



# UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green

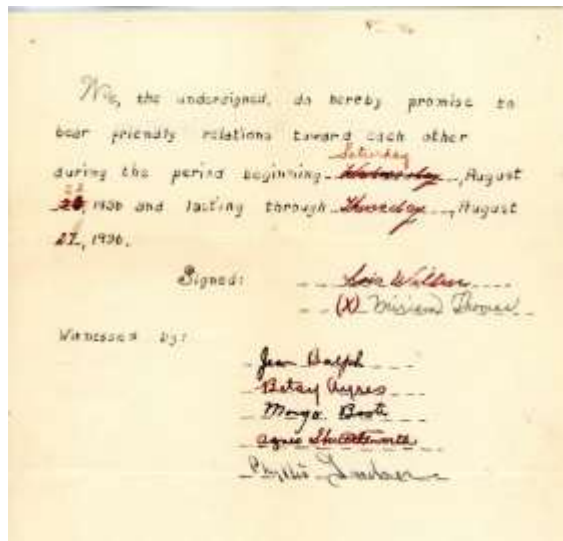


## Happy Campers

by Meg Costello

Miriam Thomas had a wicked sense of humor, and she got along with almost everyone she met at North Falmouth's Camp Cowasset. *Almost*. The exception was Lois Wilbur. Unfortunately, the two girls couldn't avoid each other. They were both assigned to cabin 7, living in close quarters with five other girls. They finally settled

their difference like ladies, by signing a contract. It read:



*We, the undersigned, do hereby promise to bear friendly relations toward each other during the period beginning ~~Saturday~~ Saturday, August 22, 1936 and lasting through ~~Thursday~~ Thursday, August 27, 1936.*

The document was titled "Declaration of Truce," and was duly witnessed by five fellow campers. It gives no clue about why the girls were at odds.

Top: Miriam (center) with "my campers," c1940, while she was working as a counselor at the camp.

Above Left: Declaration of Truce, 1936

Above Right: Lois Wilbur, on left, with another camper.

Miriam was not exactly a typical Camp Cowasset girl.<sup>ii</sup> She was eighteen, right at the upper age limit. She had never attended Cowasset before, while many fellow campers had been coming every year since the age of five. She hadn't even arrived until partway through the 1936 season. Her social position was not quite on a level with the other girls'. They were, mostly, the daughters of upper middle-class families from around New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the Midwest. By contrast, Miriam's widowed mother worked as



**Far Left: Miss Bea, 1936.**

**Left: Miriam Thomas, at the mast, facing the camera, 1936.**

**Below: From a promotional brochure.**

an assistant clerk for the city of Quincy. Her father, a lawyer, had died of Hodgkin's disease when she was three years old. When Miriam graduated from North Quincy High, she knew she was going to be responsible for supporting herself. Luckily, she seemed to relish that prospect. She already had plans for a career in education. Camp Cowasset was a stepping stone on the path toward her goal.

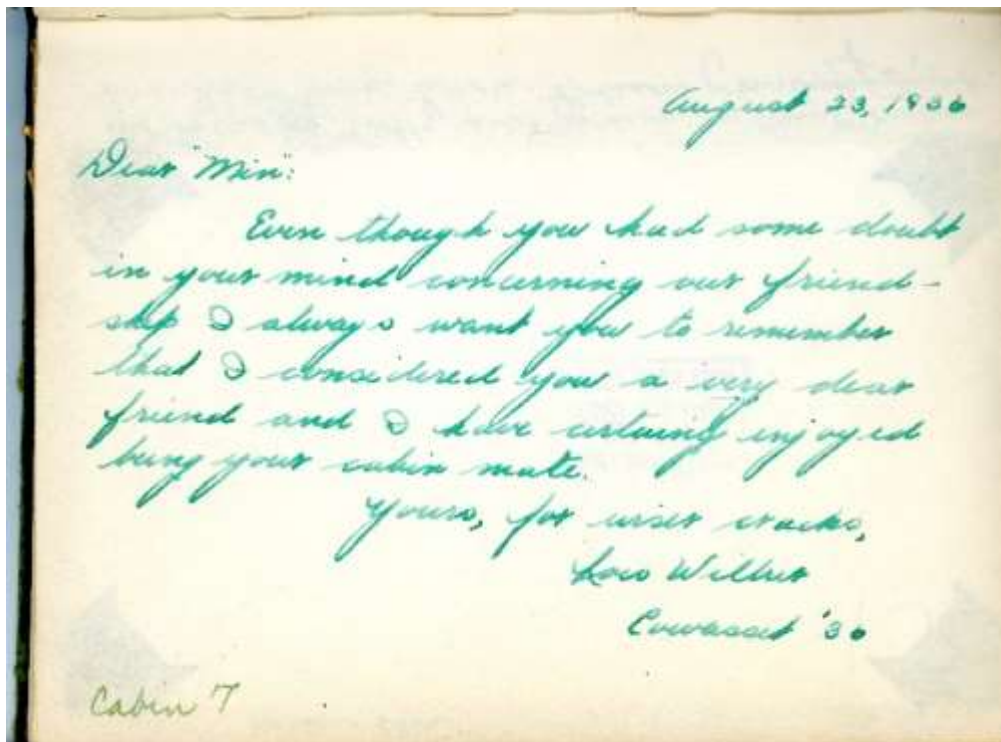
Miriam made a favorable impression on the camp's director, Beatrice Hunter. "Miss Bea" had reigned supreme at Cowasset since

