

Edo Potter - Chappy personified

By **Whit Griswold** - June 10, 2010

Edo Potter first visited Chappaquiddick in the winter of 1932, when she was five years old. Her father, Charles Welch, had bought a hunting camp on Poucha Pond in 1928, when camps like it were sprinkled along the south shore of Martha's Vineyard — from Cape Poge Pond to Squibnocket Pond — for the use of well-heeled sportsmen from the city who came to shoot the waterfowl that filled the skies in those days.

With the focus on gunning, the 100-acre “backland” farm and the unheated, unplumbed farmhouse that came with the camp were afterthoughts. In a few years, however, after live decoys were banned and new bag limits were placed on duck and geese, Mr. Welch lost interest in hunting and turned his attention to the farm. Old outbuildings were fixed up or torn down, and soon a new hub was added — a long building that eventually included barn space, a garage, and a workshop. “My heavysset, strong father — proper Bostonian, international sailor, former businessman — was now a farmer,” Ms. Potter writes in “The Last Farm on Chappaquiddick,” her bright, loving portrait of summers spent there between 1932 and 1945, which has just been published by Vineyard Stories.

Family visits now took place in the summer, during farming season, and Pimpneymouse Farm — as the place came to be called thanks to a practical joke — has been continually worked as a farm by Mr. Welch and his children and their children ever since. In the early years, it was principally a truck farm, producing dairy products, vegetables, and fruit for local consumption. Pigs and chickens were soon added to the mix, followed by bantam chickens and bees, as Mr. Welch took up one project after another.

Separating out honey was laborious and very hot work, but the payoff was mouth-watering. “One jar has been saved in the cellar since the 1930s,” Ms. Potter writes. “If historical reports are true, honey found in the tombs of the Pharaohs in Egypt is still good. Though I can't bear to open this last jar of our honey, I hope someday, someone will open it and prove that our honey, too, keeps indefinitely.”

Today, hay and cordwood are the principal crops, and horses are boarded there. Over time, it has outlasted the handful of farms that existed on Chappy during the 20th century, living up to the name of Ms. Potter's book.



Seventy-eight years later, Edo Potter still lives in the farmhouse, which from the outside looks much the same as it did when she first saw it. With her husband, Bob, she raised four children there, and there is now an expanding fourth generation of Potters connected to the place.

“No-one told me we were living on a primitive island, but we surely knew it was a paradise,” Ms. Potter writes in the first sentence of her book. She also knew that her four-month-long summers on Chappy were unusual for people of her background who tended to gather around clubs or activities — golf, sailing, tennis — when they escaped the city in summer. “We felt like pioneers, with no electricity, telephone, or running water, and ready for any adventure.”

With her two sisters, Ruth and Hope, Ms. Potter was expected to pitch in on the farm when hired farmers Frank Drake and Ralph Harding needed extra hands. Otherwise, since their father didn't want them underfoot during the day, the girls were expected to fend for themselves. And they made the most of it: “We would set off [on horseback] in the morning with lunches, bathing suits, and extra clothes in our saddlebags or tied around our waist, and be gone all day,” Ms. Potter writes. “On rainy days we holed up in our own secret place to play or read or think.” Self-sufficiency was a natural by-product.

They got to know Chappy inside and out, and the residents as well. “The land was so open we could gallop full tilt across grassy fields to the top of Meeting House Hill,” Ms. Potter writes, “and as children on ponies, we were welcomed everywhere we went.” Always looking for a new outlet, in 1939 the Welch girls created The Chappaquiddick Weekly, which they wrote, printed, and distributed. Stories covered hot topics like a runaway horse, a lost diamond ring that was recovered by a diver from New Bedford, a truck and a car colliding at Hairpin Turn — the latter a stop-the-presses kind of bulletin considering there were only a few dozen vehicles on the island.

When the staff met to divide their profits at the end of one season, their father “encouraged” them to give the proceeds to MSPCA. “The seeds of volunteerism were sown then and have influenced my entire life,” Ms. Potter writes.

