

# FOGGI

## FRIENDS OF GREAT GULL ISLAND

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**CATHERINE PESSINO, 1925-2005**

Catherine is still very much a presence here as indicated by the following reminiscences. She told her relatives she wanted no funeral, no memorial service and no obituary in the local paper. Many people asked if there was anything they could do and so I asked them to write something they remembered about Catherine for this inaugural issue of FOGGI.

Catherine worked in the Department of Education at the American Museum of Natural History. I first met her at Linnaean Meetings in the late-1950's, but did not become really acquainted with her until 1964 when she asked me if I would like to join an expedition to Great Gull Island to see how many terns were nesting there. I jumped at the opportunity and when I saw the island I asked Catherine if we could do research there. That was the beginning.

Catherine and I "held the fort" on Great Gull Island for the first two weeks in May for most years from 1966 to 2002. She and I would take watches from 6:00 to 9:00 a.m. to record the behavior of the terns as they arrived at the island each spring. Catherine usually watched from the Central Tower. Toward the end of her stay she always heard the *Halleluiah Chorus* before the end of her watch and knew it was almost time to go home. The spring of 1966 was particularly wet and cold. The buildings had no windows and so depending on the wind direction we kept moving around the building to find the most sheltered spot for meals.

Catherine also came to help during the season in the 1970's and early 1980's. She worked hard and left a lasting impression, as you will see from the memories of Great Gull Islanders.

Catherine was a wonderful, generous, complicated, yet straightforward person. She saved the day for me many times, although sometimes on Great Gull Island, after a good deal of sputtering. The time I remember most vividly, however, was when she gave me an open invitation to La Capanna after my Achilles' tendon was replaced in 1999. I thought, quite unrealistically, that after the operation I could hop around in my apartment on crutches. I had never in my life felt so helpless as I felt after the operation. I called Catherine immediately. She said the invitation was still good and she and Nancy Stevens came to the hospital the day I was released, bundled me into the car and we were off for Lake Katrine! I felt very lucky.

Once we reached Catherine's I settled in and the neighbors began dropping in and we had a wonderful time for two months after which I reluctantly returned to New York City to begin physical therapy.

As some people mention in their reminiscences, Catherine traveled extensively. Louise Forshaw remembers: "When Catherine and Lois Hussey Heilbrun completed traveling all over Europe during their first overseas trip and that included going to Greece during the civil war, they discovered they did not know where or when to meet their merchant vessel for the voyage home. For Catherine, there was no problem: 'In the movies, Lloyd's of London always knows about all the ships,' she said, so off to Lloyd's. She and Lois were ushered into the office of a bemused official, who sent an underling to find where and when they could meet their ship. He also had tea served and spent the waiting time chatting with these two intrepid American women. Whenever anyone asked why they had gone to Lloyd's she always said the movies had taught her that Lloyd's was the center of shipping news."

Catherine and Lois made three trips to Alaska to visit relatives of Lois. Catherine loved Alaska and had a wonderful Alaskan sweater she wore on Great Gull Island. Louise Forshaw says: "During the 1950's, Catherine and Lois took a motor trip through Mexico, a trip many people cautioned against. Because Catherine did not speak Spanish, she began to think vendors were taking advantage of her. 'We need to bargain,' she told Lois. 'The people selling the goods expect us to bargain.' So, at the next stop, she spent considerable time haggling over the price of a craft item she wanted. Satisfied that she had driven a hard bargain, she stowed her basket in the car only to have Lois, who knew Spanish, comment: 'I hope you're satisfied. You just spent fifteen minutes and managed to save two cents American.'"

The U. S. Government sent Catherine to India as a consultant on science education for children. Louise asked her how she had managed living in India. Catherine said she took a drip-dry dress and that was all she needed for the two or three months of her visit.

**Helen Hays**

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## Family

*Catherine was born in the Bronx. The following reminiscences are from Catherine's family.*

Catherine was close to and kept in touch with her family both in the U.S. and in Italy. In 1948, just after World War II Catherine and I went by boat to Italy to visit our grandparents and to meet the cousins we had heard so much about. We landed in Genoa, and took a train to Vernio where our cousins met us. Remains of buildings destroyed in bombings during the war were visible on both sides of the track throughout the journey. At Vernio our cousins loaded our gear into their truck. There were benches in the back of the truck, but Catherine and I were given the seats of honor in the cab beside the driver. The mountains where the villages stood were very steep and Catherine and I stopped looking down as the trucks climbed. Catherine's mother came from the village of Cavarzano di Vernio, which was a little higher in the mountains, but within walking distance of my mother's village. Although we stayed in different villages our routines were very similar and we did many things together. Each day we took two pails and visited the well in the village square, filled the pails and took them back to the house and filled the basins and pitchers for washing. I loved doing this because the floors were brick and it did not matter if I spilled water. Once the washing was finished I could just throw the water out the window — very simple.

The older women in the villages all wore black. Catherine and I brought clothes from home, which we gave our cousins. On later visits we noticed the clothes our cousins made after 1948 had straight seams in contrast to those made before. Many men and women in the village had very good voices and there was lots of singing in the streets. Catherine and I were serenaded. Every Saturday there was a dance in the village square. Catherine wore jeans all summer. The villagers were not used to seeing women wearing pants, but they made allowances for Catherine.

Our cousins took us on long expeditions in the mountains. We did lots of walking and occasionally rode burros to negotiate the steep slopes above and below the villages.

**Delores Nugent**

Catherine had a large extended family. Each year she brought the family together at her home, affectionately known as "La Capanna", in Lake Katrine, west of Rhinebeck. She would organize a day of activities. It might be a day of family games, a tug of war, a potato sack race, and a piñata for the little ones. Other times she would arrange something more adventurous. Once, she hosted a gathering of approximately thirty "cousins" aboard the schooner *Clearwater* and we sailed along the Hudson. Even her mother, who was in her early nineties, enjoyed the adventure.

On a Thanksgiving weekend, Catherine invited the family to her house to make Christmas wreaths. We gathered foliage from the woods surrounding her property and took home beautiful decorations for the holidays.

Catherine's Christmas celebration, "La Bafana" was held on January 6<sup>th</sup>, the feast of the three kings. Legend has it "La Bafana" was a loveable old witch who traveled throughout Italy bringing toys and sweets to all the good children. Catherine searched high and low to find "interesting" gifts for all of us. You might get a roll of masking tape or a piece of jewelry from her world travels. ALL the children received a lump of coal to remind them to always strive to do better.

**Alfred & Eleanor Pieratti**

When the twins grew old enough to understand about cursing, they were, of course not allowed to do it. One day they asked Catherine to teach them some swear words in Italian. Catherine agreed, but told them they must not tell anyone where they had learned the words. They promised and Catherine carefully taught them *patate e cipolle*. Eager to try out the words the twins spent the next two days "swearing". They noticed the words did not have the affect they had hoped. They expressed their curiosity, only to find that the phrase Catherine taught them meant potatoes and onions!

**Catherine Alberino**

While it is true Catherine was not married and had no children of her own, her involvement with, and impact on, four generations of cousins cannot be overlooked. Throughout her life, and indeed until the very end, her generous spirit was a pervasive presence in all our lives. Her home was

always open as she hosted many “Cousins’ Picnics” and holiday celebrations. She taught us through her books and on visits to the Museum, and helped us with our school projects. She always thought of us and made each one feel special.

I know I express the feelings of our entire family when I say I will miss my “Great Cousin Catherine”.

