

There's Long History of Cleverness in the State of Maine

by
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On top of Munjoy Hill in Portland, Maine, there's a signal tower that is the last one of its kind on the east coast. How and why it came to be built there is an interesting story and a good example of the Yankee ingenuity and entrepreneurship that made the state of Maine what it is today.

Back in 1807, long before there were cell phones, there was Lemuel Moody, a sea-captain-turned-entrepreneur who ordered the construction of an 86-foot-tall octagonal tower to serve as a communication station for the bustling Portland harbor.

The early 1800's were boom times for Maine, and it was common for the harbor to be filled with as many as 50 ships carrying raw materials for the Mid-Atlantic States. Moody observed the chaos and convinced local



businessmen that they needed a more efficient harbor. The best way to achieve it, he said, was to know in advance which ships were arriving, and what goods they were carrying. A hilltop observatory was sorely needed, he urged.

Moody raised \$5,000 by selling shares in the proposed building then spent the next four months erecting the imposing structure in the middle of a former cow pasture. He chose an octagon shape, which he had first seen in Europe during a stint in the Merchant Marine, because he knew the wind would curl around the sides, lessening its assault on the structure.

He also faced the reality that the hilltop site was solid ledge rock and made the decision to float the tower on the surface, using rubble stones as ballast to anchor it. He had no blueprint for the building, and no machinery to prepare and set the 65-foot corner posts honed from timbers floated downriver from inland Maine. He paid the men who worked for him \$2.00 a day, the boys 50 cents.

Once the tower was finished, Moody charged local mill and factory owners an



annual fee for his reporting services. Peering through the powerful telescope at the top of the tower, Moody could see ships approaching from 50 miles away. After many years at sea, he was skillful at identifying the

ships by their shape, and he could predict when each would arrive in port and what it carried in its hold.

He would then raise the corresponding series of signal flags and the ship's house flag if it was locally owned, to marshal the town workers. If the flag signaled "leather from Argentina" for example, the owner of the shoe mill would quickly hire a crew of stevedores to unload the ship and then fire up his factory to be ready when the cargo arrived at his door.

Lem Moody was not the only entrepreneur at work in Maine's early days. A still-popular food staple, B&M Baked Beans, is produced in Portland by a process that dates back to the days of the Pilgrims.

Because no work or laborious cooking was allowed during the Sabbath, housewives had no choice but to prepare food on Saturday that could last through Sunday. A Saturday night "bean supper" was often followed by a Sunday bean breakfast---and a Sunday bean lunch!

The drudgery of a hot summer kitchen eventually sent housewives to the local baker with their favorite bean recipe in a clay pot, ready for baking at slow temperatures for several hours. For a fee, the baker took in several pots from neighbors, and local grocers started stocking the beans for purchase. To this day, B&M bakes the beans in pots all day long in brick ovens, and the aroma wafts across the city.

Portland's working waterfront might seem an unlikely place to find good old Yankee ingenuity, but when you catch a whiff of lobster stew simmering in the 40-gallon vats at Morrison's Maine Course, you know they're on to something good.

Don Morrison, co-founder of the company explains that he uses only fresh, off-the-boat lobster for the stew he concocts using his father's hand-me-down recipe. The succulent dish is hand-crafted in small batches using a few simple

ingredients: Maine lobster meat, cream, churned butter and “just a hint of Maine sea salt.”

Morrison does not sell direct, but his luscious lobster stew and a rich creamy clam chowder inspired by his great-grandfather’s recipe are available through the



Browne Trading Company catalog http://www.brownetrading.com/new_morrison.html, a neighboring business on Merrill’s Wharf in Old Portland.

Just up the coast in Bath on the shores of the Kennebec River, ship building has a very long history. Today, Mainers at the Bath Iron Works build guided missile destroyers, but back in 1888, the first BWI-built vessel was a passenger ship named Cottage City.

In 1909 at the Percy & Small Shipyard in Bath, the six-masted schooner “Wyoming”, at 329’ the longest ship with an all wood keel and hull ever built, was

launched to great acclaim. It was a workhorse delivering coal from West Virginia to New York City, Boston, Portland and Halifax until 1924 when the ship sank in a storm off Cape Cod with all crew onboard.



Today, the siren-call of boat building is heard loud and clear at the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath, where every Friday afternoon eighth graders from a South Bristol middle school who have maintained perfect attendance learn what it takes to make a boat float. During the coveted half-day away from school, they huddle side-by-side with seasoned volunteers who teach them enough that by June they have proudly launched their own eight-foot skiff.

Many years ago, I visited the L.L. Bean Store (<http://www.llbean.com/>) in Freeport, Maine. It was an unassuming place back then, about the size of a modern-day Kwik-Trip and probably not much changed from the day in 1917 when Leon Leonwood Bean opened the doors.

On a recent visit, I was stunned to see that the flagship store (there are several retail and factory stores on the east coast) was now a dazzling glass edifice the size of a city block and open 24 hours a day.

Had I wanted to try out a new sport using their equipment, for just \$12 I could have boarded their shuttle to participate in a 1½ to 2½ hour "Walk-On Adventure" in fly-fishing, kayaking, or clay shooting, taught by instructors from the L. L. Bean Discovery Schools, an operation founded 25 years ago to teach customers how to get the most out of their equipment purchases.

Chances are by the end of the session, I would have owned a new fly rod, all the clothes to look the part, a sleek new kayak, and whatever it takes to become skilled at clay shooting.

Ah yes, Yankee ingenuity.

Photos by Betty Stark; tower photo courtesy of Portland CVB

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