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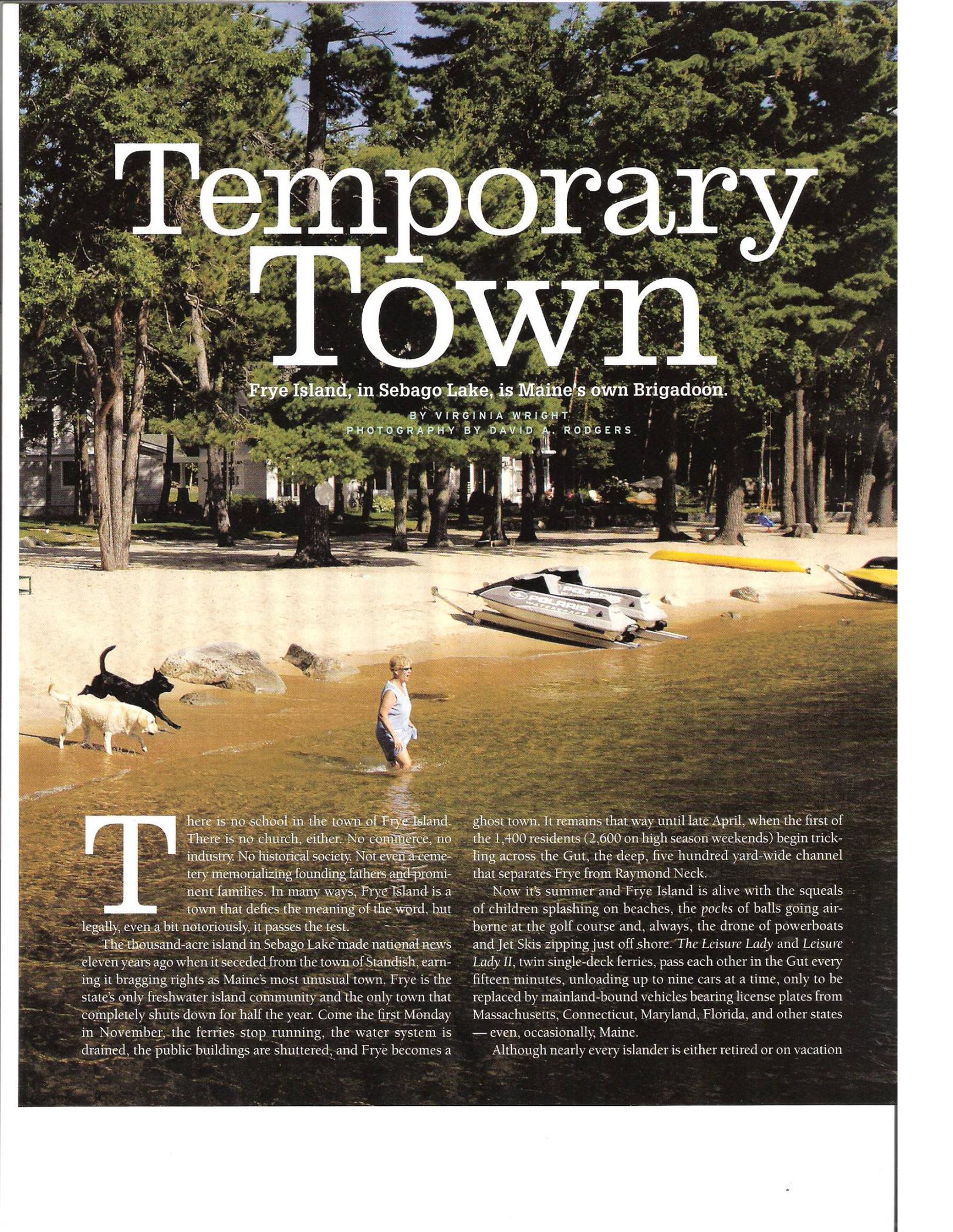
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Temporary Town

Frye Island, in Sebago Lake, is Maine's own Brigadoon.

BY VIRGINIA WRIGHT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID A. RODGERS

There is no school in the town of Frye Island. There is no church, either. No commerce, no industry. No historical society. Not even a cemetery memorializing founding fathers and prominent families. In many ways, Frye Island is a town that defies the meaning of the word, but legally, even a bit notoriously, it passes the test.

The thousand-acre island in Sebago Lake made national news eleven years ago when it seceded from the town of Standish, earning it bragging rights as Maine's most unusual town. Frye is the state's only freshwater island community and the only town that completely shuts down for half the year. Come the first Monday in November, the ferries stop running, the water system is drained, the public buildings are shuttered, and Frye becomes a

ghost town. It remains that way until late April, when the first of the 1,400 residents (2,600 on high season weekends) begin trickling across the Gut, the deep, five hundred yard-wide channel that separates Frye from Raymond Neck.

