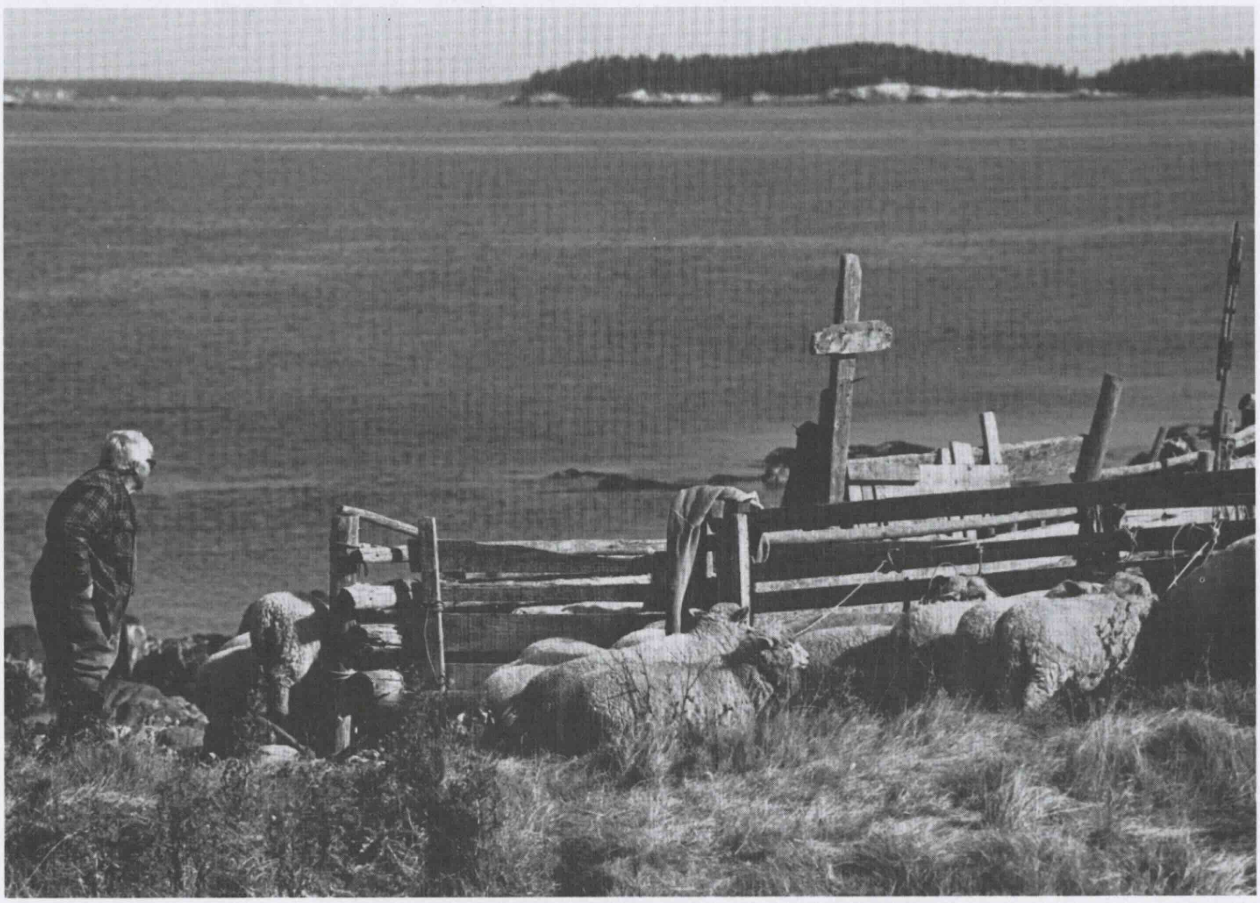
JENNY
ISLAND SHEPHERDESS

By Terri Selfa



Photography by Lynn Kippax, Jr.

"WHY IN THE DEVIL did I wear this red shirt? See, I can't drive 'em. They all, about 90 percent of 'em comes to me. No, no they come right up to me, say, 'What you want me for?' "

Jenny Cirone and I crouch motionlessly, trying to camouflage ourselves in the crevices of the rocks. Behind us, the tide licks the rocky shoreline rhythmically. The ebb and flow of the tide is broken only by the distant sound of bleating sheep.

Jenny's big, sturdy frame is sandwiched between rocks so that the sheep won't catch sight of her. She slouches, chin resting on her chest, in an effort to conceal her bright clothing and blend into the shoreline. Jenny's black, hip-high rubber boots cling to the pebbly sand that surfaces when the tide washes out.

