



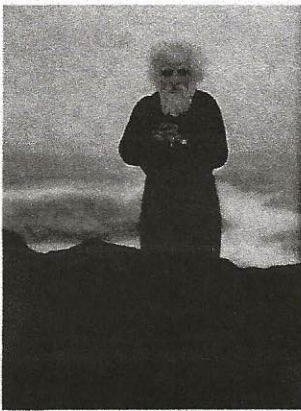
E. K. Miller Fine Art

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The Hermit of Monhegan Island

by E. K. Miller Fine Art on 7/12/2015 1:10:34 PM

1 Comment



Life is what you make it.

Thousands of people head out to sea every year to soak in the idyllic atmosphere of Monhegan Island, Maine. That magnetic pull has been drawing artists and tourists to her shores for over a hundred years. Stepping off of the ferry, one can't help but notice the tiny island of Manana that flanks the opposite side of the harbor. "It's where the hermit used to live", state those who know, "He lived there for 50 years." Hard to believe, when you look over at the piles of rocks and windswept grass. It's suitable for seagulls, that's about it, but then there was this young man, Captain Ray Phillips, who saw Manana as the perfect place to live for the rest of his life.

Who was Captain Ray Phillips? He was born in 1892, received a BA degree in Agriculture from the University of Maine and headed straight to New York City to make a small fortune in wholesale groceries. Living in Manhattan, he supported his aging mother in an apartment on 11th Avenue. When World War I broke out, he joined the US Army without hesitation. He became a Captain and led his troops bravely in battles through Europe. War IS hell and when he returned to his job in New York City; he had a whole new outlook on life. He had fought for freedom, but was he free? The hustle and bustle of city life that he once loved, he now found stressful. He found solace in sailing his small sloop on Long Island Sound. It was on one of those sailing trips that he decided to just sail where the wind took him and never look back.

Captain Ray Phillips was familiar with Monhegan Island when he landed there in 1928. He had been there before, in 1924, and knew his way around. For the first 2 summers, he lived on his small sailboat and rented a cottage for the winters. There was a Coast Guard Station on the other side of Manana and a small fog house. The Coast Guard ships would pull into tiny Monhegan Harbor, taking up a lot of space. The lobster men and fishermen, in their relatively small boats, always had to work around the obstacles of those huge ships. In his third year, Ray purchased 7/10 of Manana Island for \$75 and never allowed the Coast Guard to park their boats on that side of the island again. He moved onto Manana and commenced building a cottage with driftwood that he found. Monhegan residents also donated their surplus building materials to him.

Ray built an independent life for himself on Manana. He would walk along the island, gazing out to sea, contented with his life. He brought a herd of sheep over to the island and a very large goose. They became like family. He bottle

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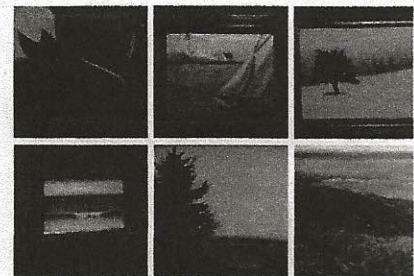
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fed one of the baby sheep that had been abandoned by its mother, and it imprinted on him. He named her Eva. She followed him around very much like a pet dog would. His goose also followed him everywhere. People would ask him what his "duck's" name was and he quickly said, "Donald Duck". Ray would just smile, knowing they had no clue it was a goose. Ray went over to Monhegan everyday, with Eva in his rowboat. He picked up his mail at the post office and got books to read from the library. He was an avid reader and read nearly every book in the library. He looked forward to getting his Wall Street Journal in the mail and enjoyed his subscription to the Reader's Digest. His veteran's pension and social security checks were mailed to him every month. Ray often got letters from tourists that he met and he answered every one of them. He would turn the envelope inside out and send his response back in the same envelope. Ray was a smart recycler long before it was savvy.

Captain Ray Phillips was not a recluse and not insane. He spent hours talking to people. When asked if there was anything that he regretted, he quickly replied, only that he wished he had taken that sailing trip five years sooner. Although he lived a solitary life, he was interested in the rest of the world. He had a transistor radio that he turned on only to listen to the news. He enjoyed people to a certain extent. He once said he thought the mustard gas that he was exposed to in World War I changed his social skills. He found large groups of people difficult to interact with. When he felt overwhelmed by Monhegan tourists, he would break into "sheep talk" and start baaaaa-ing. People would back away slowly and leave him alone. It worked and he'd smile that little smile. Surely they knew he was insane now!

At one time, there was a visiting pastor who came to Monhegan Island for a day, to save the heathens' souls that lived there. Ray happened to be on the dock when that pastor saw him. He went straight over to scruffy looking Ray, telling him he was going to save his soul. Ray looked at him for a moment and said, "Well that's great, but can you come over to my island and help me put my roof up first?" The pastor said he didn't have time for that and Ray said, "Well, that's too bad. I guess you don't have time to save my soul either." He got into his rowboat and headed back to Manana with Eva in the stern.

Captain Ray Phillips went to the mainland, Port Clyde, twice a year. He made the journey every June and September to get his haircut and beard trimmed. He would also enjoy the luxury of staying overnight and sleeping in a real bed. That was the longest he could ever stay away from his beloved home and pets. As a hermit, he still cared somewhat about his appearance and was once asked about taking a wife. He said he would have a wife, but he didn't think he could ever find a woman who could survive the winters out there.

The Maine winters were quite brutal on those islands ten miles offshore. Ray went across the harbor in his rowboat, even in winter, to get his mail and supplies. The waves would often splash into the boat and his hands would freeze to the oars. The Monhegan residents always kept an eye out for him and were there to help, if he needed them. Ray was a hearty old man in his mid eighties when he crossed in a storm and then slipped on the rocks while getting out of his boat. He was completely drenched, frozen and insisted on staying in his cottage. He wasn't feeling well, coughing a lot and said he didn't think he'd see spring. His friends on Monhegan didn't want to leave him alone, on the other side of the harbor, but old Ray convinced them he'd be alright in his home. He would put the kerosene lamp in his window each night to let them know. He said if it ever goes dark, then you'll know I need help. The light of the old kerosene lamp blazed across the waves in the harbor, each night for two and half weeks, and then there was darkness. Sadly, in 1975, in his 86th year, it was the winter that he didn't survive.

Today, one can't help but wonder what it was like to live on Manana, an island 10 miles out at sea, alone, for 50 years. There is no trace of Ray's cottages. They were completely destroyed and removed for safety reasons. After Ray's death, a family tried to live on the island and built the odd structure that's visible today. They abandoned it after two years. There is, however, a small herd of sheep still on the island. They live on the mainland in the winter, but are turned loose on Manana every summer. Seeing them bounding on and off of the cairns that Ray built and frolicking in the tall, wild grass gives us a sense of the joyfulness of complete freedom that Captain Ray Phillips savored for 50 years.

These images of the Hermit of Monhegan had never been seen before. My paintings in this Hermit series are based on photos that were taken by Bob Miller in June of 1972. He and his wife, Elaine Miller (coincidentally, that's MY name too!) spent summer vacations on Monhegan and befriended Ray. They rowed across the harbor, brought him two of his favorite things, coffee and pipe tobacco, and would chat for hours with this kind and intelligent man. Ray was very happy to have the gifts and enjoyed the company of the Millers so much that he offered to pose for pictures, if they wanted any. Ray chose his favorite backgrounds to stand in front of and Bob Miller snapped away. What I love most about these images, is how contented Ray looks. Bob even captured Ray's smile with the twinkle in his eyes. Bob's photographic compositions are quite artistic with their own merit.