

## **Naval Ammunition Depot Hingham/Bare Cove Park**

by Philip A. Fortnam

It's a lovely place. It is a place for me to fortify my verve. I live a long distance from it now, so I see it with fresh eyes on my annual pilgrimage. I have the perspective of time, too. I see its changes, the trees are taller, the bunkers are gone, and the earth steadily consumes the macadam. But I'm sure the river stills moves with lunar cycles and weather; the woods, too, respond to the weather, seasons, and geography.

I first entered it from the water around 1970; an easy swim during a Sunday morning walk with our family dog. From Great Esker Park we swam across the Back River to the shuttered Navy base. What a remarkable place of adventure for a ten-year-old boy with an active fantasy life.

Military detritus littered the place. Not trash, but old ammo cans, a truck with no engine, and old telephone poles with glass insulators. Some train tracks and switches remained, set on earthen beds disappearing into the woods or up to large buildings. The buildings felt cavernous with wide-open floor space and bright light shining through the still intact glass in the windows. Shelters, sheds, and a sentry post with wires still connected to a telephone, but cut and dangling to the ground on the outside of the building on the pier nearest the 3A bridge lingered. Empty paved roads with yellow and black stripes painted on large concrete blocks to control long-ceased traffic. The white lines marking parking spaces were still visible. A first aid kit discarded into the woods was treasure as were the remnants of gas masks partially concealed in the mud near the lighter wharf. Hand-tools lying in the dirt waiting for purpose were curious sights. To this day discovering an Indian arrowhead or a fragment of its prior iterations is thrilling.

It was a blessing that those nearly thousand acres of land was a Navy base because the military protected it from the merciless exploitation that happened to all of the other large rivers emptying into Boston Harbor. The Naval Ammunition Depot Hingham existed from 1915 to 1960 as a place to store and handle ammunition for ships sailing in and out of the Boston Navy yard. It closed in 1960 and reopened as a park in 1974. When the GSA decided it was excess property and offered it to Hingham a lot of acreage was sacrificed to development. It took years for it happen, but as usual development degraded the geography and compromised the ambiance of tranquility contained there.

Little in the world receives the dignity of being left alone, but the effect of the decision to develop the land feels bad. The South Shore desperately needs open space and the undeveloped Back River area was a treasure. No prize like it will be found ever again. My fantasies are, a land

conservation group will gradually buy up property surrounding the park and let it revert to open, undeveloped space, and, perhaps it could become part of a wide, contiguous green belt circling Boston.

Weather events experienced at Bare Cove were awe added to joy; the deepest snow, aggressive summer rain, misty thick fog, and dark moonless nights were simply intense pleasures. I'm a great believer in the old New England saying, *There's no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothes*. Regardless, the water, trees, marsh grass, clam beds, blue skies, clouds, warm breezes, autumn splendor, deep snow, barren trees, spectacular storms and all the biology, geography, and moods stirred by the passing seasons remain vivid in my mind and in the many photographs I have.

I started small campfires there, sleep in boats offshore, rode my bike, ran the roads, walked the beaten paths, trapped lobster, dug clams, and grossed-out a Midwest girl when I showed her an ugly horseshoe crab shell washed onto the marsh grass. I fail to see the necessity for street signs. I'm glad for the barriers stopping cars from entering. I wish mufflers on vehicle and airplane engines were more effective. I felt violated when I read about the horrible murders.

I make annual pilgrimages there now; I live and work in Arizona (and look forward to the day when I'm living on the South Shore again). I know the buildings have mostly been knocked down and the lighter wharf with a trestle and tracks are gone. I'm glad the dilapidated lighter remains and the bollards from the wharf were saved. Bare Cove Park has been rendered safe now, it's beautiful, but benign and still fulfilling. My imagination and *joie de verve* are particularly powerful when I'm there.

I tried to share the place and feelings with my daughters, but alas feelings lie within and are at best only described to anyone else. My daughters understand it is meaningful to me and that's about it. I hope they find their own places of similar feelings.

The tree branches still hang low enough for me to jump up and climb to the top for a spectacular view. Fifty years old and discreetly climbing trees, I don't care if someone sees me, but I don't want to explain myself to the police when someone gets nervous and reports me. I don't have a unique claim to the place, I can't even claim to have family left on the South Shore, but I do claim it as mine. I'm willing to share. Just don't mess up my memories.