

Tragedy at Joe's Pond

E. Jane Brown

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I was contacted in November 2007, by a stranger named Joe Colombo who needed help locating the cottage at Joe's Pond that his aunt and uncle had once owned. As a teenager, Joe had spent summer vacations there and was curious about the place. I was able to help him, and we exchanged some history about the pond. He asked if I remembered when two nuns drowned here in 1961. I had a dim memory of the accident – every now and then someone will bring it up and say how sad it was and go on to something else - and I confessed I knew nothing of the details. As secretary of the Joe's Pond Association, I have many newspaper clippings about Joe's Pond saved in a large album; but I didn't have one about the nuns who drowned.

Joe e-mailed to me a copy of the Caledonian Record article dated July 29, 1961, describing the tragedy. Along with that clipping, he sent his own account of what happened that day. He was only 14 years old at the time. As I read his story, I began to feel for the first time the awful horror of that day. Joe mentioned a couple names of people still here at the pond. I read the clipping and recognized more names. People I knew who had been there that day.

I contacted first Pam (Buttura) Hebert. Joe recalled Pam Buttura had been there and helped in the rescue. From then on, the story developed a life of its own. Everyone I contacted knew someone else who had been there or who was somehow connected. I began to put the details together – things that were left out of the newspaper. The reporter had done his or her job and got all the facts in, but there was so much more to the story I wanted to know, I began gathering information. We will never know all the details of that day, but here's how I think it perhaps was, and how it is remembered by some of those present.

The water in a cove near the narrows at Joe's Pond was sparkling blue under the hot July sun. Beyond the cove, the largest section of the three-mile long pond seemed placid, innocent, even beckoning. It was Friday, July 28, 1961. John Prevost and his wife, Minnie, owned a pleasant little cottage

not far from the narrows between the second and third ponds - on the third, or largest pond, but in a sheltered cove, not on the broad lake. That day they had entertained four nuns from St. Johnsbury. Two of the nuns, Sister St. Pauline who was John's sister, and Sister St. Edmund worked at Mt. St. Joseph Academy in St. Johnsbury. The other two nuns, Sister St. Joseph, from Montreal, and Sister St. Raymond, from Chicago, were visiting at the convent. John and Minnie often entertained the nuns, as did many of the Catholic families in St. Johnsbury.

They'd all enjoyed a nice lunch, and probably the two nuns who worked at Mt. St. Joseph's, traded stories with the two who were visiting, and John and Minnie would have been anxious to show them their beloved Joe's Pond. There was a cluster of cottages in the Prevosts' area that were owned by families from St. Johnsbury and Barre who were either close friends or related. The afternoon sun would have been beating into the quiet cove, and perhaps it was Minnie who suggested a cooling boat ride. A day at Joe's Pond wouldn't be complete without a boat ride. They may have planned to visit Priests' Island that had at one time been owned by Fr. Drouin of St. Johnsbury and later the Sisters of Charity who ran the St. Johnsbury Hospital. Surely that would be of interest to the nuns visiting from away. Sister St. Pauline and Sister St. Edmund would have known about the island and had perhaps visited it before. Or perhaps they were going to go through the narrows into the middle pond where the cars on Route 2 traveled close to the water and where they could see the activity at Point Comfort and Injun Joe's Cabins where cabins were rented to summer folks.

John readied the 12-foot, flat-bottomed aluminum boat as Minnie guided the women onto the wooden dock. We can only imagine the confusion as the four nuns, in full habit, climbed into the boat, careful not to tip it, gathering their heavy skirts, their regulation black shoes thumping noisily on the metal. John and Minnie would have steadied the boat and directed where their guests should sit before getting in themselves. As each person stepped into the little boat, it would have settled lower until the gunwale was only a few inches above the water. There were no life preservers - in 1961 people just didn't use them for a simple boat ride on Joe's Pond. The boat was square on both ends, and was powered by a small motor. Once everyone was settled, John probably pushed the boat away from the

dock, revved the motor a little and headed out of the cove. Everyone was talking loudly to be heard over the rattle of the motor as it struggled to move the heavily loaded boat through the water, and probably as water splashed over the sides into the boat, the women good-naturedly tried to avoid getting their long black gowns wet. Suddenly the laughter turned to screams as more water came into the boat and sloshed over their heavy black shoes.

Probably John tried to turn the boat to go back to shore. He would have realized the danger. Perhaps in turning, the boat floundered and took on more water. The boat wouldn't have responded as normal to turning, instead probably rolling awkwardly to one side, awash with water. There were screams and shouts for help as the little motor sputtered and stopped and the boat sank slowly beneath the six desperate people. It would have been nearly impossible for the nuns to stay afloat once their habits became soaked.

Many of the cottages around the small cove were occupied that day. Some folks were no doubt enjoying keeping cool, reading on their screened-in porches, and some were inside, perhaps hulling strawberries or making potato salad for the evening meal. There probably were people swimming here and there along the shore.

A short distance away on the shore directly across from the Prevost cottage, 14-year-old Joe Colombo was spending his vacation with his Aunt Madlyn and Uncle Angus Murray. He was sitting on their porch when he saw several people floundering in the water and screaming for help. At first he thought they were just fooling around, but then his aunt screamed, "Those people are drowning," and together they raced to their rowboat. Madlyn tried to row, but was too excited, so young Joe took the oars and rowed as hard and fast as he could.

