

SATURDAY, JULY 21, 1945

Prospect Harbor and Corea Are Residential Background of Maine's Youngest Novelist, Who Wrote "Wind Off the Water"

BY ALICE FROST LORD

Prospect Harbor and Corea are tiny, neighboring hamlets in the Maine coast town of Gouldsboro, and are the residential background of Miriam Colwell

who has just had published her first novel, "Wind Off The Water."

For this reason, and because Corea was the last sketching ground of a successful Lewiston artist, Marsden L. Hartley, our

trail recently followed Route One from Ellsworth down the off-side bulging peninsular that thrusts into the ocean on Frenchman's Bay east of Mount Desert Island.

Both Winter Harbor, a fashionable small summer resort, and Schoodic Point are visible from Bar Harbor. But Prospect Harbor and Corea are beyond the highlands out of sight, being on the southeast shore, and are about 25 miles from Ellsworth, the nearest city.

There we found the postmaster-author and her artist-

author friend, and saw something of their habitat.

Typical Fishing Village

Leaving the drab, low-wooded stretch eastward from Winter Harbor, we first came to the tiny fishing village of Birch Harbor, and then swung along until we reached

Clark Point, where the houses begin to thicken and really jell at the head of the sheltered bay.

Two churches, a two-deck school-house where vacation pupils were running in and out, a new, small, and very trig library and the corner store unquestionably were Prospect Harbor. For over the door of the store was the sign indicating the place and also the post office.

Inside was Miriam Colwell, tall and lean in her modish slacks, her blond hair thick about her face, and her unusually expressive hands fingering the letters that were being sorted, while a mail inspector—an annual visitor—was at her elbow performing his duties.

Back among the shadows and the well-stocked shelves a conspicuous item was the tall, barrel-stove that must have been heating the store for many a Winter. Something like it appears on the jacket of "Wind Off the Water."

There, also, was the author's grandfather, with his pipe in his mouth and his feet on the stove-rail—from habit rather than from need of warming, for this was July. This was Mr. Cole who lives third house down the Corea Road where the author was born and brought up; and who protested against the ultra frank language of the new book, albeit he admitted to his granddaughter that he had heard the same many a time at the store.

Store Lore

Years have done little to this old-time mart, where a great-grandfather of the author was a postmaster. One may see the like of it in the small towns all over Maine, each of them brought up to date

with radios sounding the latest world news, and sheets of ceiling prices posted conspicuously, but the same drift of townspeople in and out, chatting, wondering about the herring catch, whether the new picture at the Opera House at Milbridge would be good, if Churchill would win out in England's election and if the mail was going to be on time.

While Postmaster Colwell was finishing with the inspector (whom we heard complimenting her for first-class official house-keeping for Uncle Sam) we were asking her grandfather how he pronounced "heath". There's a heath in the book, and one a couple of miles down toward Corea.

"Ha-ath" said Mr. Cole, who is over eighty and looks under seventy. "You mean the cranberry hath, don't you?"

Then everybody began to talk about "baked apples", which are called cloud-berries there, it seems; and about highland cranberries that grow on a vine and have a small leaf; and about the little wren's-egg-size cranberries that are speckled.

"Folks drive in from long distances for baked apples," Mr. Cole said, "come about the first of August."

Corea Way

It was down the southerly stretch of road to Corea, three miles away, that we passed Gramp's house, where Miss Colwell was born and brought up—a modest cottage set among flower-gardens and tree-shaded. It was hardly more than a good stone's throw from the corner and the post office where he presided until his granddaughter took over; and across the head of the bay the "long, red factory shed" and wharves lay low against the horizon.

"Our place is just a mile away by the speedometer, and when you come to three houses nested together ours is the last," explained Miss Colwell, as we set out for her present abode.

On our contour map we found the three dots fronting Sand Cove,

and there we soon were, with the beach in front of the little old dwelling that was built over a century ago—in 1818, we later learned—by Captain Rufus Allen. It was quaint in line and trig in appearance, and modernized inside to the point of thoroughly comfortable living; bathroom upstairs, an out-sized brick fireplace and Dutch oven in the onetime kitchen that is now the living-room; beautiful, satin-smooth old sea-faring furniture; ship-pic-

tures on the wall, and views of the sea from the front windows.

