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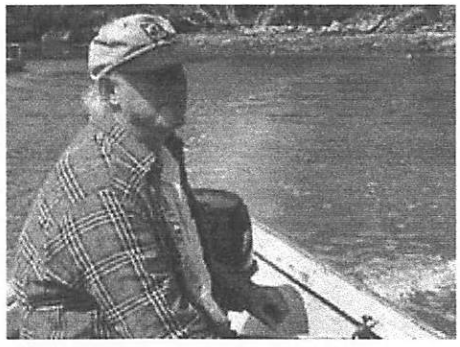
Faith and fishing sustain So. Bristol man

Art Mayers



(Photo Art Mayers)

Faith, fishing, and family has brought Ralph Norwood II through tough times.

The fishing part comes naturally. Norwood, 71, is descended from generations of seafaring folk that spread up the coast from Massachusetts after the colonial period.

"His first love was fishing," said Norwood of his father a lighthouse keeper in Boston. When the family moved to Maine in 1944, the young Norwood took to fishing immediately. His first boat was a 16 ft. dory with an outboard motor bought from Sears Roebuck.

"It is just a reflex," said Norwood last week as he tossed a mackeral jig over the side of his current dory on a daily tour of Poorhouse Cove in South Bristol. His converted fishing boat "Unity" is up for sale. His sailboat the schooner"Shekinah Glory" awaits the next adventure.

Norwood has done the full range of fishing: seining for herring, trapping lobsters, dragging for groundfish, shrimping and lobstering.

"There is a saying that every fish comes to shore once during the year," said Norwood. He admits that lobster fishing was the least fun. Although in a decline in recent years, herring offered the greatest chance for quick wealth.

"A boat from Tenants Harbor made one million dollars in three days," said Norwood. His best catch off of Damariscove Island netted 22,000 pounds or about $2000 per man.

Norwood's life changed forever at age 42 when he found religion. He was in church watching the Christening of two babies when he was saved by God. As he left the church he mentioned the transformation to the minister who did not appear surprised at first.

"He came to my house every day that week," said Norwood. The change in Norwood's life was immediate and overwhelming.

When a heart attack created a legal disability at the age of 55, he asked to be retrained as a minister. When that fell through he went back to fishing but began to work on another God given gift: song.

"I wrote poetry in high school," said Norwood, a 1949 graduate of Lincoln Academy, Newcastle. With his faith as motivation, Norwood took up the banjo and electric piano and began writing gospel songs based on his home and life. He and his wife Kathy have recorded 20 of those original songs on a tape album "Glory Dory Gospel". Norwood acts as his own producer for the album and has videotaped and edited his own music video.

For over 25 years the couple has brought a message through song to area nursing homes. They also perform on the second and fourth Mondays at Erskine Hall in Alna. For several years, the Norwoods have gone to Florida in the winter where they perform informally for anyone who will listen.

Norwood recalls setting up his piano in his dory on a Gulf Coast beach.

"There were two movements of people, one away and one toward me," he said. Someone once slipped a dollar bill in his pocket while he was not paying attention, he recalls.

Upon retirement the Norwoods moved from their deep water home on the Damariscotta River to Poole family land.

Norwood and Kathy Poole were high school sweethearts, but were not the first of the Norwoods to link up with Pooles.

As the story goes, Caleb Norwood was digging up roots on the property of Francis Poole in Rockport, Mass., 250 years ago when he discovered pirate treasure which set the two up as large property owners there.

"I haven't got my share," said Norwood. Most of the Massachusetts property was lost to the banks during the Great Depression.

In 1821, Abraham Norwood set sail for Maine and established a branch of the family in the Saco, Biddeford area.

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Another relative, Mary Norwood of South Bristol married Nathaniel Gamage who disappeared on his way to England to seek Norwood's rumored inheritance. It is believed he was forcefully impressed into the British Navy. He was never heard from again. Their daughter Jamima married Ebenezer Poole, thus continuing the links between the two families.

In spite of his own difficulties, Norwood believes his faith will carry him through.

One of his jobs in Florida was to mend nets. As a lesson in faith he sometimes cut up some net sections and carefully mended them with a different color twine. When it was finished the image of a cross appeared in the middle.

"When Christ comes, He mends you up," said Norwood.

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