Clothed in heavy denims and a red flannel shirt, Jenny looks prepared for a day's work. Her fist closes around a staff sculptured from driftwood. Though her fingers are thick and almost stubby, she clenches the staff tightly.

The wind lifts off the morning's calm seas. Jenny stares into the sea, steel blue eyes fixed on a point far in the distance. Deep grooves in her ruddy skin fork at the corners of her eyes, running down the edge of her face.

The bleating of sheep steadily grows in volume, until the sheep seem to be quite close. Three fat sheep ascend into the horizon above our hiding place in the rocks. They trot by complacently, heads swinging from side to side, eyes focused on the grain that lies in the corral ahead. Others follow, grouped loosely in twos or threes, and a choir of bleating resounds across Little Nash Island.

"Ain't they pretty?" Jenny whispers breathlessly.

"PEOPLE DON'T KNOW no more about these island sheep than I do about that ledge. Now there might be somethin' in that ledge that's valuable, or it might not be worth a darn, but I don't know either one."

Jenny says this with the authority that comes from tending island sheep for a good 60 years. She keeps a flock of about 250 sheep on three islands off the coast of Maine near South Addison.

Island sheep raising was once quite common and profitable in Maine, though rare today. A grassy land mass surrounded by water, islands were recognized as ideal for containing and raising sheep.

Today, Jenny's islands are the only ones off the coast of Maine where lambs are kept year round. "Now downeast, all them islands, they take all the lambs off and winter 'em. And bring 'em back on come springtime."

Jenny's sheep raising dates back to her childhood on Little Nash Island, one of the three islands where her sheep now live year round. On Little Nash, Jenny helped her father raise his sheep, fish for lobster and look after the lighthouse he was assigned to as keeper for twenty years.

She bought Little Nash in 1944 — some eight years after her father's death — along with half of Big Nash Island and a sheer rock ledge called the Ladle. The 100 or so sheep on the islands then were rickety and thin. Jenny brought in some "doctors", who said the problem was malnutrition.

"I said, 'Look, how can it be malnutrition, because there's every kind of feed on here that you could ask for. There's clover, there's blueflag, herdsgrass, everything on here, besides all the feed they got.'

"I says, ' I don't believe you.' I says, 'I think I'm working on the right end of it.' "

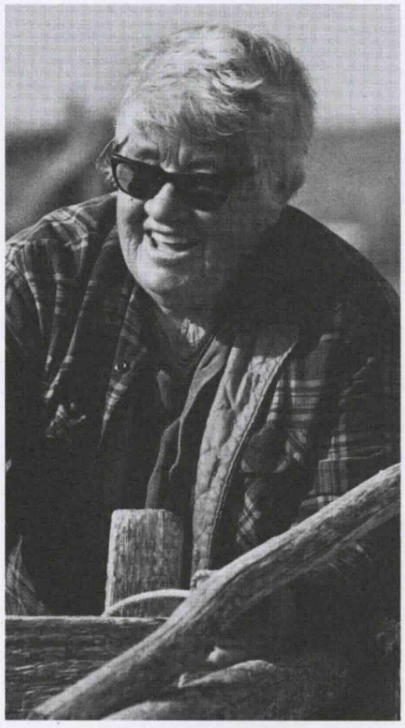
The right end of it, according to Jenny, was "because they was inbred so many years. Oh it was an awful mess. We just cleaned it off, kept the best ones, then kept puttin' on a different ram every year. And we got it built up so that rickets don't show up t'all."

Jenny is the first to argue that raising sheep is easier than raising other animals. Despite that, if you listen to Jenny's conversation very long, you'll decide that a good many people don't know how to do it.

There are the people who think sheep ought to be tied by the legs when they're taken on board a boat. No, Jenny says. They'll smother that way. "I never tied one of their legs. The first one you put in [the boat], you tie to the muffler or somethin' [around the neck]. Then you put the rest of 'em in, and that's it. They stay right there."

There are the people who are too rough with sheep during lambing, herding or shearing. Jenny's best swearing is directed toward such people.

Before long, talking to Jenny, you decide that the



"People don't know no more about these island sheep than I do about that ledge."

problems in sheep raising spring from the human raisers rather than the sheep themselves.

"You can't raise an animal less work in it than a sheep is. The only work there is, is when you shear 'em. That's the only work there is in 'em.

"Other than that, they take care of themselves and they can lamb [by themselves]. I don't believe in taking a lamb. I don't do that. After they start in labor, they're two hours. You give 'em two hours and if that lamb is not born in two hours, you know there's something wrong. Other than that, no, no.

"Another thing, you can go off and leave sheep, and you can't any other animal. A cow or horses or ponies or anything is a lot more work than sheep are.

