

FROM AWAY

Every misguided and ill-conceived project merits a scapegoat. Therefore, I place blame for the adventure soon to be described on our then 15-year-old daughter Josephine...the third of our four children. If I felt the story could cast me in an admirable or, hopefully, even a heroic light, I would seek full credit but such is not the case.

A woman named Lucy Maude Montgomery wrote books detailing the fictional adventures of a young girl named Anne, specifically Anne of Green Gables, who lived in a remote part of the Canadian Maritimes called Prince Edward Island. Both in books and in films, starting with the first publication in 1908, Anne captured the imagination, specifically of young girls throughout the world and especially in Japan. Visitors to the Cavendish part of the island in which Anne of Green Gables lived are vast in number each summer and many of the guests indeed are Japanese.

But back to the blame game. Jo, the most ardent admirer of Anne among our three daughters and certainly not endorsed by only son P.G., wanted very much to see the sights involving Anne. In the summer of 1996, Betsy and I rented a cottage for the six of us. As the time until departure shortened from months to weeks and the weeks to days, each of the children found something better to do than travel to Prince Edward Island...or at least, to travel to Prince Edward Island with their parents. The group morphed into us with other middle age couples because, while we had minimal interest in Anne, I was damned if we were going to let the rental go to waste.

Prince Edward Island is north and a little east of Nova Scotia. It is expensive to reach by air and time consuming by car and those are two of several reasons why non-Anne-of-Green-Gables tourism has never developed as had been hoped by those in the area. Should the group here this evening be tempted to leave the Club immediately, I can promise minimally 30 hours of driving time before Island arrival. But the late Spring weather will get better if you will delay your departure, at least, until the end of my presentation.

Until 1997, PEI could be accessed only by boat. In that year, the handsome Confederation Bridge was completed and, spanning approximately eight and one-half miles, connects PEI to the Province of New Brunswick. The Confederation Bridge bears its name because the convention to create Canada from a group of disparate provinces was held in Charlottetown, the capital of Prince Edward Island, in 1867. Although the Confederation did indeed form, Prince Edward Island did not join the country initially. Indeed, PEI has always had its maverick ways and, for example, did not allow automobiles on the Island until the 1920s. Perhaps it's ironic then, that almost all of Betsy's and my now 15 or more visits to the Island have been by car.

Once settled on our initial visit, Betsy decided to go kayaking. Not the rough stuff but that best pursued in gentle waters and, as she always puts it, a kayak with a bottom as broad and as flat as her own. Although usually quite supportive of me and encouraging to me, Betsy has always believed that should I enter a kayak, I would never successfully extricate myself and that admonition has dissuaded me from even trying. Left to my own devices, in this and other settings, I have learned a trick which is certainly more exploitive than admirable but generally serves me well. If one wants to explore an area, securing a compensated guide is a satisfactory if not inexpensive solution. An

alternative is to engage a real estate agent and indicate a possible – not necessarily a probable – interest in purchasing something in the area. This will stimulate a vehicle, a driver, and an enthusiastic description of whatever area is being toured. And that is exactly what I did.

By the time Betsy returned from several hours paddling, I greeted her with the news that I had found a piece of property to buy. At that time, the American dollar was worth 1.4 dollars Canadian and waterfront property on the Island was selling for approximately 10 to 15% of the cost of comparably situated land in Maine or Massachusetts. I proposed to buy a few acres of undeveloped land with the hope that my great grandchildren would find I had shown the clairvoyance of Peter Minuit when he purchased Manhattan Island from the Native Americans. Betsy asked, argued, cajoled, and urged that I pursue other mid-life-crisis-inspired hobbies: tango lessons; raising alpacas; learning a martial art. All for naught. When she realized that I was not to be dissuaded, she retaliated by pointing to a falling down wreck of a building several hundred yards from the land I proposed to purchase and said in a capitulating tone “Then, what about that?” To make a long story if not short at least less long, it was a building that had been abandoned for some 50 years without electricity, plumbing, or central heating and was reminiscent of the Big Bad Wolf’s threat to the three little pigs: “I will huff and puff and blow your house down.” It did, admittedly, have some pretty interesting lines and the vestiges of its original classic mansard roof. Before I tell you what happened next on our PEI escapade, let me give a little more context.

