

The Man in the Park



Sandra Miller finds her father's dream, and his humanity, persevere in the dunes, marshes and stones of Hammonasset.

Photographs by Thomas Cordy

Photograph of William Miller courtesy of the state Department of Environmental Protection

If Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison is a two-mile-long story with a history as old as coarse white sand and as profound as the waters of Long Island Sound, then my father, William Miller, is one of its main characters. He was born on farmland that is now part of Hammonasset — the most visited state park in Connecticut. In death he was memorialized with the naming of the William F. Miller Campground. And during his 64 years, almost 40 of them spent working in the state park system, he left his stamp on the park, ensuring that Hammonasset would survive for Connecticut residents to love long after any of them would remember who William Miller was.

In the 18 years since my father passed away, I have lived in New York, Los Angeles, Japan, Luxembourg and now Boston. But as often as possible, I have returned to this park that my father so loved. This time is different.

I come as a mother. My 3-year-old son Phineas and infant daughter Adeline would be my father's first grandchildren. Someday they will ask me about him. But what will I say?

I was 19 when my father died from cancer. He battled that demon with all the tenacity I'd expect from a man with his fight. And while the disease didn't break my father, in the end it softened the edges.

I was away at college during his illness, however, and barely got to know that gentler man. It would take many years, and many ponderous walks to understand his absence in my life.

As the director of Connecticut State Parks and Recreation from 1971 until his death in 1984, my father's dedication to the environment began in our backyard. In summer, each zinnia, each daisy in his extensive gardens stood straight and tall as if afraid not to. On our large corner lawn in New Britain, where he lived for 35 years with my mother, Betty, he could place a stick in the ground and make it come up green. He could almost curse crabgrass into retreat. And he always noticed that one more shrub that needed trimming, that one string bean my sister and I had neglected to pick.

From early spring to late fall, from the moment dinner finished until the hour that the night and soil were the same rich, black color, he worked that yard with a fierce caring bordering on obsession. And when he wasn't harvesting his own abundant crops or balancing his organic soil long before pesticide became a dirty word, he was acting as the local garden guru. Many a Saturday, neighbors came by bearing sick plants in need of Bill Miller's doctoring. Aphid-infested peppers. Fungus-struck zucchini. He also made house calls. With plants, he had the bedside manner he sometimes lacked with people.

Now put that man in charge of 88 state parks and imagine.

I was intimidated by my father. I knew his standards well. And the superintendents of the individual state parks had the good sense to be nervous when Bill Miller stopped by for an inspection. He was a handsome, imposing man with sharp, dark eyes and a quick smile that could be either reward or weapon. Poking around the park with a makeshift walking stick, he always found

that soda can buried in the pachysandra or that tiny piece of Styrofoam anyone else would have mistaken for a rock. In fact he established such a reputation for being able to discover hidden trash, the proudly fastidious park workers started to believe Bill Miller planted aluminum cans just to have something to find.

Mr. Savage, one of the seasonal superintendents under my father and my sixth-grade teacher, gave me the only "A" I've ever gotten in a math class. To this day, I wonder if I deserved it, or if he was thinking of his summer job and my father's temper.

His temper confused me. I remember how his hands, so large and rough and quick to punctuate an argument, could coax any reluctant bud into bloom or twist bunches of fresh princess pine into



the most magnificent Christmas wreath for the church door. If I couldn't be close to him, at least I could connect to the beauty he brought to this world. And as I stood alone in our lush garden on a hot August day popping sugar snap peas in my mouth, I loved him immeasur-

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ably.

My father had a special association with many of the parks: Sherwood Island in Westport, the oldest of Connecticut's state parks, was developed in the '60s under his leadership; and when a bulldozer worker from the Department of Transportation discovered dinosaur prints in Rocky Hill, my father oversaw the almost immediate transformation of that site into Dinosaur State Park. He began the Victorian Christmas festivities at Gillette Castle, and in 1983, the year before he died, he established the summer concert series at Harkness Memorial.

But if those were a few of his babies, Hammonasset was his chosen son.

William Frederick Miller was born in 1920 to German immigrant parents who farmed the land that is now at the park's entrance. He had five older brothers and one younger sister, most of whom continued to live in the Madison area as adults. While my father didn't visit his siblings very often, our small family made regular weekend trips to Hammonasset in the summer. Before I was old enough to swim by myself, I could tell you where my father's family farmhouse stood. I knew that the Meigs family of Meigs Point on the east end of the beach were good friends and neighbors. And I understood that something happened to my father when he was at the park. His strong, lean, 6-foot-1 body relaxed a little. His rigid manner turned contagiously playful. Hammonasset resonated in his life with the magical, unbreakable connection that a person feels to his home. And for my

father, Hammonasset was home.

