

THE IRONBOUND JOURNALS

BY TERRY TODD

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Preface: In 1975, Terry and I moved to Nova Scotia, Canada, and promptly fell in love with its small farms, horse pulls, the craggy coastline of the North Atlantic, and the incredibly kind people we met during the four years we lived there year-round. After we left, moving first to Auburn, Alabama (1979), and then to Austin, Texas (1983), we often talked about how much we missed Nova Scotia and vowed that one day—maybe when we retired—we'd figure out a way to spend time there again.

When I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 1988, however, we were forced to think about how much time we might have left together and decided that finding a summer place in Nova Scotia could no longer wait for retirement. So, Terry called several friends and asked them to keep an eye out for a place on the ocean for us. In the spring of 1990, Dee Hilburt, one of those friends, called to say that there was an eighteenth-century house with acreage for sale on a private island about three miles off the coast of Nova Scotia. We hadn't been thinking about living on an island as we knew it would be challenging and complicated, but Terry couldn't resist going and taking a look when he learned that the two-hundred-acre island was still an active fishing outpost, had only eight private homes on it, contained no stores or businesses other than fishing, and that it was magically named Ironbound Island.

Terry bought the property that weekend and we never regretted it—our days on Ironbound were among the richest and happiest of our lives. During the 1990s we spent three months there each summer (and several Christmas holidays), and our time on Ironbound taught us much about the power of community, living with nature, and self reliance. Although Terry was always writing something—letters, articles, poems, and so on—he had never kept a regular journal. On Ironbound, however, he felt moved to record what we did, what we learned, and how living on the island made us feel as we became Ironbounders. What follows are just a few selections from entries he wrote during our first summer.

~ Jan Todd



July 20, 1990 (first entry): The island has us now. If we're up to its demands, it will no doubt have us for years to come, if they come. . . . Ironbound brings on feelings of care and of the fragility of things. It's so small and so heartbreakingly beautiful. . . . Neither can we forget our dread neighbor, the one Duke [Ed note: a reference to John Wayne who also dealt with cancer.] called the Big C. All the more reason to come to Ironbound while we have the will and the *huevos* to see it all and experience it fully.

It does seem to be a place that will test you. Trips to the mainland are either infrequent or costly and such a situation engenders both conservation and preparation. We've been growing more and more into the pace of the

place, having been here for almost two weeks and having gotten the house mostly, if not very well, furnished.

We look forward to our walks and our swims—both lake and ocean—and later today, when the tide clock says it's time, we plan to take one of the latter. Jan's beside me at the table, taking notes, bearing down hard at the task of preparing for her orals. Earlier this afternoon she went down to the fishstore and set up a makeshift desk where she could read and take notes in peace. . . . [Ed note: I prepared for my doctoral orals and wrote much of my dissertation on Ironbound. A fishstore is a building used for cleaning fish and storing nets and other gear.]

The wind is up today more than any time since



This is the view as you arrive at Ironbound by boat. The large red buildings at water's edge are called fishstores, and it was in these buildings that the cod and other fish were cleaned, packed in salt in large wooden barrels to dry, and where various kinds of fishing gear were stored. Because it was one of the outermost islands in Mahone Bay, Ironbound also had a working lighthouse, located at the top of the hill. Our house was directly behind the fishstore with the boat in front of it.

we came and we're hoping for a much-needed rain. The island was as green as Ireland when we came and is green still but the water level is going down in both the lake and in our well. During our swim-bath today in the freshwater lake, we attracted our first leeches, tiny things attached to our feet. But they'll have to get a good deal larger before they drive us out and force us to swim only in the cold Atlantic.

Our first day therein on the sandy beach at the end of our four-acre barn lot, was three days ago. Dee [Hilburt] was with us and the hyperactive little rascal that he is, plunged right in. He also plunged right out again, even faster. Jan stayed in for six or eight minutes and I stayed for about 15. It was painful at first—a sort of burning—but once that wore off I was comfortable standing in chest-deep water without much movement. Not much by Vic Boff (of Coney Island's Iceburg Club) standards but stimulating for us. Hours later, our bodies were tingling and felt somehow refrigerated.

Later. . . 8:30 PM. Well, the weather turned dark and blowey so we decided to forego the swim and go down into the boggy field

between our front windows and the back beach and chop down some of the spruce and fir blocking our view. And so we did, old Jan and I. I chopped and she hauled and we argued about who had the hardest job. We'll let the trees dry out a bit on the beach and one day when the wind is right, we'll burn them and shovel the coals into the high tide. After we cut and hauled the trees, we walked down to the Finck's fishstore and Russell [Finck] and Paul [Finck] were doing the last of the four boxes of fish Russell caught today. Each box weighs around 125 pounds, so he brought in about 500 pounds, mostly codfish, and more or less an average haul for a day on the water, from what I've seen in our few days



The freshwater lake on Ironbound where we took many of our baths was separated from the ocean by only a low barrier made of shells and rocks. We owned the open land just behind the lake which was called "Cow Pasture Head." The Head faced west and was our favorite place to watch sunsets.