"And they can really stand a lot of pain. I've seen 'em — well, we had a fella up there (shearing) and I kept telling 'im, I said, 'Don't throw your sheep that way. You're gonna break their leg.' But it didn't sink in 'til it snapped, broke the front leg right off.

"She never said a word, never a blabby, never, never — well let's just say one of the coyotes were out over there. And they never let on that anything was bothering 'em."

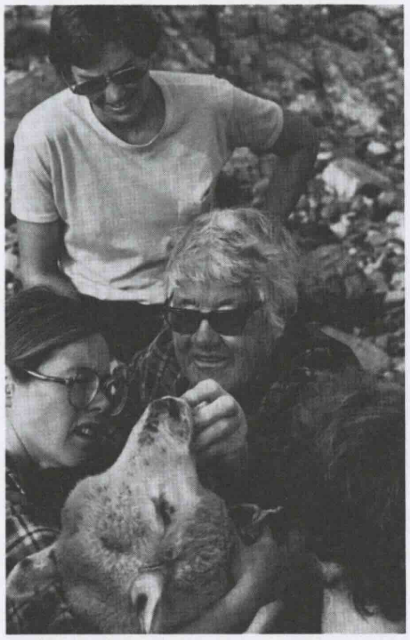
Jenny says sheep will set their own legs. "It'd be quite a job to keep a splint on one because they're so active. They'd set themselves if you let 'em go.

"I was shearing one day. I was goin' down the leg like this. She was a Oxford, wooly legs. I said, 'What in the world did I hit?' There ain't supposed to be nothin' there.

"And I looked and that leg, somebody had shot it off, it had grew together just like that. She had to lay on it for that to heal together. So they will heal up."

Over the years, Jenny has lost a good number of her prized island sheep to dogs, coyotes, eagles, Blackback (Arctic) gulls, and thieves. When one of her sheep is killed, Jenny suffers both economic and emotional losses.

"There's only just one thing. If I ever caught anybody on there, botherin' one a them sheep, I know before I'd come to my senses, I'd kill 'em. Especially if I had a gun. Or if I couldn't do that, I'd prob'ly clobbered 'em to death."



"These are my foolish ones."

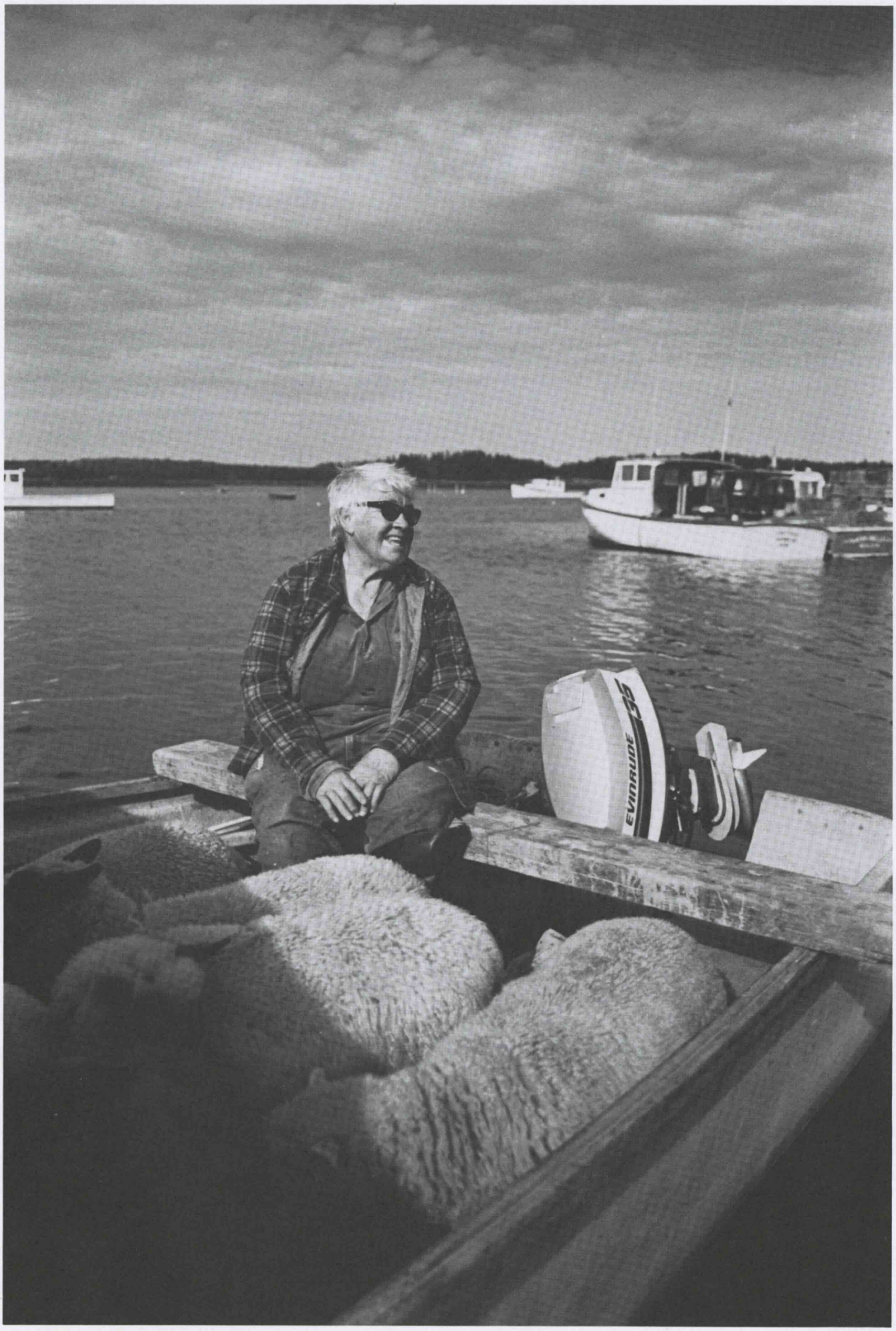
"THESE PEOPLE, THEY was tellin' me about how dumb sheep was.