As a boy, he sold milk from the farm to the vendors at Hammonasset. At 15, he pushed hot dogs at the old Clam Shed on the beach. And later, during summer vacations from the University of Richmond where he was a three-sport varsity athlete, he served as a lifeguard on the shores where he had learned swimming 15-odd years before. Between the years 1941 and 1944, the Army Air Corps claimed him for service in the South Pacific, but after World War II, he would return to Connecticut, joining the State Park and Forest Commission. He was named western district supervisor in 1960.

Four years later he became the superintendent of state parks, just about the time Hammonasset was getting into serious trouble.

That was 1964, the year I was born. And I like to think his young daughter gave him even more reason to fight to preserve the land he loved.

Whether this is true or not, I can't, of course, say, but sometimes longing makes our fantasies as valid as any known truth. What I do know, from hearing the story as a child, is what happened at Hammonasset. My father's voice would be gravelly with disgust when he'd tell of how road construction in the early '30s had destroyed

large sections of sand dunes, the natural barriers to wind erosion and storms. "The road and parking lot were right there," he said, "practically on the beach. Everybody liked the convenience more than they cared that half of the beach was gone." Richard Clifford, the assistant director of state parks under my father and now the chief of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, told me, "The beach was breached as waves washed inside the area, creating an erosion problem that threatened the existence of the waterfront." In fact, after a 15-month study, a Wesleyan geologist predicted that by the year 2000 there would be no beach left. It was my father who in 1971 envisioned and implemented the project of moving the road and parking lot several hundred yards back, reconstructing the devastated sand dunes and ultimately rescuing this invaluable piece of state land from watery doom. Though the project, according to Clifford, outraged thousands of park patrons who didn't appreciate the long walk from car to sand, my father was not afraid to make enemies in the name of conservation.

As soon as he had the administrators in Hartford on his side — and according to Clifford they did give him a lot of latitude in his judgments — he decided the moaners could go to the devil. Or at least get educated. With old tires for stabilization and tons of other fill hauled into the park, the Hammonasset staff erected the dunes that still protect the beachfront like a tall, arresting line of sentinels. Dune grass, beach plum and salt-resistant

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vines give the dunes staying power much the way sand sticks in your hair. And to keep people off, my father found a great ally in poison ivy.

To this day, I am fiercely defensive of sand dunes, and, while I'm typically not confrontational, I never hesitate to tell people who are walking on them that they are jeopardizing the life of the beach.

Last summer my husband watched as I unapologetically interrupted an extended family photo being taken on newly erected dunes on Matunuck Beach in Rhode Island. When I returned to our blanket, my husband leaned over and whispered, "Your Dad would be so proud of you."

According to Clifford, my father also had tremendous insight into the value of wetlands years before state or federal governments recognized their importance. Both inland and tidal wetlands are an integral part of the park system, and Hammonasset is about 40 percent tidal wetlands. Tidal wetlands occur at the interface of the land and ocean where daily tides move water in and out of the system. And the dunes built over 30 years ago were instrumental in preserving the diminishing wetlands. Today those wetlands teem with plant, aquatic and bird life. According to the Connecticut Birding Web Site, at Meigs Point East there is probably more bird habitat variety than at any other spot in the state: It's home to herons, os-

preys, egrets, rails, swans, ducks and owls. When you stop to heed quietly the fertile beauty of the salt marshes, you can smell the pungency, feel the vitality, hear them singing with life.

Life that to me contains the spirit of my father, whom I lost long before I would know him through his environmental legacy. Who would teach me how beautiful this life is, but only after he'd surrendered to death.

And when my children ask me about their grandfather, I will not talk about easy family times, resounding laughter at the dinner table or heartening conversations. Instead, I will describe my father's garden pumpkins that to my young eyes looked as big as the moon. I will let a fistful of sand pass

through my fingers and explain that each small white grain could have been one of my father's giant dreams. And as often as possible, I will stroll with my children along the water's edge of Hammonasset Beach State Park and teach them that their grandfather's timeless humanity is in the thriving grasslands and the lofty dunes, the abundant marshes and the edging tide that creeps up to catch our toes. As if he, my father, William F. Miller, knew all along what absolutely must endure and what in the end will fly away with forgiveness. □

Sandra Miller lives in Arlington, Mass.