Summers at the Eyrie

Although their Mount Desert summer home was palatial in scale, the Rockefellers actually came to Seal Harbor each year to enjoy the simple life. By Ellen MacDonald Ward.

Laurance, Babs, John III, Abby, David, Winthrop, John, and Nelson.

IN the early 1900s, the summer home of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., rose from a high granite bluff on the southeast corner of Mount Desert Island. The world, quite literally, lay at its feet. Towering above a broad brick terrace, the rambling, half-timbered, Tudor-style house known as the Eyrie looked out over Seal Harbor, to Sutton Island and the Cranberries and the sea beyond. Behind the hundred-room house, a thousand-acre estate — densely wooded, private, impenetrable — spread all the way to Jordan Pond. Today the estate remains in the Rockefeller family, if anything more secluded, more wooded, more understated. The long herringboned-brick terrace still commands its extraordinary view of woods, water, and islands. But the huge, richly furnished house is gone. A relic from a vanished way of life, it had become, by the early 1960s, too large to be comfortable, too expensive to maintain, and it was razed. Today the natural ledges which once formed the house's foundation appear rough and untouched; about them, mature spruce brace their lofty limbs against ocean gusts as though they had stood there always. In fact, were it not for the rare family photographs on these pages, it would be hard to believe that the Eyrie ever existed.

In 1910, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 36, made two decisions that would affect the rest of his life. An only son who had been trained his whole life to take over the billion-dollar family business, the deeply religious, shy, and somber magnate decided that year to give up his active role in his father's oil and investment empire and instead become a full-time philanthropist. He would spend the rest of his life giving away millions.

The other decision that he and his wife, Abby, made that year was to buy a summerhouse in Seal Harbor.

None of the Oriental art and antiques that John and Abby collected and displayed in their summerhouse could rival the ocean views from the Eyrie (opposite, top). In contrast to the imposing facade, the family rooms inside, such as the living room (top) and dining room (above), were hardly baronial. The premium here was on comfort. The beloved house outlived its day, however, and rather than maintain it as an expensive memorial to their parents, the children had it razed in the sixties shortly after these pictures were made.

WHY would a billionaire vacation in a tiny Maine village when he could have gone anywhere in the world? The place he called home on New York's Fifty-fourth Street was a nine-story tower, with whole floors given over to the living quarters of his six children and vast staff, a building so immense that, as the story goes, Rockefeller once set a pot of violets out on a window ledge, never to find either the window or the violets again. Weekends were spent at his father's 3,500-acre country estate in nearby Pocantico, with its vast formal gardens, illuminated fountains, and fleet of electric cars.

In his later years, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., would travel the world, construct and fill whole museums, restore Colonial Williamsburg and Versailles, and during the worst of the Depression, build the immense Rockefeller Center. Yet a hint as to what attracted him to Maine is to be found in a comment he made while visiting the tar-papered construction-site office of one of his employees in Seal Harbor. "I wish I could take this view with me to New York," Rockefeller mused. "It would be nice to see it from *my* office."

A few miles north of low-key Seal Harbor was the far more fashionable watering hole of Bar Harbor. The most extravagant gatherings staged there could easily have been upstaged by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. But that was not why he brought his family to Seal Harbor every summer. To him, an ideal vacation day started off with chopping wood, riding horseback, or leading his youngsters off on a six- or seven-mile hike in the woods. Afternoons he liked taking a carriage ride or a stroll with his dearest companion, his wife, Abby, stopping in at Jordan Pond House for tea.

That is not to say that all of Rockefeller's pleasures on Mount Desert Island were simple ones. John had first come to the island as a college student; in 1908 his and Abby's third child, Nelson, was born in Bar Harbor because her doctor summered there. Two years later the couple bought the sixty-five-room Eyrie for $26,000. Architect Duncan Candler helped them renovate and add on, bringing the number of rooms to a hundred.

EVER since we have made the house over, I have wondered what to do with my little office room," Abby wrote to her sister, Lucy. "I have just finished hanging my set of fourteen Utomara prints there and . . . it occurs to me that I could make this room very attractive if you would bring me back some things from Korea." Buddhist statuary, richly shaded Chinese rugs, and exquisite Japanese prints — such objects, often priceless, gathered from around the world, came together at the Eyrie in a warm and friendly fashion, rather than in any strict and formal arrangement. Just off the front hall, as in their other houses, were John and Abby's private studies. John's was on the left, where he handed out the children's weekly allowances and punishments and where the family gathered for morning prayers. What Abby termed her "little office room" was on the right, according to one biographer, "where the children could find milk and cookies at teatime and a sympathetic ear." "The Eyrie was a comfortable and friendly house," their youngest son, David, now eighty-one and for-

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mer chief executive of Chase Manhattan Bank, recalls. "Even though there were many costly things in it, as a child I didn't feel constantly in danger of breaking things." There was also a ballroom; despite his reticence, John Rockefeller loved to dance and regularly arranged tea dances for his only daughter, Babs, and all her friends.

