The Story of Ruth For 34 years, Ruth Farris has been writing a column for a small weekly newspaper in Cutler, Maine. It chronicles a cherished way of life that may not be with us much longer. *by* *Edie Clark*

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, when the 21st century seems too close, I like to drive way Down East on the coast of Maine to the little fishing village of Cutler. When I'm there, I stop by to visit with Ruth Farris. Ruth's house is near the harbor, the kitchen is always warm, and she's always got a story to tell. If I can't make the nine-hour drive, I can read her column in the *Machias Valley News Observer*. She tells her stories there, and she keeps us up to date on what's happening in Cutler, who came to visit, how many loons she spotted while out rowing her boat, what's up in her garden, what the weather might be. Ruth's columns are like the very best letters from home, full of news, advice, and lots of love.

Since 1961, Ruth has been writing for the paper. She doesn't think of herself as

– *photographs by* KINDRA CLINEFF



Ruth relaxes after one of the church suppers she has been helping to put on for 50 years.

a writer nor even a reporter. She is more like a keeper of the town. Often there is eloquence in her simplicity, poetry in her words.

* * *

There is a fallish feeling as I start off my items for this week. Last evening the moon gave a glow across the water as it slowly went down. It was the color of an orange.... As I rowed in to the beach one day, one sand peep flew out. I wonder how long it will stay here....What a change to the outer beaches where seas have pounded those places. It is interesting to see how the rocks have moved to form different shapes. Also, the ocean at times looks so blue. (September 1994)

Ruth is a hardy woman with circles of rouge on each cheek, little rising suns,

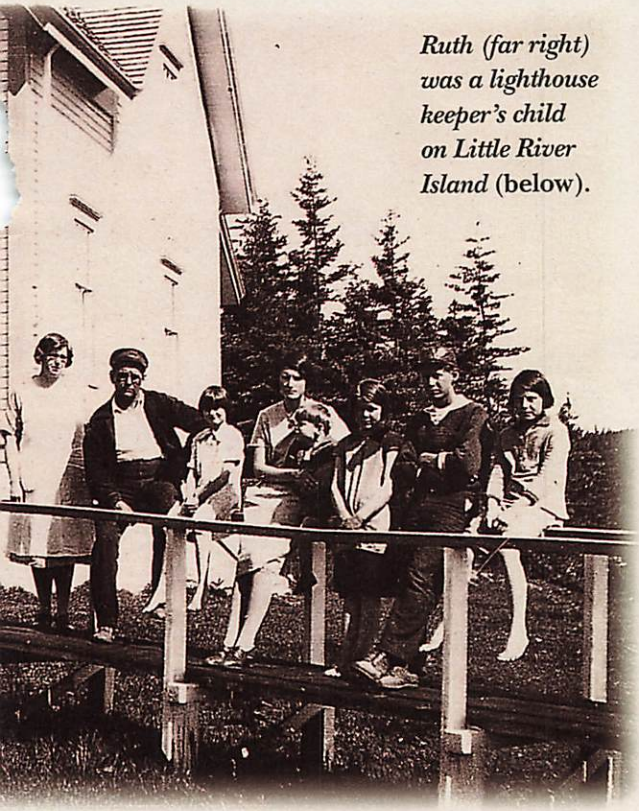


Ruth has not traveled much, but she has a grip

and lines on her face — worry lines, laugh lines, life lines that run deep, like roads on a map. Ruth has not traveled much, but she has a grip on her town, on her place there at the end of the American coastline, and if you read her column, she doesn't mind sharing this with you, all the little events that make up a life in a small town, all the tiny miracles she observes in a single day.

Ruth Farris grew up Ruth Corbett, daughter of the keeper of the light out on Little River Island. There were eight children, four boys and four girls, living in the red-roofed farmhouse beside the light. The island was big enough for a garden, and there were boats to row. "We always had a good time," Ruth says, remembering back. The island is still in her view, very nearly, from her dooryard. If she steps out across the road, it's there; and if she puts her boat in and rows, as she does every day that the weather is nice, in 20 min-





***Ruth (far right) was a lighthouse keeper's child on Little River Island* (below).**

utes or so, she is back on the island. The light is automated now and the farmhouse boarded up, but it's all pretty fresh to Ruth, who is 75 but strong, her hands big like a fisherman's.