Now it's summer and Frye Island is alive with the squeals of children splashing on beaches, the *pocks* of balls going airborne at the golf course and, always, the drone of powerboats and Jet Skis zipping just off shore. *The Leisure Lady* and *Leisure Lady II*, twin single-deck ferries, pass each other in the Gut every fifteen minutes, unloading up to nine cars at a time, only to be replaced by mainland-bound vehicles bearing license plates from Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maryland, Florida, and other states — even, occasionally, Maine.

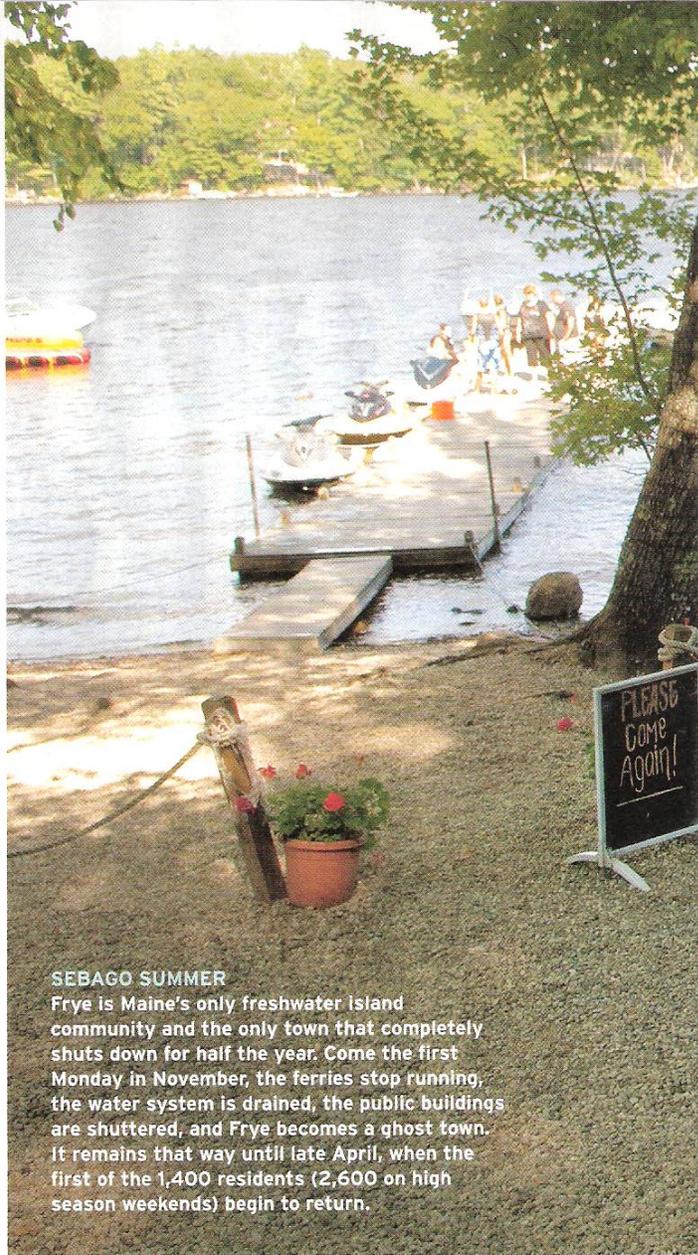
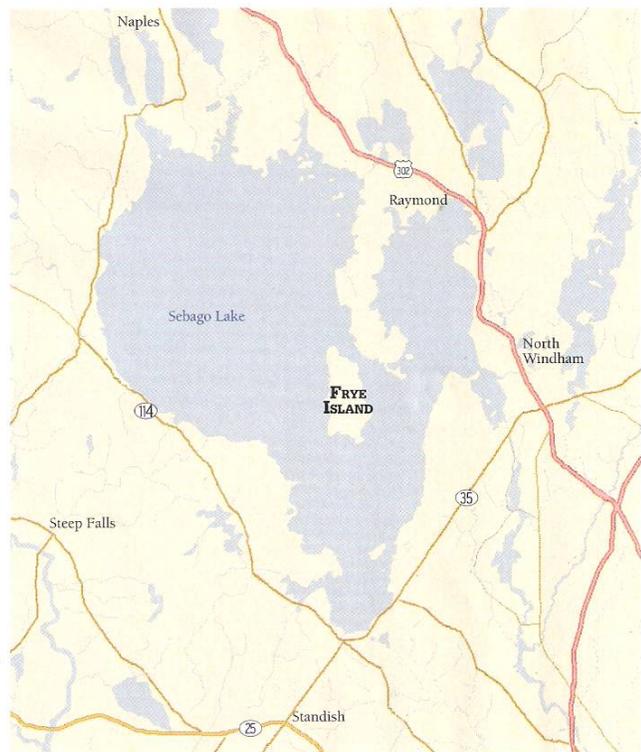
Although nearly every islander is either retired or on vacation