**June Pieratti**

My first recollection of Catherine was when I was perhaps five or six years old. We were paid a long awaited visit from Mom’s cousin Catherine, all the way from New York City. Catherine with her warm smile and infectious laugh captured my heart. In short order I thought I would much rather live with her and asked her to take me with her when she returned to New York. Alas, she said she could not, but she would stay in contact by mail as often as she could. Not being one to take no for an answer, I concocted a clever plan. On the day of her departure I hid in the back of her station wagon under her baggage. Unfortunately, someone thought to search the back of the car. My dreams of going to New York and learning about birds and Indians from Cousin Catherine were shattered. How could my plan have failed? Tearfully, I bade farewell to Catherine fearing I would never see her again. True to her word, Cousin Catherine began a decades long stream of letters and presents, nearly all of which I still have. If you don’t believe me, ask my wife.

In 1957, I spent the most memorable summer vacation of my teenage years in the Museum where Cousin Catherine worked. The people I met and the things I experienced in the Museum have left a very lasting and beneficial impression on my life. I believe that summer did more than anything else to move me to be a life long learner and ultimately, a teacher.

In August of 2005, learning of Catherine’s illness, my wife, Leslie, and I paid a visit to Catherine at the facility where she was living. Knowing this was probably the last time we would see her, it was a moving and difficult parting.

Goodbye Catherine. Thank you for having touched my life and the lives of so many others. Know that you made a difference and that you are missed.

**Douglas Tozzini**

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**Hunter College**

*Catherine attended Hunter College. She kept in touch with a number of friends she met there. Reminiscences from five of these friends follow.*

Catherine and I met in the fall of 1942 when we were freshmen at Hunter College. From a student body of 8000 we found a group who later joined a sorority together and formed friendships that have lasted more than sixty years.

She was always interested in learning new activities and considering new ideas. Surf casting was one such activity. Under the guidance of my father, a veteran fisherman, we started to fish. Catherine exclaimed: “I have a bite.” She successfully hooked the nibbler and after some time landed a stingray.

One day we went to explore the Bronx Zoo. At the reptile house we spoke with the keeper, who offered us the opportunity to handle a non-poisonous snake. Catherine accepted quickly, I hesitantly. She had a great time.

After graduation, we all did not see each other frequently as we followed different career paths. However, Cath was always there to listen to ideas and problems and help when she could.

After retirement we saw each other more often. Once we were to leave for Cape Cod from my house. On her way she stopped to visit in Lake Katrine. She arrived hours late because she found that “the house” was for sale. After several sleepless nights she decided to buy La Capanna. Now only fifty miles apart we visited frequently — sharing gardening hints and growing basil. Catherine gave me three pesto recipes of varying calorie content, pesto *alla* mama, pesto *alla* cousin Fran, and real Spartan pesto. I remember one time a group of us were having dinner at the Pegasus, a restaurant halfway between Lake Katrine and Delmar. Catherine wanted to get a picture, but everyone looked a little stiff. “Say, Cheese!”, said Catherine, hopefully. This didn’t really work so Catherine shouted: “Say, Fromagio!” This broke us up and the picture was good.

Then there was “the stonewall”. She thought one would look great out back. When she was away for a few days, her friend and neighbor Andrew, borrowed her address book, called her friends asking for contributions to build

“Catherine’s Wall” as a 75th birthday present. She later said that she was so embarrassed when Andrew presented her with the gift — but she had a great birthday and it is a great wall!

Writing of these memories has helped to fill the void left early in November.

**Kay Martini**

We met in 1943 at Hunter College, where Catherine and my sister Helen were freshmen and I, a junior. We soon became part of a closely-knit group who have remained good friends to this day. We belonged to the same sorority and to the Lutheran Club; Catherine, a non-Lutheran, used to say she had joined the club because our monthly intercollegiate supper meetings had good food.

In those days, we called her “Cathy” to distinguish her from another friend named Catherine, whom we dubbed “Kay.” I think I was in my 50’s before Catherine informed me that she preferred to be called by her given name. Thenceforward, I called her Catherine.

On pleasant Sundays, Catherine would make the short bus ride to our home in the north-east Bronx where, after dinner, we three would go for walks, dressed in the Sunday dresses we all wore in those days. Usually we went toward the Hutchinson River and the Hutchinson River Parkway, to stand at the edge of the marshes and discuss what was on our minds.

One spring Sunday, Catherine announced she planned to leave school at the end of the semester, feeling that her studies were taking her nowhere and she was wasting her parents’ money. Fortunately, Helen and I were able to persuade her to wait and to join us that summer as counselors at Girl Scout camp where Helen and I had worked previously.

When we arrived at camp, serendipity stepped in. Catherine’s tent mate was our nature counselor and, as Catherine observed and helped with nature study activities, she realized where her heart and mind lay. That fall, she returned to school, focusing on the courses that would help her to realize her twin ambitions of becoming a naturalist and working in a museum. Her extensive travels began in 1949, when she and her friend Lois left for Europe on a former Liberty ship. Her accounts of her experiences, as well as her stories after all of her travels, captured the real nature of the countries and people she encountered. In a

trenchant phrase or a vivid anecdote, she enabled the rest of us to see the world through her keen eyes. Because Catherine saw food only as a necessary fuel for body and mind, she was not much interested in cooking. When she took her first apartment on the West Side, however, she had to learn to prepare meals. I recall the evening she invited our friend Bernice and me to dinner. When I arrived, a flustered Catherine showed me a package of frozen squash and one of frozen peas and asked, “Do you know how to cook these? I’ve never done them before.” All went well, of course. Catherine prepared veal marsala (her father’s recipe) and I met the challenge of frozen vegetables.

Although not interested in food per se, Catherine never hesitated to eat the food of wherever she traveled. She was matter-of-fact about eating raw squid in Italy and unusual foods in Africa. It was at her lovely home in Lake Katrine that she finally could devote time and energy to food preparation. As usual, our Catherine saw what had to be done and learned to do it in splendid fashion. Many of us have fond memories of delicious meals at La Capanna.

Many years ago, Catherine’s mother received word her mother in Italy was dying, so Mrs. Pessino went to Italy. Catherine’s grandmother did not die for a long time, but Catherine’s mother stayed on, expecting the end. Catherine recognized her father was becoming lonely, so she arranged for a telephone call to Italy. It was a complicated process because there was no telephone in her grandmother’s village; but there was a telephone in the post office in the village down the mountain. When the call went through at the appointed day and time, Mr. Pessino spoke with his wife and then Catherine took the telephone. As she tried to sign off, her mother insisted she talk to first one and then another and then another and then another relative. When Catherine protested she was paying a lot of money for the call, her mother explained the entire village had come down the mountain, the mayor leading the way, because it was the first time one of the residents had received a telephone call. It became an expensive call but Catherine always laughingly said the experience was worth the cost.

In 1967, Catherine and Kate Swift visited me on the Navajo Reservation. They explored the area, sought out the people living there, and drew upon their knowledge and experience to assess

what they saw of living conditions, government programs, and the experimental school at which they stayed.

In February 1978, Catherine visited my husband and me in New Mexico. We went to places that interested her — the Gila Wilderness, White Sands National Monument, Fort Selden, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, and the Sacramento Mountains. We also went to Stahmann Farms, the largest pecan orchard in the world, where she bought a box of unshelled pecans for her mother. When the time came to pack, the box would not fit, so she dumped the loose pecans over her clothing, letting them settle into the nooks and crannies. She later told us the airport people looked puzzled when the loose nuts rattled around her suitcase. We also went to our large used-book store where she stocked up on works by Louis L'Amour, reading she considered mandatory for a visitor to the Southwest.

When she and I took an Elderhostel to Scandinavia in 2002, it goes without saying she was a favorite of all of our group and a wonderful companion for me. We did a lot of exploring on our own and were very proud of our accomplishment in using the Oslo subway. It was that subway which surprised us two New York City girls when, during one trip, we saw different passengers taking onto the train a bicycle, a baby carriage, and a German shepherd dog.