Amid the acreage which John proceeded to buy up around the Eyrie, the estate also came to include the Playhouse, which still stands today, its Gothic exterior charmingly disguising a complete gentleman's sports club, including bowling alley, squash court, a hallway lined with exquisitely carved wooden lockers, and, outside, clay tennis courts. The Resthouse, which also still exists, is a cozy five-room hideaway where, away from their children and many guests, John and Abby enjoyed quiet suppers of blueberries and bread-and-butter. Elsewhere on the grounds Abby Rockefeller and renowned landscape architect Beatrix Farrand designed one of the world's most stunning gardens, set with Chinese statuary and still beautifully maintained in the spirit of the original. All of these sites were so hidden amid the dense forest and its meandering network of one-lane roads and quiet paths that newly hired groundskeepers frequently got lost.

THOSE who visited the estate expecting to find extravagance and glamour must surely have been shocked, for John and Abby insisted on leading very down-to-earth lives, especially in Seal Harbor. "There is no question in my mind but that I am very much a New Englander and won't get over it," the Rhode-Island-born Abby Aldrich Rockefeller once declared. Even married to a Rockefeller, Abby held tight to her good humor, amused rather than irritated when one elderly visitor called her "Mrs. Roosevelt." John and Abby's complicated but absolute devotion to one another has been brilliantly documented in Bernice Kert's recent book, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller: The Woman in the Family* (Random House, 1993), and as their daughter-in-law, Peggy, later observed, "he never seemed to be entirely comfortable without her." Nor did they ever lose their pleasure in a rare quiet day together, such as the one they spent at the Eyrie on October 9, 1926. "It will amuse you to hear what we did," Abby wrote to twelve-year-old David. After rearranging the boathouse's furniture, she and John had made hot chocolate and read by the fire. "It was pouring when we started back to the house," Abby continued, "and so dark I had to hold on to Papa and

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he had to feel his way back with his feet." Thus the Rockefellers celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

Home, in the summer, meant the Eyrie. David Rockefeller still remembers the excitement of the trip up from New York. "We always celebrated my grandfather's birthday on July 8 at Pocantico and we would make the trip to Maine after that," he recalls. "We would get on the Bar Harbor Express in New York about 5:30 in the afternoon. We rode in Pullman cars, of course, and Mother and Father would come and the children and the nurses and various other people. We had a whole household with us, a huge group with steamer trunks and all. It was a big undertaking, not something you undertook every day. And I remember in those days it was the thing to bring Walker Gordon fresh milk in iced boxes for the children because they didn't trust the milk they might find on the train.

"We would go to the dining car for dinner," Rockefeller says, "and sleep on the train and then have breakfast on the train the next morning before ending up in Hancock. Then we would get on the ferry — the *J.T. Morse* or the *Norumbega* — and we would have lunch on board, because it was midafternoon before we arrived in Seal Harbor. In all, it was almost a twenty-four-hour trip. Nowadays, of course, we fly up from Westchester Airport in fifty-two minutes."

BY 1915, when David was born, the family already included four boys and a girl. Early on, the Rockefeller children realized they were not like other wealthy offspring. Some rich young misses might spend their days in flouncy dresses riding pampered ponies; John and Abby's oldest child and only daughter, Babs, planted potatoes, knitted dishtowels, and disdained schoolmates who wrangled over who owned the most expensive jewelry. Two of the Rockefeller boys built a pioneer cabin in the woods at Seal Harbor, complete with an outdoor cooking fireplace, while the youngest collected bugs with such passion that his governess wrote to his mother, "There won't be a bug left on the island when David finishes." (He went on to study with a foremost entomologist.) In the Playhouse's kitchen, the children sometimes prepared meals for the staff and their parents, handling everything from ordering the groceries to washing dishes afterwards. This lesson in practicality would stand them in good stead. Years later, crewing aboard a schooner off Labrador, Nelson and Laurance took charge of the galley cookstove when the cook got sick, and, according to a 1950 biography of Abby Rockefeller by Mary Ellen Chase, their chow proved so popular that they were chosen to keep on dishing it up even after the cook recovered. Nor was the use of needle and thread neglected; their father, after all, had prepared for Brown University by hemming himself some towels. Aboard his campaign plane during his 1968 presidential bid, Nelson attended to some emergency pants-mending, no doubt keenly aware of the stir he was causing among both his staff and the press.

