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Ronald H. Gilson
Waterfront Raconteur

by Carla L. Grillo



FOREWORD

The following story is an excerpt from the full profile on Ronald H. “Ron” Gilson appearing in *The Past Is A Present*, a book by local author Carla L. Grillo highlighting the life stories of 28 women and men from Gloucester’s diverse Senior Community. Sponsored by the Friends of the Gloucester Council on Aging—and over five years in the making—*The Past Is A Present* features over 500 hours of oral histories tracing each Senior’s unique personal background. Curated with hundreds of historical photographic images and contemporary portraits by award-winning local photographer Bill Sumner, the book is available online at www.pastisapresent.org and at The Bookstore of Gloucester, Dogtown Books, and the gift shops at Cape Ann Museum, the Gloucester House and the Building Center. 100% of sale proceeds benefit the Gloucester Senior Community.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

Portrait of Ron Gilson at his Gloucester home in front of a 6-ft. framed photograph of Schooner *Gertrude L. Thebaud*, September 2020 (portrait by Bill Sumner).



www.pastisapresent.org

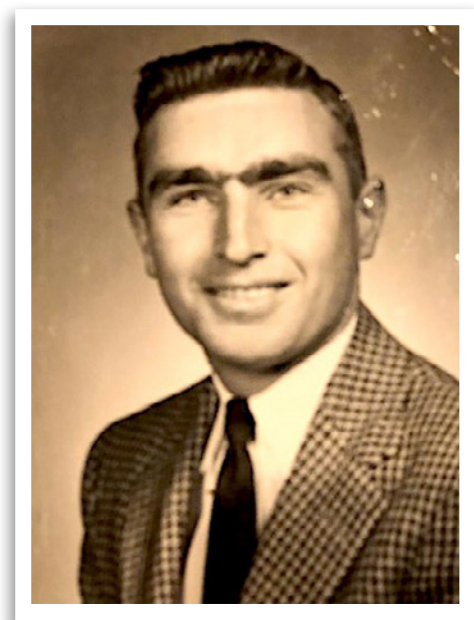
Ronald H. Gilson

Waterfront Raconteur

BY CARLA L. GRILLO

At 90 years young, Ron Gilson bides his retirement time by being an author, a blog host and a documentary filmmaker. And, of course, he continues effortlessly with his God-given talent of being a raconteur on just about anything to do with the Gloucester waterfront, particularly during its heyday of the 1950s.

To commemorate the City of Gloucester, and to ensure the “passing down of stories from one generation to the next,” Ron wrote *An Island No More, The Gloucester I Knew*, his memoir and love letter to the city of his boyhood, published in 2006 and available at local bookstores. He genuinely does not want the Gloucester he knew to be forgotten.



Ron's GHS Graduation photo, 1951

His home on McEachern Street in Gloucester is a veritable museum—filled with nautical artifacts and historical photographs and paintings of fishing boats, sea captains and the Gloucester waterfront. A separate study in his home is dedicated exclusively to the Gloucester fishing industry, “You’re looking at my entire life here!” He proudly shows various pictures of waterfront scenes from Gloucester in the 1950s—the fishing vessels *Ida & Joseph* and *The Saint Peter II*, and Cardinal Cushing performing the ritual “Blessing of the Fishing Fleet” during *Fiesta* with hundreds of boats in the harbor (versus the relatively small number of participants today).

Born in Gloucester at the height of the Great Depression, Ron was the only child of Herbert “Herbie” and Pauline Ida (Martin) Gilson. He vividly recalls his family’s financial struggles during the Depression years. His dad worked at Cape Ann Laundry on Parker Street and his mom was a dedicated homemaker who “was determined to keep me away from the waterfront.” Asked if his parents were responsible for his interest in the fishing industry, he gives an emphatic, “No!” “It was the exact opposite. My mother didn’t want me hanging around on the

