

Memorial to Peggy McKenna By Jay Davis

Let me start by saying how happy I am that Peggy's photographs will be part of the Penobscot Marine Museum's collection, open to the public and available, as they are today, for display. Peggy was a great photographer and a wonderful recorder of the life around her. Because she happened to be here, in this place, she left an unforgettable record of a way of life that was, and is, quickly changing while somehow retaining much of its early rough charm.

Peg left her images, thousands of them, in the capable hands of our friends Dan and Wendy Rowland, who worked out the agreement with the museum. I know they are thrilled -- and sorry they can't be here today.

I'm going to show you 75 or so of Peggy's fine photos in a few minutes, selected and organized by Dan and Wendy. But being a writer who has spent some time reflecting on this place we share, Waldo County, Maine, I'm going to add some words to her pictures.

A sense of place. Peggy and I came to this place in 1971, she from Pennsylvania via Washington, DC, me from Connecticut via Cambridge. We weren't alone in finding ourselves here, and like many who came in the early 1970s, we were white, middle-class or higher, educated, energized and ready for change.

I know Jay Fischer and Peggy came because friends were organizing opposition to several big developments that were on the drawing board for the Maine coast and they asked Jay to lend a hand. Along the way, Jay decided he liked building buildings instead of political movements; one of his first projects was constructing the small home near Bartlett Stream in Montville where Peggy spent most of the next 40 years, including her last moments, chickadees and finches flitting just outside her window, friends all around her.

Finding one's place in a place is life-changing because in order to do it you have to give up a bit of who you are to where you are. I did that in Monroe, learning things I'd never even dreamed about, and it came as naturally, though not as easily, as summer turns to fall. You jump into new places that offer as much as Waldo County did and, bam, you're here to stay, even though the you who had just arrived might have gone back.

I didn't know Peggy back in the early days, maybe just peripherally, but her photographs are just what I would have taken if I took photographs. People, all kinds of them, the ones I'd want to interview (and sometimes did); the landscape, so compelling in every season and all kinds of weather; big events, like the huge excavator eating up the Penobscot Poultry building; the water and the boats and mariners that plied it.

There is no formal entry fee to the community, but you have to pay your dues nonetheless. The dues were pretty low here and mostly involved an inclination to work hard and a willingness to talk and be open. Peggy's pretty smile was an advantage; my long hair wasn't. But many times I got out of my car in a farmer's dooryard, felt his instant skepticism, and emerged three hours later as a new friend. It wasn't enough to just be curious about the new people we were

meeting; we had to work at getting to know them, at least in the beginning. Fair deal, I thought. And the payoff – openness to whatever was going on – was, as they say, priceless.

We came at just the right time 45 years or so ago. This was one of the poorest places in the country, and along with Washington County the poorest in Maine. The old ways were still dominant – the chicken plants and shoe factories and small farms that were barely sustainable. There were no jobs for us, no sub-communities of like-minded folks ready to take us in, no easy ways to do anything. But there was that openness that gave us access to a cast of characters William Faulkner might have tried to create had he liked snow. They were often very smart in their way, very funny, very skilled at rural living and photogenic as hell. Great people to get to know.

And the landscape was very beautiful behind the alders and inside the cutover woodland, the great mixed forest on the border of the spruce-fir ecosystem to the north. All of us have stories about encounters with nature here. Here's two that involved Peggy. One night Margo and I were finishing dinner with Peggy and Mo in Montville. I saw Mo leave, thought nothing of it, and was surprised a few moments later when he placed a golden pheasant in my lap, a warm bunch of feathers its heart beating like crazy.

Eddie Bartlett delivered mail in Center Montville for many years, and Peggy and I went with him on his final pass through the neighborhood. I looked out the window as we drove by the same houses and trailers and clotheslines he saw every day. I said, “What's it like when nothing changes?” He said, “Oh no, it changes every day.” That was one of the most astute observations about place I've ever heard.

I was partly responsible for Peggy becoming the photographer for the Independent in 1988, following the death of Richard Norton. She fit right in photographically, though she had her own way of doing things. She was almost always late, for one thing. She could complain with the best of them about covering yet another basketball game when it was 20-below outside and the game was in Damariscotta. Most news photographers go to where the action is and look for the best place to shoot from. Peggy liked to go places and arrange them herself, so knowledgeable about her subjects that she always knew better than they did how they should look. Their place became her place, in other words.

Let me finish this exploration of place with its logical connection to home. You develop a sense of place over time, of course, and are changed by it. Your world becomes smaller in the sense that most of what you need and want and know is right outside, your knowledge of it growing without stop. But wherever you are in this new phase of your life isn't home, at least not yet; that's where your family is, or where your childhood took place, or even the last place you lived for long enough to call it home. I remember so clearly the time I was in Connecticut visiting my family in the home where I was raised. I said to my mother, “It's time to go home,” and we gathered our things and headed back to Maine.

Home isn't just a place, at least not a physical place, like a house. It's far richer than that. It's where you love and live and celebrate and cry and grieve. I have a real family here that

includes some in this room. Peggy was part of it and I still grieve for her loss. But let's look at her photographs and see that she hasn't left this place after all.