Ruth lived on the island until she was 24. She moved to the mainland, to Cutler, when she married Glenn Farris, a lobster fisherman. Over these many years, from the windows of their house, Ruth has watched the great tides in Cutler harbor heave and sink, heave and sink, like a great timepiece that lives inside her — she can close her eyes and know where the tide line rests, the phase of the moon, and the temperament of the wind.

Among other things, Ruth predicts the weather for her neighbors. In her column on September 17, 1985, she wrote: *What a warm week this has been! Almost too hot to stay outdoors . . . with these high tides, lucky not to have a storm. Having such hot weather could feed a hurricane up this way.* Two weeks later, the paper featured photos of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Gloria.

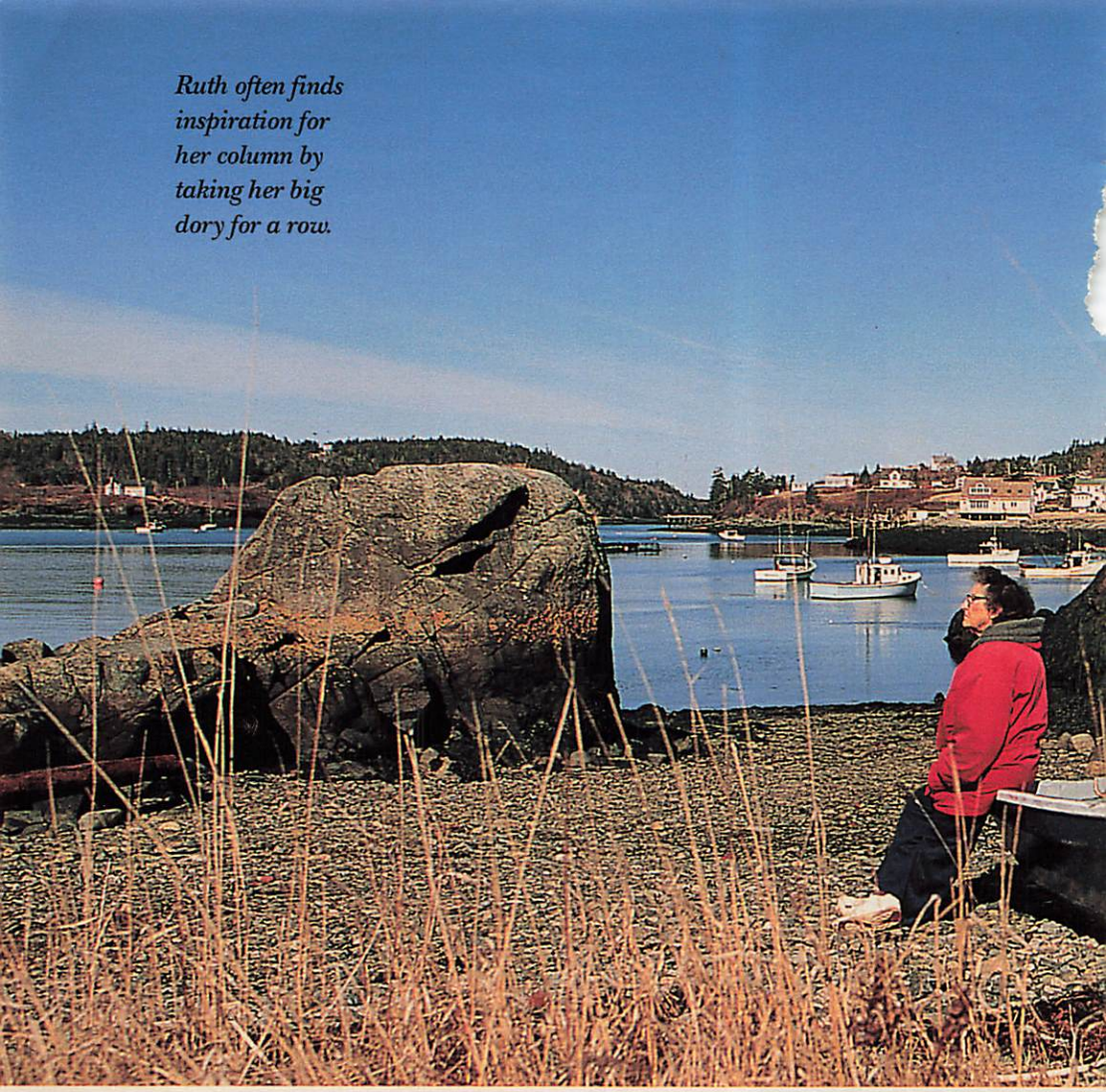
on her town, on her place at the end of the American coastline.