In a sense, Catherine was a science educator all the time. Her attitudes and comments, even in relaxed situations, conveyed to the rest of us what she considered important and what she thought humans should be doing in their dealings with the natural world.

Catherine respected nature and its creatures, but she was not sentimental about them. She recognized and accepted the sometimes harsh rules governing living creatures. She was tolerant of those of us who put out bird feeders and birdbaths, but she believed birds had to forage for themselves and, if necessary, live or die according to Nature's food supply.

She did not anthropomorphize animals. In the Science Center, the skunk was named "skunk", not "Petunia", "Rosebud" or similar appellations. The same policy obtained for the other creatures on display. And all of them were returned to their natural habitat after a brief time so they would not lose their ability to live in the wild.

The news Catherine has departed for the next leg of her journey made me realize she has not left me. She remains close in the warm memories of time spent with her and the knowledge that she taught me to see the earth and all of its residents somewhat more clearly, thanks to her astute observations and sensible judgments.

**Louise Forshaw**

Cathy was an exceptional person. It was a delight to be with her and listen to the adventures. We didn't see much of each other during our working years but reconnected when we retired, especially when she moved to Lake Katrine and her mother came to stay with her.

I particularly remember one story she told us. Cathy had beautiful red hair and was very careful of the color she wore, so it didn't clash with "the red". As time went by, the red turned to gray, but Cathy still considered herself a redhead. Just before she retired, she was invited to an elegant dinner. She decided to go all out and buy a smashing dress. She shopped and shopped, but couldn't find anything to her liking. Finally she landed in a boutique where a nice young saleslady brought out dress after dress for approval. Each one brought a negative from Cathy. Finally, the salesgirl said she had a really beautiful dress and brought it out for inspection. It was red silk and truly beautiful. Cathy fingered it and said to the girl, "It's really lovely, but I could never wear it with my red hair." The young girl just stared. Cathy caught a look at herself in a mirror and started to laugh. In fact, the two went into gales of laughter. I believe Cathy bought the dress.

**Loretta Blaul**

Catherine did not suffer fools easily and was very direct in communicating that when the occasion warranted it. But, if you were privileged to call her "friend" however, (or family) you were the recipient of intense loyalty, unstinting generosity and unlimited hospitality.

During one of my visits to Lake Katrine, a couple from Alaska, along with their trailer, "dropped in" unexpectedly to spend the night. No problem! We had a great time.

They, in turn, sent a young couple from Mongolia who were studying in Manhattan. On the phone one day I was inviting Catherine for a

visit to my home in Florida when she said, “Well, I have to find out first when the Mongolians are coming.” No problem

We had great fun traveling together: Ireland, Greece, Nova Scotia, Guatemala and more. Catherine was the consummate traveling companion. Everything we did was pleasurable and many things were hilarious. We could laugh over mishaps until tears rolled down our cheeks. I miss not being able to laugh with her.

One time we were on a bus in Ireland and I pointed out a small bird to Catherine. She got so excited and couldn’t thank me enough for showing her an English Robin — her first ever!

Little did Louise, Kay, Catherine and I know when we met at Hunter College in 1942 that we were creating a bond that would endure for these many years. A precious part of that bond is gone now and we are the poorer for it.

Catherine Pessino was truly the epitome of what the term, “best friend” means.

**Marie Friedsam**

“Full lasting is the song, though the singer, passes.” — *The Thrush in February* by George Meredith.

My dear friend, Catherine, your song lingers on. Our long friendship, our travels together on business and pleasure, the shopping trips, the visits to Hudson River historic sites, the laughter, good meals and wine — all rich memories that will keep the song alive. But most of all, your understanding, wisdom, support, and counsel will be remembered and treasured.

Cheers, dear friend. Your spirit lives on.

**Marie Hewitt**

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**American Museum of Natural History**

*Catherine’s Science Center served as a meeting place for many volunteers as well as members of the Education Department. Ken Chamber’s often dropped in for coffee in the morning. He taught the starling to say “Hello Charlie” which surprised and pleased C. De Wolf Gibson, the vice-president of the Museum when he visited the Science Center.*

For more than fifty years Catherine Pessino was my colleague and my good friend. In celebrating her life I remember her as a talented teacher dedicated to a love of nature. Throughout her career at the American Museum of Natural History her strong and lively spirit captured the imagination of hundreds of children as they explored the wonders of the Museum — and particularly the child-oriented exhibits in the Natural Science Center, for which she was largely responsible.

The enthusiasm for understanding and preserving the natural world around us, which she nurtured in those children, has now become an important part of their adult lives.

Well done, Catherine!

**Ken Chambers**



Catherine began opening doors to adventures in natural science for me fifty years ago. Newly employed in what was then the Public Relations department at AMNH, I was assigned to publicize the Natural Science Center for Young People. I considered myself a science writer but had no inkling of how little I knew about natural history until Catherine started teaching me. Although I left the Museum to move to Connecticut in 1965, we remained close friends and I continued to learn from her for the rest of her life.

I’d never heard of microclimates until a day we walked in the woods after an early snowfall and Catherine pointed to a tiny green plant —

pipissawa, I think — whose energy had melted the ring of snow immediately around it. Hiking with her in the 1970's in a Connecticut state forest recently devastated by Gypsy Moths, I came to appreciate the motto she and Lois Hussey had adopted to reassure themselves as teachers. "Nature scares us."

Catherine and I shared some great adventures on the water: piloting rented canal boats for week-long trips with other friends through the English Midlands and on the Erie Canal; rafting down the Green River in Utah, running the rapids and camping nights along the shore. Always her curiosity about new surroundings, the native wildlife and the impact of human activity, drove her to discover more than was in the guidebooks and even in the scholarly papers. She was a consummate scientist.

Ave, Caterina Maria, and thanks!

**Kate Swift**

As I think back, I realize how much Catherine impacted my life, and by extension, the lives of those around me. I first met Catherine when I began teaching in the Education Department at the American Museum of Natural History. Catherine ran their wonderful Natural Science Center. I loved this room full of live animals found around NYC: the talking starling, the voles, the fresh and saltwater aquariums, and so much more. I loved the simple, clear message that there is a beautiful natural world out there for all, especially children, to discover and enjoy even right in the city. When I wasn't teaching or working in my office, I spent as much time as I could in the Science Center, learning from Catherine and her assistant, Barbara Neil. I had just graduated from college and was eager to absorb their knowledge of natural history and of how to communicate this to others.

What I learned in those years has carried over into the environmentally based family learning program, SPARK, I started in Virginia. As I think about my program, I see the seeds for it were planted in my mind in the Science Center with Catherine. I learned from Catherine not only facts of natural history, but, more importantly, how to relate to the public, especially the children, visiting the Museum; she understood what they did and didn't know, what would stimulate their interest, how to teach them in a way that would be

meaningful to them. I like to think what she taught me is being carried over to new generations of children through my work with SPARK.

There are two other, personal and significant, ways Catherine impacted my life. It was Catherine who introduced me to Helen Hays and invited me to Great Gull Island for a weekend of nest marking. That began what for me has been a most wonderful, decades long, experience working with Helen and the terns. Last, but not least, it was in the Natural Science Center that Matt and I met again after a few years apart. So began a wonderful courtship that ended in marriage and two sons who carry on an interest in the natural world influenced by Catherine's Natural Science Center.

**Grace Cormons**

It was a privilege and pleasure to know Catherine Pessino. My children and I spent many wonderful winter afternoons with her at the Alexander M. White Natural Science Center, where she introduced us, in a quiet and peaceful setting, to varied and unexpected aspects of nature in New York City. She kept small collections in drawers — stones or feathers or insects — and it was always exciting when she pulled out a drawer to reveal new treasures. For a time, she had at the Center a pet skunk (deodorized) that was a great favorite with visitors.