Wood-carving and water-colors suggested an artist at hand; and she proved to be Miss Colwell's house-mate, Miss Chenoweth Hall, a native of Kentucky, who now makes her home in Maine. Miss Hall's stories, by the way, have appeared in leading magazines in this country and in Canada.

"Aunt Dorcas House"

Such a dwelling must have a name for this day and generation; and we found that it had: The Aunt Dorcas House, so-called for one of the Allen women.

Incidentally, we also noticed that the village library is the Dorcas Library, this, however, being associated with a society of that name that is common in certain Protestant churches.

As we settled down for a four-o'clock tea in front of the fireplace the conversation turned on the earlier life of Miss Colwell, as it led up to the writing of her first book.

It was in the two-story white schoolhouse at the head of the bay at the village that she had her gradework; and at Winter Harbor, five miles west, that she went through high school, at a time when Clair Wood was principal and the courses were excellent.

After a year or two at the University of Maine (in the class of '39) she had gone to New York, planning to try for the advertising field. That was in 1938, and she had been doing some free lance work along this line. She also gave considerable attention to a serious study of photography.

Already Miss Hall, whose initial urge was toward music and art, had become active in advertising, and the two young women found in this a common interest.

Then Mr. Cole retired from the postmastership at home, and Miss Colwell settled down, not only to this one-horse job in the 64-box post office corner at the store, but to writing a novel that she had on her mind.

A Five Year Project

It seems that for five years this author has been working at "Wind Off The Water", which goes back to 1940, of course. Mornings Miss Colwell served the office, and afternoons Miss Hall did her stint as assistant postmaster, this plan leaving each half the day for writing.

"I began with short stories," she said, "but soon settled down to the novel."

"Why did you leave so much of the cursing and cheap talk such as dominates Vernie's conversation," we asked, frankly.

"I had a definite point to make," she said. "The people in my book are inarticulate. When they reach out for some special emphasis the only words available to them are oaths, though these are not used as such, but only for emphasis. Words to express their ideas fail them, and they substitute the recurring oaths."

"Then, indirectly, this book is something of an indictment of the schooling such village children have?"

Not Propaganda

"The novel is not propaganda," she explained. "But the facts are true to life. Few of the school children in such isolated communities obtain more than one or two years at high school. Neighboring opportunities are scarce and none too good and many parents cannot afford to send their boys and girls to boarding schools like Higgins' Institute or Kents Hill where efficient courses are offered."

"What is the answer to such a problem?" we pursued. "Is it the consolidated schools that Commissioner Harry V. Gilson of the state educational department has advocated, to which village children can be transported to profit by the best sort of schooling?"

Miss Colwell and Miss Hall were quick to say that something like that plan is needed, if youth in the rural areas are to have the advantages city children have; and if there is not to be a continuance of the poverty of thought and experience that turns out Vernies in life, as in "Wind Off The Water".

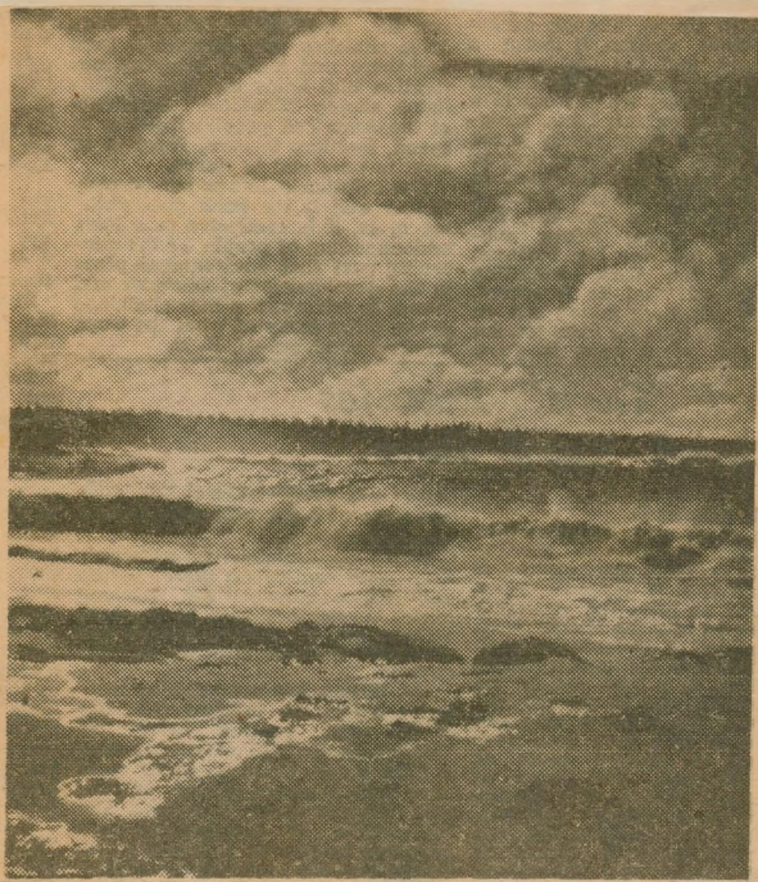
There's something for readers to think about in the continuous cursing, in this book about a part of Maine. Maybe the author is inviting people to question what lies behind the habit; to consider what can be done about changing the