1915. She owned the camp and the land it sat on—100 unspoiled acres at Wild Harbor. It was her vision that had established the camp as a refuge where girls could "develop a firm physical foundation to meet the demands of present day life." Sailing, swimming, riding, and hiking were the main activities, balanced by dramatics, dance, music, and crafts. Miss Bea made sure to hire the best staff: nutritionists and cooks from Mount Holyoke College, a riding instructor from the U.S. Army, drama teachers from the New York theater scene. Her promotional brochures enticed parents and daughters with descriptions of protective pine trees, smooth white beaches, and the freshening breezes of Buzzards Bay. "On warm, sunny days . . . the boats seem to sail themselves!"<sup>iii</sup>

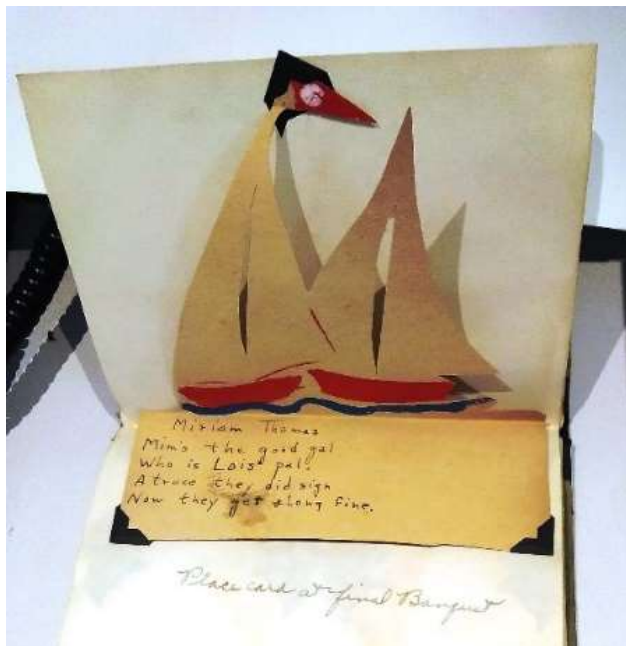
With a shrewd eye for everything that went on in her camp, Miss Bea noted that (Lois Wilbur aside) Miriam was a hit with the Cowasset community. Campers and staff alike praised her as a "steadying influence," calm, resourceful, always ready with a "merry remark." Miriam's career ambitions no doubt struck a chord of sympathy with Miss Bea, who was herself a graduate of Framingham State and Columbia Teachers College. She hired Miriam to return to Camp Cowasset as a counselor. From 1938-1944, Miriam studied for a bachelor's degree at Bridgewater State, then a master's at Boston University, and spent her summers working at Camp Cowasset. Her career, once launched, was very successful. She was a teacher and guidance counselor in various New England towns, before settling in Canterbury, New Hampshire and serving as principal of its elementary school. She also traveled extensively, married a man named Robert Hill, and was a devoted supporter of Canterbury's Shaker Village.<sup>iv</sup>







Miriam cherished all her memories of Camp Cowasset—even the memory of her nemesis, Lois Wilbur. Was Lois really such a bad egg after all? Photos of her show a serious girl with knitted brows, looking older than a carefree camper should. She wrote a farewell message in Miriam’s album in a tightly controlled hand, where the pronoun “I” puffs out like a wind-filled sail straining leftwards, against the decidedly right-leaning slant of the rest of her words.<sup>v</sup>



August 23, 1936

Dear “Min”:

Even though you had some doubt in your mind concerning our friendship I always want you to remember that I considered you a very dear friend and I have certainly enjoyed being your cabin mate.