My children, and generations of other children, discovered the natural world around them through Catherine. Her imaginative exhibits, her enthusiasm and patience and warm humor will long be remembered and will carry her influence far into the future.

**Anne Sidamon-Eristoff**

Percy Chappell and I will always remember Catherine Pessino from our days of working with her in the Natural Science Center during the early 1970's. She shared with us the joys of working with New York City school children visiting the museum. There were many projects and things to learn about the seashore. We will all miss her.

**Betsy White**

Catherine Pessino was an inspiration to any of us volunteers who cared about education at the Museum. It was amazing to see how, in her quiet way, she could draw children into the wonders of the natural world that surrounded them. The Natural Science Center was her greatest achievement in my book. She had an unerring sense of what would intrigue children and open their eyes to what they could find under, around and above the city streets.

I always had such a good time with Catherine: her laugh, her no-nonsense approach to any situation, her gentle irreverence when bureaucracy reared its head, her passion for the terns on Great Gull, the care she took of her mother. I will miss all these and more, her spirit and her friendship, but I will always remember them.

**Caroline Macomber**

When I came to work at the American Museum of Natural History in 1972, I assisted in the activities taking place in the new anthropology teaching area called the Frederick H. Leonhardt People Center. The Center was a weekend facility that promoted cross-cultural learning and understanding through lecture demonstrations, performing arts and interactive participation.

Next door, the Natural Science Center was an educational corollary to the People Center. It was there I first met Catherine Pessino and was introduced to the rich natural history of the urban environment. The Center, complete with live exhibits and interactive activities, provided visitors and students with an educational experience and added to their knowledge of nature. The goal of the Center was to build an interest in environmental stewardship by connecting Museum visitors to nature through learning experiences offered by passionate naturalists like Catherine. Children were able to learn about nature as they explored and investigated the displays. Catherine's 1973 renovation of the exhibits in the Center focused attention on New York City streets and Central Park. She hoped to show children that even on the way to school, on the street and on the subway there were habitats to look for and things to discover.

As my supervisor in the Education Department and guide to informal education and natural science empathy, she was my model for

the museum professional. At a time of increasing concern over how to better develop critical scientific thinking skills, she went beyond the basics. A woman of energy and talent, Catherine had a sharp wit and a brilliant, questioning mind. She was a strong advocate for science and nature. Recognizing the educational skills to use effectively the intellectual tools of logic, observation and imagination.

**Nat Johnson**

As exhibition designer at the American Museum of Natural History in the 1960's, I was intrigued by the Nature Science Center in the Education Department. Catherine Pessino, an outstanding figure in the Department, had fresh, imaginative ideas about ways to open children's eyes and stimulate their interest in the natural environment.

Located as we were in the four-block space off Central Park West, Catherine pointed out to me, in answer to my question of what to focus on in this natural environment, that if I would just walk around that Museum plot, I would get my answer! I walked: smashed beer cans, bottles, pieces of clothing, bits of trash accumulated around benches, etc.

As introduction when entering this Center, I confronted children with a sample of these materials they encounter in Central Park and other areas of "natural environment" in the city.

This negative way of introducing children to consideration of natural environment led to exhibits for "opening doors": reconstruction of bits of Central Parks (rocks, plants, stuffed birds), elements of the marine environment around Manhattan, the view out the window from an elevated platform we constructed to give good views of the park maintained immediately around the Museum.

So, in exhibits we tried various means and devices and technology to define "natural environment," to identify its deterioration, and to spell out ways of helping to protect it.

In time, it was possible to arrange short trips in and outside the city by bus to give children the wonder of various kinds of healthy natural environments.

**Henry Gardiner**

I first met Catherine in the fall of 1974 when I became a member of the Museum's Education Department as Coordinator of the Environmental Information Center. Malcolm Arth, Chairman of the Education Department, assigned Catherine the task of giving the new kid a survival orientation on Museum "do's" and "don'ts". With kindness and thoughtfulness, Catherine started my education in the Alexander M. White Natural Science Center and introduced me to Barbara Neil. I still marvel at what a wonderful first day she orchestrated for me.

About two weeks into my tenure, I recall a conversation in which Catherine was instructing me on the proper way to contact the curatorial staff working behind the scenes. She explicitly explained that making contact required asking assistance from the Chairman. There was a brief pause in her recitation of the rule as she gazed into my puzzled face. Her next words were quick and decisive: "Well, Talbert, let's break that rule right now." With a smile and a sparkle in her eyes, she reached into her coat pocket and gave me the precious "1209" key! Catherine told me to go forth, explore, and introduce myself to every person I encountered. With key in hand, I made my first visit to the fourth floor. I found the office of Margaret Mead, introduced myself, and had lunch with her. Catherine had given me my "wings".

Catherine's passion for sharing science with young and old was amazing to watch. On a daily basis, I observed her keen intellect, depth of knowledge, and benefited from her masterful modeling of the best practices of museum education. Her influence on my professional development and career choices remains with me to this day. As a mentor, Catherine was always available, giving honest, constructive feedback on program ideas, leadership issues, and job opportunities.

Catherine freely shared her wit, sense of adventure, and love of the natural world with me. Her simple gift of that "1209" key began a fantastic thirty-one year friendship. I will truly miss our conversations, field trips, and the occasional sipping of fine wine.

**Talbert B. Spence**

Catherine was quick to welcome me to the fraternity of naturalists at AMNH when I started in 1974 and first introduced me to Farida Wiley, who was then still leading bird walks in Central Park. There was a very strong field-naturalist presence in the Museum's Education Department at the time with such notables as Bill Schiller (still present), Ken Chambers, Farida, and Catherine among them. Catherine stands out, in my mind, as very vivacious, out-spoken and no-nonsense. She had sparkling eyes, a great smile, and was always quick to laugh and joke. She was also a first-rate field-naturalist, a dedicated environmental educator, and devoted to the goals of the Museum. The natural world has lost a great advocate and we have lost a great friend.

**Steve Quinn**

When my grandmother said a person had character, it was high praise. Catherine had character! For thirty years at the Museum, her skills as an energetic, dedicated educator enriched the lives of untold numbers of children, young people, teachers, families, and visitors. I was lucky to have spent fifteen years as a colleague, delighted by her ideas for public programs and her down-to-earth approach. She was direct, independent, and fair. She was great company with a sardonic wit and she could never hide her endless fascination with the natural world. The Alexander M. White Natural Science Center with its simplicity, originality and surprises was her creation. There was curiosity and learning put into every nook and cranny.

Catherine's round, brown eyes were especially clear-sighted. I suspect no one was ever able to pull-the-wool over her eyes. She dismissed sentimentality but was loyal to the core. Great Gull Island, with its remarkable research and hard-working Committee, was a strong focus for Catherine. Above all, it gave her special, treasured friends and many years of joy.

I missed seeing Catherine after we both left the Museum and moved away from New York City. I always wished I had known her wonderful mother whom she described so vividly and been able to witness one of Catherine's many visits to her family's little village in northern Italy. I know that people there of all ages awaited her stories, her company and her laughter.