When Terry and his friend, Russell Finck, returned from fishing, they would transfer the codfish from the bottom of the boat to fishboxes with a special two-pronged pitchfork. The boxes were then carried in to the splitting table where the fish were gutted, split in half, and salted down in large barrels to dry out and become salt cod.

Terry and Woola, our English mastiff, rest in the cranberry vines on the eastern end of Ironbound in 1990. Although Terry hoped he could convince Woola to help him find the pheasants after he shot them, she could always be counted on, instead, to head home as soon as he fired his shotgun and wait for him on the porch. He loved her anyway.

here. Russell fishes alone, in one of the Cape Island boats that are specially rigged with a wide keel so they can be hauled up on one of the launches and out of the water. He's an altogether wonderful man, kind as they come, and he'll take no money from us for codfish, pollock or mackerel. . . . I've been invited to go outwith him and spend a day jigging for codfish. I'll go, of course, but not without some trepidation about how I'll bear up in an anchored boat for a long day of fishing. I've never really been seasick but I've never been particularly tested. But the test day's coming; I can't resist the chance to go out. He leaves each morning about 5:00 and returns between 2:00 and 5:00, then he needs another few hours to clean the fish and salt them down in wooden puncheons that look as if they hold around 300 gallons.

He was pleased today because he caught a big codfish and he knew that I'd been wanting to take a photo of one so I could send it down to Texas with the story that I hadn't had time to really go out far that day and had caught this "small one" off the pier. He caught an even larger one—about 90 pounds—the first day we came onto the island and I told him I was sorry we hadn't gotten a picture. So we got our picture today of the 70-odd pound codfish and I just hope it turns out well so we can make a large copy for Russell and his wife, Maxine. If he won't take money for the fish he's given us almost every day, I'll have to think of things to give him. . . . the threatening skies finally let go and we had a nice albeit too short downpour. . . . So I expect the lawn will green up to a high shine again and the seeds Jan planted yesterday will germinate right away, here in the rich kingdom of Ironbound.

July 24, 1990: Tonight we'll see if, full of wine and wild mussels, I can produce a readable journal entry. Probably not, I'd guess, but maybe the poet Jack Spicer's trick will work and the muse will show in response to the proper combination of location and libation. The mussels, by the way, were the result of the diligence of old Jan, who went back to the beach at low tide on the advice of Charlie Finck and, with the help of 11-year-old Liam Anderson, gathered about 15 pounds of the tasty little bivalves. I helped some but it was most-

ly Jan's deal and she did most of the work, chose the recipe, which involved garlic, butter, bay leaves, white wine and God knows what else and produced a real feed—mussels, home-made dark bread and white wine.

So we scored heavily with another meal consisting primarily of found food and the success of the mussel hunt took some of the sting from the loss of a hen pheasant I knocked down earlier in the day and then couldn't find, even with the help of Jan and Woola [our English mastiff]. The day was a repeat of yesterday—cool and foggy—and we decided to have a mid-afternoon walk and take the gun along in case we could raise one of Ironbound's many pheasants. And sure enough, about 100 yards past the pond, a big hen came up out of the long grass and headed toward the woods only to be hit by what I thought was a killing shot from the 12-gauge. But she went down in heavy brush along a creek and although we looked for about 45 minutes we were unable to find her.

To lose a downed animal—one you've shot and wounded—is the worst part of hunting to me, and I honestly don't know if we just overlooked her in the heavy, fern-filled overgrowth or if she wasn't hit as solidly as she looked to be. But it left a bad taste and even though we hunted hard again once we reached Cow Pasture Head and then back down the bare headland above the lake we raised no more birds. But there are so many pheasants here—hundreds of them, with no natural enemies and I hope and intend to kill and eat a few before I leave.

July 28, 1990: Up at 4:45 today to have some coffee and biscuits, put on my rubber pants and meet Russell for a trip out beyond the island. He had set some nets out to see if the herring were running and I told him I'd be glad to go along and give him a hand. So by 5:45 we were passing a shoal called the Grampus and heading for the eastern end of the island. The day was overcast, but not quite as foggy as it's been all week and he had no trouble locating the large float he uses to mark the location of the herring



Terry also got to help with lobstering when we first arrived in June and on our several Christmas trips. He's standing in front of a pile of lobster traps that he's just helped Russell Finck unload.

net. As it came in view, he said, almost to himself, "Oh my God, what have we got here?" And when I asked him what he saw, he said the gillnet was full of herring. And so it was, drifting down out of sight in the bluegreygreen water, studded with the twisting, silvery fish. When we had hold of the nets, Russell took me to the back of the