Yours, for wise cracks,

Lois Wilbur  
Cowasset '36  
Cabin 7

**Top: Lois’s farewell note.**

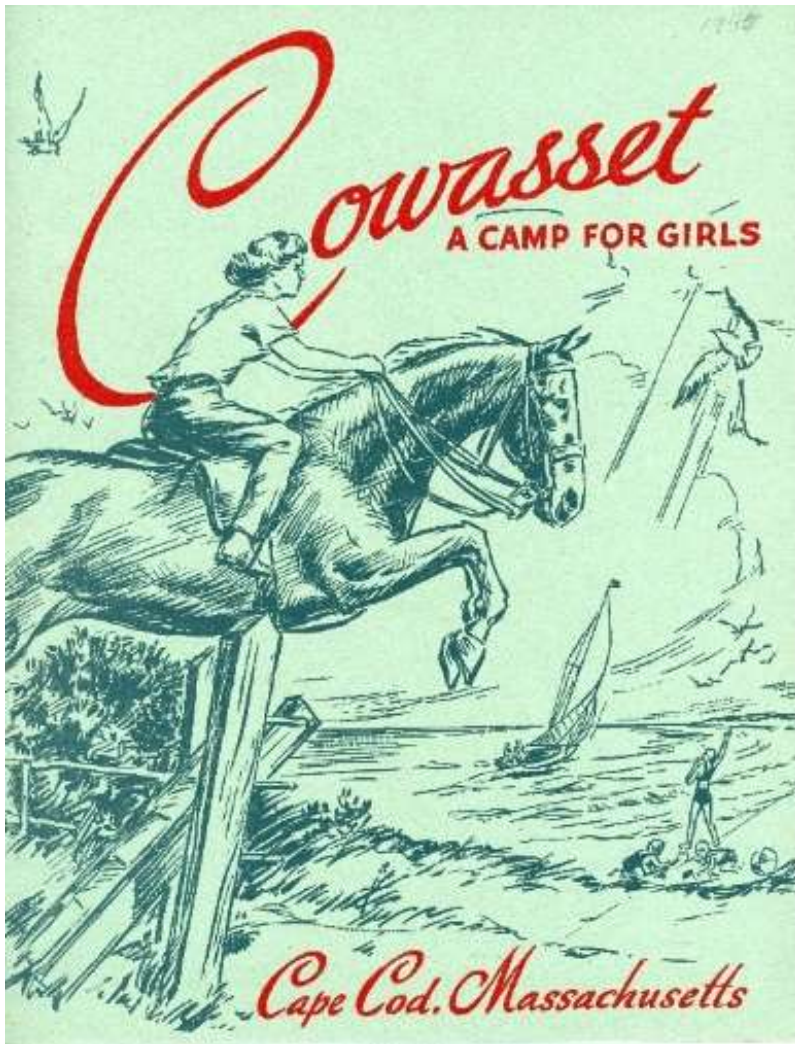
**Above Left: Place card from final dinner, 1936, proving reconciliation between Miriam and Lois.**

**Above Right: Paper doll of Miss Bea, found in Miriam’s album.**

Miriam kept this note and the “declaration of truce,” along with all her other camp memorabilia, for the rest of her life.

Meanwhile, Miss Bea carried on with the camp until her retirement in 1965. The new owners

merged Cowasset with Camp Namequoit in Orleans, and sold the North Falmouth land to a developer. The former camp’s 108 acres were then re-sold at an auction held on a January day in 1970, before a crowd of 225 people crammed into Megansett’s Grange Hall. Developer Redmond J. Condon placed the winning bid of \$780,000 for the tract, which was now being called “Wild Harbour Estates.” The Enterprise noted, “It is unlikely that there was ever a larger public sale of property on Cape Cod.”<sup>vi</sup> Condon, a resident of Belvidere Road, had already built houses on Fox Lane in West Falmouth and several more in Great Harbor. He began construction on the Wild Harbour development immediately.



**Above Left: Promotional brochure, 1945.**

**Above Right: Unknown camper. From a promotional brochure.**



An ad for the new homes ran in the *Enterprise* in May of 1971.<sup>vii</sup> “There’s Nothing Like It Left,” trumpeted the headline. Unspoiled Cape Cod shoreline was now “almost non-existent . . . Like anything that is scarce, Wild Harbour will merit and get its price . . . it will be a community of people who know what they want out of life, and can afford to pay for it. . . . We think this is as it should be.”

Beatrice Hunter knew what she wanted out of life, and she went ahead and did it. She gave girls the skills and resources to navigate their uncharted futures. At Camp Cowasset, hundreds of girls gained

confidence in themselves. They also learned how to get along with all kinds of personalities, even the ones that could drive you right up the wall. Many considered these achievements to be priceless.<sup>viii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> From Miriam Thomas’s Camp Cowasset album, 1936, in the Museums’ archives.

<sup>ii</sup> Family background on Miriam was found in the U.S. Census and other vital records accessed at FamilySearch.org. Descriptions of her character come from remarks left by fellow campers in her album.

<sup>iii</sup> Camp Cowasset promotional brochure, undated, in the Museums’ archives.

<sup>iv</sup> Miriam’s career is summarized in her obituary, published in the *Concord Monitor*, January 9, 2016.

<sup>v</sup> From Miriam Thomas’s Camp Cowasset album, 1936.

<sup>vi</sup> *Falmouth Enterprise*, January 20, 1970, p. 1

<sup>vii</sup> *Falmouth Enterprise*, May 21, 1971, page 5A.

<sup>viii</sup> Information on Beatrice Hunter and Camp Cowasset not otherwise cited comes from the Camp Cowasset collection at the archives of Museums on the Green.