and traditional institutions are few, Frye does have projects and a few burning issues that bring people together in a sense of common purpose. Take the Frye Island Golf Club, a popular gathering spot in the middle of the wooded island. Like other town-owned facilities, such as the ferries and marinas, the nine-hole course derives its income strictly from membership and user fees, not taxes.

“There is a lot of sweat equity here,” Bruce Nisula says proudly as he shows off the clubhouse and landscaped parking lot designed and built by volunteers. “When we started, there was a lot of concern about whether we’d get it done, but we managed to keep on going after it.”

Volunteerism like that keeps Frye running, Nisula says, but nevertheless a laid-back summer spirit prevails. Facilities are built and celebrations are thrown by people who want them; otherwise, they don’t happen, and no one minds. “We do what we can with what we have,” Nisula explains. “If you don’t volunteer, no one holds it against you. It’s not that kind of culture.”

Few people have lived on Frye longer than Nisula, who is tall and slender and speaks with a folksiness reminiscent of Motel 6’s Tom (“We’ll leave the light on for you”) Bodett. His rustic but tidy cottage, which has its own small sandy beach, was built the year his parents bought it, 1966, making it among the oldest of the island’s five hundred dwellings. Nisula visited every weekend, first with friends, later with his own family. “My kids loved the place and insisted that we come as soon as school ended,” he recalls. “We planned our vacation so that they’d walk out of school, get into the car, and we’d drive from Connecticut to Maine.”



SEBAGO SUMMER

Frye is Maine’s only freshwater island community and the only town that completely shuts down for half the year. Come the first Monday in November, the ferries stop running, the water system is drained, the public buildings are shuttered, and Frye becomes a ghost town. It remains that way until late April, when the first of the 1,400 residents (2,600 on high season weekends) begin to return.

Now semi-retired with a second home in Florida, Nisula and his wife are among the roughly one hundred residents who stay on the island for the full six-month season. “My wife and I have traveled the entire world and if we had to choose one place to be, it would be here,” he says. “I get on that ferry and I feel the stresses and strains of someplace else lift. It’s the most beautiful place in the world. It’s a great community, too. It’s closer-knit than many families.”

On September 7, 1996, before television cameras and hundreds of cheering neighbors, two dozen Frye Islanders wearing waistcoats, knickers, and tricorne hats dumped boxes of “Standish Tea” into Sebago, Maine’s second-largest lake, located just northwest of Portland. The demonstration may have been the most colorful expression of islanders’ longstanding dissatisfaction with the town of Standish, but the critical moment in this



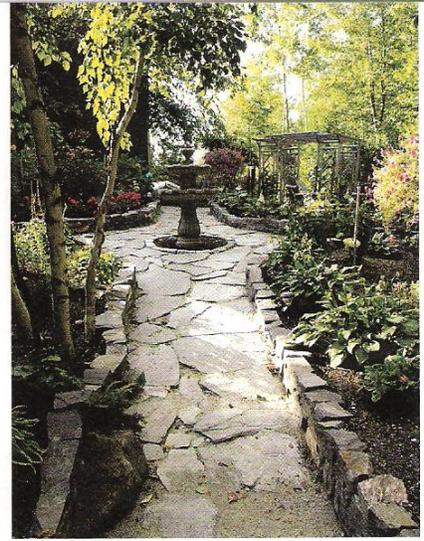
Frye Island is proud of its independence. Its motto is “a community managed by its owners.”

canicular revolution came a few days later when the Standish Town Council voted to remain neutral in Frye's bid to secede. The following spring, the state legislature, which had previously rejected secession bids by seasonal neighborhoods like Biddeford Pool and Peaks Island, interpreted Standish's position as a sign of little opposition and approved the separation. Frye Island's independence became official on July 1, 1998.

Frye Island had chafed under Standish's rule almost since the

island was settled, which, by Maine standards, was not long ago. Other than a decade of farming in the mid-nineteenth century, Frye had hosted nothing but a few cabins and a boys sailing camp until 1964, when most of the acreage was purchased by Leisure Living Communities, a Massachusetts-based developer of resort villages. (The company's principals included the late J.A. Bowron, whose pink jumpsuit and pink Rolls Royce earned him the nickname “Pink Panther.”)

