillside Road as consisting of only a soapstone kitchen sink on the first floor with an electric pump. Later, another sink was added to the second floor when Fred’s family bought the house. The bathroom was an outhouse in the backyard, with four holes, in case family members needed to use the bathroom at the same time.

“Yes, the outhouse was divided with two holes on each side, one child-size, and one adult size. The majority of outhouses back then were fronted with a trellis of roses, as was ours.”

At nighttime and in the winter months, Fred and his family did not venture outside to use the outhouse. Instead, they kept what he called a “thunder jug” in the bedroom and a pitcher of water.

“Yes, we grew up without modern conveniences, but we didn’t know any different,” said Fred. “Life at the time still had its joy and simple pleasures.”

Rockport Baseball

Fred fondly recalls that having access to Pingree Park on Story Street helped keep him active in sports with his friends. The park was also utilized for athletics by his elementary school, the Pigeon Cove School.
In about the fifth grade, Fred joined the Knothole Gang, a baseball league for kids (then sponsored by the Boston Braves). He became a catcher because he found himself bored at any other position, and “not too many people wanted to stand behind someone swinging a bat.”

At first, Fred used his dad’s old glove but eventually asked his father for a new catcher’s mitt. His father told him to stick with catching as he would not be buying another glove.

“After many years of use, I wore a hole in the glove,” said Fred, “A local Finnish cobbler, Antti Niemi, sewed in a new leather patch, so I was able to use it many more years.”

The team had other Finns including Jackie Martin, Jackie Kleimola, Ronnie “Jug Head” Huttunen, and Billy Gates. Non-Finns were Dick and Johnny Carlson, Paul “Sep” Sepich, John “Grass” Powers, John Story, Bobby Nelson, Roger DiNapoli, and Richie “Half Pint” Johnson.

After the Knothole Gang, Fred played for the Rockport Junior Legion Team between the ages of 13 to 18.

“I have many fond memories of playing baseball and going to school,” said Fred, but one memory that still stands out had nothing to do with baseball. It was the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.”

World War II Memories

“I wasn’t quite six years old when the attack on Pearl Harbor happened,” said Fred. “It’s something I’ll never forget. Dad loved classical music and would listen on Sunday afternoons on his floor model Stromberg-Carlson radio. It had a dial as large as some of our first TVs. When the announcement came, the adults in the family gathered to listen and talk. Finally, someone said,
‘Where’s Freddy?’ Mother found me at the dining room window looking down Hillside Road to Stockholm Avenue. I was already on guard duty.”

Although WWII seemed far away to some, life changed in Rockport as the war raged on. The Coast Guard patrolled the shoreline looking for enemy U-boats in the Atlantic waters, not far from Rockport.

“My Uncle Altti was on land,” said Fred. “He was one of the guards that patrolled a chain-link fence topped with barb wire enclosing the Cape Ann Tool Company who forged parts for the war effort 24/7.” Fred proudly explained that the Cape Ann Tool Company was awarded the Army-Navy “E” Award for achieving “Excellence in Production” during WWII.

During much of WWII, the U.S. coastline was under a blackout so as not to aide enemy planes and boats with their navigation. Fred recollects several guard stations along the coast and a volunteer auxiliary police force carrying nightsticks to patrol the coast.

“If any resident had a light on that shone out to sea, they would tap on the door and have the light extinguished,” said Fred. “It got down to the small things too,” said Fred. “During the blackout period, the top half of all headlights were painted black, and the streetlights had a metal shield blocking the light on the ocean side.”

**Baseball Scholarship to Boston University**

Fred describes himself as lucky to have particular mentors at a critical time—more moments that were meant-to-be. Dr. John M. Harmon, a professor at Boston University (BU), moved to Rockport in the early 1950s and had a son that played sports with Fred. Harmon took note of Fred’s baseball skills, and in the spring of ’52, Harmon arranged a baseball tryout at BU for Fred. Fred hopped into his ’35 Chevy and drove there with the same catcher’s mitt that the local cobbler Antii had repaired for him.

When Fred arrived for his tryout, he was waiting at Nickerson Field and heard a voice behind him say, “Hey.” Fred ended up playing catch with Harry Agganis, one of the most well-known
athletes to attend BU, who eventually played first baseman for the Boston Red Sox in 1954 to 1955.

“My baseball glove brought me luck. It’s the only baseball glove I’ve ever owned,” said Fred. “I was wearing it when I played catch with Harry Agganis, and it helped me get a four-year scholarship to college.”

Around the same time Fred was considering colleges, he also was scouted by the St. Louis Browns and other teams. Later, the Chicago Cubs did offer Fred a minor league contract, but he declined it in favor of a graduate assistantship at BU. Fred eventually graduated with a master’s degree in Education in August of ’58.

A Grateful Man

The 1950s era of Fred’s life was quite busy with school and baseball, but he found the time to marry his high school sweetheart, Joanne. They began a new life together and later had two children, Wayne and Deborah Joan. Whenever Fred spoke of his family life, he included the many women who held significant influence over him. He described his mother Lillian as very talented, hardworking, with “an abundance of sisu”— a common Finnish description of someone who possesses a unique combination of courage, grit, and determination. To someone who has sisu, no task is insurmountable.

“Where my Mom got all the energy and the ability to focus is still a mystery,” said Fred. “She was part of the Folly Cove Designers at one time. She left them and sold her block printing and artwork in a shop on Bearskin Neck. Painting and flower arranging were her forte.”

Fred Peterson (at top right) with a few teammates from Boston University’s varsity baseball team. If the uniforms look familiar, it’s because the Boston Red Sox used to donate their old uniforms to BU.
Another female influence was Fred’s cousin Audrey, who worked for the CIA for 25 years. During her career, she would often come to Cape Ann for much-needed R&R. Another cousin of Fred’s, who currently lives in Lanesville, is Phyllis Wickey. Fred describes her as the current matriarch of the family and the “glue” that holds the family together.

“I talk a lot about meaningful moments in the past, moments that were meant-to-be,” said Fred. “I’m grateful I’ve had over eighty years’ worth of those moments, and still do, with my love, my wife, Joanne. My entire family, my friends, and my life on Cape Ann are everything to me.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS FROM FRED PETERSON

I would like to thank Wayne Soini and the Cape Ann Finns for their initial interview where this story first came to be. Thank you to the Gloucester400+ and the Gloucester Writers Center for their work to share community stories, including the stories of Finns. Thank you also to my cousin Phyllis Wickey for helping me gather the photos needed to tell this story. And last, but not least, I would like to thank Terry Weber Mangos for her care in telling my story, insightful conversations, and guidance.

ABOUT THE CAPE ANN FINNS

The initial interview on which this story is based is part of a Cape Ann Finns project called “Many Finns, Many Stories.” The mission of the Cape Ann Finns is to preserve information about Finnish families, their community, social and work lives from the mid-1800s to the present in Rockport and Gloucester, MA.

To learn more about the Cape Ann Finns, visit www.capeannfinns.com.
NOTES

NAME CHANGES - In the 1800s and early 1900s, it was common for a new arrival in America to have their name changed by immigration/government officials. Fred Peterson’s father’s name would have been Karlo Kokkonen, but his name was changed to Carl Peterson upon his parents’ arrival here. Fred’s mother Lillian’s original last name was Pakkala but was anglicized to Bakka. Carl’s brother Axel (the minister) decided to change his last name back to Kokkonen so that he could lead the Finnish church with his proper Finnish name intact.

ROCKPORT - Please note that the Gloucester400+ accepts stories from residents of Rockport because Rockport was once part of Gloucester. In 1840, Rockport became its own town.

ENDNOTES


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