Like the moon, there are many phases to Ruth's life. In her kitchen little painted figures line the shelf behind the stove — pieces she has carved in the dark part of the winter. In the summer she sells these carvings to tourists. In the back room is her desk, where she writes her column in longhand on a yellow pad. Beside the couch in her living room is a fine button accordion. She taught herself to play many years ago, and now she plays for the Grange meetings and for her own enjoyment.

The last time I went to Cutler, Ruth was at the sink, cutting up a big cod. Her son-in-law had caught it in

– photograph courtesy Ruth Farris; illustration by Susan Dowley



Ruth often finds inspiration for her column by taking her big dory for a row.

She can close her eyes and know where the tide line

his traps and brought it over when he got in to the dock. He often does this. Ruth, the daughter of the lighthouse keeper and the wife of a fisherman, cannot remember ever having bought a fish. Glenn died seven years ago, but her son-in-law fills in on that score. In this house there has always been fish. He also brought her a lobster claw. She put the claw into a saucepan and set it on the hot part of the big iron stove. The room was filling with the sweet steam of the lobster cooking. The cod, she was preparing to dry.

"Do you like dried fish?" she asked.

I told her I wasn't sure.

She took a jar from the shelf. It was filled with chunks of dried fish. She shook one out into my hand. I put it on my tongue. Ruth took one and popped it in her mouth like a candy. The fish was soft, like licorice, and the flavor of



rests, the phase of the moon, and the temperament of the wind.

fish was strong, salty but not unpleasant. "Some people don't like it," she said.

She set the fillets in a turkey roaster, covered them with salt, and carried the pan to the shed. In a few days she'll set them out to dry. She took off her apron and said, "We'll have a row, if the wind will let us."

Ruth's boat is a big dory that her husband bought for $10 at auction many years ago. It was a boat from the island, sold off by the Coast Guard while they were keeping the light. "It's been a wonderful boat," she says. It is painted gray on the inside, bright blue stem to stern. It bobs on a mooring just off the rocks across from her house. To get to it, she rows out in a little pram that she keeps on the beach. The tide is full, slack tide.

"I love to row," she has told me. "I can row just about as I did when I was young, better maybe. Rhythm. It's the rhythm. *(continued on page 122)*

– photograph by Kindra Clineff

THE STORY OF RUTH

(continued from page 67)

I love dipping those oars, feathering those oars, row and feather, row and feather, skimming over the water."

* * *

Saturday evening I took a row in the calmness of the harbor. Such a beautiful sight to watch the sun set from a boat. The clouds were bright rose and how the trees stood so lovely against the clear sky and the peacefulness of the day. It was soothing to my mind. There were two ducks swimming out from the rocks and a blue heron standing in the water by the seaweed ledges. (July 1985)

Ruth pulls on the oars. The water around us moves swiftly. A wind has kicked up. The boat spins a little. "No," she says, "we're not going to move." If there is anything that Ruth knows about, it's the water in Cutler. We head back to the mooring.

