

ELMER'S CAMERA

Photographing prewar mid-coast Maine

by Maynard Bray

M(for Maynard) Elmer Montgomery's career as a serious amateur photographer spanned only about five years, from the tail end of the Great Depression, when residents of coastal Maine were "just getting by," to 1941, when our country declared war and Elmer entered the Army. Born in 1911, he was the youngest of four boys and lived with his parents until married. Throughout his life, banking provided his livelihood, and until fathering his own family, he built ship models and took photos in his spare time.

With a folding Kodak, a cloud-enhancing yellow filter, and 616 Verichrome film, he recorded mid-coast vessels and waterfronts that postwar prosperity would forever alter. Elmer's father, Charles, and brother, Earl, worked as painters at nearby Snow shipyard (now Rockland Marine), so whenever a launching was to take place or the railway was scheduled to haul out a vessel, Elmer knew about it and showed up for the action. Of his 800 or so maritime photos, the largest percentage was taken at Snow's. But he traveled the coast as well and captured scenes from Mount Desert Island to Pemaquid.

Viewed from a present-day perspective, Elmer's eye for subject matter and composition places him above and beyond most photographers of that location and era. Although he valued his photos and held them humbly private, he willingly shared them with folks who were interested, but never sought to sell any. Many of the negatives never made it to his album as prints, so until they were recently scanned, these images remained totally unappreciated. He'd be surprised and honored at being published in this magazine and in having his work exhibited by Penobscot Marine Museum (PMM), which now owns them, along with a few of his finely crafted models.

My dad and the four Montgomery boys palled around together in the 1920s and '30s, so I knew Elmer all my life. On weekends, Dad and I sometimes joined Elmer and his camera as we walked down Mechanic Street to Snow's, scouting for photo opportunities. Most times, things were quiet on those Saturdays and Sundays, but occasionally the sawmill would be screaming as it converted oak logs into shipbuilding timber and planking. I was only five or six years old, but still recall that scene vividly. As I grew into a teenager and helped Elmer and his wife, Helen, build their house next door to ours, Elmer became a mentor who

taught me the value of careful and patient work, as well as a love of traditional watercraft. From then until he died some 50 years later, he was always eager to talk about boats whenever our paths crossed.

Many of Elmer's photos are undated and only a few have their subjects recorded, so writing captions required considerable research as PMM Curator Ben Fuller and I fleshed out the cataloging. Bertram Snow's comprehensive record of Rockland shipbuilding (*The Main Beam*, Rockland Historical Society, 2005) was a huge help. Bert, like Elmer, was a mentor for whom I've always been grateful. He welcomed my buddy Don Merchant and me as, after school, we hung out at his Snow Marine Basin and helped build, repair, and store boats there. Working with Bert and his partners in those days, before Bert became Rockland's chief of police and we became adults, inspired both of us to choose boat-related careers.

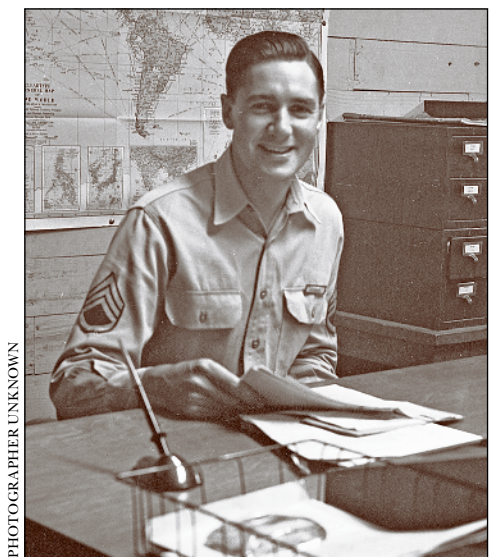
The images that follow show but a glimpse of this wonderful collection; to see more or to order prints, contact photo archivist Kevin Johnson at Penobscot Marine Museum, 5 Church St., P.O. Box 498, Searsport, ME 04974, 207-548-2529; www.penobscotmarinemuseum.org.





