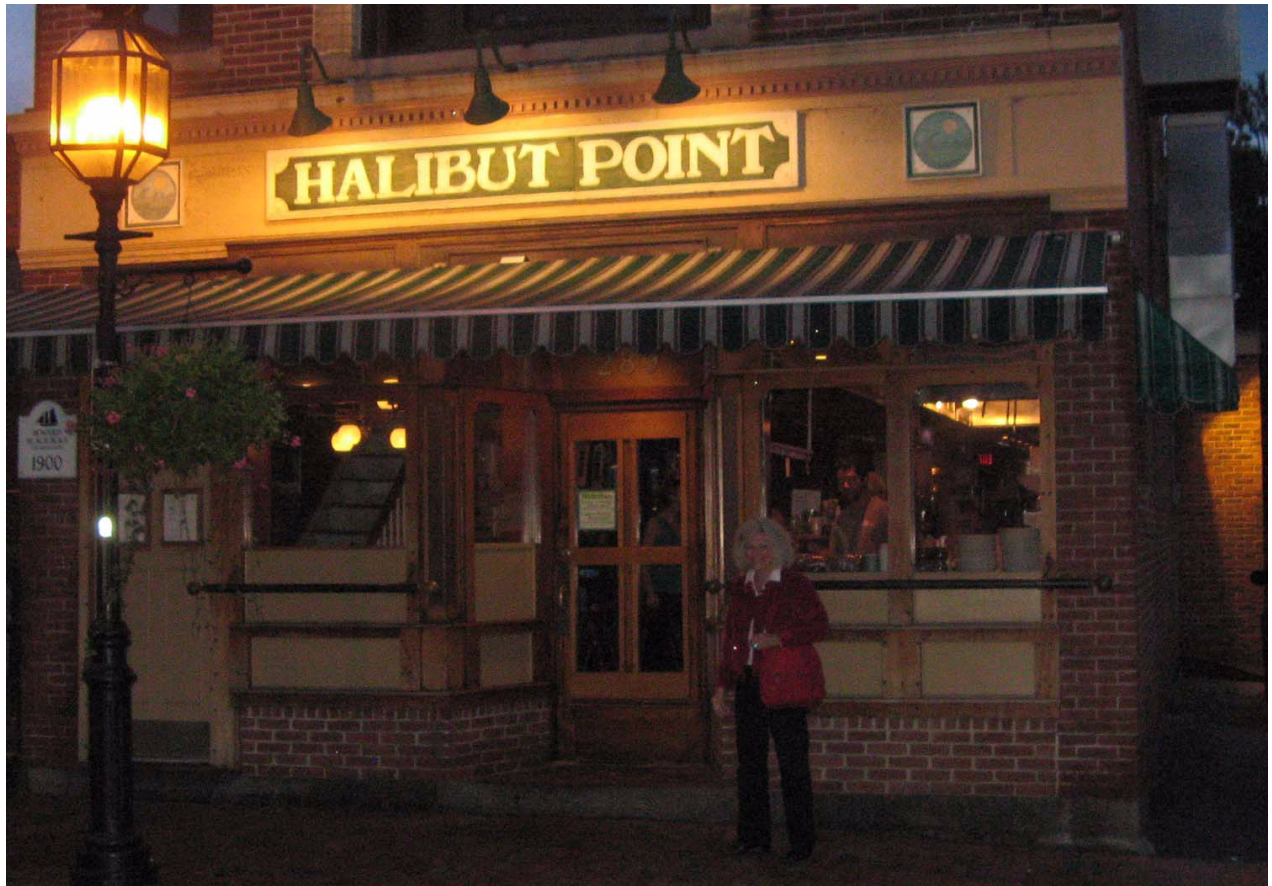

Letters From New England

October 3, 2009

Gloucester



Halibut Point Restaurant, 289 Main Street, Gloucester, MA.

The *Halibut Point Restaurant* makes the best *Italian Fish Chowder* in the whole world – at least in those parts of the world that I’ve had a chance to visit – and that includes Italy! The menu says it’s made with “spicy tomato broth, haddock [big chunks still firm], and vegetables [very crisp].” What they don’t, and won’t tell you are the mix of spices that give it its unique flavour. If you are traveling within 100 miles of the place, it’s worth a trip out to Cape Ann in Massachusetts to sample this culinary delight. I’m not alone in this opinion. Frommer’s review states “The clam chowder is terrific, and the spicy Italian fish chowder is so good that some people come to Gloucester just for a bowlful of that.” Ann had the clam chowder.



Now the Halibut Point Restaurant is special not just for its fish and clam chowders, but for the fact that it was established by Howard Blackburn. In the late 1800’s, as a dory fisherman trawling for Halibut in the *Grace L Fears* on the Grand Banks, Blackburn lost his fingers and most of his thumbs plus half a foot to frostbite in one of the most harrowing survival stories to come out of the

dory fisheries¹. Pictures and clippings of his exploits, then and afterwards, cover the walls of the restaurant. And there is one striking portrait photo of him in a gentlemen’s outfit that shows his missing fingers and thumbs.

Seems he and his dory mate, *Tom Welch*, were caught in a blizzard while hauling in their lines. They lost sight of their ship and after a day and night of looking for her, and I assume she for them, they decided to row for Newfoundland – about a hundred miles to their East. In his own words, here’s how he lost those fingers.

“My fingers were getting whiter and stiffer. Too late now to stop ‘em from freezin’, I think. I knew that if my fingers froze straight and stiff I couldn’t keep rowing after they froze. So I made up my mind—there was nothing else to do—that if my fingers was bound to freeze that they’d freeze in such shape that they’d be of some use afterwards. So I curled ‘em around the handles of the oars while they wasn’t yet too stiff, and I sat there without moving till they froze that way, around the handles of the oars. There now, I think, I’ll be ready to do a dory mate’s full share.”

1. There are many references to this story on the Internet, but the best reference I’ve found, and the one from which the next quote was taken, is James B. Connolly’s book *The Book of the Gloucester Fisherman* (The John Day Company, 1927).

Needless to say they made it to Newfoundland, but only Blackburn survived the trip. He spent the rest of the winter with a fishing family on the winterbound coast.

I am absolutely fascinated with Gloucester, and have been ever since I sailed into its harbor for the first time with Graham and Pat Campbell in July of 1987. Just before entering the mouth of the outer harbor, I got this eerie feeling. I can’t quite explain it, but it’s the same feeling I get when I enter a large cathedral – like the one in Cologne, Germany – only early in the morning when it’s quiet and cool and hardly a soul is stirring (forgive the pun). The message, however, was clear: “This is hallowed ground.” I stopped whatever I was doing on deck and just stared at the water and let the cloud of feeling pass over me. It wasn’t a frightening feeling, just an overwhelming feeling of reverence. Only afterwards did I learn about the nature of the fishing industry out of Gloucester, the many fishermen who had lost their lives while working out of this port, and of the ships that had been lost while trying to enter this port in a storm.

It was out of this port in October of 1991 that the *Andrea Gail* was lost. You probably saw the movie or read the book by Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm*. The *Andrea Gail*’s sister ship, the *Hanna Boden*, captained by Linda Greenlaw², managed to survive the storm. Here’s a shot of the *Hanna Boden* that I took in 1990 while she was lying at berth in the harbor.



No premonitions; it was just one of many photos that I took that day.

Tomorrow we head for Freeport, LL Bean’s, and our seal hunting expedition in Casco Bay.

Garrett (with Ann)

2. Linda Greenlaw is a fascinating person in her own right. I highly recommend her book *The Hungry Ocean* which describes her life and that of her crew aboard the *Hannah Boden*.