In “discovering” Prince Edward Island, Betsy and I were in good company. The first residents of what has become PEI was the Mi’kmaq Nation. The Mi’kmaqs called the island Abegwit which translates to “cradled on the waves.” Legend has it that the god Glooscap finished painting the world and then dipped his brush into a blend of all the colors and created Abegwit as his favorite island of all. Vikings are thought to have visited the island around 1000 AD and Basque fishing crews from Europe first landed at the beginning of the 16th century. After French explorer Jacques Cartier’s landing in 1534, Samuel de Champlain claimed the Island for France in 1603 and it became part of the French colony of Acadia. The French began settling the area around 1720 and when the British took over the area in 1758, during the French and Indian War, they deported most of the French Acadians. By 1769, what was then known as St. John’s Island became a separate British colony and, in honor of Prince Edward, son of King George III and father of Queen Victoria, the name Prince Edward Island was selected in 1799. Geographically, PEI is the only Canadian province completely separated from the North American mainland. As noted, the Confederation Bridge connects Prince Edward Island to New Brunswick across the Northumberland Strait and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The economy, modest at best, is fueled by potatoes from the land; fish and shellfish from the water; and tourism. Lobsters and tuna are among the most valuable components of the catch, and oysters and especially mussels are heralded as some of the world’s best.

For a number of years, the population of the island has hovered in the range of 135,000 people with about one-fourth of them living in Charlottetown. Most of the residents descend from English, Scottish, or Irish ancestry while more than 20% have some French or Acadian forbearers. Less than five hundred Mi’kmaqs, who prefer to be known as First People or First Nation, remain on the island.

Topographically, Prince Edward Island is a gently rolling plain with about half the Island being forested. Prevalent trees include beech, birch, evergreen and maple. No point on the island is more

than ten miles from the ocean. The brief but brilliant growing season is highlighted by grasses and includes wildflowers such as black-eyed Susans, buttercups, daisies, violets, and, early on, lupines. All bloom in the rich red soil, which means that for the first time since my long-ago post-college teaching days in Japan, in P.E.I. I have encountered another culture where, as a consequence of the crumbly earth, it is standard to leave shoes at the front door when entering any home. The loam mixture of clay, sand and decayed matter, is situated on beds of sandstone and shale. The loss of top soil to erosion is a continuing challenge and water is sourced primarily from wells.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, the climate is relatively mild and certainly more so than that of most of the Canadian mainland. Further, the surrounding waters are warmed by the Gulf Stream and are, surprising to many, significantly more temperate than the coastal beaches of Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island or Connecticut. PEI boasts a wide range of small game: ducks, geese, Hungarian partridges, ring-neck pheasants, ruffed grouse and snow-shoe hares. Coyotes, foxes, raccoons and skunks are regular neighbors.

For those interested in time outdoors, there are many options. When the railroads were discontinued, and the tracks taken away, the expanse was renamed the Confederation Trail and this has become an impressive example of the rails to trails concept. My favorite portion of the Trail parallels the water and offers wild flowers on either side. Gently graded, as is the Island itself, it is perfect for biking, jogging, or simply extended walks. Incidentally, this is where I pursue much of the training for my next triathlon. Other outdoor options include tennis courts, all public and easily available—as well as superior golf courses, often with extraordinary water views. Kayaking, both on a gentle scale on rivers within the Island and more adventuresome in water around the perimeter of the Island, is very popular.

Both the swimming and beach walks are simply wonderful. The soft sand beaches provide miles of walking, and fifty people constitute a real crowd when one gazes several hundred yards in either direction. Greenwich, a National Park, affords a stunning opportunity to view the dunes, to bathe, to walk, and to refresh.