MUSKEGON Launching

MUSKEGON, a 72' x 18' round-sterned, Eastern-rigged dragger, splashes overboard on April 26, 1937 from the I.L. Snow shipyard in Rockland. She was the last vessel built before the Snow family sold the yard and it was reorganized as Snow Shipyards, Inc. MUSKEGON's owner, Capt. Arthur Bain of nearby Owls Head, furnished the model from which plans were drawn by the yard's designer and superintendent, Albert E. Condon. Besides being an unusually fussy client, Capt. Bain excelled at fishing, going after scallops as well as redfish, and usually landing his catch at Rockland. Trips lasted about a week, and in four trips during the single month of July 1942, 225,000 lbs of fish were unloaded from this vessel, whose capacity was 60,000 lbs. Bain kept MUSKEGON until he retired in 1950, after which the new owners fished her from Greenport, New York, as a scalloper. She lasted at least 40 years, disappearing from the register in 1978.



PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Elmer Montgomery, pictured during his military service.

Photographs by M. Elmer Montgomery

ST. GEORGE on the Ways

As the largest of the Snow-built draggers to date, and one of the largest ever constructed of wood, the 110' x 23' ST. GEORGE is about ready for her January 25, 1940 launching. Subsidized by the Maritime Commission and built for Capt. Clyson Coffin, a St. George, Maine, native, she was designed by Albert Condon shortly before he left the yard's employ. (Condon's drawings, including those for the ST. GEORGE and MUSKEGON, are at Mystic Seaport.) ST. GEORGE's oak-planked hull is fastened with locust trunnels instead of spikes, and her frame bays are filled with salt as a preservative. Besides the usual crew berths (for ten) forward, there are four single staterooms aft as well as another berth in the captain's stateroom. Her 500-hp direct-reversing Fairbanks-Morse diesel turns the big 5'8"-diameter, three-bladed Hyde propeller. After she's afloat and before she leaves the yard, she'll be rigged with three steadying sails and a pair of dories. Fishing was good back then, and in trip after trip the ST. GEORGE brought in thousands of pounds more than her official 180,000-lb. capacity.



HAGGIS

Besides commercial fishing boats, Snow's simultaneously turned out yachts. This 32' power cruiser, to be named HAGGIS, was built inside the machine shop on its second floor, and when finished was rolled down a jury-rigged ramp to be launched on May 25, 1938. She was the first of two power cruisers built for Bermudian owners. Hamish Mitchell owned HAGGIS, and his father-in-law, Charles Mott, had the larger SCAUR built the following year.

THOMAS H. LAWRENCE

Elmer's photos show that, for several months before being hauled on Snow's railway, the three-masted coasting schooner THOMAS H. LAWRENCE was worked on while afloat and at anchor. Here on August 27, 1938, after she was hauled, three shipwrights (Fred Townsend and Owen Athern are noted on the back of this contact print) are replacing a plank on the vessel's starboard quarter. The topsides have been already caulked and payed. This 374-ton schooner was built in Boston in 1891.



LYDIA M. WEBSTER

Mill Cove at Sandy Point on the Penobscot River, opposite the lower end of Verona Island, was a favorite site for grounding. The sand was firm and sloped so a vessel didn't heel excessively. More important was that grounding saved the cost of a railway haulout. Ingenuity helped keep coasting schooners going long after their heyday. If they leaked or their bottoms needed cleaning or painting—or even if a plank had to be replaced—access was accomplished by beaching. Here, the main boom is guyed out to starboard while the schooner was still afloat so she'd ground out that way. By May 1941, when Elmer took this photo, Capt. Frank Swift had added the WEBSTER to the rest of his aged schooner fleet and converted her for weeklong passenger-carrying coastal cruises. His was always a marginal operation, but as time passed and times improved economically, his idea proved sound and enduring. Today's world-famous Maine Windjammers, well kept, individually owned, and Coast Guard certified, are the result. The WEBSTER (built in Castine back in 1882), however, didn't survive this evolution.