environment and conditions that breed this sort of talk! Maybe it is saying, in another and indirect fashion, just what Commissioner Gilson is saying in college-educated language, in his appeals for statewide, adequate schooling in Maine.

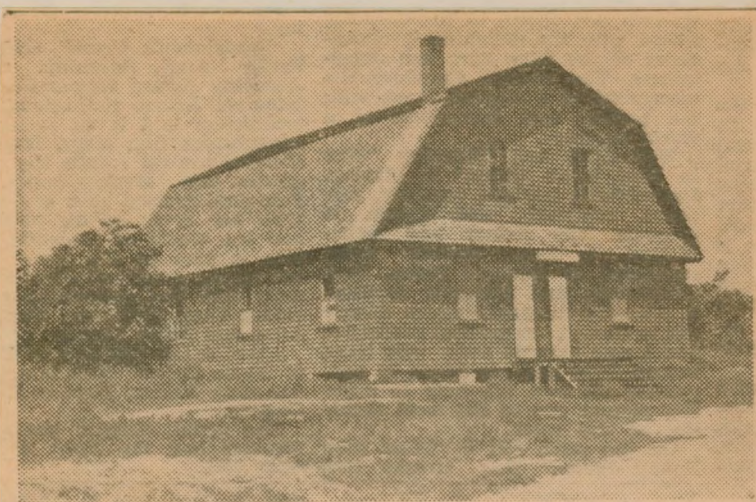
Maybe Miss Colwell is right; that broader education is the cure for the oath-habit, giving a richness of ideas and vision and vocabulary in place of sheer paucity of words.

Part Of Social Problem

As the heritage of old silver and



WHEN COMBERS ROLL Up The Sands, in front of author's house.



DANCE HALL, on road to Corea

old china was gathered aside, and city confections were being shared, along came a Brewer car with none other than Christine Weston aboard, the author of "Be Thou The Bride", "The Devil's Foot", and the best selling novel about India, "Indigo," who had come down to spend

the night, as a personal friend of these two Prospect Harbor young women. She set off for the beach, and left us to go on probing the depths of this novel of Miss Colwell's.

Part of the story is the social problem of Vernie, who typifies the youth who are crushed by circumstances over which they seem to have no control—such shiftless living, such meagre outlook, such stifled ambitions, and the downward lure so strong!

They haven't the steadfastness of Milroy and Lima, who manage against terrible odds to keep their house shipshape, and forge, however slowly, ahead. They haven't the profound love for the soil of their remote harbor to anchor them against storm and stress.

So there's something behind the social problem of tawdry living, where children are born to knowledge of crude facts of life and sleazy attitudes toward them almost from the cradle.

What is behind this cheap front? "Wind Off The Water" is not propaganda. That Miss Colwell avers. Yet there is in her book an unescapable lesson from this sort of life, for those who do not run when they read.

Maybe it is the lobstering industry, with the Consolidated in control and the lobstermen subject to its economic pressures and suffering from small returns for their labor, yet unable, because of their native Yankee independence, to unite in the co-operatives that promise help.

Maybe there is something from the author's family history that furnishes the bedrock for her writing.

Grandfather Colwell

"My Grandfather George W. Colwell began to pull lobster traps when he was 12 years old," she said, reminiscing, as she relaxed in a huge, modern, over-stuffed chair by the window. "He used to have them off Petit Manan Point, to the eastward. Then he ran a smack for the lobster factory, paying two cents a pound for his catch, until he realized that there seemed to be no future in the business, unless there was developed a larger market.

