People Who Made a Difference
by Walter McGrath, Jr.

Walter's graduation photo, 1951

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FOREWORD

Walter McGrath, Jr., is an 89-year-old resident of Gloucester, MA. He is a member of Cape Ann Finns, a group that works to preserve information about Finnish families including their social and work lives from the mid-1800s to the present in Rockport and Gloucester, MA.
People Who Made A Difference

BY WALTER MCGRATH, JR.

My name is Walter McGrath, Jr. I was born in Rockport, Massachusetts, on February 11, 1933. My mom, Evelyn Maria Niemi, was the Finn in the family. She was one of eight children born to Emil K. Niemi and Josephine K. Mäki. My dad, Walter McGrath, Sr., was one of ten children born to Lawrence McGrath and Myrtle M. Aikens.

Early Lanesville Days

I moved to Lanesville, a neighborhood in Gloucester, MA, in 1937 and have lived there to this day. I attended the Lane School and, with pals, explored and played all over the village including Lanes Cove, Plum Cove, and the many quarries once worked by immigrant Finnish men.

During my childhood, Finns made up a significant portion of Lanesville’s population while all residents socialized and worked together, whether Finns or non-Finns.

Looking back, I can easily identify the influence of four men in the Lanesville Finnish community: Vern Niemi - my uncle, who possessed exceptional musical and teaching talent; Boy Scout Leader Lauri Natti; Scoutmaster Cappy Dunn; and sculptor Walker Hancock. Each of these men influenced my interests and contributed to my career path.
My uncle Vern Niemi’s name indicates his Finnish ancestry. He was a music teacher and band leader at Rockport High School. He’d arrive Sundays in Lanesville when I was very young to give me clarinet lessons until they came out of my ears. I had a metal clarinet, which I desperately tried to bend but couldn’t - you can gather how badly I wanted the lessons to end.

Despite my reluctance, I learned to play well enough that Uncle Vern took me to play in the Rockport Legion Band when I was about 14 or 15 (in approx. 1947). If I were still playing in the band and had not bowed out a couple of years ago, I would have been the oldest member at this time. As it is, seventy years with the band probably comprises a record by itself.

Uncle Vern’s persistence in teaching me to play the clarinet opened the door to four years in the ROTC band at Gloucester High School (GHS). When I later attended Northeastern University, I briefly joined the band, ultimately achieving the rank of warrant officer in the ROTC program. Both experiences led to a commission in the United States Army Corps of Engineers.

Uncle Vern’s gift and love for music have given me pleasure as a performer and listener; music enriches my daily life.
Boy Scout Leader Lauri Natti

Across from the former Lane School (today a children’s playground and a parking lot for St. Paul Lutheran Church) is the building where the Boy Scouts often met to work on projects to earn badges. The building owned by our scout leader Lauri Natti and his wife Elsie Kleimola had once been Hildonen’s bakery. With Lauri Natti and his assistants, we built monkey bridges (simple rope bridges) across Walker Hancock’s quarry. To be clear, we kids called it Walker Hancock’s quarry because he did own it, but its official name may have differed. Building monkey bridges at 12-14 years old – we were serious people engaged in an activity that mattered.

To start the construction of the bridge, one person swam across the quarry pulling a small rope with a larger rope attached. Then, when the swimmer reached the other side, he also pulled the larger rope across. An A-frame was assembled and set up vertically. Then the main rope was set on top. A second A-frame was constructed on the original side. Smaller ropes were used for the handrails. Short ropes were spaced between the main rope and the handrails for support. There were no wooden planks to walk on; your feet were on one rope, and the higher ropes were used to keep your balance and support the bridge. Later, the troop constructed a monkey bridge in the Salem armory for the Boy Scout jamboree.

Scout Leader Natti also arranged Boy Scout camps on Dogtown Common along with Cappy Dunn. Overall, the experiences of constructing bridges, camping, and other Scout activities were “survival training” without the name. Lauri Natti trained us to be self-sufficient and to endure in the outdoors. Put any of us down in the middle of the woods, and we had the skills to stay alive.

Me in my Boy Scout uniform in Lanesville, mid-1940s.
Scoutmaster Harold “Cappy” Dunn

Now, a name associated with Lauri Natti is Cappy Dunn. Cappy was married to Elsie Mattson. She was a Finn, and Cappy’s good fortune to meet and marry her.

Cappy was also a scoutmaster who lived scouting every day of his life. He taught me many skills that I have used throughout life. The scouts often dropped by his house. Elsie used to braid rugs while Cappy worked on projects in the backyard in an Adirondack shed where everybody met. There I learned such skills as how to fold canvas, tie all kinds of knots, paint, and set up entrenched tents.

Lanesville Boy Scout Troop. Me, second from left in front row. Lauri Natti is on far right in white sweater. Harold Cappy Dunn is on far left in white jacket.
On weekends, Cappy would load his Jeep with kids and take us swimming from quarry to quarry. He taught us lifesaving techniques such as how to save someone from drowning. What should you do if the person clings to you and pulls you under? Go underwater, and the person will let go. He’d also load us in the Jeep and take us camping in the Dogtown woods near Whale’s Jaw (a large split rock formation, once on open ground, unlike today). At night we would identify star patterns using a flashlight beam as a pointer. At the time, in the mid-1940s, Dogtown was more open. You could still see outlines of grazing lands for cattle. The trees were not so tall, and from Whale’s Jaw, you could still see the ridges of hills. Sometimes we would go blueberry picking in those hills. Near Whale’s Jaw, I remember seeing another rock with a smooth groove in it, and we speculated that this is where the earlier inhabitants of Dogtown may have sharpened their tools.

