

Ginny and Bob Potter

By Brenda Underwood



Bob Potter first established his connection with Cornwall when his father, a New Yorker, bought two acres of forest land from a friend to build a one-room cabin and an outhouse. The year was 1937 and Bob was seven years old. That cabin became the Potter family's weekend escape from the noise and congestion of city life.

"Today, of course, you couldn't build a dwelling that

small and as to an outhouse, certainly not!" said Bob. "But in those days it was legal." And, by today's standards it was inexpensive: Bob's father paid \$50 an acre.

Russell Potter, Bob's father, was employed by Columbia University as head of its public lecture platform. He organized ten-week sequences of public lectures which included writers, artists and politicians. It was before television and one of the ways information was disseminated at that time. "That's the way you got known in those days," said Bob, recalling that Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Amelia Earhart and Dwight Eisenhower had given lectures at Columbia.

But the dynamic of the Potter family was soon to change. In 1940, when the rumbles of World War Two reached this side of the Atlantic, "people were worried that New York would be bombed as London had been." Russell Potter decided that for the duration of the war his wife Dean, son Bob and daughter Peg would move to Cornwall full time to be out of harm's way and he would join them on weekends.

Bob's connection with Cornwall thus became entrenched. He was ten years old when he started at the Cornwall Consolidated School (CCS). As the war played out, Bob graduated from CCS and started high school at the Housatonic Valley Regional.

By this time, the war was drawing to a close and the Potters decided it was time to move back to their apartment in New York where Bob finished his high school career at Horace Mann.

“I was a science nerd in high school,” recalls Bob, who won the Bausch & Lomb Medal for Science. That discipline, however, was not to be his career choice when he attended Antioch College. “Like a lot of young people, I got interested in other things.”

After two years at Antioch, Bob took a year off. The Korean War was suddenly looming on the horizon and Bob found himself in the army. Due to a bad left eye, he was sent to Germany and not the battlefield. “I wasn’t fit to go and be slaughtered by the Chinese.”

We’ll leave Bob in Germany while we introduce Ginny as before long their paths will cross.

Ginny was born in Ohio in 1941 and lived there for three years. When her father died at age 40, her mother, Helen, decided to move back to New England to be with her parents. The three generations moved into a large Victorian house in Claremont, New Hampshire, where Ginny was close enough to walk to both the grade school and the high school.

“My mother was very much a stay-at-home mother who looked after her parents and me. It was great but it was also rather closed. I was a very ‘good girl’ because I needed approval,” said Ginny, articulating a common characteristic of girls of that generation. As an only child without extended family, Ginny felt her life in Claremont was sheltered.

That was to change when a recruiter from Mount Holyoke came to her high school and suggested she apply. “I knew nothing about it but I interviewed there and at a couple of other schools and to my astonishment (and to that of my high school advisor) Mount Holyoke accepted me. And that was a wonderful thing because from Mount Holyoke I learned that there was a lot more to the world and possibly to me if I looked around for it.”

Over the course of time, Ginny’s grandparents died and “my mother didn’t want to keep this large old Victorian house in Claremont—and this still surprises me—she got an apartment in New York. So from Mount Holyoke I went home to New York. And that was kind of fun. I started to see more of the wider world, as it were.”

Ginny, who had studied English literature at Mt. Holyoke, decided to become a teacher and applied to Teachers College, Columbia (TC) where she pursued a Master’s Degree in teaching English. To qualify as a teacher, she needed to have some student teaching experience and a supervisor. Enter Robert Potter. Bob, now teaching in a junior high in New York and working on a Ed.D. at Columbia, became Ginny’s supervisor.

After she graduated from TC Columbia, Ginny went to teach at Oberlin High School and recalls that, “It was the worst year of my life. I didn’t know anything about keeping discipline in a classroom. I had student-taught in New York but I always had a supervisor with me in the room and the kids in New York were motivated; they wanted to learn something. Oberlin High did not

have that kind of environment. They were kids that couldn't make it but were expected to graduate that year anyway. I had study hall in the lunch room with over 100 people."

Ginny wrote to Bob for advice. "I can't do this," she said. "Bob wrote back kindly with some suggestions but they didn't work." Ginny decided she needed a new job and Bob was able to help. His brother-in-law, Ken Keskinen, who was a teacher at the George School in Pennsylvania, was looking for a new person in the English Department and Ginny applied. Bob drove her to the interview.

On that eight-hour drive, "we talked a lot in the car and got to know each other in a relationship other than as supervisor and student -- although Bob has tried to continue as my supervisor for about 50 years."

