



In the dog house again

PEOPLE, PLACES AND THINGS

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Gretchen J. Gudefin*

“Two specials and a super, please!” Say this phrase to anyone who has longtime ties to Wright’s Beach on Blaisdell Lake in South Sutton and they will know exactly what you are talking about. This would have been a typical order placed at the window of the beloved little hot dog stand that plied its trade for almost 40 years along the lake’s western shore. Today, the little building now sits idle and empty; the words “Dog House” still visible on its front, albeit a bit faded and crumbling; and the once busy order window is boarded up. But those two words are capable of unleashing memories that stretch from Sutton to Broadway and beyond.

In the years between the two World Wars, South Sutton attracted quite a little colony of show biz people (profiled in *Kearsarge Magazine* Fall 2008). The town’s rural charm, beckoning woods and clear cool lakes provided a welcome respite from the bustle of the city and life on the road.

Pat Rooney (1909-1979) was a dancer who had followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather onto

the stages of Broadway. He was just one of the many well-known entertainers to make the trip north to visit fellow vaudevillian Buster West at his farm in South Sutton for a bit of rest and relaxation. The visit would change Pat’s life forever when he met a local girl, Estelle Wright. They married in 1942 and he would call South Sutton his home for the rest of his life.

In 1947, Pat — with the Lowe brothers, Don and Tom — opened The Dog House for its first summer of business. It adjoined the Wright family compound of businesses owned and operated by Estelle’s father, Sutton native Chet Wright. In its heyday, the compound included a thriving general store, privately owned Wright’s Beach and bath houses, their home, and a tiny museum housing Chet’s collection of vaudeville memorabilia. In 1948, Pat and Estelle took full ownership of The Dog House.

Blaisdell Lake was a happening place back then, and The Dog House was at the hub of it all. These were the days when families stayed at their cottages for the whole season and there were three summer camps on the lake, too: Camp Wabasso (still in operation), Camp Kemah and Camp Blaisdell. The little hot dog stand — with the big red dachshund painted on its front — opened the first of May for trout season and closed on Columbus Day (although

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Big tents are set up on Wright’s Beach for Dog House Weekend.

An old postcard of The Dog House, Estelle “Mrs. Boss” Rooney at the grill, a vintage postcard view of The Dog House and Wright’s Beach, Pat Rooney in 1973, the first Dog House Weekend in 1991, postcard view of Wright’s Beach (date unknown), all photos courtesy of Gail Olson



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it was only open on weekends before Memorial Day and after Labor Day). The order window, flanked on either side with hand painted menus, opened at 11 a.m. and would try to close by 9 p.m. or when they could clear everyone out — Estelle recalled sometimes not being able to close until midnight! The two most popular items on the menu were Specials and Supers; the Special was a hot dog with cheese, bacon and sauce, while the Super was a hamburger with cheese, bacon, onion and sauce. The “sauce” was Pat and Estelle’s own delicious (but closely guarded) secret recipe. Absolutely everything was made fresh.

The Dog House was a favorite hangout for camp counselors and a much anticipated treat for the kids. Estelle remembered that when it was parents’ weekend for the camps, The Dog House was so busy that, even with

five employees working, the wait for a hot dog could be as long as two hours! They eventually had to ask the camps to alternate their parents’ weekends so that they could better serve everyone. Colby Junior College (now Colby-Sawyer College) students routinely made the drive from New London for their hot dogs. For years, it was a tradition for students to bring their parents here for lunch on graduation day.

Having to wait was not always such a bad thing. You could walk across the street to the beach or walk over to the general store and pick up your mail, get caught up on the news (both printed and overheard), pick up a few groceries, listen to Chet’s stories of his vaudeville days, or perhaps visit with Willie, Chet’s famous ventriloquist dummy who held court in the corner of the store for decades.

You could enjoy your food at one of the umbrella covered tables outside or in the tiny dining room where the windowsills were lined with porcelain dog statues and the walls were covered with signed photos of movie stars that Pat had known and worked with during his career, including Bob Hope, Red Skelton and Mickey Rooney. Pat also honored his regulars with their own coffee mugs on which he would paint their name in bright red letters and



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these hung proudly in the kitchen and dining room. An oddly shaped corner table could seat eight comfortably, but it was not unheard of to squeeze up to 20 people inside for a “cozy” evening.

Pat was the head grill man and ran a tight ship; former employees, many of whom still live here on the lake, remember him as a stern task master but credit him with teaching them the value of strong work ethics. They worked hard and for long hours — but not one would trade their memories and experiences of being part of The Dog House legacy. They were a family, and most were thought of by Pat and Estelle as the children they never had.

Pat and Estelle ran The Dog House every summer until Pat’s passing in 1979. Estelle ran it with the help of her devoted employees for a few more summers, closing the order window for good in 1984. She passed away in 2006 at the age of 90.



A vintage Dog House menu

Today The Dog House returns every other summer for one weekend. Huge tents are set up on Wright's Beach and the original grill once again sizzles with hot dogs. Sponsored by the Blaisdell Lake Protective Association (BLPA), the "kitchen" is staffed by former employees and their families who still prepare the food to Pat's exacting standards. BLPA members help out with everything else. And what about that secret sauce? Estelle left the recipe to only a select few ... you might say it's still a "super special" secret, even after all these years!

WHAT: Dog House Days, sponsored by the BLPA

WHEN: July (watch for dates/details in local papers)

WHY: Get there early to buy freshly made jars of the secret sauce

HOW MUCH: Super might set you back about \$3.50 and a Special is \$3

Gretchen J. Gudefin has lived on Blaisdell Lake since 1997. She learned much of the history of The Dog House from Estelle Rooney and from her neighbors and friends, many of whom are former employees. Gretchen is a member of the BLPA and was a "runner" (server) during Dog House Days in 2007; she hopes to be one again this summer!

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