

Maine Policy Review

Volume 12
Issue 2 *Aging*

2003

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Nancy Grape

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Recommended Citation

Grape, Nancy. "The Dream of Coming Home." *Maine Policy Review* 12.2 (2003) : 8 -9, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol12/iss2/3>.

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The Dream of Coming Home

by Nancy Grape

Ask a Stonington lobsterman how he feels about people “from away” coming to live out their golden years in Maine, and you may be met with a silence as hard as granite and as cold as the Atlantic. Waterfronts are for fishing boats, that silence is saying, not for gentrified retirement condos.

However, should you put the same question to a doctor in Philadelphia, a business executive in Atlanta or someone like me, you may discover you’ve tapped into a lifelong dream.

It is a dream of coming home—and having all the time in the world to enjoy it.

“All the time in the world.” That may sound wistful, coming from a person entering what Shakespeare called “the last of life for which the first was made.” But time, stretching out not over days and weeks but over years and decades, is what “retirement” as a major stage of life is all about.

Relatively new and entering on a new century, retirement is a stage that has the potential to change much around it. As writer Justin Ellis observed recently in the *Maine Sunday Telegram*: “The arrival of retirees from away, combined with the aging of Maine’s resident population, will have broad impacts on Maine life. Health care, the economy, social services and politics will all be affected by the trend—especially in southern Maine, where popu-

lation growth far exceeded the statewide figure of 3.8 percent in the 2000 census.”

Already, retirees have helped to make Maine, in terms of its citizenry, the seventh-oldest state in the nation, as reported in the 2000 census.

As a born-and-bred Mainer who lived and worked for decades “away” before coming home to do the same line of work, I see no signs that the demographic trend toward more and more “seniors” for Maine is going to change. Our natural environment, wealth of living space, slower-paced lifestyle and values rooted in the deep soil of New England exert too powerful an attraction.

While many Mainers live out their lives where they were born—never moving away, never wanting to—others of us leave the state in our early twenties for schooling and career opportunities that carry us far from home. Often, if the distance isn’t all that far in miles, it can still be far away in lifestyle. In different, faster, often more high-powered environments, we hold jobs, raise families and make friends. Good friends. Yet the desire to some day return to Maine seldom fades.

Memories—some of them muscle-deep—beckon, surprising us with their freshness. The rhythm of a four-season year, with autumn foliage and winter snow. The sounds and smells of fall afternoons on a football field, playing out one

of the ancient rivalries between high schools from Bangor to Portland. Mental pictures of marching bands, afternoons on an ocean beach, parties at a lakefront cottage return like hauntings. So, too, does a harsher sense of remembering shoe factories and textile mills, hardscrabble farms and fading retail stores. All are part of our Maine heritage—and it is a compelling one.

We are part and parcel of this northern New England place at the upper eastern corner of our country. And it's no surprise that it calls us home so powerfully.

Still, we returning Mainers—and those who never left in the first place—are by no means alone. More and more, we are being joined by others whom I call Mainers by adoption.

Some come to rekindle family roots. Others come to put down new ones.

Some come to embrace the work of a saltwater farm that's been in their family for years. "I want to wear out, not rust out," you'll hear them say.

Others winterize cottages with roomy but rickety porches that have meant summer happiness to them since they were water-winged toddlers.

Still others are drawn to lakes and towns nestled in the state's western mountains—"God's Country," my father always called it. Or they choose quiet coves, out-of-the-way niches from Camden to Corea. And yet more shop carefully for just the right condo, tailor-made for two with state-of-the-art appliances and guaranteed free forever from mowing and plowing chores that grow bone-weary with age.

So many people—so many different people. Look at them, listen to them, and ask yourself whether any common thread runs through all these lives.

I believe the answer is "yes." And I believe it can be found in a luminous Shaker hymn:

'Tis the gift to be simple,
'tis the gift to be free.

'Tis the gift to come down
where you ought to be.

Those words, with their evocation of Maine's own Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in New Gloucester, speak a wealth of wisdom. Simplicity, freedom and a sense of belonging sum up what's best about living and retiring in Maine.

Not so long ago, the very idea of living into an entire stage of life called "retirement" would have left our grandparents flabbergasted. Earlier generations, living life close to the bone, worked until they dropped, then pulled up a chair in the kitchen to watch new generations of life go on around them. Social Security, the massive funding that underwrites much of modern retirement, didn't yet exist. Neither did a broad array of private pensions.

Even those with wealth enough to afford retirement saw no need to give up achievements they'd spent lifetimes accruing. Power to control was sweet and they kept it with them—if they could arrange it—all the way to their graves.

As for women? Retire from what? Nobody thought to ask.

Strange, isn't it, how such scenarios sound like ancient history? Retirement has become such a normal part of American life that it's difficult now to imagine life without it.

Carefully and completely, Maine is weaving the new phenomenon of retirement as a full stage of life into its multi-hued fabric. Voting reflects it directly. So



Nancy Grape of South Freeport is a retired editorial writer for the *Portland Press Herald* and *Maine Sunday Telegram*. She comments on state and national affairs in a weekly column for the *Telegram*.

do shopping malls, churches, medical care, movie theaters, transportation, recreation areas and expectations for our schools.

Like the Shakers of an earlier era, retired people are learning that it is indeed a gift to be simple, a gift to be free when you come down in Maine, where you ought to be.

Here is where older lives move into a fresh new chapter. The depth of winter may drive "snowbirds" to warmer states for a few months. But the earthy smells and sounds of spring will bring them home.

You can count on it. 🐞