Needless to say Ginny and Bob were married. "Entering into Bob's family couldn't have been better," said Ginny. "You couldn't find a better place to have a sister and brother-in-law; it was a safe and wonderful family environment."

Bob, who had been teaching at Litchfield High School, accepted a job at State University College at Oneonta, New York, and the couple made their home there. While Bob taught at SUCO, Ginny taught home-bound students who needed special help. She was also hired by the Oneonta school system to teach English as a second language and was paired with a Korean boy who could scarcely speak English. "He was just the most delightful person to work with," recalls Ginny. "I worked with him for three years and he went on to become an "A" student."

At the same time Bob was also writing books for challenged readers with which Ginny was able to help, both in typing them and with the help of her Korean student. "If there was something my student couldn't read," she said, "the challenged reader of English would have the same problem."

After three years, "Bob got fed up with having student teachers," said Ginny, "not that I muddied the waters for him" and the couple started to work their way towards Cornwall.

Bob accepted a position as English teacher at the Torrington Branch of UCONN and the couple lived in Harwinton for a year. At this point, they made three decisions.

"When we married," said Ginny, "the Potters gave us some land in Cornwall as they had given Peg and Ken the land across the street. The first decision was to build a house on our Cornwall property. The second was that Bob would not teach full-time any more but devote most of his time to writing textbooks."

"And the third decision was to adopt a child." And, all these things came to pass. The Potters adopted Bonnie and built a house simultaneously with her arrival and Bob started writing books as his primary occupation.

“It was both a busy and a difficult time,” recalls Ginny. “The house came as a shell but Bob did most of the work on the inside himself including the walls, floors and ceilings.

It took the Potters two years to complete the house while Bob continued to write textbooks and Ginny to type them as well as take care of Bonnie. “It was hard,” said Ginny. “Bob’s father was ill with cancer and Bonnie, who was a loud, talkative baby, was no help.”

Six years later, the Potters had a surprise when Ginny found that she was pregnant with Dean. “The house was finished but we didn’t have a bedroom for him so we had to put an addition on the house.”

Meanwhile, when Bonnie was a toddler she and Ginny become fixtures at the library. “Bonnie was very teachable and I taught her to read so we went to the library to get books.”

It was 1974 and Hildreth Daniel was the librarian at the time. “As we were there a lot she asked if I would help her,” said Ginny, adding that the library wasn’t as busy as it is today. And, thus, when Hildreth retired at the age of eighty, Ginny was offered the position.

“It was a time of transition for the library,” recalls Ginny. “The first computers were bought and we added more books and videos. The need for a children’s librarian became obvious and the library got to the point where it couldn’t fit into the town hall building anymore. Eventually the library board established a fund-raising committee and with the addition of a state grant we raised enough money for a new library to be built.” After seeing the new library built, Ginny retired as librarian in 2003.

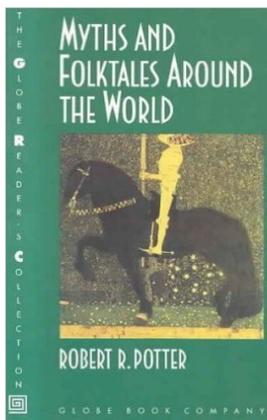
On family car trips, a game was to select the dream auto each would like to acquire. For Ginny it was a blue, sporty, top-down, two-seater. Unbeknownst to her, Bob had been keeping his eye out and when he spotted a listing at Modern Motors he made a deposit, but didn’t quite have the courage to complete the purchase without her approval. Of course for her – no question – it was a very bright blue tiny Mazda convertible she obviously enjoyed driving around town. “She stunned us,” said Marie Prentice. “It seemed as if she was a butterfly emerging from the chrysalis.”

Both Dean and Bonnie are now married and live and work far from Cornwall. Bonnie is a marketer for Sirius FM Radio and Bob, her husband, works in IT and they live in Virginia. Dean is a freelance graphic designer and Robin, his wife, whom he met while studying at Williams College, is an engineer specializing in geology and hydrology. They and their three-year-old daughter Zola live in Anchorage, Alaska.

Ginny and Bob recall with joy the weddings of their two children. Dean and Robin were married at the Cornwall Library the year after the library was finished. “It is the only time the library has hosted a wedding,” said Ginny. “Friends came from all over the US. And Ken [Keskinen] who was a justice of the peace, married them. It was a real wedding and just lovely to have it there.”

Bonnie's wedding came as a surprise. "She was engaged and planning a really big wedding in Alexandria and all of a sudden she wrote, 'No, cancel that. We are not getting married.' A couple of months later she wrote that she was buying a condo with a man named Bob and wanted us to come down for Mother's Day weekend and see it."

