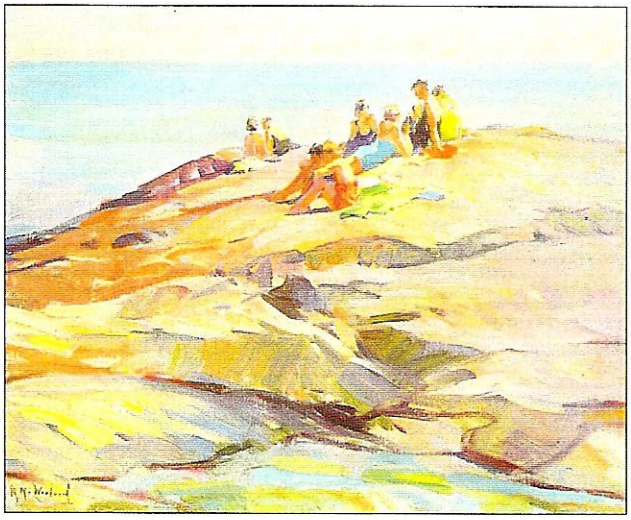
The Sing-Along

By Katherine Pew



Victoria Prouts Neck is a small place—about forty families in all—that springs to life in the summertime. A narrow cliff walk winds steeply above the sea, and a wide, sandy beach stretches below. Boardwalks weave through the woods, raspberries grow wild along every path. Since the days when Winslow Homer painted scenes of the jagged Maine rocks and the churning sea, Prouts Neck has remained virtually unchanged. And one of summer's most enduring traditions is the Sunday-night picnic and sing-along.

Every weekend in August for as long as I can remember, weather permitting, we have packed our picnic baskets and congregated at Cannon Rock for Sunday supper. Families appear one by one, clad in sweaters and jeans and clouds of mosquito repellent. Children clamber across the tide pools down to Seaglass Cave, where, for some mysterious reason, the finest sea glass washes up in droves. The parents are left to sip their drinks and watch the fiery sun setting over the sea. The smell of grilling burgers drifts into the twilight and down to the cave, and the children emerge triumphantly, clutching jars aglow with vibrantly hued sea glass.

After supper, we extinguish the last of our glinting embers and head down the road to the yacht club for the Sing. The cozy, wood-beamed room is always packed, and it begins promptly at 8:10. The stalwart maestro Chippy has led the Sing since 1955, accompanied by the minister's wife on piano, and he refuses to put up with any whispering or giggling. He waves his conductor's wand menacingly at rambunctious children and waits until the room has completely quieted down before announcing, in his boomingly resonant voice, "Now, would everyone please turn your books to page 70 for 'Waltzing Matilda,' " or to page 11 for "Oh, My Darling Clementine." "Abdullah Bulbul Amir," a rousing ballad about two swaggering war heroes, is so long that its 19 verses are split up and sung over the course of two consecutive Sundays.

The blue, hardcover "The Prouts Neck Sing" songbook is overflowing with tunes about the sea, such as "The Drunken Sailor," "The Marine's Hymn," and "Bell-Bottomed Trousers." My favorite is "The Rhyme of the Chivalrous Shark" ("A doctor, a lawyer, a preacher, he'll gobble any fine day. But the ladies, God bless 'em, he'll only address 'em politely and go on his way.") But the uncontestable highlight of the evening, thanks to my father, has always been "Li'l Liza Jane," a Southern-dialect song. The first verse goes, "I'se got a gal an' you got none, Li'l Liza Jane"; and then the chorus: "O-o-oh, Liza, Li'l Liza Jane." One Sunday, when I was three years old, my father spontaneously leapt to his feet, threw me up in the air, and caught me on the "O-o-oh." It was so exhilarating, I begged him to toss me up again and again. By the time the next Sing rolled around, the idea had caught on like wildfire: The moment Chippy uttered the words "Li'l Liza Jane," the room was in an uproar, and every child leapt onto a parent's lap to be thrown up, too.

In our adolescent years, well past the lap stage, we would scramble for the tables or window seats—any place where we could dangle our legs and swing them in unison, establishing our own impenetrable posse—sure to be a unit when the room was divided up for rounds, such as "Scotland's Burning." Still, at the chorus of "Li'l Liza Jane," we would jump up and touch the rafters.

The final stage of independence entailed a self-imposed exile to the porch, where we were free to cavort in the chilly night air, outside the reach of Chippy's clutches. I peered in longingly at the light and warmth of the room, straining to hear the familiar melodies and regretting the cost of being cool.

Now, as I look around at the Sing's familiar scene, the window seats are crammed with the latest crop of whippersnappers, full of their own pacts and pranks. I wonder fleetingly where I fit in, until I hear the first chords of "Li'l Liza Jane," and one of my little cousins comes breathlessly racing for my lap.

Mabel Woodward, American (1877-1945), "Seaside, Ogunquit, Maine," c. 1925, oil on canvas, the William Benton Museum of Art, the University of Connecticut.