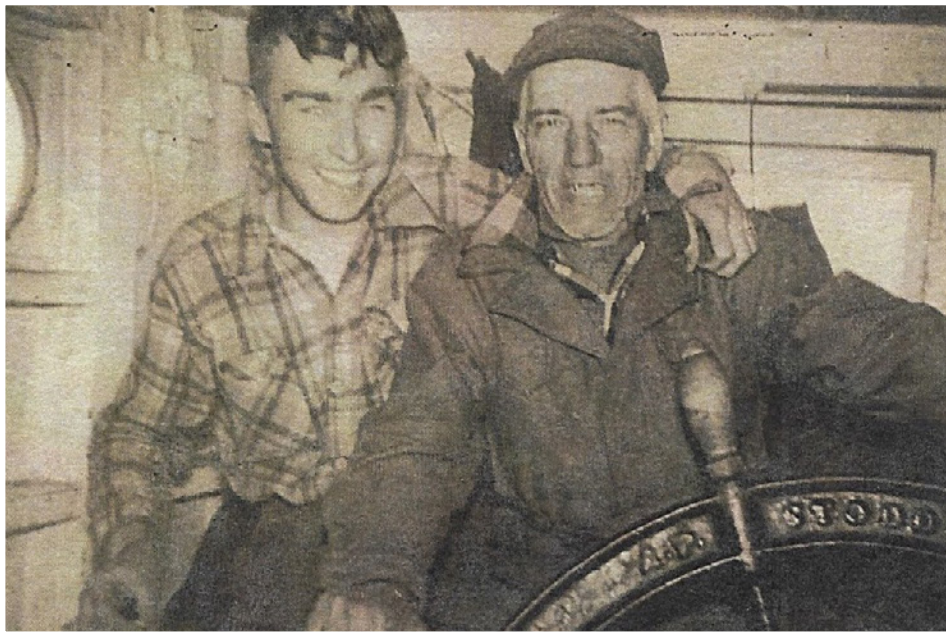
piers with fishermen.” He continues, “What she didn’t understand was that waterfront workers were some of the nicest, most decent and solid family men anyone could ever know.” His maternal grandfather, Albert “Skilly” Martin, was responsible for sparking Ron’s love for the fishing industry, taking him down to the docks almost every day when he was five years old. “When I got a bit older, I would stay down at the fish pier until 8pm in the summer. I lived for the waterfront.”

As a young boy, Ron had the opportunity to interact with many of the most respected leaders on the waterfront. “They took me under their wings—men like Capt. Ben “Piney” Pine (of international schooner racing fame, racing *Gertrude L. Thebaud* against the celebrated Lunenburg, Nova Scotia salt banker, *Bluenose*, and its Capt. Angus Walters, in a series of exciting races during the 1930s), Capt. Leo Hines & Leo McDonald of *Schooner Adventure*, Capt. Cyril Dyett of *Yankee*, Capt. Sam Nicastro of *Felicia*, Joe Cody, former mayor John J. Burke, Ray Kershaw, and my dear friend Ivan Conrad—all of them mentored and protected me. I owe them a debt of gratitude, and I will never forget them.”

Ron went to elementary school at the old Hildreth School (now the Masonic Temple) on Eastern Avenue, where he met his lifelong friends Ronnie DeCoste, Joe Mello, Bob Quinn and Beryl Cressy. Upon graduating from GHS in 1951, he immediately went to work on the Gloucester Fish Pier as a fish cutter (redfish) at American Filet Company. One year in to working on the fish pier, he decided to go to college, starting at Becker Junior College in Worcester, MA, two years later transferring to Boston University, graduating in 1956 with a BS degree in Public Relations & Communications. During this time, he met his future wife, Joan Kortekamp from Millbury, MA—they attended the same nighttime class at Becker Junior College. The couple dated throughout college, got married in 1957, and have been happily married for 66 years. They have two sons, Blake and Brent (who passed away in 2002), and are proud grandparents to Ethan, Lucas, and Daniel and great-grandparents to Wyatt, Logan and Nicholas Maverick.



Ron & Joan at BU graduation dance, 1956



Ron (left) & Frank Mayo at the wheel of Schooner *Adventure*, 1951.

