

Gazette Profile: **My Good Neighbor, Donny Cluff** *by Rob Wood*



How many people can claim to have lived in the same house for their entire life—of over 75 years? Donald L. Cluff—Donny—wins that award. And he has been my good neighbor for only the last 40.

Donny has always worked within five miles of his home. A private man, he has supported his neighbors when needed and has never been a burden to anyone.

Donny's grandparents Hatty Henderson Cluff and Edward D. Cluff were the first to put down roots in North Yarmouth. They had started married life in a small house on Maplewood Avenue in South Portland in 1891. Edward was employed as a machinist. In 1921 they moved to North Yarmouth, to the last house on what was to become Cluff Road, on land adjacent to the Grand Trunk Railroad line. And for the next 100 years, four generations of Cluffs would live in this small home.



A plane flew over in June, 1996 and a photographer snapped this photo of the Cluff's house.



Donny's grandparents Hattie and Edward Cluff, uncle Bert (left) and father, Arthur Cluff in a photo taken before their move to what would become Cluff Road.

When did Donny's road officially become Cluff Road? I am still trying to find out!



Donny's father Arthur: Left, with shovel in 1965, working with North Yarmouth's road crew on The Lane. Frank Parker is on the tractor; Hermie Smith at right. Above, a quiet moment in 1974.

Arthur A. Cluff, Donny's father, was sixteen when the family moved to North Yarmouth. Before moving to town, he had worked for the Grand Trunk at Rigby Yard in South Portland as a telegraph delivery person, using a bicycle. Later he went to work on the North Yarmouth road crew, supervised by Herman Smith.

When a maintenance position opened on the Yarmouth to Danville Junction section of the Grand Trunk Railroad, he grabbed it. For years, Arthur supervised a three-man crew that included Irving Richards—his Cluff Road neighbor. Together they kept the rail bed and rails solid for scores of trains that travelled through every day. Arthur died in 1979.

Donny's mother Madeline Mae Williams was born in Gilead, Maine in 1910 and moved to Yarmouth in her teenage years. She met Donny's father as he worked on the Grand Trunk switching yard in Yarmouth. Arthur and Madeline were married in 1928 at the old Methodist church, now gone, at the "v" of West Pownal and Lawrence Roads. The young couple lived with the elder Cluffs for the remainder of the latter's lives. The small four bedroom, one bathroom house would be full for the next 70 years.

Donny was the fifth of six children: Dot, Gerald, Eva, Gene, Donny, and Nancy. But these were not the only children who lived at the end of the road. Madeline loved caring for any child under the age of three. Over the years she cared for 30-35 foster children. At one point there were thirteen people living in four small bedrooms. Madeline also cared for neighborhood infants, returning them each evening smelling of warmth and Madeline's Jean Naté perfume.

Donny was born in 1943. He remembers being three years old and his grandfather Edward smoking a pipe and rocking him in the front room.

Donny attended elementary school for two years at Dunn's Corner school. His first teacher was Marion Dunn. His older siblings went to the Hicks School at the corner of North Road and New Gloucester Road, Route 231. He then switched to the brand-new Memorial School for six years. Shirley Fountain was his teacher. Mrs.



Donny Cluff, circled, in 1958. His teacher Shirley Fountain is in the middle of the last row.

Donny, at left (with pipe), sorting bricks at Royal River Brickyard as they are prepared for shipping. From *Historic Preservation Magazine*, March/April 1981.



Fountain gave him his first book—*Lost on a Mountain in Maine*—and Donny has been reading ever since.

For high school he traveled to Yarmouth with his father on the railroad’s “putt-putt truck” (handcar) and attended Yarmouth High School. He would walk home.

Donny started working at a young age. During high school he labored at Zeegers truck garden, located on Route 115 where Toots is today. He also worked in woodlots and blueberry fields. Every year he would cut at least five cords of poplar firewood with a bucksaw for his neighbor Irving Richard and Irving’s sister Mildred Morse. During his senior year, he was cutting to earn money to buy his graduation clothes. As graduation approached, he had not finished and Irving was withholding his earnings. Finally Mildred stepped in and insisted on early payment. All the neighbors agreed that Irving was very tight with his money.

Right out of high school, Donny started his first full time job that lasted 26 years—at Royal River Brick Yard on Mill Road. The yard did up to five firings a year. The first few years Donny was paid by the piece except during the firing. The pay was 50 cents per thousand bricks. Later he was paid minimum wage.

Donny’s job was to handle the bricks after they had been mixed in the diesel pug mill and dried in brick molds. Another crew would pile the bricks to form a long kiln under a tall shed roof. The pile had tunnels through the bottom where up to 100 cords of slab wood would be burned for six days straight. The slabs were pine, as any hard wood would burn too hot. Once the pile cooled, the bricks would exhibit various shades of red depending how close they were to the fire pit. Royal River Brick Yard’s last firing in 1985 produced bricks that were bought by the

Portland Museum of Art. Beautiful North Yarmouth bricks cover the façade to this day.

When Donny left the brick yard in 1985, he secured a maintenance position at the Pineland State Hospital until it closed in 1992. As always, he took great pride in his work and especially liked buffing the acres of linoleum floors.

In 1994 Donny signed on to work at Fat Andy’s, a lumberyard on Walnut Hill Road. Fat Andy’s was just beginning to grow into an established provider of finished lumber for cabinets and furniture. Donny stacked and moved piles of local and exotic wood. During this time he kept his nickname of “Popeye”—for his frequent pipe smoking habit—that he had earned years earlier at the brickyard.

In 2018 Donny finally retired from paid employment at Fat Andy’s. But that is not to say he has stopped working. Last summer Donny was loading wood into a cardiologist’s pickup truck during a hot spell when he experienced a medical shock. North Yarmouth Fire Rescue responded quickly and he is very thankful for their life saving actions.

He has since admitted that as he has aged, he has learned how to pace himself.

This season he has slowly worked through twenty cords of tree - length hardwood. After cutting the wood into 18” pieces he splits each piece by hand with a wooden handled maul. He is certainly still working.

Donny will be the last person buried in Cluff Road’s Bowie Cemetery next to his grandmother Hattie and near his mother, father, and two siblings. His headstone is ready—although the engraver mistakenly carved 1945 as his birth date.