**Flo Stone**

On November 5<sup>th</sup> Catherine Pessino departed life at a care facility in Mount Vernon, NY. With Catherine's passing, I reflect not only upon her life, but how life was at the AMNH, when friendships born out of the love of nature transcended departmental boundaries. I met Catherine shortly after I arrived at AMNH in 1979, and she generously shared her love of a special mountain in Bethel, Connecticut. I was not only welcomed onto Bogus Mountain, but into the company of her two aunts, Engalena and Babe, who lived at the base of the mountain at the end of a narrow road called Second Lane. Trips to the mountain were always accompanied by sumptuous, multi-course Italian home cooking; the vegetables from the gardens lovingly tended by Engalena and cooked to perfection by Babe. It was on Bogus Mountain that I collected samples of Jefferson Salamanders, beginning a 25-year long (and still ongoing) research collaboration with colleagues in Canada. I made repeated trips to the mountain, accompanied by other AMNH naturalists, including Helen Hays and Grace Tilger. Coming full circle, I now live only a few miles from Bogus Mountain in nearby Ridgefield. On trips to Danbury I drive by Second Lane, which is surrounded by an industrial park. I never have had the courage to drive down the lane to see what became of Engalena and Babe's cottage and gardens. The mountain still towers overhead, cloaked in forest, its vernal pools and wetlands unscathed by the development sprawled over the valley floor. In a world that has changed so much over the last quarter century, it's comforting to see some things remain unaltered. Although Catherine is no longer with us, I will always remember her when I look upward to the green slopes of Bogus Mountain.

**Michael W. Klemens**

Catherine joined the Museum after graduating from Hunter College in 1946 with a B.A. in Biology. She met Farida Wiley in the Education Department and helped Farida with her work in the John Burroughs Association (JBA). Farida met John Burroughs in 1920, a year before his death, and helped found the JBA in 1921. Farida was instrumental in disseminating information about John Burroughs as well as in expanding the Burroughs Sanctuary and establishing its presence on an international level. She was one of

JBA's most active and spirited members. Catherine was the second Secretary of the JBA. She worked tirelessly to ensure the legacy of John Burroughs, dean of great American nature writing and to protect Slabsides, his little log cabin in the woods that is now a literary National Historic Landmark that draws hundreds of visitors yearly. She became a JBA board director in 1972.

Catherine taught and traveled for the Museum's Department of Education, visiting Alaska several times and Mexico, and devoted many years to the terns of Great Gull. She used her knowledge of the urban environment to skillfully conceive and develop the displays in the Museum's first Discovery Room and in the Alexander M. White Natural Science Center that are still on exhibit today.

Those who knew "C.P.," as she was affectionately called, remember her in a different way. Catherine asked me if I would like to become the next Secretary of the John Burroughs Association. After I agreed, she asked me to also be the Treasurer and a Director all in one breath and with careful pauses. She was retiring from the Museum after forty years of service and from the JBA. By the time the last offer was made, I was leaving her office with as much haste as I could muster and wondered what the next several years had in store. The next several years turned into twenty-two of what can be described as a fruitful and extraordinary relationship for and with the JBA. Periodically, Catherine would check in to see how it was doing. She had a great fondness and a strong commitment to the JBA. This commitment remained a part of her and she was able to pass it on to the next generation.

Catherine brought to her work at the Museum and the JBA an academic training in biology and science education, and her personal passions for nature. Catherine was an energetic teacher from whom I have leaned much about running a nature organization. We are with her at Slabsides in spirit remembering our dear friend and colleague. All of us that have had an opportunity to be a part of C.P.'s life are indeed better for it. Her like-minded interest in nature generated a strong bond between all of us and solidified a commitment to the JBA that still continues today. Teacher, nature lover, friend, and colleague — she will be missed.

**Lisa Bresloff**

My friend, Catherine, has been a cheerful part of my life for over 30 years, and I shall miss her feisty spirit and endless fund of fun information. Once, after working on a project for the Museum's Education Department (for which she did most of the work, and opened my eyes to much I had missed), she thanked me profusely, and gave me a copy of *My World – and welcome to it*, thus reintroducing me to James Thurber's wonderful stories. At the time, I remember wondering if she thought my approach to the task had been a tad strange! All the same, although I am currently downsizing my life, that treasured paperback will follow me wherever I go, always reminding me of a very dear, and special, friend.

**Gillian Newell**

Catherine was an easygoing travel companion, flexible about schedules, and the master of pithy comments when such was called for. In New Zealand, we covered 3000 miles without hotel reservations except at the International Ornithological Congress in Christchurch. Catherine navigated, mastering the unfamiliar New Zealand mapping system, and we saw the birds we wanted to see, stopped at attractions that interested us, endured the trip to see the Stewart Island Brown Kiwi in a downpour (many pithy comments!), tried the local grog, looked for clotted cream and thyme honey, stayed at bed-and-breakfasts along the road and hated to leave when our time was up.

Totally different was our trip to the Gambia to visit my daughter, Lauren. Here Catherine was in her element, visiting local markets and traveling up-country to visit family compounds in the arid countryside. By contrast, our trip across Nova Scotia to Newfoundland was a bus trip through magnificent scenery, with much of geological and human historical interest, including early Viking settlements. Catherine, with her practiced museum eye, especially appreciated the beautifully prepared and labeled reconstructions of these historical sites.

These long trips and many shorter ones were enriched by Catherine's presence and remain with me as pleasant memories. I shall miss her company and her friendship.

**Mary LeCroy**

I'm a great admirer of birds but as a birder, I'm best left on the sidelines. So at Birdathon time I threw myself on the mercy of Catherine, who gallantly offered to represent me. Each year I enjoyed receiving her awesome list of birds and a brief, cheery message; always amazing me with her ability to sort out all those elusive creatures. A great thing about Catherine was the way she took on projects from birding to administration with a good-humored wink at the beginning and a good laugh at the end. Far from faltering in the face of obstacles, she saw them as navigable bumps in the road and often had a funny story to tell about how things went — win or lose. She was a lovely person to know and her approach to the world around her was a splendid model for the rest of us.

**Peggy Cooper**

Catherine will always be one of the people who are treasured because of her human qualities of patience, understanding and readiness to be helpful. I knew her because of her knowledge of science, children and education ... and that she was always someone who could give me accurate and important information. At the same time, we could always share a bit of humor and general agreement on the frailties of humanity. I will miss her and always find something wonderful to remind me of her.

**Ethel Tobach**

Catherine was the person who hired me for the job of Museum instructor in the Education Department. I'm still here nearly twenty years later. I have taken her inspiration as an educator to the design and implementation of the Discovery Room, a successful permanent interactive exhibit for families that opened in 2001. One of the "process of science" activities in the Room is built around the research on Great Gull Island.

**Ann Prewitt**

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## Great Gull Island

*Catherine was a great favorite and fun whenever she came to Great Gull. She always worked hard during spring clean-up even though she was quite pessimistic about the order she imposed on the kitchen lasting beyond her visit. She was a loyal friend and intrepid doing her Tower Watch the first two weeks in May. We will all miss her.*



What I remember most about Catherine are the glorious conversation, the scandalous, fascinating stories she told, interesting places she had been — tales of a sophisticated urban life distant from mine. When I say conversations, I mean mostly ones I just listened to while she talked with Helen, or Ken, or Melissa, or other New York people about city things and life at the Museum. I remember marking tongue depressors on rainy days, and playing hearts, and doing things in the banding room, but mostly it was listening to her conversations. And this, from an inveterate talker. When I heard the news of Catherine's death, my thoughts went to the fabric of relationships defined by work and play on the Island. I have little notion of Catherine, or of many of the others, in their mainland lives, a random collection of facts and impressions from scattered conversations over the years. But I can recall her ragged hat and her sardonic humor. She was a wise and valuable person.

**John Avallone**

Through Great Gull Island, the Linnaean Society and the Museum, I knew Catherine for over thirty years. However, my fondest memories are the times spent with her on Great Gull when we opened the island for the new season each spring. Catherine would almost always start a major clean up soon after her arrival. Most years this included new contact-paper for the kitchen table. It also usually involved finding various items that had been hidden before the island was shut down the previous fall. For a number of years some things were hidden in the Bayberry bushes that then existed across the path from the Carpenter Shop. These things weren't always remembered, or all found, the following spring. I remember one hilarious "treasure hunt" Catherine and I did, crawling on all fours through the Bayberry thicket looking for these lost items. There were great shouts of "Eureka" when we spotted a glint of glass or metal in the leaf litter.