The collective commitment to ecological, environmental and conservation issues in PEI is both admirable and noteworthy. The focus ranges from the macro to the micro, with an articulated goal of Provincial energy self-sufficiency by the year 2015. Growing numbers of wind turbines are found around the Island and, while the aesthetic appeal of their appearance is subjective, they seem to this observer just as handsome and visually effective as the George Rickey sculpture at Cincinnati's intersection of Fifth and Main. The eco-sensitive dunes along the endless island beaches are carefully and thoughtfully protected. Boardwalks and netting guard the native grasses and decrease the ever-present threat of land erosion. From the most basic aspects of trash removal and recycling, the Island processes and recycles plastics through the level of five while, here in Cincinnati, we only recycle through number two. The differential is substantial. Further, all materials put out for waste collection must be placed in clear plastic bags and if anything is not in its proper container and correctly labeled, it is simply not picked up. As surely as the angel of mercy somehow knew which homes to pass over to spare the oldest son of the Israelites during the last of the plagues in Egypt, so these well-trained garbage collectors gravitate instantly toward that which is appropriately handled and instinctively avoid that which is not. An apparent consequence of this commitment to sustainability is the virtual absence of graffiti and litter on Prince Edward Island.

With long winters and short days, perhaps it is inevitable that a wide range of crafts are pursued and, many to a high level of accomplishment. Woodworking and, specifically, handcrafted furniture is a well-established art form. Painting, drawing, photography, weaving and metal work are found in homes and galleries all over P.E.I. While Charlottetown offers, especially in immediate proximity to the cruise ships which dock there, predictable and tiresome knickknacks and tschotchkes, quality work, at the hands of extraordinarily accomplished artisans, is found in many other settings. In some cases, the prices are embarrassingly modest.

If you've begun to wonder if my paper tonight has been subsidized by the PEI Tourism Bureau, just wait until you hear my description of the City Market. Held every Wednesday and Saturday during the season, this market offers a blend of offerings from small farms – fruits, vegetables, meats, cheeses, fish, as well as a wealth of crafts. When typical Island fare is not the goal, authentic ethnic foods abound - Ethiopian cuisine; thin sliced lox and bagels from a transplanted New York delicatessen vendor; and, at least to Betsy's estimation, the best variety of the most delicious organic Italian sausages, either raw to go or charcoal grilled on the premises: every imaginable seasoning and intensity of heat or lack thereof. The Market is mobbed, the produce wonderful, and the prevailing spirit fresh and alive. Special Island food? Mussels, right from the processing factory near our Cottage and on their way to national and international export, are \$1.25 per pound. Steamed in a little white wine, garlic and other herbs, and dipped in lemon butter, they slither down in a most satisfactory way. Bed and breakfasts from the most basic to truly elegant inns offering splendid accommodations and cuisine outstanding by any standard. They dot the island. Our favorite restaurant, Shelter Harbor, has all of the curb appeal of a Dairy Queen. It is physically attached to a gas station, but both the seafood and clam chowder along with everything else, all homemade, are first-rate.

Charlottetown offers theater options most of which focus on the life, the times, the trials and the tribulations of Anne of Green Gables. If one is a ten-year-old girl, sublime; if not, not so much. The second town of consequence on the Island is Summerside in the west and it features a bagpiping college. Although the Island is relatively small, virtually all roads are two lanes. Thus driving is slow and the two hours each way to experience the piping presentation is not our notion of a good investment of hours or dollars. What *are* worth the investment to Betsy and me are the Celidh, which are increasingly popular and with good reason. Celidh, originally offered up in neighboring Nova Scotia, translates loosely into "kitchen concert" and these are informal early evening presentations of Welsh or Celtic derived music: fiddling, singing, storytelling, clogging, and the like. At their least good, they tend to be a little amateurish and at their best, and they are usually fine, they are really wonderful. During the summer season, at least one or two Celidh are presented in different settings, usually community centers or churches, every night throughout the Island. Some attract two or three dozen people while others gather as many as five hundred or six hundred and sell out early. The performers, often a mix of well-trained teens and seasoned vets, combine contagious enthusiasm with undeniable talent. We have come to know, though certainly not well, a number of the performers and enjoyed a visit from a couple who performed here in Cincinnati.