Bonnie had also invited Bob's parents. "We were all chatting away when Bonnie and Bob disappeared – we really didn't notice. We heard the door bell ring and before long a nicely dressed woman carrying a book came into the room followed by Bonnie wearing a tee shirt that said "Bride" and Bob wearing one that said "Groom." The woman, a justice of the peace, married Bonnie and Bob then and there with their parents looking on. "So, we have had two kind of neat weddings," said Ginny.



Meanwhile, Bob retired from writing textbooks. His first book, *Myths and Folktales Around the World*, at left, which he wrote in 1963 while teaching junior high in the Bronx, recently celebrated its fifty-second year in print. In all he is credited with 20 books, which Ginny typed with her more nimble fingers.

In their retirement and long before, the Potters have been devoted citizens of Cornwall and the region. Bob served on the board and then as president of the Cornwall-Goshen Public Health Nursing Association (now absorbed into Northwest VNA). He spent 16 years on the Board of Education, six as Chair and eight as the high school representative. He has been an active participant in getting the monthly *Cornwall Chronicle* to press since its founding. And both Ginny and Bob edited both the June and July *Chronicle* for years. "Bob and Ginny have been the backbone of the *Chronicle* for many years right along with the late Spencer and Bobbie Klaw and Tom and Margaret Bevans," said Lisa Simont. "The standards they set guide the paper today and will for what we all hope will be a long future."

Ginny has also contributed many hours to Cornwall helping to make it the vibrant community it is. She has worn a number of different hats over the years: Board member and President of the Historical Society overseeing its renovation in 2008-2009; Chair of the Planning and Zoning Committee (1981 to 1995 including 12 years as Chair); Registrar of Voters (2001 to 2015); and Treasurer of the Child Center Board for a period during her 18 years on the board. She ran the Memorial Day carnival games for many years, and, of course, worked at the Rummage Sale Book Department.

In 2009, Cornwall honored Ginny with its Community Service Award.

On the morning that she was to be presented with the award (and being totally unaware that it was going to take place), she and Bob were struggling out of the Parish House with a heavy table for the carnival and she said to Bob, "Gee, Bob, we ought to get the award for all this public service".



Another interest of Bob's is a miniature railroad known as the Pottersville, Pa. Railroad. Son Dean started with the tiny trains in 1993 and Bob continued. It has become a family project. The trains run around three different tracks, through tunnels set among rolling hills with farms in the valleys. There are rivers and ponds, homes and lumberyards, old mines and a sawmill. There is even a covered bridge which looks familiar and... yes, Gordon Ridgway's farm stand. You would be right in thinking that it is set in Cornwall except for one thing: an IRS building on fire (photo at left) complete with flashing lights and smoke, a delightful example of the Potter sense of humor.

Photo by Lazlo Gyorsok

When not clipping articles for the Historical Society, Ginny reads. She has been in the same book group for about 25 years. And she still volunteers at the library.

Bob is also interested in traditional jazz and other types of music. Recently he tried writing down all the tunes he could name and gave up as the list neared 1,000. Not only can he give you the title of a tune but a line or two of lyrics as well. "There were an awful lot of good songs written when I was growing up."

Both Ginny and Bob agree that the degree of public participation in Cornwall is wonderful and feel we are lucky to have such a good EMT team. Bob, who last winter had an emergency trip to Sharon Hospital, can attest to that.

However, Bob, who considers himself a great populist politically, wishes that Cornwall was more representative of the greater area. "Cornwall is very Democratic and very liberal and that's fine. But I think there's a tendency to be a bit too smug about it all. The number of working class people is a lot smaller proportionately than in some other towns."

"Cornwall doesn't have your normal bell-shaped curve," added Ginny. "But I do think the nature of the land affects how people feel about living here. I think the important problem for Cornwall is finding a balance between protecting that land, and providing the environment for work and family. We were lucky that Bob could write at home and send his manuscripts in to New York,

and I could be productive here at home and the library. In Cornwall's future I hope more home-based businesses will make possible a closer, cohesive community."

This story wouldn't be complete if we didn't mention that the Potters love cats. One immediately becomes aware of this when observing the cat contrivances in their home such as crackly brown paper grocery store bags for cats to hide in and furry things and balls to bat around and chase. Bob, who wears hearing aids ("only when he must," said Ginny) recently wrote the following poem.

Not So Hard of Hearing

By Robert Potter

*Martha, my cat,
lies in my lap,
purring.*

*I hear with my hand,
not my ears,
that sound,*

*that smallest sound
to be stroked out of
silence.*