Catherine also had a treasury of hilarious stories that would liven up those cold spring evening meals. One of my favorites was the time she was sent by the Museum to Kennedy Airport to pick up a foreign documentary film about New Guinea natives for the Margaret Mead Film Festival. At the Customs office she encountered a petty bureaucrat who felt it necessary to flex his bureaucratic muscle. First there were various government forms to be filled out — in triplicate, of course. Catherine dutifully filled out and signed every demanded form. Then he demanded she swear the film contained no Communist or other subversive propaganda. Catherine assured him it did not. Then he wanted assurances the film was not pornographic. Catherine told him it contained no pornography. Then the Customs' officer wanted to know if there was any nudity in the film. Of course, Catherine knew all the natives in the film were naked, but thinking quickly she replied the film was of "local religious ceremonies". Evidently, sensing some prevarication on Catherine's part the Customs' officer started to press on the nudity point. As Catherine considered how to respond, a voice from further back in the office called out: "Harry, give her the film already! She is from the Museum of Natural History! Does she look like a porn queen to you?" Catherine was finally given the film.

**Joseph DiCostanzo**

Everyone who was on Gull Island in the early 1970's will remember Catherine Pessino with great fondness; for her humor, her gusto, her commitment, and her interest in every participant. In those years, we were close enough to her own pioneering launch of the tern research so that, when she told us stories of the first summers, we could feel we were almost present at the creation of the project. What she and Lois Hussey accomplished seemed incredible at the time, and equally so reading about it today.

By our time, the island was already well populated with volunteers, at least on weekends during the peaks of hatching and chick banding, so the real fun with Catherine was during the weekdays when we might have been only four or five people. With fewer people to do the daily round of chick-check, examining every one of the island's several thousand nests, we all worked longer and harder. Catherine was a great pep raller, and a tireless searcher for new nests and concealed chicks. She explained the purpose of each activity and what we could learn from it.

From her, we also received an education in the island's flora and fauna, terrestrial and marine. She knew both their life histories, and their applications, including which was the best seaweed for covering our lobsters until they went into the boiling pot. About people, she could be sardonic, although gentle in person. Off-island, she was always welcoming in the Museum's Science Center, where conversation transported us back to the previous summer's days.

I can easily hear her laugh and visualize her on the island. But, in the one thing of hers I have tried over the decades to recreate, I have not succeeded. On Friday evenings, when the new shipment of supplies arrived, she made the most delicious hamburgers. Lots of onions, chopped and blended into the meat. Cooked at nightfall on the primitive grill set on bricks over a paved area in front of the "Carpenter Shop." There must have been something more. Perhaps it was the efficiency she brought to cooking in the darkness, punctuated by the hearty laugh or barbed comment, or the enthusiasm for every aspect of our simple and focused island life. Whatever the mystery ingredient Catherine's skill or personality added, I've never had anything better.

**Roger Pasquier**

I remember Catherine as a wonderful, outgoing and fun person to be around and to work with. She always brought a bit of cheer and humor to almost any situation. I can see her smile yet.

**Charles Collins**

Like a cloudless night sky over the Island, it all becomes clear to me now why Catherine and Helen had such admiration and respect for one another. I knew Catherine like many of you — from a distance. She seemed to me, like Helen, a very private person.

Catherine was an erect, forthright, gray-haired lady, who always wore elegant jewelry even while tending to the crusty pots and pans at the dish stand. She had an air of class about her. With bright yet determined eyes, Catherine appeared fashionably dressed for Island work with a stylish neckerchief, sweatshirt and jeans. There was no mistake about it. She was from the "City".

When Helen called to ask me if I wanted to write "something" about Catherine I fumbled quite a bit. Helen was her usual chortling self. Though slow on the up-take, even I could tell through the telephone that she was grieving.

Yet how could she grieve someone who seemed to be always tormenting her? Catherine: "This is terrible! Helen don't you think we should ....?" Helen: "Oh, Catherine you don't really mean that. Ha, ha, ha." Relentless, Catherine would respond: "Yes, I do!"

As a newcomer to the Island I watched with utter amazement at the way Helen would cheerfully deflect each arrow Catherine fired in her direction. Preferring a certain order to things myself, I often agreed with Catherine but didn't have the courage to say so.

It all becomes clear to me now. Yesterday, while talking with Helen, I learned Catherine first came to the Island in 1950. That's right, fifty-five years ago. She spent the first two weeks of each season with Helen for nearly thirty-six years between 1966 and 2002. I can imagine Helen and Catherine huddled together over hot tea and cookies as they pondered museum politics and the changing world around them. Helen offered that it was Catherine who many years ago gave up some of her own valuable museum space for the musty GGI files and buoyant staff and volunteers when the Project first started.

Catherine had a quick mind, to go along with her sharp tongue. She seemed to address life on her terms. Most matters required a definite response, black or white. It explains why Helen and Catherine were seemingly such opposites. For instance, during a torrential rain Helen would exclaim, “The sun is beginning to come out, we’ll be whisking through the Coal Area in no time.” Catherine would say, “You gotta be kidding?”, but minutes later she would be carrying garden gloves and hoe, marching off in the direction of the Eastern End for another weeding session.

You see they seemed to be contemporaries in so many odd but interesting ways. They both loved to reminisce as only friends can. Each in their own way, Helen and Catherine carved out productive careers in a time when smart, independent woman had to fight for acceptance in their chosen fields.

Helen and Catherine had an abiding respect for one another despite their obvious differences — a respect borne out of time and loyalty to one another and to the Island. The Island, that mystical place where religion is never spoken of and yet where spirituality is always present — present in the fellowship around a soothing fire, or a candlelit supper. Present in the satisfaction of work done well and in making the Island, and strangely, yourself a little better. The Island, where we seek personal renewal and communion with Creation and one another. A place where one experiences a sense of community amongst relative strangers.

So it is today across the miles where we as a community can support one another as we’re left to quietly feel sad about the passing of one of the original Great Gull Islanders. Someone close to the heart of our dear Helen.

Paradoxically, it’s only when the sun gives way to the darkness of night that we see the expanse of Creation. And so it all becomes clear to me now why Helen called. Sure she wanted me to write “something” but like many of Helen’s messages there lies something behind the words — “I miss Catherine. I can’t believe she’s gone.”

Two different women yet very much alike. It sort of explains our Island community. Different individuals on the outside yet so much in common on the inside. We’re so lucky to have one another, and the Island.

**Jim Sorensen**

Catherine was responsible for getting me interested in biology. I started off doing tongue depressors for the Great Gull Island Project in the Science Center a year or so before I got to go to GGI. She knew so much about people. I wasn’t quite old enough to fully benefit.

**David Duffy**

Catherine often told wonderfully funny stories. One of my favorites is one she told to Helen and me one spring on Great Gull Island. As the three of us sat in the Carpenter Shop having dinner, Catherine was remembering her years at the AMNH — particularly some adventures and misadventures in raising funds for a project during her early years at the Museum.

As Catherine recalled, a project would be described and discussed with a potential donor over lunch at the Museum. It was hoped that by the end of the lunch, the donor would support the project. When Catherine was first asked to attend these luncheons, she was quite pleased — she was a woman, after all, and despite her formidable credentials, in those less-enlightened times women were not often asked to take part in such events. Soon, however, she discovered the real reason for her inclusion: the potential donor, who always seemed to be a man, would often bring his wife — this caused some difficulty when, as often happened, the wife asked to visit the ladies room. Who amongst the all-male cast could possibly take her? Hence the need for Catherine’s presence — she was to be the official “Ladies’ Room Escort for Potential Donor’s Wives”.