I hope I've provided a sense of the spirit of the island, so without further ado, back to the house. What I had envisioned as a quirky but potentially promising investment of several acres along St. Peter's Bay in northeastern Prince Edward Island was complicated by my decision to call Betsy's

bluff and also purchase the circa 1880 cottage on land several hundred yards away . Because there are few Island overhead power lines, moving houses, while not an everyday endeavor, is scarcely without precedent. And thus Captain Battersby's house was moved.

Captain Battersby, a seafarer and farmer, built the house for his family: his wife and three daughters, Beatrice aka "Beatie"; Ruby, and Laura, near the train track which traversed the 200 kilometers across the island. When the poor fellow was lost at sea, his wife, fearing tinders from the trains would cause the residence to go up in a blaze, moved it. The location to which we returned it, by complete coincidence, was within 50 yards of where it originally stood. When the last of the Battersby daughters died in the 1950s, the home apparently was abandoned. It did have, as is often said, good bones and good lines which are all-too relevant if one is married to an architecture buff who teaches art history.

Next, enter Martinus Rose or, better described, Martinus "Have I got a deal for you" Rose. An incarnation of a 20th century Viking and a native of the Netherlands, he is the personification of the entrepreneur. Blustery, bright, hard working and energetic, he will sell you the land; he will move the building; he will serve as a general contractor; he will do anything and everything...and then try to sell you some more land and then some more land and, then, a little more land.

The odyssey that ensued, over the next nearly three years, was a collaboration between Martinus and Betsy, via telephone, written correspondence, and email in maintaining the architectural integrity, leaving in place the original flooring and staircase, and creating a four bedroom two and a half bathroom cottage, cozy and comfortable, with lots of windows providing vistas and views. Mussel farming is a substantial industry and a good deal of it is done in the Bay visibly adjacent to our property.

As Martinus and others we have come to know on PEI have confirmed to us, there is a substantial difference between unintelligent and unsophisticated. The Islanders, at least to our way of life and way of living, are unsophisticated people but they are remarkably intelligent, and it is truly they who have captivated Betsy and me to such a degree. Perhaps you won't be surprised to hear that, although we are made to feel welcome, we are also conscious of being foreigners. All visitors, even Canadians from other Provinces, all visitors are "from away." And yet we cherish the friendships we've made in PEI. When I'm asked why I am drawn back over and over, I think, for instance, of Raegan English.

I previously mentioned the crafts made and sold on the island. Years ago, we saw in a rural shop a chair which had been stripped and painted decoratively. It was so charming that we bought it, sought out the artist, Raegan, and have come to know her well, admire her greatly, and collect the work with unending enthusiasm. Raegan represents the resilience and the can-do attitude of so many of the self-reliant Islanders. The beneficiary of more ardor than commitment from a once-serious beau, he left her with a baby as a going away present. Unable to work outside the home, she began buying broken pieces of wooden furniture...chairs, tables, bureaus and anything inexpensive and in need of restoration and then repaired, refinished and painted each piece in a whimsical and stylish way. Our cottage now boasts more than a dozen pieces of her creativity...the type of things precious shops along Madison Avenue would think worthy of fetching hundreds if not thousands of dollars. Raegan's sunny disposition, and that hackneyed description could have been developed for

her specifically, has won her a wonderful husband and a second child. We are grateful to claim her as a friend.