Sebago Lake Shores was to have 1,400 cottages, roads, marinas, a golf course, equestrian facilities, and more — all fully supported by homeowner fees. Perhaps predictably, property owners were soon grumbling about “double taxation,” noting they paid Standish property taxes, yet received minimal services in return. In 1973, they failed to convince the state legislature to allow them to either join the town of Raymond, which provided Frye's emergency services, or go it alone.



In 1975, Leisure Living was ordered to reduce its plans to 750 homes after losing a court battle with the Portland Water District, which serves two hundred thousand customers in surrounding communities with Sebago Lake water. The company went bankrupt the following year, but that didn't alter the way the neighborhood received services. Two resident boards were formed to handle Leisure Living's assets, including unsold real estate, and to collect fees for road maintenance, rubbish pickup, police, and other services. Standish continued to resist Frye Island's attempts to part ways — the island represented 10 percent of the town's tax base — but finally relented when it became clear that letting the island go would be cheaper than providing services to which islanders insisted they were entitled.

Eleven years of independence hasn't changed Frye much, says Nancy Perry, a gracious Texas native who built a house on Frye's western shore in 1990. "Standish is twenty miles away by road," she points out. "We didn't have a relationship with them other than to pay taxes. We were their cash cow. Frye Island is pretty much the same place that it always was, but now we have more control."

Perry and her husband, Phil, a selectman, lived in Cumberland and had a summer place in nearby East Sebago for twenty-three years before their careers took them to Alexandria, Virginia, where they own a high-rise condominium. Now retired, they live on Frye Island from early May through October.

LEISURE LIVING
Frye Island made national news eleven years ago when it seceded from Standish over the issue of taxes. The legislature, which had previously rejected secession bids by seasonal neighborhoods like Biddeford Pool and Peaks Island, approved the separation.

"We feel like the other places we've lived, like Virginia, are temporary," Nancy says. "Maine is our home."

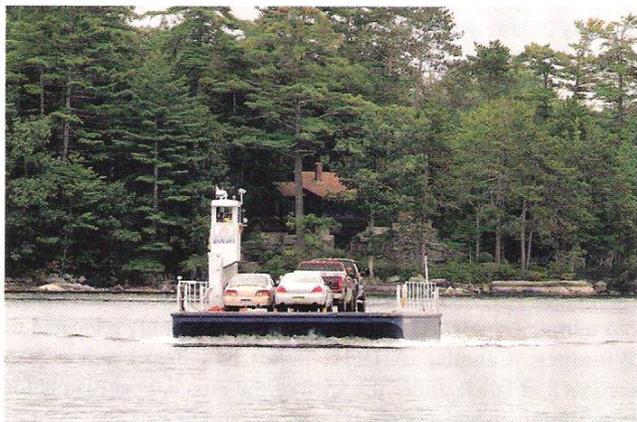
Perry is a member of the Frye Island Garden Club, which has added touches of manicured beauty and color to an environment cloaked in tree shadows, fragrant pine needles, and lush mosses. Among their fine efforts are the beds of roses, astilbes, irises, silver mound, and poppies near the ferry landing, the busiest place in town. Here one finds Frye Island's only commercial enterprise, Frye's Leap General Store and Café, doing business on the first floor of the town office, an unassuming building with gray barn-board siding. Golf carts — the chief mode of transportation on the island's dirt roads — come and go. Hordes of bathing-suited children line up for ice cream cones on a covered porch that twinkles with string lights day and night, and friends gather for beer and sandwiches on a small waterside deck with a view of Frye's Leap, an eighty-foot cliff across the Gut.

Taking all this in one bright afternoon, Perry explains why she and her husband decided to build a house here. "I liked the



idea of being in a community," she says. "Frye Island had all the things we wanted — we play tennis, we golf, we swim — and there are activities like potluck dinners. It is truly a small town."

Neighbors meet on the sixteen town beaches, scattered all around the island, most no more than thirty or forty feet long. Simply marked by numbers painted on rocks, the strands are approached via narrow, shady drives, which open suddenly to bright sand, crystal clear water and, in some spots, stunning views of the western mountains.



Rainy days, meanwhile, steer folks to the community center, where Leisure Living once wined and dined potential homebuyers. The building houses a drop-in recreation center stocked with jigsaw puzzles, crafts and games, and an honor-system library whose eclectic selection of donated books is typical cottage fare magnified: fifties vintage cookbooks and encyclopedias, quirky coffee-table tomes, paperback romances, and mysteries galore. On Sundays, nondenominational services are held upstairs. The sign welcoming worshipers is pure Frye Island: "Chapel service: 9–9:30 A.M.," it reads. "Dress very casual."