"I say, 'Whaddya mean, they're dumb?' Well, she says, 'Well now, for instance,' she says, 'if one jumps over a cliff, they'll all go.'

"I says, 'How 'bout the people?' I said, 'Now you're talkin' about how dumb sheep are, they're forced to jump. O.K.,' I said, 'You take a crowd a people and get them into place and then a fire starts, what do they do?' "

Jenny's sheep are able to distinguish color, and have proven to be quite capable of caring for themselves, left alone on the islands all year. The sheep have even set their own broken bones in the past when Jenny hasn't been able to get out to the islands for any length of time.

Jenny leaves most of her flock on the three islands she owns for the entire winter. She visits the islands regularly, whenever the weather will allow, bringing hay as required by "law" to supplement the abundant grasses on the islands.


EVINRUDE 35

Bringing the hay is a token gesture, because the sheep grow fat without it, so rich is the mixture of grasses. The sheep fare quite well through the winter, Jenny says, as they band together under the snow during storms. The snow acts as insulation and shelter. Jenny finds her sheep on the islands during the winter by looking for air holes in the snow.

"They take good care of themselves. In the winter, they do extra good. When it comes a storm, you don't have to look for 'em, 'cause you know they're all gonna be in one bunch, and then when there comes a real blizzard, course we ain't had any real blizzards for a long time, you go along big snow piles, crawl up over them.

"You see a little place that don't look just about right. Oh about this big. You touch it, that's where they breathe, see. They'll be right in a little cave down there.

"Funny. People can't do that. They must panic, under snow, snow goes down on people, they smother.

"I don't know what it is, but the sheep they don't, it don't bother them any. You just ah, as I said, you know, on your hands and knees, and crawl up over the snow bank, you know, and you find their beds then, there's a big bank, a snow bank there, all you have to do is just go up over it, and see if there's any under it.

"They travel, just the same as they do in summer, you know they're everywhere, only as I said, the only time they get together is on a blizzard, a big storm, a snow storm, any kind a snow storm, they're together. Yep."

Several years ago, when one of Jenny's neighbor's flock all died, the County Commissioner paid her a visit. He was investigating how well her sheep lasted through the winter on the islands. When Jenny showed him photographs of her flock, he was astounded by their health. Jenny recounts his comments:

" 'No. There's so many sheep right here on this mainland that's in so much worse shape than these sheep are. Well, them sheep are fat!'

"I said, 'I know them sheep are fat. You can kill 'em right in February, and they'd be as fat as a pig!'

"So he says, 'The only thing, you put some hay out there. They can't do a thing to ya.' I been puttin' hay out there every year since. That's how I had to have hay out there. Before that you never had to have hay.'

"Well March and April is the hardest months we got, it's warm, it don't seem warm to you, but when the sheep get in one of these knolls here, and sun themselves, especially when they are heavy with lambs, they lay down and stretch out, they get cast. They can't get up to save their souls. They get their hind feet, they get up hind feet first. They get those hind feet a quarter inch off the ground, they can't get up, they numb them. You have to pick 'em up."