And then there's Brenda Watts. A woodworker, likely in her mid 50s, she is easily recognized by the sawdust in her hair. Her carpentry studio, adjacent to her home, is on the grounds of her flourishing garden and under the watchful gaze of her ferocious but lovable dog. Or Sherry Pagé: a social worker in a women's shelter, and a volunteer gardener for her friend during the height of the flower season, Sherry paints Island vistas on small pieces of wood each with its own distinctive border of local fauna or flora. We first saw a tiny piece of hers at the Island home of one of my guests this evening, David Motch, and, subsequently, at the City Market where occasional small pieces are available at the booth staffed by her former husband and current admiring friend. Each painting is a treasure.

If Cincinnati finds it challenging to retain its most promising young men and women and attracting others, those challenges are magnified in this Maritime Province. The University of PEI is a good and consistently-getting-better institution with one of the strongest veterinary programs in all of Canada. However, the on-Island sizzle and dazzle certainly don't rival the metropolitan areas of Montreal or Toronto or the virtually Wild West dynamic of the Western provinces. Those who do stick around, for the most part, wouldn't think of living anywhere else and the ones we have met, some noted before, are distinct personalities...friendly and forthright, not particularly demonstrative, and blessed with uncommon common sense. Often the same people walk on the same part of the Confederation Trail at about the same time each day and familiar faces turn into occasional hellos and occasional hellos into brief greetings. One couple, probably our closest Island friends, are Frances and Lawrence – don't call me Larry – MacAulay. Betsy somehow understood, from our brief exchanges, that both were retired Island elementary and secondary school teachers. When they learned that we had the old "Battersby Place" they expressed appreciation for its preservation and were delighted when we asked if they would like to see it. Lawrence and his brother, in their early years, had been sent to help the Battersby sisters with various chores and shared vivid if not particularly happy memories of their parents volunteering them to help the sisters! The MacAulays invited us to their home for dinner – albeit served at lunch hour – and it turned out that while Frances indeed had been a teacher, Lawrence and his family had been potato farmers for generations. What didn't add up for Betsy and me was why they had, on their property, what appeared to be a barn but was actually a meeting hall seating 400 people. That became clear when we learned that Lawrence is one of the four members of the Canadian Parliament from Prince Edward Island and, additionally, served in the Prime Minister's cabinet as the United States' John Ashbrook's counterpart during the 9/11 period. They are as feet-on-the-ground people as one can imagine and a sign of spring each year for us is Frances' call offering to purchase a pass to the national parks at a discounted price which would no longer be available by the time we get to the Island. Practical, thoughtful...the real deal.

That friendship has led us to Lawrence's brother Jimmy MacAulay and his wife Loretta. Jimmy, the go-to guy for all past, present and future information in our St. Peter's Bay area, is as good humored as he is persuasive. Thanks to his attracting manner and unbridled enthusiasm, Betsy and I are now participants in and patrons of the annual St. Peter's Bay Blueberry Festival. Lest the word patrons sound grand, let me disclose that we contribute approximately the same amount we'd spend on dinner at our gas-station-like favorite restaurant.

Then there are our neighbors Anna Hopkins, a chain-smoking, no-nonsense professor of English at the University of Prince Edward Island and her long-time companion Jacob Tremeer. A Dutch transplant, he is a talented and imaginative professional gardener and, to our delight, has made our hollyhocks happen and good things grow.

Or Eddie Quinn, the lead singer in the most popular Island Celidh, whose regular job is garbage collector for the town of Montague.

Or envision the staff at the local credit union where sending a fax or receiving mail or just about anything is always free and just a kind of neighborly thing people do.

Or the occasional but not predictable 5:30 p.m. visitor, to the exact same top branch of our tallest tree, who is a bald eagle!

Or Judy and Dwight Mullally who watch our place and a number of others while we are gone. He is a retired member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and when his invoices, always modest, do arrive, they include detail down to every nail purchased and every penny expended.