Occasionally, Cappy loaned me his kayak, which I stored at my house and used regularly. After Nor’easters, I kayaked off Folly Point, the location of huge ground swells. The valley between the waves was such that at their peak I could not see a fishing boat close by on the other side because of the wave’s height. After the wave passed, the fishing boat came into view.

In 1947, community-minded Cappy organized the scouts to fight a massive forest fire that engulfed Cape Ann, simultaneously teaching us the importance of civic duty.

Sculptor Walker Hancock

Renowned sculptor and teacher Walker Hancock resided in Lanesville. Like Cappy, Walker Hancock had the good fortune of marrying a Finn, Saima Natti, and, thus, becoming absorbed into Lanesville Finnish life. Beginning when I was about 14 or 15, I worked for Walker through high school and college for a total of about seven or eight years.

We became close. In fact, Walker served as best man at my marriage to Joyce, daughter of Finns Arvo and Viano Wallius. “Walker” is my son Timothy’s middle name, so I guess we can figure out where that name came from.
Countless Finnish young men posed for Walker’s sculptures. I modeled for him early on when I walked to his studio in the woods off High Street. Eventually, he asked me to complete other tasks about the time he was commissioned to create inauguration medals for Dwight D. Eisenhower and another for Eisenhower and Richard M. Nixon. Later, while at Northeastern University, I helped with the final touches on a bust of Steven Foster, another commission. I polished the marble bust via a very light sanding to a smooth finish.

An especially cherished souvenir of mine is a signed photograph from Walker. He is standing next to his monument of American naval hero, John Paul Jones. I was hands-on help for Walker with this particular monument, assisting with the surface work on the sculpture while learning about precision and concentration and observing the traits of a master instructor.

The statues and busts created in Lanesville somehow had to get to Newport, New York, or wherever they were destined. For example, the John Paul Jones monument went to Fairmont Park in Philadelphia. Walker and I took other statues and components of his work to Newport, Rhode Island; my involvement was moving his works after they arrived in Newport. He and I picked them up with a station wagon for delivery to places like the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

About Walker’s Pennsylvania Railroad War Memorial in Philadelphia: what I took from Newport to Philadelphia were models he had prepared of the war memorial. Placed in the 30th Street Station, the sculpture is dedicated to the fallen airmen of World War II, a memorial for
the 1,307 soldiers who had worked for the railroad. Walker gave me a photograph of that statue coming into the city on a flatbed trailer. The memorial is the largest statue inside a building in the country, arguably the most viewed, making it virtually his most famous work. The Cape Ann Museum has a smaller but nevertheless impressive version of the memorial.

Success at Hewlett Packard

I must thank my four influences for helping me succeed in the field of mechanical engineering. They sparked my interest in construction, design, teamwork, and discipline. I worked for thirty-nine years inventing products in the R&D medical development lab of Hewlett Packard (HP), Waltham division. After I invented small projects on time, HP asked me to solve and save a $750,000 incomplete project (big money 35 years ago). I said, “If I don’t solve the problem in three months, I’m going to take everybody off the project.”

Only a few trouble spots separate a knotty project from success. The product was a recorder which measured heart or respiration rates of a patient in a hospital’s operating room. It could produce a report on paper, something similar to what a cardiograph machine produces today. A device needed to be developed to “draw” the lines of measurement. I knew the former team had identified one key spot—the tip writer and the tip itself, somewhat similar to the arm and needle of a record player from earlier times. So I decided to tackle that particular step, set a deadline, and determined a realistic and measurable goal. By following this strategy, I developed a hot-tip writing device and successfully solved this project’s key problem. From then on, HP assigned our team to most of its mechanical projects.
Grateful

Because of my musical training with Vern Niemi, I gained a love for both performance and music experiences, which led me to the ROTC band at GHS, then to ROTC at college, and eventually to be selected and succeed in the Army Corps of Engineers. I owe Lauri Natti my first encounters with applied mechanics of construction and teamwork from building monkey bridges over the Lanesville quarries.

I credit Cappy Dunn for providing a living example of constant industry and integrity. As for Walker Hancock, I remain in awe of his mastery of design and attention to fine details, both crucial in my career.

These four men - Finns or married to Finns, members of the Finnish community of old Lanesville, each in unique ways, inspired and stood behind me invisibly—at home, in the community, and at Hewlett Packard.

The telling of this story gratifies me and allows me to give them the fair amount of credit each deserves. Thanks, Uncle Vern, Lauri, Cappy, and Walker.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Rob Ranta, founder of the Cape Ann Finns for his assistance with the Finnish aspect of the story; Wayne Soini, Author, for his editing and guidance in organizing my thoughts; and Terry Weber Mangos of the Gloucester400+ Stories Project for her skill and fine tuning of this story. A special thanks to my wife for always giving me her support.

Me and my wife Joyce a few years ago.