Ice left over from winter can also be troublesome for the island sheep. When crust gets embedded in their hooves, it is both painful and difficult to remedy. Jenny spends a lot of time during the spring out at the three islands, caring for her sheep.

Jenny and a few of her friends built what she calls a "maternity home" on Big Nash Island a few years ago. It is used to shelter the ewes during pregnancy and birthings. Jenny began delivering lambs when she was 13 years old, and in the 58 years since then, is reticent to guess at how many she's "taken."

"Dorris and I and Margaret built it, oh everything, even the nails, everything we picked up 'round the island, and we built it. I said we was gonna have to have a maternity home so when the lambs was comin', we could put 'em in it. We just got it built, and I had a sheep named Sunshine, and my godfrey, she went in that night, and had her lambs. Ya, she went in and had a pair a lambs, and Margaret had never seen lambs born, so she got her view.

"Oh, I wish now, course you see, when you're young, you think you gotta remember everything, but you don't. I wished I'd set down how many lambs I had taken."

IF ANY OF THE ISLAND sheep require extra care or need to recuperate, they are brought back by boat to Jenny's home in South Addison. Often, they never return to the islands, as Jenny becomes attached to them, and they to her.

She refers to her flock in South Addison as her "foolish ones." Jenny holds a special affection for the flock of 15 "foolish ones" that graze right around her house. They are some of her best companions at home on the mainland.

Jenny's house in South Addison sits in the midst of low green fields, with the Atlantic as backdrop. Today, a thick layer of fog lies on top of the pastures, the air moist and heavy.

Ducks parade by the house in single file, quacking for

their evening meal. The sheep nibble impatiently at the grass, waiting for feeding. It is suppertime for the many animals that Jenny mothers.

"See? The old duckies reckon they ain't gonna get no supper, so they gonna eat them cranberries," Jenny jokes as we step into the barn to get the grain. Jenny is obviously in her "element" outside with the animals that she nurtures like children.

"Oh, I'll take all the lambs back to the island next spring, because I haven't got the room here, you see. And, of course, I never take Rocky back because I think that was 90 percent of his trouble in the first place. Cause, oh, when I used to go out there, it'd break your heart, he'd come right down to the shoreline and you'd think he was a baby, he would *yowl.*

"These are my foolish ones. I got six out here I brought up on a bottle. You see, they had their milk, 'til I just got them on the grain now. This little pen here, I go out and speak to 'em. Open the gate and they'll all barrel in here, and I'll feed the babies in here, and take these fellas and go to another place and feed them. There's an awful bunch a gluttons."

Jenny pours out grain in piles on the ground of the pen. She carries armloads of hay and stuffs it into the stand-up feeder. The sheep congregate near her, bleating loudly, as Jenny converses with each one individually, by name. She speaks to each sheep as though she were addressing a slightly naughty, but endearing, child. Responding spiritedly to their nudges for affection, Jenny gathers her flock.

"Well, Aunt Jemime, she's been here ever since she was born, she's, I think, goin' on eight or nine. Velvet's been here ever since she was born. And that is Bufflehead there.

"Joe, what you doin'? Got to look things over, huh?

"That's Towers, we found him next to the lighthouse, so we called him Towers. And that's Finicky Fanny, she's the little fella they brought in. And Stubby, Hop-a-Long, Apaloosa. Skin-n-Bones got two names, he's Deadman, Skin-n-Bones.

"Once I had me a sheep, Poodle her name was. I loved her s'much, but boy she loved me. Now let me tell ya. I'd go out the islands with the boys. Well, my brother and I and his wife went out, spent Labor Day weekend.

"Ya, when we came back, my sister-in-law met me on the water, oh boy, she went up one side a me, and down the other. And I said, 'Now *what* has Poody done now?' She wouldn't eat, not one thing, she wouldn't even take her bottle, all she would do was sulk.

"And I said, 'Well, that's funny.'

"So I come up the house and my husband, Stan, laid into me.

"He said, 'The next time you go on vacation, you take your lamb with ya.'

"I said, 'What she done now?'

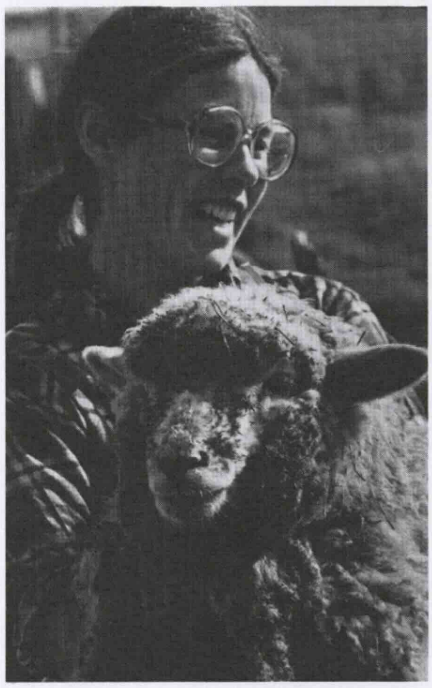
"Nothin'. She wouldn't eat.' She wouldn't even eat. We bought her some macaroon cookies, you know? He says, 'She wouldn't even eat her cookies.'

