

Gwen Behan: Memories of a Lifetime on the Point

"I can't believe it!" says Gwen Behan, looking back on a lifetime of living on the Point. "Every time I go by Callender School, I say, 'Where are the children?' They used to pile in there when I was a kid!"

During her 91 years, Gwen attended not only Callender School, but also Potter, Mumford, and Rogers. She has seen our community grow from the days of the streetcar line down Third Street, through the introduction of traffic lights in the area, to the Point of today. She shared some of her memories in an oral history a few years ago with Rowan Howard and Marjorie Magruder, and in more recent conversations with *The Green Light*. This article, based on her memories of life on the Point, follows one in the Spring 2001 issue that described the unusual livery stable and stray animal shelter that her father-in-law, Joe Behan, ran on Third Street in the early 1900s.



Gwendolyn Pike Behan, 2001

Gwendolyn Pike was born on Second Street, near where Jestings' grocery store used to be. The Pike family has lived in Newport since about 1690, for the most part on Washington Street; and today the John Pike house, on Washington near Walnut, bears the family name. Gwen has three children: Sister Mary Behan of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Father George Behan, pastor of St. William Church in Warwick, and Julianne Kelly of Fairhaven, Massachusetts, but she is the last of the Pike family.

Although Gwen has moved several times over the years, she has lived on the Point her whole life—except, that is, for a brief period immediately after she and George P. Behan were married in 1929. They moved into an apartment on Harrison Street in the Fifth Ward, but she found she wasn't happy to be away from her old neighborhood. Within several months they had moved back to the Point, this time to stay. Gwen and her husband moved to Third Street in 1938, just in time to experience the big hurricane of that year, and she has lived in that house ever since.

"Living in Newport has always been a joy," Gwen says. While growing up, she and her friends enjoyed

playing in the park and listening to band concerts. "Everybody was neighborly. We didn't have TV or radio growing up," so youngsters had to make their own entertainment.

But she remembers there were rules for growing up on the Point, and one of them was that her mother expected her to be back in the house before it was too late. Evidently the deadline was well known, because in the evening the local policeman would come walking by the park and call out to them. "He'd say: 'Hey, you kids! You know what your mother says? You're nine o'clock in the house, not nine o'clock up in the park!' Boy, and we beat it."

Even later, when she was raising her children on Third Street, it was a safe and pleasant place for families to live. "It was wonderful. And somebody said to me, 'You let your kids go over to the playground?' I said, I *pushed* them over!"

One of her most striking memories is of a day at Callender School that still seems remarkable today. The children had the chance to listen to, and shake the hand of, a very special guest speaker: a man who had once shaken the hand of Abraham Lincoln. "I got in line," Gwen says, "and if it was the Pope I couldn't have been more pleased to shake his hand. I really was thrilled—I was just a little kid. Abraham Lincoln, he came alive to me." Even today she enjoys telling this story to visitors, who by shaking her hand are only two lifetimes apart from Abe Lincoln.

A more common memory for Gwen and her daughter Mary is one that many Pointers will find familiar: showing out-of-town visitors around Newport, especially the mansions and Ocean Drive. But after several decades, that can grow tiresome, she says. "If I see that Ocean Drive once more! If I had a penny for that—no, a nickel—Mary, we'd be in Florida now!"



*Chief Machinist's Mate
Thatcher Thayer Pike*

"You know, what I miss is the Point Fair," says Gwen. "They don't have it any more. I know one time when it was in St. John's Hall, I made a cake, and it was a lovely looking cake. I brought it down and handed it to a man behind the counter in St. John's Guild Hall, and he said, 'Well, we ought to get a dollar and a quarter for this.'

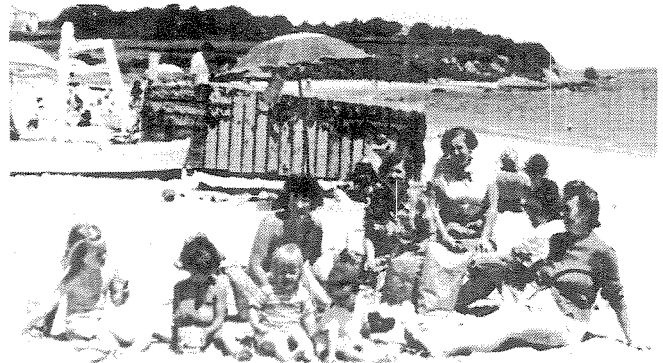
And I don't think he was being funny! Men, what do they know?"

She remembers swimming off the Elm Street pier, which was then called City Pier. Girls swam in large dresses, but one day her sisters returned from a trip to Florida with the newest fashion—the first one-piece wool bathing suit she had ever seen.

But not all innovations immediately seemed to make sense. For example, she remembers seeing her first traffic lights down in New York City. "What do they need those for?" she thought. "I wonder where they got that idea? Probably from France."

Gwen's father, Thatcher Thayer Pike, ran away to join the Navy in 1888 just before his sixteenth birthday, lying about his age in order to enlist. A photo from the time shows a good-looking young man with a long, stylish moustache. He became a Chief Machinist's Mate in the Navy, and after retirement ran the boilers on the ferryboat that traveled between Newport and New York. The boat came in at 9 o'clock in the evening, and when she would meet it "he always came off the boat with a bar of candy for me," Gwen recalls.

Gwen and her son George have fond memories of the many shops and stores that used to exist on the Point. Katzman's grocery store at Second and Walnut, for example, was a place where local residents could go for necessities and even to find credit during the difficult times of the Depression. "Things were very bad then," says Gwen, remembering that Mr. Katzman was always willing to help out a neighbor in need. "There never was a nicer man!"



Three of the Pike sisters, Gwen, Dorothy and Madeline (left to right) with their brood at Third Beach. circa 1951.



Gwen with son George and her father on the porch at 29 Walnut, 1930

George enjoyed visiting several shops that sold children's favorites. Langley's candy store sold big lollipops for a nickel—a lot of money for a youngster in those days, but worth it. And Westall's on Bridge Street was the place for ice cream. "You never had to go off the Point, it was all there," says George. He even remembers walking down to the Gum Factory at the end of Third Street and eating the gum scraps the boys found on the ground. "And it was good!" he says with a smile.

Newport and the Point of today are quite different, Gwen says, largely because today's residents are a mobile, constantly changing population. "You knew everybody, mostly," she remembers. And yet Gwen herself is living testimony that in the midst of change there is still tradition and continuity. By shaking her hand, a visitor can reach back not only through American history to the days of Abraham Lincoln, but through nearly a century of her memories to an era when candy cost a nickel and traffic lights had yet to be invented.

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