Before one lunch, the Museum host mentioned to Catherine he hoped the donor would contribute twenty-five thousand dollars for the project. Man and wife arrived, lunch was eaten, plans were discussed, and much interest was expressed. Things were winding down; the donor pulled out his checkbook and said to the host: “Would fifty thousand be alright?”

Catherine’s heart leaped -- \$50,000! Twice as much as they had hoped for! Her leaping heart soon plummeted as she heard their host reply: “Oh, no, really, twenty-five will be **plenty!**” Catherine, inwardly howling, left the table.

Catherine told this and many other stories in May of 2002, on what was to be her last visit to Great Gull Island. Helen and I had been out for the preceding week, and Catherine arrived as the

sole passenger on the Friday boat. Looking quite pale and unsteady, she disembarked with difficulty, and somehow managed to negotiate the dock. Helen and I, alarmed by her frail appearance, worried as to how she would manage a week on the island. But after disappearing into her room for a brief recovery, she emerged and began inspecting the island, inquiring as to plans for dinner, and offering some tart comments on the general state of affairs on the island. Over the next few days her vigor returned, and she spent the following week with Helen, setting up blinds, weeding terraces, going on egg-check, and, of course, labeling tongue depressors. All of which, I think, is a testament not only to Catherine's stamina, determination, and resilience, but also to the rejuvenating powers of Great Gull Island itself.

### Doug Kopsco

The word curmudgeon is usually applied to crusty, ill-tempered old men. But when I first met Catherine Pessino, curmudgeon was the word that immediately popped into mind. I believe all who knew Catherine would agree she certainly was crusty; she did not suffer fools lightly, and she relished playing the curmudgeon role. Having said that, I would like to share one of my earliest encounters with Catherine.

The year, I believe, was 1990. It was a warm, sunny day in the merry month of May on Great Gull Island. The Bittersweet had already spread its newly green tentacles up, under, over and around the island. The terns were busy scraping their nests, and volunteers, with freshly painted blind sides atop their backs, were weaving their way towards the Eastern End like a colony of giant ants. Since I am much too short to successfully carry a 4 x 4 blind side all the way to the Eastern End, I decided to take respite in one of the gun turrets overlooking the South Beach. As I emerged from the tunnel I overheard Ms. Pessino and Ms. Hays discussing the Bittersweet that was now sweeping over the gun emplacement.

"Hays, you're going to have to get some people in here with scythes to clean this off," Catherine remarked as I bounced into view. This was before the Dr.. Fields mower and the Kubota tractor were introduced to the island. At that time, our only means of battling the Bittersweet was to clip, chop and slice — activities for which I had little talent and no little motivation to embrace. As

if the thought of being sent out here to tackle this stuff with a scythe wasn't scary enough, Catherine fixed one of her stony looks at me and said, "Hodges, how good are you at swinging a scythe?" My face must have betrayed my anxiety, as Helen immediately came to my rescue suggesting I might be of better service if I moseyed out to the Eastern End and observed a tern three-some that might be a *ménage a trois*. I was to take scope, notebook and pen, and climb into a stuffy little blind hanging over the wall on the northern side of the island. I was to observe and record any activity by the three suspects.

"What am I suppose to be looking for?" I asked unthinkingly. To which Catherine crustily replied, "Use your imagination!"

Red-faced, I dashed off to the Carpenter Shop. Grabbing scope, notebook and pen, I stuffed my pockets with Oreos and sauntered off toward the Eastern End. This was akin to Observation 401 for me. Prior to this I had only read leg-bands at the dock as the terns began arriving. I climbed into the little blind, perched myself upon the stool, positioned the scope so it was not protruding, but just peeping out of the window slit, and began to observe. I soon realized, however, that I didn't even need the scope as I was practically sitting on the terns that were perching and parading up and down the wall at the rate of about five hundred per minute. Locked into full observation mode, I watched and I watched and ... "Ah, that must be them," I thought as two Roseate Terns flew in and landed near a third bird, who immediately flew away. As I watched, the pair basked contentedly in the sun ... and they basked and they basked while myriads of terns flew out and back, out and back. When a tern swooped in next to the basking couple, I got an adrenaline rush. Surely this one had to be the sultry vamp that would complete the *ménage a trois*. Of course, I had no idea which tern was Casanova and which were the vamps, and as I watched tern after tern, including the two that seemed to be a pair, fly out and return, fly out and return (at least I hope they were the same ones), the afternoon dwindled away. And so did I!

Awakened by people heading back for dinner, I congratulated myself for fulfilling my obligation as I climbed from the stifling little box into the fresh air. Then came a nagging thought, "What was I going to report?" I could just hear Catherine saying, in that inimitable tone of hers,

“What do you mean you didn’t see anything?” So, I resolved to avoid Catherine at any cost. No such luck! As soon as I walked through the door of our dining/living/kitchen/supply room there was Catherine scrapping candle wax off the heavily caked blue-and-white checked oilcloth. No friendly greeting like “Was it hot out there? Would you like something to drink?” No, Catherine just leveled that “no nonsense” stare at me and said, “Well? What did you observe?” To which I immediately replied, “Well, François and Francesca seemed to be close, although he never brought her a fish, and Lola didn’t seem too interested in hanging out with them ...”

“Hodges what in the hell are you talking about?”

“Well, you said for me to use my imagination!”

At that Catherine threw up her hands in an Italian gesture that could only be interpreted as “I’m going to kill you,” and said, “I hope you know how to swim!” But the little grin and the twinkle in her eyes betrayed her. And that’s when I knew that Catherine Pessino really wasn’t such a curmudgeon after all.

**Elaine Hodges**

It certainly is easy to remember the first time I met Catherine out on Great Gull Island. From her distinctive voice to her straight-to-the-point, can-do personality, I remember thinking, “Wow. Here is an incredibly strong, independent and spirited woman!” It sticks in my mind, among other things, how she had quite the magic touch when it came to replacing the contact paper on the dining table and making the entire room look very respectable. We would always mention her name when things started looking a bit ratty. She was incredibly blunt when she spoke, but I could detect a wry sense of humor there, and a twinkle in her eye. Her energetic and dynamic work throughout her life shows just what a completely selfless woman she was. Her love of nature and her spirit will live on at the Museum and Great Gull, and in the many, many people, young and old alike, that she touched during her lifetime.

Happy trails, Catherine. It was my pleasure to have known you.

**Lisa Neild**

The first time I met Catherine she was getting the island kitchen ready for the summer — cleaning, putting new contact paper on the tables, cleaning some more, putting up new fly paper, cleaning some more. She kept up a running commentary about “Hays and company — they won’t pay attention during the season to keeping the place clean”, etc. Catherine was tough and articulate. She was hard working. She was glorious. Every time I met her, I was impressed by her strength, her no nonsense attitude, but particularly by her affection and love for the Great Gull Island project and particularly for our wonderful leader — “Hays”.

**Margie Haggerty**

I was very sorry to hear of Catherine’s passing. I have many fond memories of work weekends on the island pulling weeds or cutting Bayberry and Bittersweet next to her; sitting at the long table in the Carpenter Shop eating morning donuts and the countless times she got up early in the morning to wash the dishes from the night before. She was dedicated to life and a great person to be around. Our thoughts are with her family and the others she leaves.

**Tim Male**

Catherine was a remarkable woman, excellent teacher and scientist and, I know, a special friend to all the Great Gull Island people. Just wanted to let you know I am thinking of you. I was very fond of Catherine and admired her greatly. If there is a heaven, I have no doubt Catherine is up there wisecracking and counting terns.