Hauling the KICKAPOO

The 157' steam-powered USCG vessel KICKAPOO, widely appreciated for breaking up winter ice so vessels could still get into harbors and up the Penobscot River to Bangor, had served the Rockland area since 1926. Here she's getting her annual haulout on Snow's big railway, on the same tide as the small railway hauls a double-ended lobster smack. The date is April 1, 1939. During the war, KICKAPOO was reassigned to Buzzards Bay as buoy tender WAGL-56, never to return. She originated as the tug BALDRIDGE, and in 1925 rescued all 227 passengers and crew from the steamer MOHAWK, which had grounded on Brandywine Shoals off the Delaware coast.

Drying Sails

A calm and sunny day after a rainy spell is when idle sailing vessels get their sails aired out. Elmer caught these coasting schooners (the THOMAS H. LAWRENCE in the background, with another three-master named EDWARD R. SMITH nearer the camera) while both were dockside and drying sails at the same time—a rare sight even back in 1939. The SMITH is the newer of the two and larger; she was built at Phippsburg, on the west bank of the Kennebec River, in 1911 for carrying coal.



Elmer Montgomery Repairing a Model

This model of the Rockland-built clipper ship RED JACKET, built by Capt. Willis Snow and now painted black and owned by the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, is undergoing some kind of repair under Elmer's careful hand. Of the models Elmer built himself, I recall the sidewheel ferry J.T. MORSE, the whaling bark WANDERER, the fishing schooner GERTRUDE THEBAUD, the clipper ship FLYING CLOUD, two plank-on-frame peapods, a Banks dory, and a two-masted coasting schooner. The last four listed are now in the collection of Penobscot Marine Museum, a gift of Elmer's son and daughter, Paul Montgomery and Marcia Smith.



VINAL HAVEN Aground and Abandoned

On November 10, 1938, this steamer's guardrail snagged under a wharf stringer at low tide and, as the water rose, she filled and sank. At the time, she'd been laid up and replaced on the Rockland-to-Vinalhaven run by the newer steamer W.S. WHITE; so, after being raised and pumped out, the VINAL HAVEN was moved to this unused, shallow-water wharf at Lermonds Cove where she sat out the war, flooding and draining with the tide. Afterwards, she was towed to Sheep Island off Owls Head, beached there, and left to disintegrate. Built originally in Searsport in 1892, and later rebuilt and lengthened to 100', this vessel served her namesake island for over 30 years.



DELILAH II

Besides photographing this handsome little Friendship sloop, Elmer measured her hull and drew up plans, with the idea of someday building a model. I don't believe that model ever came to fruition, however. Lawrence Crane owned DELILAH for four or five years while he was in college, and moored her off the family cottage on the Owls Head shore facing Rockland Harbor, where this photo was taken. When he entered the service, Crane sold DELILAH, and the new owners soon put her ashore on a local ledge, where she broke up.



Schooner Bows

His detailed photos led Elmer to understand rigging, which, in turn, allowed him to build accurate models. He never built models of these particular vessels, but knew that their headgear was similar to other coasters. It's no accident that this pair of laid-up three-masters resembled each other. Only three years and three miles separated them at launching, and Michael B. McDonald was master builder for both. The GEORGE E. KLINCK, newer (by three years) and larger (in tonnage by about 10 percent) than the CHARLES H. KLINCK, was built at Mystic, Connecticut, in 1904. The CHARLES H. KLINCK came out of Noank in 1901.



Cordwood on the TABER

On August 3, 1941, only a few miles upriver from Sandy Point at Bucksport, on the Penobscot River, the schooner STEPHEN TABER awaits a fair tide to continue her run to the paper mill. The peeled 4' spruce logs of pulpwood, cut on the offshore island of Frenchboro, are stacked so high that getting from stern to bow requires traveling atop the pile. For climbing, there's a ladder, and it shows at the right of the photo. Sailing is nigh impossible with a load like this, so the motorized yawlboat (whose bow can be seen at the bottom of the photo) will be brought into play to slowly push the vessel toward her destination. If the wind's astern, the TABER's headsails can be set to boost her along. Built in 1871 in Glenwood, New York, in 1941, she was owned, fittingly for a wood carrier, by Fred Wood. Recently and thoroughly rebuilt, the STEPHEN TABER operates today as the oldest documented sailing vessel in continuous service in the United States, and has been honored by inclusion on the National Historic Register.