If she cannot row, Ruth walks. She takes me up to the point of land beyond her house. It is woodsy and smells like a Christmas tree. On the way, she pauses to observe. Great clusters of berries hang on the mountain ash. A lot this year, she notes. "The crows eat a lot of them. They make an awful rumpus. They get drunk on those berries and sing and carry on."

Halfway up she stops beside a ledge that looks down onto the sparkling water. "This is my leaning tree," she says, putting her hand against the smooth bark of a big mountain ash. "Do you have a leaning tree? See, it's got a slant to it." She leans back against it, her full weight. "I love to hear the water slapping. A boat slicing through the water, it makes a lovely sound. I love it in the wintertime, when there's no leaves. I can look up and see the clouds. It's wonderful to come out and be by yourself. The noise of the world gets you all jangled, all worn out. Go out there and look, look at the little things and then come back to your house, and you'll find you've rested your mind. It's worth a thousand dollars."

When her two daughters were small, Ruth used to take them out for walks on weekends. Sometimes they would camp. "We had an awfully good time together, my girls and I. Every weekend we had things planned, where we were going to go, what we were going to do. We would go camping, stay in there nights, sometimes in an old camp, different places where we would go hiking. My husband wasn't much for that. He liked to come home and stay. So we'd take off."

Ruth's older daughter, Delia, is writing a book about her mother, a collection of Ruth's columns and memories of her mother. She may call it *The Book of Ruth.* "I guess it'll be the book of Ruth, all right," Ruth says, laughing, her warm brown eyes squeezed shut at the thought.

From a distance, the sound of a boat engine grows steadily closer, coming down the harbor. Ruth's eyes are still closed. "My son-in-law," she says.

"You know the boats, without looking?" I ask.

"Yes, I know the boats. That's him. Good boat. He built that boat. He's built a lot of boats. He's going out to lobster fish. I know that engine. I can tell."

* * *

Delia Farris spent this past weekend with her parents. She told us of her great trip to Cape Cod over Thanksgiving. (December 1985)

"Whenever I arrive back to Cutler, I close my eyes and just listen. Mama tells me about her garden and the things we share in common." Delia Farris lives in Warren, mid-coast, about three hours from home. Delia comes home when she can, more so perhaps now that she is writing the book. When she was in her twenties, she left home and stayed away. Now she is in her forties and she is back. Delia has seen something of the world, has lived in different places, and she knows enough to know that her mother and her aunts and uncles, all of them, are a disappearing tribe, the passing of a culture. She has come this weekend in time for the supper, one of her mother's bean suppers up at the church.

Outside the church, the foghorn moans. Inside, down in the basement where the tables are set, smells of baking beans and casseroles rise. Ruth is in the kitchen. It's

steamy and warm. She's slicing brown bread. Delia is too late to get a chair at her aunts' and uncles' table so she and her friends sit two tables down. The Corbetts and the Cateses take up two whole tables. The rest of the town has eight to fill and they do, quickly, tucking their knees under the long tables, setting the napkins on their laps, and waiting for the bowls to be brought so they can dig in.

"This is my best day," Ruth says of the monthly supper day. She has been up since dawn. Ruth has managed the Cutler suppers for nearly 50 years. Last night she made two pies, blueberry and apple, and set the beans to soak. This morning, she started the beans early in a big canning kettle. She uses kidney beans or Jacob's cattle, and molasses, sugar, onions, pork ("not so much pork as I used to"), and vinegar. "The vinegar is what gives them so much flavor." She cooks the beans at her house until early afternoon, when she carries them over to the church, which is just a short walk from her back door. They continue to cook there, in the big church oven. In the meantime, she made a chicken casserole and found time to row out to the island. The weather was warm, and she saw loons. Her best day.