**Ivy Kuspit**

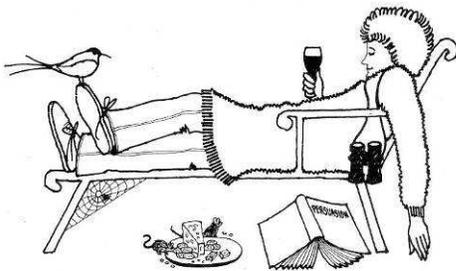
There once was a maniac pyro  
By the name of Catherine Pessino  
When it came her turn  
The grasses to burn  
She did it with white gasolino

**Great Gull Island Limerick**

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## La Capanna

*In 1985 Catherine purchased the house in Lake Katrine she had always loved. She named it La Capanna — primitive but in Italian. The house, converted from a chicken house was far from primitive. Windows from floor to ceiling on either side of the living room made it feel as if one were living outside and were very much a part of the woods and fields. Here Catherine entertained her cousins each year and here her mother lived until she died in 1995.*



Catherine M. Pessino  
Announces her Early Retirement  
from  
THE Museum  
on  
September 1, 1985

She will then be available for:  
*Travel*  
*Bird Watching*  
*House Sitting*  
*Wine Tasting*  
*Other Pursuits of Happiness*  
*and on occasion*  
*work*

I first met Catherine at a Tai Chi class in upstate New York. Over the course of weekly practice sessions (our “homework”) and dinners at La Capanna, a chicken coop transformed into a simple but elegant home, I came to know and love this fabulous woman.

To me, a person often burned out by spending too many stressful hours in a cubicle, she embodied the possibilities of a life of true adventure. It seemed that at one time or another she had been almost everywhere with colleagues, family, or friends. In Alaska, India, New Mexico or New Zealand, in the bush or in the city, Catherine was at home.

In time, she invited my husband Taylor and me to share in the Great Gull Island experience. She somehow knew we would come to love, as she did, the backbreaking work of raking vegetation, roofing derelict buildings, and setting up observation blinds in a cold and damp brick-and-concrete wasteland with no amenities of any kind, all to create a paradise for nesting terns and a reasonably habitable place for the humans who studied them.

Indomitable and independent, disciplined and hardworking, devoted to her family and friends, she lived with zest. When ants threatened La Capanna, she attacked them with relish, dust-buster in hand. When she hosted the “Cousins Olympics” for her large extended family each summer, everyone got a prize. Friends gathered regularly for marathon games of Spite-and-Malice. Catherine was about possibilities and opportunities, working hard and celebrating often and well, paying no attention to people who said it couldn’t be done, bringing newcomers into the fold. She walked in beauty on the road less traveled and inspired us to do it too.

**Liz (Staples) Brugman**

Catherine was one of our original Maine Camp crew thirty-five years ago — helping us set up, dig a privy hole, and providing “roughing it” advice as well as moral support.

She was a friend and good neighbor to us in Lake Katrine. Helpful and kind to her many friends, cousins, anyone in trouble, ill or anyone in an “emergency” situation, devoted to her dear mother who tolerated none of her guff.

Game for anything, such as slogging in a muddy pond at dark looking for spring peepers. A fine birdwatcher.

Never reticent and sometimes needed help removing foot from mouth.

We’ll remember one of the best!

**Barbara Hastie**

Catherine was my next-door neighbor for nearly twenty years. In that time we became very close. Knowing Catherine is knowing her family to which she was deeply committed.

Catherine appreciated life. She, of course, traveled the world and shared those experiences with her friends. I know this sounds clichéd, but Catherine will always live in my memory. She will never die in my mind. There is no separation spiritually between life and death in our friendship.

**Andrew Koehn**

I met Catherine Pessino a few years ago through Kay Martini. Kay told me that Cathy traveled a lot and usually found birds to add to her life list wherever she went. I am a very amateur birder and whenever Cathy visited Kay, I was invited over and usually got her to talk about some of her birding adventures. I remember one story about a trip to New Zealand with the AMNH when on a dark and gloomy and rainy night the group set off on a long walk on a shoreline to see a Stuart Island Kiwi. As Cathy told it, everyone was wet and shivering when the guide said, quietly, “there it is”. Cathy says she saw something whiz by -people murmured, “Ah yes, there it is.” And Cathy said, “I’m not sure if it was or not, but I was happy to get out of the rain.”

That one story made me feel very good at being the fair-weather birder that I am. It is a pleasure to have Cathy and her stories about travel and especially Gull Island in my mind. I visit her there often and I miss talking to her terribly.

**Rose R. Dill**

Catherine was certainly a welcome and very positive part of my life, at least since about 1945 when she and Lois Hussey Heilbrun ran a Nature Center at Bear Mountain Park and I got to go and stay with them for a few days.

I think of Museum visits up in the Education Department, evenings of seeing the pictures they brought back from their travels, helping them get ready to go to Great Gull Island the first time and others, her visits to Alaska.

She and her mother made my mother’s last trip to Italy so very special.

I remember her wonderful story of how she was in a stall in the staff toilet one day and heard the conversation going on and was sur-

prised by the language being used. When she left the stall she said there was sudden silence and red faces and people said: “Oh! We wouldn’t have talked that way if we knew you were here.” She was astonished to know her presence cleaned up the language.

**Harriet Schirmer**

Catherine surrounds me everyday for the simple and obvious reason I live here at 70 Potter Hill Road, her La Capanna. I always knew she thought carefully about her decisions and made excellent choices — i.e., travel, education, entertainment, books, fashion for herself and home furnishings; now I appreciate snippets

Outstanding and long lasting friendships were perhaps the keystones to a remembrance of Catherine. Therefore, everyday as I peer out the window and the view of The Stone Wall blesses my view, as it was for her. Her many friends, solid, strong, “rock of ages” has a living message of Catherine for all.

**Nancy Stevens**

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Pictures

- p. 1 Catherine in Maine (Kate Swift)
- p. 2 Catherine with student in Science Center (Arthur Singer; courtesy of American Museum of Natural History)
- p. 13 Catherine on Great Gull Island, 1950 (Lois Hussey Heilbrun, from “An Island Venture” by Lois J. Hussey and Catherine Pessino. *Natural History*, April 1951)
- p. 18 Catherine’s retirement announcement (drawn by Barbara Hastie; courtesy of Delores Nugent)
- p. 20 Catherine receiving book from John Kieran at a Linnaean Society of NY Annual Meeting (courtesy of Linnaean Society of New York)



Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of you who wrote something about Catherine for this issue of FOGGI. The accounts are excellent and I think together give a great, many-sided view of Catherine and her life.

I would also like to thank a number of people who helped with Catherine's *New York Times* obituary. After Catherine died I called Communications in the Museum and then called Kate Swift to see if she would be willing to write a press release about Catherine we could send to the *Times*. Kate agreed immediately, but said she needed material. I promised to send material. Kate also had a great picture of Catherine. Kate's brother Jack Swift, retrieved the picture from Kate's house in Maine, scanned it into his computer and

emailed it to her. After receiving Kate's press release the *Times* called and we sent more material. Robin Lloyd, in Communications at the Museum, faxed the *Times* the *Natural History* magazine article Lois and Catherine wrote about the month they spent on Great Gull Island in 1950. Margalit Fox, the reporter at the *Times* who wrote Catherine's obituary, put all the pieces together and produced a most affecting account of Catherine.

Thanks from all of us to Joe DiCostanzo, my co-worker on the Great Gull Island Project, who did the layout and edited (only slightly) the reminiscences. He has produced a fine looking first issue of FOGGI. Also thanks to Tom Endrey in the Great Gull Island office for handling the mailing of FOGGI.

Helen Hays