After college, Ron enlisted in the United States Marine Corps Officer Candidates School (OCS), reporting at Quantico, VA in September 1956, and served as a reserve/regular commissioned officer for five years. However, towards the end of the five years, "I got homesick for the Gloucester waterfront." He resigned his regular commission and was honorably discharged as a Captain, Marine Corps Reserve, in 1961.

Back in Gloucester, Ron worked part-time at Gloucester Marine Railways and did caulking work for Joe Golden. "Caulking was in great demand in those days. They actually cut boats in half, such as *Linda B* and *Jeanne D'Arc*, and inserted a 10-foot 'slug' to make them larger and longer, enabling the vessels to carry more cargo such as whiting and redfish."



Ron Commissioned 2nd Lt., Dec. 15, 1956, USMC, Quantico, VA

By 1972, Ron had started his insurance agency, Gloucester Marine Insurance Agency, which at the time “insured about 90% of the Gloucester fishing fleet.” His office was on the pier next to the Gloucester House Restaurant. In 1981, he moved his business to 284 Main Street above his family-owned Union Hill Coffee House, the iconic breakfast restaurant made even more special by the patriotic-tune-playing Union Hill Banjo Band featuring Ron on drums. Ron and Joan owned the restaurant for 12 celebrated years until its emotional closing—for them and the community—in May 1993, the year he retired.



PHOTO COURTESY OF RON GILSON

Opening Day of Union Hill Coffee House, September 17, 1981

Back in 1965, as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty,” Gloucester’s Action, Inc. was created, and Ron was appointed its first Deputy Director, working directly with the titan of crusaders for elderly rights, Rose M. Baker. His numerous other community projects included his participation on an esteemed board of local directors, spearheaded by author and historian Joe Garland, who brought the Schooner *Adventure* home to Gloucester in 1988. He has been a long-time supporter of the Senior Community of Gloucester and is a Director Emeritus of the Friends of the Gloucester Council on Aging.



PHOTO COURTESY OF RON GILSON

Gloucester High School ROTC Band on Main Street, Gloucester, MA, 1949.
Ron played the snare drum.

In retirement, Ron started to think seriously about writing a memoir of his experiences on the Gloucester waterfront. As luck would have it, in 2000, he was invited by his boyhood friend and Gloucester High School classmate, Dr. Richard J. Elliott, a professor at the University of New Orleans, to attend the dedication of The National WWII Museum opening in New Orleans. The co-founder of the museum, Dr. Stephen E. Ambrose, was a renowned military historian and the author of over 25 books, including the WWII best-seller, *Band of Brothers* (adapted into