Because Ironbound was three miles out in the Atlantic, you needed a heavily built boat with a special keel to land on the island. On an average day the tide would rise and fall six feet making it dangerous to leave a boat tied to the wharf. The Ironbounders, like Paul and Charlie Finck shown here, would drive their boats up on logs called "skids" and then pull the boat out of the water by hooking a cable to the front and starting a diesel engine located on the shore that pulled the boat up the skids. In earlier times, the men would return from fishing and then hook oxen to the boats to pull them ashore.

boat and set me up with a codfish jig, saying that I could fish while he hauled in and cleaned out the net. But I had no action in the first few minutes and Russell was working so hard at what I soon saw was going to be a long task that I brought up the jig and went to the bow to help.

In a very real way it was a terrible shame that the net was so full because it was Saturday and the fishplant was closed and so there was no way to save the thousand pounds or so of herring the net had trapped. Russell spoke of it himself, saying it was such a shame to have a net full of fish and a world full of hungry people and no way to save what had been caught. He was very surprised to see the herring in such numbers, and his plan was to see if they were running so he could set the net on Sunday evening and have something else to fall back on since the cod take had slackened off. Anyway, the fish were there, fast to the squares of Russell's father's net and they had to be taken or shaken out. Sometimes we'd shake the net and six or eight would fly out at a time, but usually we had to take them out with our hands. Perhaps one in 20 was whole and would live. The net was about 100 feet long and perhaps 15 feet wide, but stretched the way it was it came out of the water with a width of six feet or so. We

were at least 45 minutes hauling and clearing it. . . .

So after the nets were safely back on board, Russell suggested we hunt for codfish. Off we went through the increasingly foggy morning, Ironbound passing out of view behind us; and, in a very few minutes, Russell killed the motor over a shoal 30 feet or so below and we unrolled the jig lines. No action. Russell said that if there were cod below in the sort of numbers that made fishing worthwhile he would usually get a strike within the first 15 or 20 seconds of the time when his jig was at the right height, which he says is about three or four feet off the bottom. The "jig" is a joined pair of large hooks, about twice the size of trotline hooks—the biggest ones I'm used to—and these hooks are just below a four inch lead sinker shaped and painted to look like a small herring. The motion of jigging is done by holding the line in your hands—hence the term "handlining"—and, keeping your arm straight and pointed downward from your shoulder and with the line running over, and resting on, the side of the boat, pulling the line about three feet in a fairly rapid motion and then letting it fall back down and so on. And on. The jig, as it drops through the water, dives downward nose first and as it darts down it attracts the fish, which

either strike it and are hooked in the mouth, or follow it down and are hooked in some other part of the body as it's pulled quickly back up as soon as it reaches the end of its downward swoop.

They were not that thick this morning, however, and we moved twice more before we got a little action and caught four codfish, averaging about three pounds apiece. . . . Then off in the fog, but not so very far off, came the unmistakable—even for me who has never heard it—blowing of a surfacing whale. An indescribably LARGE sound—no small thing could have made it—and on the flat grey sea it was riveting. And humbling. It must have been fishing too, and we heard it many times before I saw it break out of the water on the starboard side of the boat, about 100 yards away. Russell said it was "only a little



Except for the beach areas, the edges of Ironbound Island were cliffs made of craggy slate that was covered in many places with red rust from oxidation. From a boat, in the sunlight, the cliffs—rising at a slant from the sea—often looked almost red, as if they were truly made of iron.



Ironbound is narrowest in the center where the land is lowest. The small harbor is located there as are nearly all the buildings on the island. There were only eight houses when we lived there, but most homesites included barns and outbuildings as the island had historically engaged in farming as well as fishing. The wharf protecting the fishstores and harbor is shown here on the left—it faces the mainland; the water on the right is the Atlantic Ocean.

Minke,” but it was hardly little to me, being at least as long as Russell’s 28-foot boat. And, as we finally saw the whale, we began to hear a school of porpoise off in the fog, expiring air in a much more dainty way, no doubt playing in between snacks. No seasickness for them. And none for me, not while the whale was nearby. And not ever enough to make me really sick, for which I’m very grateful as I hope to the outer end of hope that I am able to go out on the boats with the men to help and learn.

Soon Russell said there was no use fishing for fish that weren’t there and we hauled in and headed back for Ironbound, Russell for probably his several thousandth trip, and I for my first, full of amazement at the number of herring and the sound of the whale, humbled by the touch of sickness, and happy not to have lost my lunch to lobsters.