"No, so when I ah stepped out the door, I said, 'Poody, where in the world are you?'

"And she came barrelin' into the house. And she stomped for her bottle at that table, goin' right around and around.

"I said, 'It don't look to me as though she's left off nursin' at that bottle.'

"And I gave her the bottle



"Them sheep are fat as a pig, middle of winter!"

and he said, 'Now you watch.' And he passed her some cookies.

"I said, 'Give 'em to me.' She missed me. You wouldn't believe it. Ayuh, she wouldn't eat, no sah. And I took the cookies, and she went at 'em as though they was goin' out a style.

"And the next Novemba, same year Novemba, Carl and I went out the island. And he said, 'Poody won't eat her grain again.'

"I said, 'Ah, I didn't have time to kiss her.' I was just, you know, blowing. I stuck my head in over the fence and she ooh went right up an' down the side a me and down the other. And my brother jumped right up and down. He said, 'That is somethin'.

"That was the most beautiful sheep I ever had in my life. Course the dogs got her.

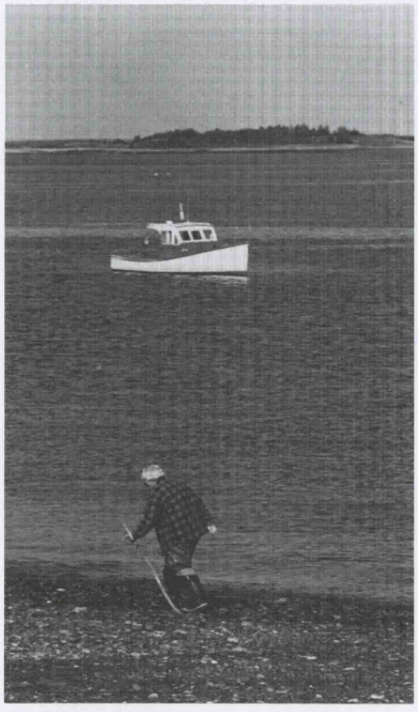
"Yep. That's the trouble. That's why I say, I wish I didn't like 'em. But I can't help it. Them six little lambs, I have to pat one every night. That little Towers, he'll go all over my face and you can't help but pay attention to 'em."

The dialogue winds on as Jenny finishes carrying grain from the barn to the pen. "They're funny. Sheep are funny. Now that's just the same as a them six little fellas. When I step right out here to feed 'em, they all run out that gate.

"I open it up, the rest of 'em would, oh Aunt Jemime and Rocky would once in a while try to get in, but a most always, they'll stand and wait and I'll say, 'Now where do you get your grain?' And they'll all barrel back to where I feed 'em."

The barn doors are latched shut. As we head back toward the house, Jenny mutters a few final words to her sheep. Now that all her babies have been fed and put to bed for the evening, Jenny makes her way back to the house for her own supper. She moves solidly, as if she were walking on the deck of a boat thrashing on the seas.

The North Atlantic stretches for miles behind Jenny's house. The green grass is saturated with fog and the day's rain. As the murky sun descends into the horizon, some calmness is restored to the sea. Rocky islands barely peep out of the ocean far in the distance, as the sun's final flare of light for the day is spent. Out on the islands, two hundred and fifty sheep bed down for the night.



"That's an awful fever, that lobster-fishin'."

ASK ANY FISHERMAN up and down the coast of Maine, from Bar Harbor to Eastport. Most of them probably could tell you of a woman who's fished the waters off the coast of South Addison, Maine, for a good 60 years.

"Yep. I heard of a woman up round South Addison. Jen Cirone. She's been fishin' for years," a scallop fisherman told me at the Eastport pier one rainy fall afternoon.

One of two daughters in a "small flock" of nine children, Jenny Cirone began lobster fishing when she was ten years old. She fished with her father in a cove right near her home on Little Nash Island.

"I started out, yes, started goin' with father, 'til my sister wanted to go. She was a bit different than I was. She couldn't stand the cold, she couldn't stand the getting on the —— she got on the water, all you'd have ta do is keep settin' her to shore, 'cause she'd have to make water.