"Money is wonderful to have when people do good things with it," noted Abby in a letter to a young son. "I am happy to know that you were generous with the money I gave you and that you made other people happy with it." Their playmates at Seal Harbor included the children of Edsel Ford

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and of other such luminaries as Harvard president Charles Eliot, yet money and the things that it could buy were not a major part of the young Rockefellers' rough-and-tumble summers. The story, probably apocryphal, is told how a friend, accompanying them aboard their thirty-six-foot sloop *Jack Tar*, inquired as to why the Rockefellers did not own a more stylish yacht like those in Bar Harbor. He was firmly told, "Who do you think we are, the Vanderbilts?" Today *Jack Tar* is still in the family; David Rockefeller, a self-described "ardent sailor," took the rebuilt, eighty-year-old sloop out to nearby Bartlett Island just last summer. "As boys we also had an A-boat," he remembers, "which my brothers Nelson and John and, to some extent, Laurance, used to race in Northeast Harbor."

DESPITE the easy life the children enjoyed at the Eyrie, summer vacation did not mean twenty-four hours a day of leisure for their parents. For Abby, who managed the staff herself, running the Eyrie was a full-time job. David Rockefeller recalls that in the staff dining room alone, some twenty or more servants ate three times a day. And hardly a meal went by without

guests at the family's dining table. The fond and involved mother who wrote to one child, away at school, that "I'm terribly sorry over the death of your rabbit. Do you suppose she could have died from eating your shoe-strings?" and to another, "I can hardly wait to have you come home, for we can have such great fun together studying the birds and insects," was always encouraging her brood to invite their friends over for any meal. She was equally well known for dreaming up delightful rainy-day games for the children. Once the young Rockefellers and their Seal Harbor friends voted on which, of all the mothers, they would choose as their own, and Mrs. Rockefeller emerged the clear favorite.

She was also a hit with more than one small visitor. Abby, whose early enthusiasm for modern art led her to play a crucial, if discreet, role in the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, also invited museum directors and artists to the Eyrie. In 1929 she commissioned Maine artist Marguerite Zorach (DOWN EAST, August, 1987) to create a tapestry portraying four generations of Rockefellers, and she invited Zorach up to Seal Harbor for a few days, accompanied by her nine-year-old daughter, Dahlov. Today a well-known artist herself, Dahlov Ipcar still recalls the magnificence of the huge house and its servants in their plum-colored uniforms. "Mrs. Rockefeller was very gracious and very friendly to me," she recalls. "She even had her kitchen staff make up a batch of my favorite ice cream, maple walnut."

If Abby Rockefeller was the fun-loving parent, John's influence on his family was more solemn, if no less profound. As his granddaughter, Ann Rockefeller Roberts, described in her recent book, *Mr. Rockefeller's Roads*, his involvement in conservation nationwide began on Mount Desert Island, where he not only helped to create Acadia National Park, but also to design and build its nearly sixty miles of carriage roads. The work also gave him a chance to let down his guard a little. "His ease, his professional knowledge, and his fair treatment of the [workers] gained him a level of acceptance among the year-round residents that was very unusual for summer folk," his granddaughter notes. "When he showed up in his tweeds and work boots he was 'Mr. Junior' and could be approached directly."

AS the six young Rockefellers grew up, college, marriage, and careers more and more kept them away from Seal Harbor. During World War II, gas rationing limited even John and Abby's trips north. Finally, in 1944, they returned to the Eyrie.

"I feel rather conscious of there being so many empty rooms," Abby noted in a letter that summer. "I am threatening to push part of it off a cliff." Nevertheless, she was glad to be back. "I think I am never really happy unless I am near water," Abby wrote that spring. "And I am convinced there is no air in the world like the air of Maine. The ducks are again on Long Pond, the horses kick up their heels in Joe's meadow; the sunrises and the sunsets over sea and hills seem lovelier than they have ever been. Every day is a gift, and I hate to see each go."

There were not many more days left to Abby; in 1948 she died suddenly in New York. Over the next few years, John continued working with Abby's friend and landscape designer Beatrix Farrand to maintain the magnificent garden at the Eyrie, the bereft widower once writing to Farrand, herself a widow, "We are fellow travellers

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along a lonely road." After John's death in 1960, David Rockefeller commissioned well-known photographer Ezra Stoller to photograph his parents' unusual Seal Harbor retreat. Three years later the Eyrie, too, was gone. "Although Father had the use of the furnishings at the Eyrie during his lifetime, they were owned by Mother and her will divided them up among the six children," David says. "Even if the Eyrie had been furnished, it would have been difficult to manage. But no member of the family wanted to own such a huge, empty house and so the best thing seemed to be to tear it down."

Today, besides the terrace, yet one other vestige of the Eyrie remains: the simple granite steps that once led up to the great house. Thirty-three years ago, when it was torn down, David Rockefeller had the steps trucked across town to his own, much smaller summer place, which he shared with his wife, Peggy, until her death earlier this year. Removed from the Eyrie by both distance and years, the ancient, worn treads still somehow provide a kind of a touchstone to the long-ago time when six lively but well-behaved children clambered up them to their beloved house in Maine. In those treads is also memorialized the warm spirit of welcome that was the essence of John and Abby Rockefeller's now-vanished Seal Harbor summer home. □