Ruth fills big bowls with her beans, and the young ones ferry them out to the tables, along with baskets of biscuits, plates of brown bread, and an endless variety of casseroles. This is also her best day because it is when she is together again with her brothers and sisters. Two weeks ago her brother, Neil Corbett, and his wife, Allie, celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary right here in the basement of the church. They squeezed 250 people in down here. There were so many cars parked out on the road, it made Ruth think of the Fourth of July. Tonight there are not that many, but there's a good crowd because the suppers always bring people in from out of town. Neil and Allie are here, of course, and after they finish eating, they go out into the kitchen and help wash the dishes. So do Ruth's sisters Kathleen and Florence. For all the preparation, it's over before you know it, the last of the diners scraping their plates for the last of that apple pie essence, sitting, sipping their coffee, and talking over the month's events. They filter out, a group at a time. Purcell, Ruth's oldest brother, gets the broom and starts to sweep. He sweeps over to the piano and puts the broom down and settles onto the bench. A sad sweet song rolls out. Delia sneaks up behind her Uncle Purcell and snaps a picture. "I want to remember this," she says. "It won't last forever." She surveys the scene, her mother and her aunts and uncles wiping dishes in the steamy kitchen, the piano music, the laughter coming up in small waves. "It's the companionship, you see, the companionship. It's not like this everywhere."

* * *

How I remember the foggy spells on the island. The bell a-banging night and day, the sound of the sea splashing around the ledges, seabirds calling, but we couldn't see them, the night hawks call and frogs singing in the swamp. Early in the morning the gulls crying. It would be so thick, you couldn't see the call of nature. (June 1988)

Delia has made a difference to her hometown, even though she lives now at a distance. Six or seven years ago, she and Jasper Cates broke the spirit of a developer who had come into town lusting after their coastline. He wanted the headlands, the magical pink granite bluffs that rise up high and protect Cutler from the blast of the open ocean. He wanted the headlands for house lots. Delia and Jasper worked tirelessly to defeat this man and his plans. In the end, they pretty much talked him out of it. The man had come from New York and planned to put an airport up on Western Head. His vanity plate read "Skyscraper." Could there be any worse vision for Cutler? Delia thought not, and on the eve of the sale she sleuthed about, looking for that giveaway license plate. She spotted it parked at a motel in Machias and knocked on his door. He was in his skivvies. He had a map of Cutler spread out on his bed. She told him about the fog, how it sometimes comes and sits there for days, as thick as chowder. "You won't be able to land your plane very often," she told him. He went home to New York and came back with his wife. It was a terrible day, spitting snow. They tried to walk out onto the Head. Delia and Jasper

don't know if they ever made it, but they came back to their car and drove home. The deal was off. The land was acquired by the Maine Coast Heritage Trust, and now there is a trail up there to the headlands, a trail that Delia loves to walk, a trail in which she rightly takes a great deal of pride.

Delia has a passion for saving these places of natural beauty. It is the same passion with which she is writing *The Book of Ruth*. She has been working on the book three years. Many times, working on the book, she's cried for what's gone by. In the time since she started the book, 18 of the old folks of Cutler have passed away. "It's leaving us," she says. "Pretty soon they'll be gone." No amount of talking can change that.

* * *

Do you know how I got through the change of life? I went out and built a camp from driftwood on the outer shores of Cutler.

The camps that Ruth built are mostly gone now, taken by time and wind and weather. It was something she did, building camps for herself and her girls. The camp she made of driftwood washed off the seawall, and she rebuilt it, and then that one went over, too. She pitchpoled it up on higher ground and it stayed, but eventually it rotted. She and her grandchildren took it down not so long ago.

Susan Dowley, an artist in Lubec and a schoolgirl friend of Delia's, is working on pen and ink drawings to illustrate *The Book of Ruth*. She's known Ruth as long as Delia. They are bent over a drawing of Ruth in her boat, pulling on her oars, the island in sight beyond her right shoulder. It doesn't quite look like Ruth, the lines on the face aren't right, the mouth is not Ruth's somehow. They agree to use a photograph instead. "Sometimes that's the only way," Delia says.