"So I'd row back to shore prob'ly once or twice before I'd get her across. Oh dear, but

after a fashion, she and father went, she wanted to go, so I had me a pod of my own."

Jenny speaks plainly about the things she's done in her lifetime. A woman with drive, from an early age Jenny was drawn to the sea. She fully intended to lobsterfish from the first time she went out hawling traps with her father.

Jenny's father, John Purington, brought his family in 1916 to Little Nash Island, where he would keep the lighthouse for the next 20 years. Jenny spent her childhood on Little Nash, a rocky island without trees, thinking nothing of rowing the five or six miles into the harbor of South Addison or other nearby fishing villages to get grain for the animals or supplies for her family. As a girl, she helped her father with his lightkeeping duties, tended a small flock of island sheep, and fished with her father.

By age thirteen, Jenny was bound and determined to be fishing on her own, fulltime. In those early days, she worked out of a rowboat, hauling traps by hand. Jenny obstinately refused to attend school any longer.

"There was always somethin' wrong [at school], so I told mother, 'Now I'm all finished.'

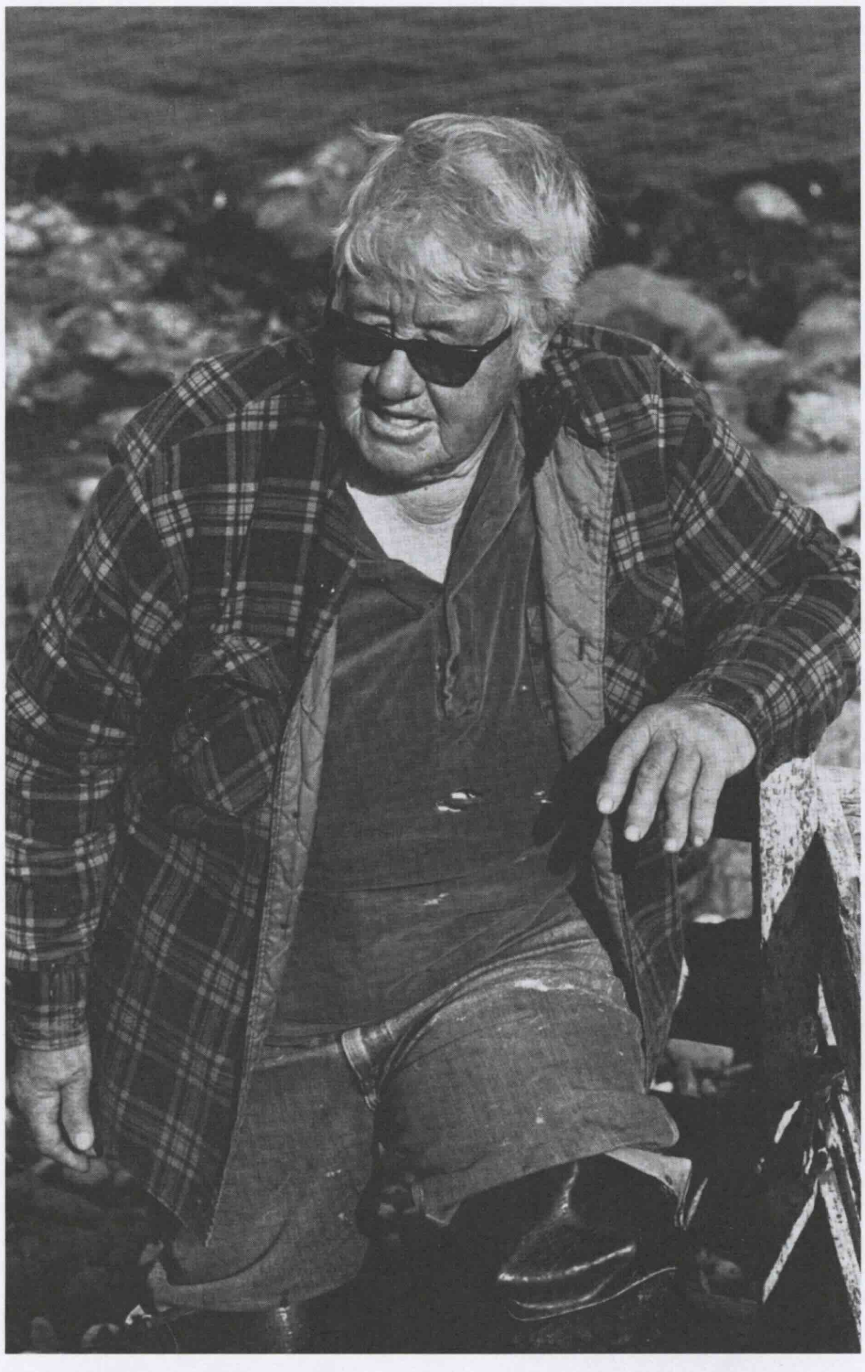
"She said, 'It might take you a while. You're goin' to school.'