"So he bought a bigger boat, picked up other lobstermen's catches and took them to Portland.

"It was on one of those trips that he saw the first lobster pound in the country," commented Miss Colwell. "That was at Vinalhaven on the Maine coast. So he came home and built a pound of his own on Dyers Island in Milbridge Bay, and later another at Hancock.

"He understood our lobstering problems at first hand, and I grew up in the knowledge of them."

What is the answer!

It is not this Maine-born author who says.

In her pages only the poignant human need reaches out to touch the heart of the reader. Indirectly, dramatically and honestly she paints the picture she knows.

Is it best to tell the world that underneath the Maine strata of scenic beauty, and well-financed sports and Summer promotion, is a layer of continuing industrial exploitation, disintegrating educational facilities, inadequate sanitary and limited social conditions that are making youth in certain rural communities such as are typified

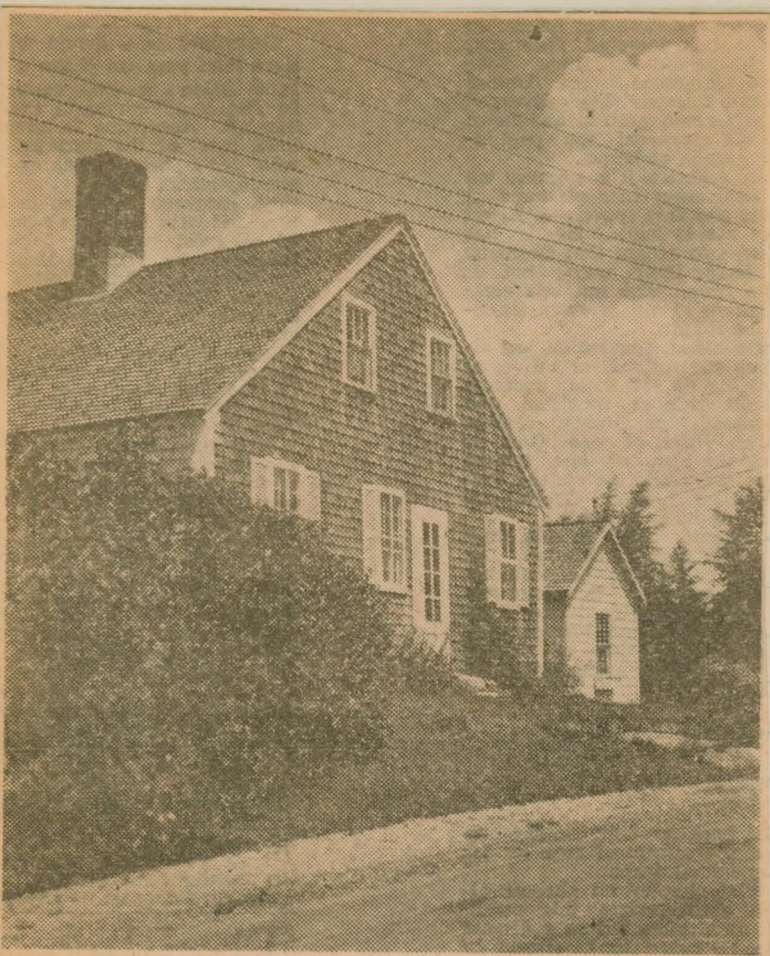
in Miriam Colwell's "Wind Off The Water"!

She has stirred up some of the mud. But it also will be found that in certain of her characters is the solid rock of New England character. As the tide of events changes will the evils be lessened, the good strengthened, and the enchanting environment transformed by intelligence and vision!