The other drawings are evocative. Ruth bent with a hoe in her garden. One of Ruth's camps, trees growing up close around it. Ruth raking blueberries. Ruth cutting fish to be dried. Another dilemma: Ruth dries her fish on the steps of a stepladder, setting her ladder in the sun in the shelter of her garage. She and her brother Purcell are the only ones left in Cutler who dry fish. Purcell nails his fish to the wall of his shop. Susan has a photograph of Purcell's fish, hung against the cedar shingles, a lovely composition. But it isn't the way Ruth dries her fish. They like Purcell's image better. But what would Ruth say? Delia studies the photograph. She thinks it over. "She'll say, 'It's all right, mine dry better anyways.'"

For the book, Delia has gathered what columns she can find. It hasn't been easy. The paper is a weekly and no one keeps back issues, least of all Ruth. Her columns are like conversations, gone tomorrow.

Ruth didn't start out to be a writer, never thinks of herself that way at all. "There was a woman, Corice Maker, who used to write the news of Cutler. When she wasn't able to do it any longer, I started in," Ruth recalls.

At first she followed Corice's lead, reporting on the town's comings and goings, who had visited with whom and who was in the hospital in need of a card. Gradually she felt more comfortable and began to include memories of her growing-up years on the island and her observations of the natural world around her. In Cutler, and beyond, she became known as Mother Nature. "Children gave me the name," she says.

People from away began to subscribe to the paper, just to read Ruth's column. Ruth spends one evening a week and sometimes part of the morning putting the column together. She takes notes during the week about things going on in town. On Tuesday she sits down to write at her little desk in the back room. When she gets stuck, she gets up and goes for a walk or for a row, and when she gets back, she writes about what she's seen, the birds, the goings-on in the harbor, the weather. On Wednesday she drives it in to Machias to meet her deadline. For her efforts, she is paid $10 a week plus four free subscriptions. She receives letters from all over. "People come up to me and tell me how much pleasure they get from reading my column. It makes me feel good that I've made people happy."

* * *

My kitchen table is a great place for me.

I have been putting little traps together. I read, play dominoes, and listen to my radio and many good meals are enjoyed these cold days. (February 1994)

When the day is over, Ruth likes to sit in her rocker beside the stove in the kitchen. On the table beside her is a stack of books — the Bible, *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, birding books. Glenn's death didn't slow her. It was the first item in her column that week: *My item to you all this week is a sad one for me to write as my husband, Glenn, passed away on the 29th of May. It's very hard for me to get the words together. We all face these sad times in life and with faith can carry on. He was always ready to help people with any problems. We had forty-one years together and I am blessed with a good family.* The column was shorter than usual, carrying only news of the town, no observations. By the next week, she was back, telling her readers of her wanderings. Though she misses him, her life continues on, full and enriched by all that she sees around her, by all that she has brought to her life. "I've enjoyed every day that I've lived," she has said many times.

Ruth gets up and goes into the living room. Accordion in hand, she sits down on the couch and begins to play, simple, dreamy tunes — "Over the Waves" and "Smile Awhile." Ruth plays with a great deal of emotion, her eyes closed, the notes drawn out and embellished.

Outside there are signs of the approaching winter. Boats have been brought in from their moorings, and the harbor looks a little empty. Ruth has noticed fewer out-of-state plates coming down her road. Her sweet peas, on a trellis beside her back door, are ready to be cut down. She is talking about mowing her lawn for the last time and bringing the rowboat in to shore. Ruth does not dread the coming winter. "I look forward to winter," she says. "The time goes by fast. I never get bored." In winter Ruth walks, and sometimes in a warm spell she takes the little punt out for a row. She reads and watches out her window for the weather. Neighbors call and ask for a forecast. They are maybe a little less vigilant. They may sleep a little later. They've got Ruth, keeping watch. □□

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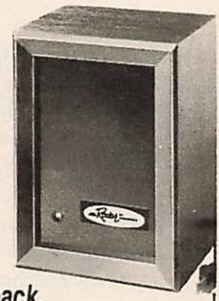
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