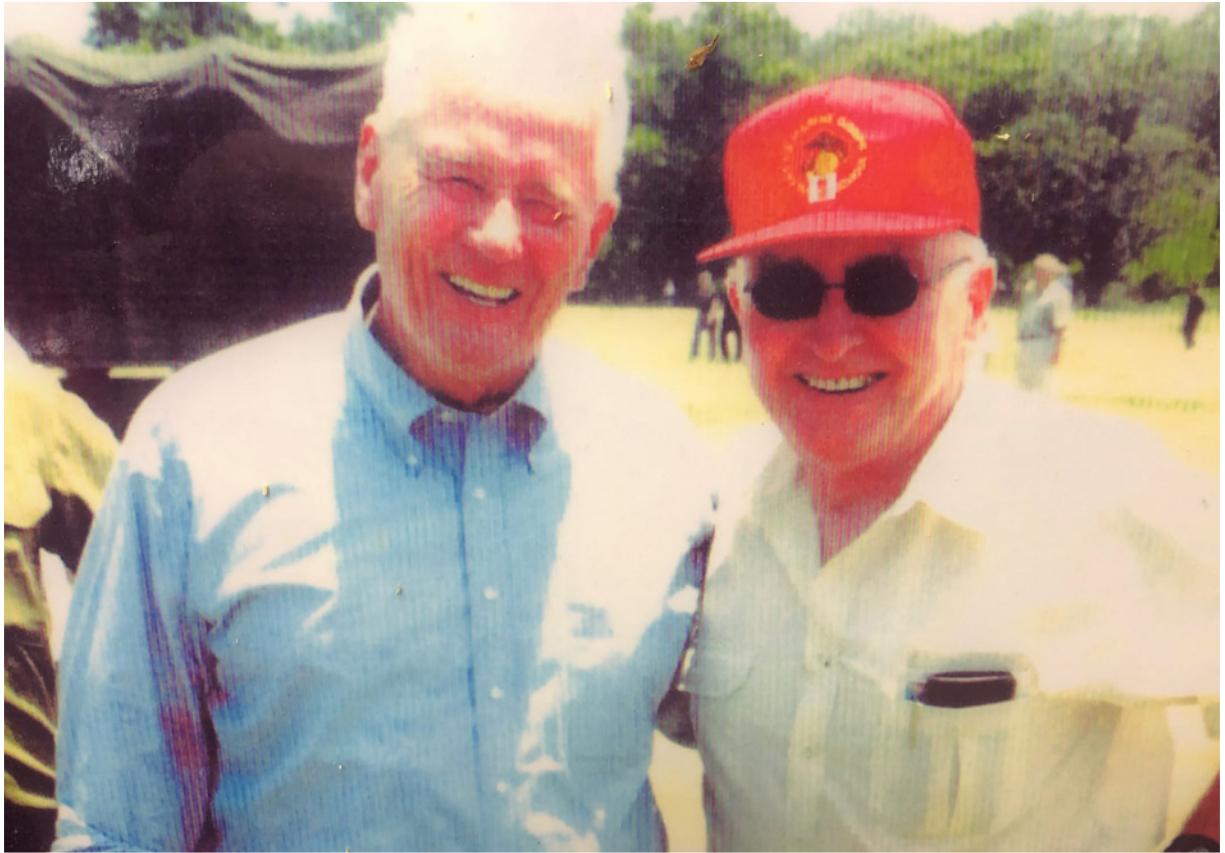


Capy. Ben "Piney" Pine at the wheel of
Schooner *Gertrude L. Thebaud*, 1938



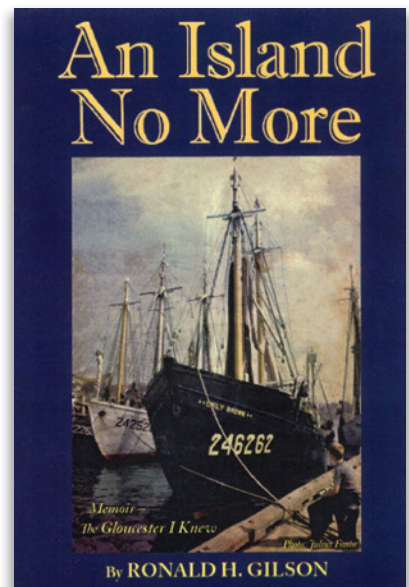
PHOTOS COURTESY OF RON GILSON

Blessing of the Fishing Fleet, 1945



Author Stephen E. Ambrose (left) and Ron Gilson at The National WWII Museum, New Orleans, June 2000

the award-winning HBO mini-series of the same name by Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg). While speaking with Dr. Ambrose at the ceremony, Ron mentioned his idea of writing a book about Gloucester's legendary fishing history. Dr. Ambrose's sage advice was straightforward, "If you want to write a book, my advice is to start now and don't give up on it until it's done!" That was the inspiration Ron needed. He took Dr. Ambrose's advice to heart and started writing, finally publishing his memoir *An Island No More, The Gloucester I Knew* after four "grueling" years. Ron notes, "I felt it was important to finish the book because the documented accounts will never happen again."