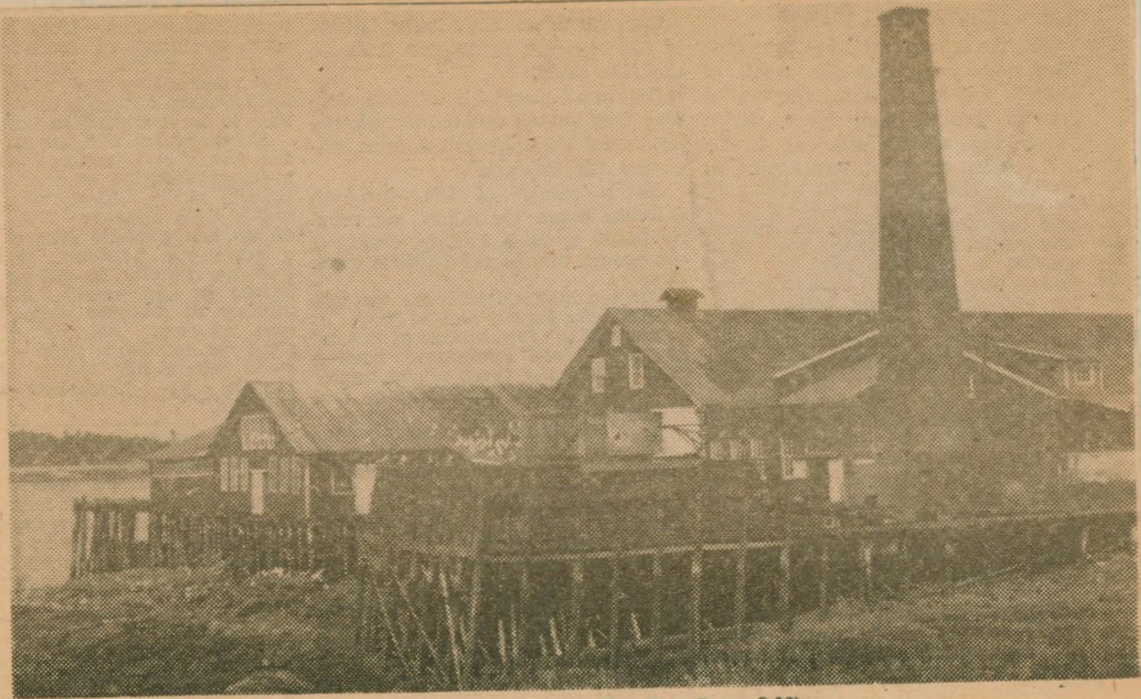
Time will tell whether Maine will learn the lesson that underlies this book out of Prospect Harbor.



MIRIAM COLWELL, 27, and going places.



THE AUNT DORCAS HOUSE, Home of two writers at Sand Cove.



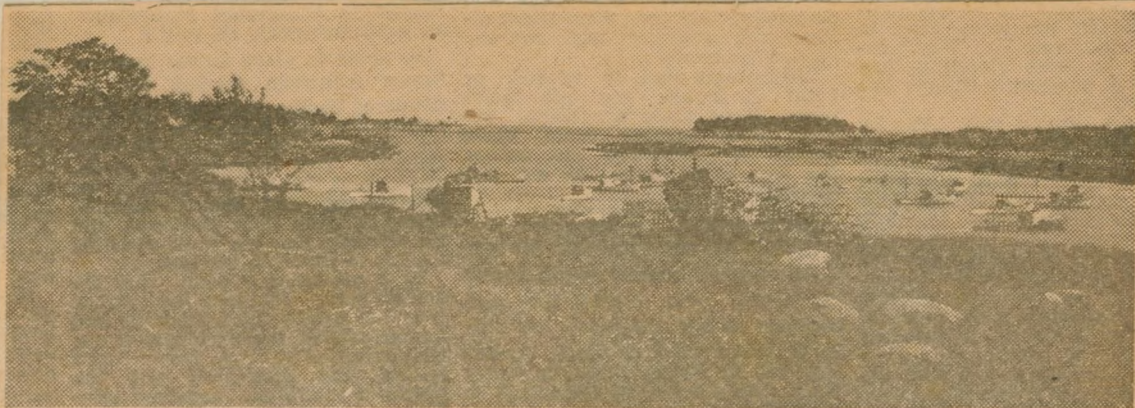
SARDINE FACTORY, a half mile from Prospect Harbor Post Office.



GRANDFATHER COLE'S HOUSE at Prospect Harbor, Where Author Was Born.



SPITTIN' LIKENESS of Grandfather Cole's store, in which is Miss Colwell's Post Office.



(ABOVE) **HEAD OF THE BAY** Looking from post office window—(Below) **Ocean View at The Bar**, toward lighthouse at Petit Maman.

Newspaper article - 7-21-1945
Miriam Colwell - Wind Off the Water

Donor: ?

See uncut article in large black scrap book. On display at OTHM summer 2017