"And I said, 'Am I? Sure you can send me, sure Mother, but I'm not goin' to ever step in that school again.'

"She said, 'What you gonna do?'

"I said, 'I'm goin' lobsterfishin'.' And that's what I did."

Only once in her lifetime has Jenny taken time off from fishing. When she was first married, Jenny and her husband, Stan, farmed the land



Sheep are smart, says Jenny.

and raised animals. But the sea kept calling her back, until one day, when she was about 31 years old, Jenny answered the call.

"Well, I'll tell ya. I guess it was a little overambition, I don't know. But anyway, I decided that, Stan, my husband, was working down at the water, and I decided that I'd go fishin'. So I built 50 traps, and he bought me a pod. That's how I started. And I've been fishin' ever since.

"That's an awful fever, that lobsterfishin'. Oooh boy, it's somethin' you just can't shake. Ya, once you been on the water, course I *lived* on the water, especially on that island for 17 years."

North Atlantic fishermen must pay careful attention to the tides as well as to the direction and force of the wind, for their lives depend on it. Jenny remembers vividly the time her father was pulling a line of traps, standing in the water between Little Nash and Big Nash islands, when the tide started coming in, fast.

"In the boat. . . well every time there's a chance, you'd get off. Sometimes it wasn't fit to be in the boat. 'Cause I know one time we were down between the islands to get a trap, and course I was just as scared of those breakers as I could be.

"And I said to Father, 'Don't go in there.'

" 'Oh,' he said, 'don't be so foolish. Grab that toggle,' he says, 'and I can pull her right off.'

"And I said, 'Maybe, but I don't like it!'

"So he went in, I got hold of that toggle. And I can see that sea now, that sea started drawin' him back, there's the sea comin' up here and the old boat was comin' like this. By and by she let go.

"He said, 'Let go of that toggle.'

"I said, 'You told me to guard it. I can live on the water as long as you can!'

"He turned just as white as a sheet. Never got the trap back ashore, and that was the end of that. But, I am, right to this day, just as scared of them breakers as I was back then. No, I never got over the fear of those breakers. I'll mess around with 'em, but I most always give 'em good berth."

For many years, Jenny's 32-foot lobsterboat, the *Convincer,* held the reputation of being the fastest boat in the South Addison harbor. The *Convincer* was built for her in 1947 by Freddy Lynfestey of Jonesport, Maine.

"Ya, that was his second boat. And if he'd taken my measurements and everything, he couldn't have built one, and fitted me any better," Jenny says. Together, Jenny and Freddy Lynfestey came to name her lobsterboat the *Convincer.*

"Well there was this guy here in the harbor, that had this fastest boat. And I said, 'Freddy, if you can build me a boat that will beat him, we'll call her the *Convincer.*

"I came in from haulin' one day, and my neighbor over here jumped onto the boat, started balin' and cleanin' and takin' all the tubs and buckets out. And I said, '*What* in the world is goin' on, Joe?'

"He says, 'You gonna have a race.' So he went to the guy that he wanted us to race with.

"He says, 'No way. I've panned her.' He wouldn't race."

Jenny fished the *Convincer* for almost 40 years. During that time, she only touched bottom twice, never hard enough to get stuck or run aground. To a fisherman, running aground is near blasphemy.

Last year, Jenny lent the *Convincer* to her nephew, Dean. She had thought that fishing was over for her, but found that she missed it too much. So, Jenny decided to use her 20-foot outboard, *Tubby,* and she now hauls about 25 wire traps by hand. It has kept her from "getting s'lazy.

"Mmm. Somethin' about it, that just, I don't know. But I *know* it's a fever, because you do it once, and you do it, you know, any length of time, it's one darn job to quit. Now that was just the same as this spring, when we turned the boat over to our nephew. I was thinkin' about quittin', but it would do me more damage than I realized.

"So I said, 'The heck with it! I'll get me, I'll get me 25 traps, an' go in *The Tub.*'

"So, I've had me a lot more fun in my little boat, nobody's pushin' me around. And I made enough to pay for my traps, and I was tickled to death, 'cause those things [wire traps] cost like the devil.

"So, I've felt a lot better, and you know, well, as I told 'em, if I didn't do somethin', they'd had me in a straitjacket. I'd be up on the hill.

"But, no, it's really somethin' that you just can't shake right off quick."

TERRI SELFA studied at Salt for a semester after graduating from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington.

salt