*An Island No More,
The Gloucester I Knew*
by Ronald H. Gilson



The "Oldtimers," all career fishermen, at their usual McDonald's gathering, (l to r): Paul Parisi, "Gussie" Balbo, "Bikie" Scola, Joe Giacalone, Ron Gilson, "Ollie" Palazola and "Memo" Spinola

In *An Island No More, The Gloucester I Knew*, he coins the phrase, "The Golden Age of Fishing," referring to the venerated era in Gloucester's fishing history from 1940–1955. "It was a phenomenal period where business was booming, people were making money and it was a big deal for families to be a part of this industry." Ron was only a young adult at the time, but he immersed himself in the lifestyle and learned everything he could about fishing. Now, some 70 years later, he is proud to have memorialized this period in Gloucester's fishing history for future generations.

As a supplement to the book, in 2017, Ron produced (in collaboration with his friend, Jim LaBelle) a two-part documentary film, *Gloucester's Golden Age of Fishing*. Available on YouTube, the films present a more detailed account of Gloucester's historic fishing industry through local interviews, fascinating industry-related stories, period photos and fishing film footage from the "Golden Age." He also hosts an informative blog about the Gloucester fishing industry, *The Gloucester I Love 2*: (website address: <https://thegloucesterilove-2.blogspot.com>).

Update: In May 2021, Ron and Joan made the difficult decision to leave Gloucester and move south to live near their son Blake in Virginia. Ron says, "Gloucester will always be home for us. You can take the boy out of Gloucester, but you can't take Gloucester out of the boy!" Meanwhile, after two sons, three grandsons and three great-grandsons, on September 8, 2021, the Gilson's finally welcomed a baby girl into the family, great-granddaughter Kamiera Ann, and a fifth great-grandchild, Levi, was born in the nick of time on December 31, 2021. On March 3, 2023, Ron turned, as he puts it, "a respectable 90 years old." Happy Birthday, Ron!



PHOTO CREDIT: JOAN GILSON

Ron Gilson & Carla Grillo at the Atlantis Cafe,
Gloucester, MA, October 2021

FRIENDS OF THE GLOUCESTER COUNCIL ON AGING

The Friends of the Gloucester Council on Aging is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization incorporated in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1988. We are currently celebrating our 35th anniversary in our mission of working collaboratively with the Gloucester Council on Aging and the Rose Baker Senior Center by providing financial assistance and technical expertise for programs and services benefiting the broader Gloucester Senior Community. For more information about the Friends, including a sample of projects funded and supported by the Friends since its founding, please visit: www.friendsofthegcoa.org.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Ron's amazing wife of 66 years, Joan Kortekamp Gilson, for her tireless functioning as the "digital go-between" for Ron and me on *The Past Is A Present* project. Her graciousness and wonderful sense of humor were greatly appreciated throughout the writing of Ron's profile.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carla L. Grillo is the creator, author, and editor of *The Past Is A Present* project—celebrating the incredible lives of 28 Seniors from Gloucester's Senior Community, affectionately referred to as "The Gloucester 28." Over five years (2017–2022) in the making, more than 500 hours of oral histories were chronicled for *The Past Is A Present*.



Top row (l to r): Son Blake in Kings Point Merchant Marine Academy Uniform; Ron & Joan, 2017; Ron with first girl in the family (after Joan), great-granddaughter, Kamiera Ann; 2nd row: Ron on Stacy Boulevard, September 2020; Son Brent, Joan & Ron in office of Union Hill Coffee House, 1981; Ron & Joe Mondello, revered Gloucester shoe cobbler; 3rd row: Ron playing drums during covid lockdown, July 2020; Ron (center) during 2019 Fiesta with longtime pals (l to r) Mike Linquata (cousin to the Gloucester House Mike Linquata) and Jimmy Burnham; 4th row: Union Hill Banjo Band, 1987 (Ron on drums); "The Sunday Morning Coffee Gang" at the "Fort" during Covid-19 August 2020 (l to r): "Joe" Giacalone, Sebastian "Bikey" Scola, "Memo" Spinola, "Gussie" Balbo, "Ollie" Palazola and Ron Gilson (with hat). Missing in group is Paul Parisi; Ron & Joan at home in Gloucester, October 2020. (Current photos of Ron on boulevard, playing drums and with Joan at home by Bill Sumner; all other photos courtesy of Ron Gilson).