Edgartown first benefited from that spirit in the early 1970s. When Bob Potter suggested that they spend his sabbatical year from Brown University on Chappy, Ms. Potter resisted the idea at first. But things changed. “After that year was over, I did not want to go back to the city,” she said in a recent conversation. “My husband was very tolerant. He kept an apartment in Providence. His weeks got shorter and shorter. He'd go back on Monday and return on Thursday, and then it was Tuesday to Thursday, Wednesday to Thursday, and finally in 1987 he retired.” To Chappaquiddick, full-time.



Some of the Potters' mainland friends and summer acquaintances were surprised when she made Chappy her principal residence, wondering how she would stay busy.

"One of things I did, was write a bylaw for the planning board in Edgartown to change Chappaquiddick from one to three-acre zoning," she said. "When I presented this thing I'd written, I said do what you want: throw it away, whatever you want. And they said, we want you to join the planning board. That's what got me started in my political career." Another way to describe it is public service, which seems more apt in Ms. Potter's case.

A couple of years later she joined the Martha's Vineyard Commission, then in its infancy. In 1980 she ran for selectman and won, to the surprise of many. "Because I was a summer kid, I didn't think anyone would vote for me," she said. "But I really campaigned hard. I figured if I'm going to do this, I'm going to really do it."

And she had support where it counted. "There was a guy named Ed Tyra — he was so great," she recalled. "He took me under his wing, and every Saturday and Sunday, he'd say, 'Now Edo, you're going to come and ring doorbells.' He really pushed me."


She ran successfully three more times, before retiring as selectman in 1992. "We saved 500 acres when I was a selectman, and I was very proud of that," she said.

It's been 18 years since Ms. Potter held elected office, but she has stayed involved. She currently serves on the Edgartown Conservation Commission and as the governor's appointee to the board of the Land Bank. The work is never done, and it stays very important to her. She worries that Chappy, once only attractive to those who sought a quiet, rural, independent lifestyle, has become an "in" place, and that the pressure on the land there will only increase.

"I just don't know what is going to happen in the future," Ms. Potter said. "They cannot put a ferry anywhere else, they cannot build a bridge, and until the opening closes, which will probably be another 10 years, you can't use the beach. The history of the opening, as far as I'm concerned, has been that it takes about 15 years to heal itself."

And then there's Pimpneymouse Farm. With Jan Pogue, editor and publisher of Vineyard Stories, the Potters held a reception at the farm on May 29 to celebrate the publication of "The Last Farm on Chappaquiddick." While Ms. Potter signed books and greeted friends and neighbors, her daughter Sandy led tours of the farm. Genteel but somehow untamed, the place is a mix of open, well-tended fields and wooded areas left to their own devices. The Welches and the Potters after them had a plan and they stuck to it, so that even today, the place holds up as an organized, organic sort of place, not a haphazard collection of spaces and buildings.

Acknowledging a brief, warm toast by Jan Pogue to a few lingerers at the end of the afternoon, Ms. Potter repaid the compliment and, in typically understated fashion, credited her children for editing help. It's not that she's a woman of few words, but she chooses them well and uses them

 **EN** encouraged everyone there to take the time to write down their memories; "We've got a lot of things, and we all have stories to tell," she said.

“The Last Farm on Chappaquiddick” captures in loving detail a time mostly gone by, but it is remarkably free of wistful nostalgia. And it reminds us, as we look to the future, of the elemental importance of place, of home, and the respect and care they deserve.

“I feel fortunate and privileged to have lived on Chappaquiddick for almost eighty years,” Ms. Potter writes near the end of her book. Ask almost anyone who has known or worked with her, and the feeling is that Chappy — and Edgartown and Martha’s Vineyard — have been fortunate and privileged to have had Ms. Potter as friend, neighbor, and steward.

The Last Farm on Chappaquiddick, By Edo Potter, Vineyard Stories, Edgartown, Mass., 2010. 190 pages. \$22.95.