HESPER and LUTHER LITTLE at Wiscasset

Few photographers could resist shooting these four-masters, since 1932 an easy-to-reach icon in the town of Wiscasset, and Elmer Montgomery was among the many who so aimed their cameras. But Elmer went beyond most in that he climbed aboard to take several on-deck photos—again, partly to capture the nostalgia and partly to understand how vessels such as these were put together, trimmed out, and rigged. Like the KLINCK schooners at Rockland (upper left), these schooners were built near each other and at about the same time, the LUTHER LITTLE at Somerset, Massachusetts, in 1917 and the HESPER at South Somerset a year later. The masts were removed from the HESPER (foreground) soon after this photo of 1939, but the LITTLE's masts lasted for years, until 1995, in fact. Finally, in 1998, by then wasted away to nearly unrecognizable hulks, this oft-photographed pair were demolished.

Offloading the Day's Catch

A lovely little double-ended sardine carrier, with bags of salt on deck, awaits her turn at the float while the fish from another boat are being unloaded, one at a time. Bottom-dwelling fish like cod and haddock used to be within easy range of small powerboats like this one. Chances are that to drive her, this longliner has a converted auto engine hiding under the box, and is set up with an automobile rear axle transferring right-angle power to the rail-mounted winch. That trap-hauling winch indicates that she also could be put to use as a lobsterboat.



NORTH HAVEN Departs for Wartime Service

This steam-powered ferry was placed on the North Haven–Swans Island run in 1931, and continued service to those islands from Rockland until her sale to the U.S. Maritime commission in 1942. Here she is, with her white paint changed to military gray, leaving Rockland for good. She'll soon be under tow, astern of the steam tug BARLOW and headed for duty at Casco Bay installations. In rough seas, the NORTH HAVEN, built in 1919 by the Ford Motor Company's Delaware shipyard as ELECTRONIC, rolled deeply due to her narrow beam and high superstructure.



An Abandoned Bow

The more I study this photo, the less I am inclined to think it a Friendship sloop. We only know the date, which was October 9, 1938; Elmer left no record of location or boat type. There's no sign of a bowsprit or gammon knee ever having been fitted, and all Friendships had them. But, with that stout mast, she's surely a sailing craft, likely commercial, and probably a sloop with a plumb stem and single headsail.

Port Clyde Dories

These seine dories carry tarred cotton nets, called stop seines, used to catch herring. Despite having been dipped in hot tar, seine twine, as nets are often called, had to be kept salted, layer by layer; otherwise they'd rot. Big wooden seine dories no longer grace this waterfront, but the buildings still stand, one housing the well-known and gentrified Port Clyde General Store. Elmer's family, as I recall, owned a 1936 Nash Lafayette, which shows at the far left.



On Deck

While these KLINCK schooners were lying idle but still rigged, Elmer spent a good deal of time studying their details and taking photos. This shot was taken aboard the CHARLES H. KLINCK looking aft from the base of the foremast. Her near sister, the GEORGE E. KLINCK, lies inboard. Lots of wood went into building vessels like this, but wood was plentiful back then (1901 and 1904) and labor relatively cheap. How sad that more of these beautifully fashioned objects couldn't have lasted longer, but how fortunate it is that their images live on in old photographs.

Small Boats at Martinsville

A round-sided dory or a flat-bottomed skiff, along with some home-built wooden traps, gave many a fisherman his start. Wood and galvanized nails were cheap and plentiful back then, so manual labor was the chief ingredient. This is Martinsville, north of Port Clyde, near the artist Andrew Wyeth's home ground, where he often painted scenes like this.