Frye Island is proud of its independence. Its motto is "a community managed by its owners." The way they do it is unique.

The town is governed by an executive committee, whose members include selectmen, elected by Frye's roughly ninety registered voters, and the board of island trustees, representing all cottage owners. Together they hash out important matters of the day, but by state law, only the selectmen can authorize expenditures.

That governance structure carries over to town meeting, the only one in Maine to convene in autumn. Two identical warrants are presented. Trustees, who are allowed one vote per family, go first. Any item they reject is dead; it will

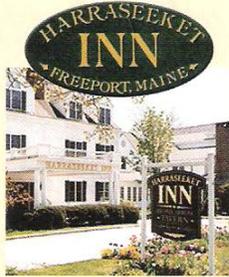
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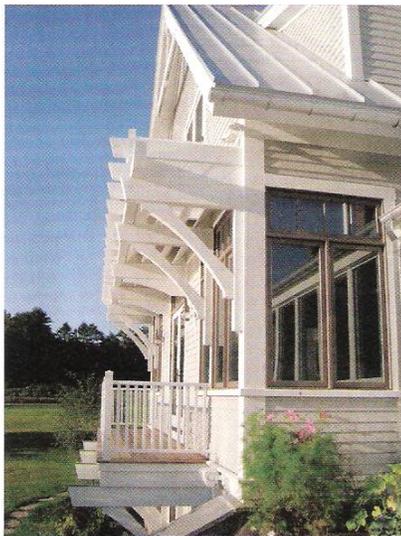
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Temporary Town

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 67 not be presented to registered voters at the official town meeting. “In no other town in the nation, so far as I know, does a nonresident have a vote,” selectman John Nun boasts. “You can own all the rental properties you want in some towns, but if you are not a town resident, you are not a town voter. We give them a big say.” Town meeting voters, he adds, have voted contrary to the trustees’ wishes only once — when they rejected a municipal budget — and that matter was ultimately resolved to both groups’ satisfaction.

It is this “true democracy” that convinced Nun to claim Frye Island as his legal residence. “My vote in Virginia counted for little, if anything,” explains Nun, who coincidentally spends the off-season at the same Alexandria condominium complex as Nancy and Phil Perry. “Here I have a say in what is going on. I like the way the budget system works. The budget is the tax rate, set by the people themselves — except for the schools and the county, to which we contribute with no choice.”

“In no other town in the nation, so far as I know, does a nonresident have a vote.”

Frye Island’s membership in Maine School Administrative District #6 is one term of the secession agreement that remains unsettled to this day — at least in the minds of islanders. Frye, which this year is contributing \$1.2 million to the MSAD #6 budget, wants out because it sends no pupils to local schools. (Other district members are Standish, Limington, Buxton, and Hollis.)

So far, islanders haven’t found much sympathy — not in Standish, where officials say Frye Island’s promise to remain part of the district was one reason they didn’t protest secession; not in the state legislature, which passed a law prohibiting Frye Island’s withdrawal without legislative approval and another exempting it from a new school funding formula based

on enrollment (Frye’s assessment is determined the old way, by property values); and not in the courts, which have upheld both measures.

Also, the Maine press has tended to view islanders’ talk of local control as a red herring. “There are plenty of resort hamlets in Maine that would love to establish themselves as indepen-

“To allow other resort communities to [secede] would suck money out of the education system.”

dent towns to get out of paying for the schooling of children who live across town,” the *Portland Press Herald* editorialized during one of the dustups. “To allow other resort communities to do what Frye Island is attempting would suck money out of the education system. . . . Not having children has nothing to do with the obligation we all share to educate them.”

But Nun and others insist they’re willing to contribute to education; they simply believe their obligation is unfairly high. “People are starting to gripe about taxes,” Nun says. “The turnover of homes here has always been low, but now I hear more and more people talking about selling.”

“MSAD #6 is a very large school district,” Nancy Perry says. “We’d like to join another district that isn’t so large or pay an agreed-upon assessment directly to the state.” Sitting on her deck, which offers a sweeping view across Sebago to the foothills of the White Mountains, Perry adds, “Our taxes are quite high, but we keep telling ourselves on days like this that it’s worth it.”

Most Mainers know Frye Island only from news stories about their tax battles, which can give the impression that islanders are a bunch of unhappy campers. Nothing could be further from the truth. “Almost everybody who comes here comes to be convivial,” Bruce Nisula says. “They are here to enjoy themselves.” How could they not? Frye Island is always on vacation. ♣