August 4, 1990: . . . Later in the day, I saw Russell and he told me there was a storm system working its way up the Atlantic coast and that it might make the seas so rough he would want to bring in his nets. Having seen how much work it was for two men to haul and clear the nets and knowing of Russell’s past history of heart trouble, I told him I’d go with him in the morning if no one else came to him saying they’d go. No one came, so again I was up at 4:45 to prepare for a 5:30 departure. Russell’s concern over the weather had deepened during the night as his special fisherman’s channel was predicting that the storm, by now upgraded to hurricane status, was moving quickly toward

Nova Scotia and was expected to strike somewhere just south of Halifax. Somewhere, in other words, right on top of Ironbound. Winds of 70 miles an hour were forecast, along with the heavy swells characteristic of a storm of that size.

As we rounded the eastern tip of Ironbound and moved out of the protected lee of the island, it was clear that we didn’t need a weatherman to tell which way the wind was blowing. The storm-driven swells lifted the 30-foot Cape Islander like a toy and we both knew it would be a very different day. But as Russell said when we hit the heavy water, “If the weather was fine all the time everyone would be a fisherman.” My first thought as we hit the open sea was that I was sorry I’d had only one Gravol [Dramamine] that morning, and I could imagine myself following in the wobbly footsteps of the Reverend Robert Hunt, a member of John Smith’s 1607 Virginia Venture, who, it was said, became so sick on the trip that he wasted away, “making wild vomits into the black night.”

But we had the nets to worry about and soon we were alongside the first and had the end of it hauled aboard. I think we both were glad there were fewer fish than the day before as we wanted to finish and get back in before the storm got worse. But the swells rolled the boat so badly that it was hard for us both (particularly me) to keep our balance. The push of the wind against the drifting boat was so strong that I had all I could do to haul the net aboard. It was my good fortune that almost all of the fish had been caught in the bottom

third of the net, so I could concentrate on holding and drawing in the rope to which the net was attached.

About a third of the way through the second net, Russell said, “Ahah, there’s the devil’s admiral,” and I looked overboard to see a shark of five or six feet entangled in the nylon webbing. We’d been seeing tears in the netting that Russell said were evidence of the presence of a shark and now we had the culprit, drowned. Russell disentangled him and off he drifted to the lobsters below. We’d been back at our work for about five minutes when I suddenly became seasick, but after several vomitless heaves, I felt normal again, which Russell said was unusual. Apparently, once you become seasick, it generally persists until you reach the land, and sometimes well after that. I was relieved by my sudden recovery, both for myself and for Russell, as I could tell that he was worried about me. In fact, he began to hurry even faster than he had been and I urged him to slow down, knowing that no matter how sick I might become it would be far better to be sick than to be in the drifting boat of a dead man in a gathering storm, not understanding how to start the engine or use the communication system. In fact, this very knowledge may have done more to cure me than the effect of one capsule of Gravol on my 270-pound body.

I was fine for an hour or so, by which time we were about halfway through with the last net. But once again, after a few wild vomits, I felt normal again and we brought the last fish into the bucking boat. Russell cranked up the big diesel and we headed westward around the island in order to run with the swells. We could see the houses so clearly across the beach of Southeast Cove, that it seemed we could have almost jumped to the beach and we spooked a family of ducks as we drew near to Southwest Rock. Soon we were back at the government pier, called by the islanders the “wharf” to get Jan, who wanted to get a couple of things at the store in Blandford on the mainland. (Apparently a wharf runs parallel to the shore and a pier is perpendicular. But since the government structure comes out at an angle of approximately 35 degrees,

I think the Ironbounders are well within their rights to stick with wharf.) In any case, since we had so few fish Russell didn’t really need me to help him unload, and since I thought I should play it safe, I got out when Jan got in. I then walked to the house, got a drink of water and a plastic bucket and went down by the lake where I picked about a half-gallon of raspberries, raspberries some of whose fate it was to be turned by Jan into a pie later that afternoon and then turned by me into some small part of the energy I’m using to write these words. . . .

Later in the afternoon when the highest tides coincided with the continuing swells, we took a walk . . . all along the southwest shore the waves thundered in at our feet, throwing spray 30 and 40 feet into the air and booming into the many partial caves that dot that side of Ironbound. As we walked the sky began to clear to the west and by the time we reached Cowpasture Head on the southwestern tip of the island the sun was shining intermittently. We took a rest on the spongy softness of the cranberry vines and sat for a while in the strong wind, now coming from the north-northeast. Our vantage point provided a postcard-like view of the buildings on Ironbound and we were taking note of how beautiful it all looked and how lucky we were to have found such a magical place when out of the sky over the eastern end of the island appeared a rainbow. A rainbow, arching almost perfectly over the buildings and the lighthouse higher up, bringing to a fitting close the wondrous day which had blessed us all.



Although not the rainbow Terry mentions above, rainbows were not uncommon on Ironbound. This is taken from our front yard, shortly after Terry finished building the new wooden fence.