Finally, in what was a challenging experience, Betsy became quite ill a couple of summers ago and we had more than a little trouble navigating the Canadian medical system. A college pal in Montreal to whom I turned with a full measure of concern, put me in touch with a doctor more than an hour and a half from our place. When I called him, he was about to leave the office for the day, but he offered to wait until we got there. He then spent a full hour with us. I don't remember that ever happening with any doctor I've encountered other, admittedly, than my psychotherapist who is only good for 50 minutes. More to the point, I apologized profusely for the fact we had run out of the house instantly to come see him and that I would mail him a check for whatever amount owed because I had neither cash nor credit card with me. He responded that there would be no charge. I countered that this made no sense and he gently explained that that is what one does for visitors. When we arrived home, now past ten o'clock that evening, the phone was ringing and it was the same doctor who said he decided he wanted some tests done for Betsy and had arranged to have them done the next morning at a clinic much closer to our home. Then, with unforgettable sensitivity, he apologized for the fact that there would be a charge at the clinic of \$88 and, "if that is difficult or inappropriate for you to pay, I am happy to cover the cost myself." If I was into drugs, at that point, I would have presumed I was in the middle of a major hallucination.

The social pleasures of PEI have also taken the form of visitors, from Cincinnati and elsewhere, who have been good sports to come and share the adventure. The most enthusiastic are close friends Blair and Skip Fleischmann who have come to see us several times. Skip passed away just a couple of months ago, but purchased two large contiguous areas of undeveloped land saying that, if the world should end, P.E.I. would be a nice place to be when it happens. And lest my fondness for PEI seem biased, let me enhance my credibility by quoting Dr. Arthur Asbury, longtime Philadelphian, and grandson of distinguished Literarian Dr. Arthur Knight, son of distinguished Literarian Dr. Eslie Asbury and brother of distinguished Literarian Dr. Tuck Asbury. Art stayed at the cottage last summer and noted in our guest book: "This Island is a magical place – beautiful rolling countryside and forest and huge carefully tended fields of potatoes and grains. Remarkable vistas where the land and the water come together."

I will conclude with two brief anecdotes which I think exemplify the kind of place PEI is and the kind of sensible people its residents are.

In the first story, I was sent to Charlottetown by Betsy to what was then one of the only major stores on the Island. The store's name, not unknown to you, is Wal-Mart and, after searching unsuccessfully for the item I was directed to secure, I approached a salesperson. She was the quintessential Islander: gray short hair; no make-up; and a pleasant business-like manner. I asked where I would find the dust ruffles. The question meant nothing to her. I rephrased the question. "Where are the bed skirts?" Again, it was clear I was speaking a foreign language. Finally I explained: "You know, the piece of fabric under the mattress that hangs over the bed frame and covers it." She reflected for a moment and, perfectly kindly, asked: "and what good would that be doing you?" Full disclosure: the beds do indeed have dust ruffles but they were imported from J.C. Penney in Cincinnati.

And the second anecdote: When the cottage was both finished and furnished, Betsy wanted to invite the skilled workmen who made it happen for beer and cheese to see the splendid success they had created. The woodwork is extraordinary and the detail and craftsmanship exemplary. Further, based on the exchange rate then operative, the master woodworkers were compensated at the rate of \$18 per hour Canadian which was then less than \$13 per hour American. The beer and cheese were easily located and the only thing we were missing I was sent to find at the area co-op serving our rural part of the Island. I walked into the store, then perhaps only four times the size of this Club. I was the only customer and the sole staff person in the shop, which has been remodeled and expanded in the ensuing years, was a young man who appeared to be in his early 20s. Again, failing to find the desired item, I asked him where I might locate cocktail napkins. Again, a blank look. I explained they are like paper dinner napkins but much smaller. Despite the fact he and I were the only people in the store, he lowered his voice shyly and asked: "Are those the things ladies use?" I explained that they were in no way related and repeated that they were like paper dinner napkins but about half the size. He pondered for a moment and, seeking to be helpful, queried: "Why don't you just buy the dinner napkins and cut them in half?"

Paul G. Sittenfeld
16 May 2011