"We were the first to arrive," Joe told me in a recent e-mail. "I saw one nun with her head under water and Madlyn and I tried to pull her up, but she was too heavy. She was wearing the traditional nun's clothing. I jumped into the water and found her legs tangled in an anchor rope. After I untangled the rope, I resurfaced and found Uncle Angus trying to pull the

nun into a boat. Madlyn and I had purposely left Angus at the camp because he had a history of heart problems, but he had taken another boat and rowed himself out to help. By then many people had arrived and were pulling the people from the water."

Twelve-year-old Pamela Buttura was on her way in her boat to visit her friends, Gaye Brown and Raye Anne Bailey, whose families had cottages near the narrows.

"Back then, my family moved out to the pond the day school closed and stayed until Labor Day," Pam recounts. "There was a group of us from Barre and St. Johnsbury, and we spent the whole summer together."

"On that day, as I neared the narrows, I saw a small motorboat that had taken on water and was sinking," said Pam. "I drove my boat closer and tried to help one nun hold onto the side of the boat. At that time the nuns wore these big cumbersome habits and you can imagine how that weighed her down. When I tried to help her hold onto the side of the boat, the boat would tilt to one side. Other boats started to arrive."

Joe Colombo remembered seeing Pam in the water. "Pamela and I were able to push one of the nuns out of the water and into a boat. Two of the nuns were taken to our camp where one was laid on a sofa in camp and the other was laid on the lawn by the water's edge. I believe the nun by the water's edge died."

Another teenager, Ron Gauthier, was nearby with friends at Dr. Caron's cottage. It was Ron who put in a call for help. "It was a party line and somebody else was trying to call, too," he said. "Everybody was so excited." Ron helped Dr. Caron and his son pull one of the nuns up out of the water. "It took all three of us," he said. "I remember the fire truck coming with an oxygen tank, but it was too late. They had come from St. Johnsbury. They didn't use CPR back then, they worked a victim's arms to try to pump the water out.

"I think what happened was another boat came through the narrows and swamped their boat," Ron told me. "It was real small - only about a foot deep, and there were too many people in it."

"I remember going to shore where they were bringing everyone and was told that I could go home," Pam said. "It all happened very quickly, but I can still recall the nuns in the water with their weighty habits."

Roland Laperle's family had a cottage on the middle pond, just down the road from the Prevosts' cottage. Roland wrote in his e-mail to me: "I was 13 at the time. I think it may have taken place on a Friday because every Friday my mother would drag me down to St. J. to spend the day because she had to do her wash and get groceries. There was once a small grocery store near the Portland Street bridge. We had just entered around three in the afternoon. The owner asked my mother if she heard the news. Two nuns had drowned at Joe's Pond. We were shocked! If I remember correctly, John Prevost and his wife Minnie had invited some nuns from the convent, Mount Saint Joseph Academy, to spend the day with them. The nuns were invited to go for a boat ride in a rowboat. One nun who was the cook for all the nuns was terrified because she could not swim but went anyway. Well, she was one of the nuns that drowned. A few weeks before, my mother had some nuns over for dinner and I remember taking them into the woods behind the cottage to see our tree house and one of the nuns was the cook [at the convent]. She was a very sweet person. Just full of kindness and joy! It was such a tragedy!"

The Belanger cottage was next to Laperle's. Priscilla (Belanger) Messier remembered that day. She had been in St. Johnsbury with her mother that afternoon: "Dad had been working on the new house and had heard all the sirens and ambulances go west - and he got concerned as he didn't know we had come [into St. Johnsbury] - when he saw us coming back from downtown and up the driveway he was so relieved - I'll never forget the look on his face when he knew we were OK. I remember how awful we all felt when we got back to camp - talking with [Roland] and getting the details. I remember one of the nuns was 'the cooking nun' - we called her - and we couldn't believe she had died - she was always so nice. And I

remember how bad I felt for the Prevost's - such an awful accident and they were always so good to the nuns."

"A couple days later, Angus and I rowed out to the approximate location of the accident. I swam around until I found the motor, dove down and tied a rope to the motor and pulled it out. The motor was returned to the owner [Mr. Prevost]," Joe recalled.

The account in the next day's Caledonian Record covers the facts about the tragedy. It noted that State Police from the St. Johnsbury barracks investigated. Lt. Chester Nash, Cpl. Robert Field, and troopers Wade and Newman were on hand. Dr. Martin Paulsen of Danville treated the four people who were rescued; the St. Johnsbury Fire Department tried to resuscitate the two victims. Dr. Maurice Rowe from St. Johnsbury, was also on the scene. It listed people who aided in the rescue effort - Dr. Caron and his son, John; Gaye Brown; Raye Anne Bailey and her mother; Ron Gauthier; Pamela Buttura; and Joe Colombo. The boat capsized and sank in 10 feet of water. These were the facts.

What the article couldn't possibly tell was the effect it had on so many people - Sister St. Edmund of Mary who taught at Mt. St. Joseph's in St. Johnsbury, and Sister St. Raymond of Toulouse from Notre Dame, in Chicago, both saved and hospitalized in shock; the friends and families of Sister St. Pauline of the Crucifix, from Mt. St. Joseph's and Sister St. Joseph of the Angels, from Montreal who drowned; those who were involved in the rescue efforts, the entire community around Joe's Pond, and of course, the profound effect on the Prevost family and the Catholic community they were so close to.

"It just about ruined the rest of John's life," Frances Prevost of West Danville told me on the phone. "John was a dear man and it was terrible for him." John and Frances' late husband, Jules, were cousins.

This is at least one of the saddest stories in the history of Joe's Pond. The newspaper article mentions the emergency personnel who were there, the police and the doctors. There are different officers serving the area now, and some of the people mentioned are no longer with us, but people

in this small community still look out for one another. I admire very much the courage shown by the youngsters who literally jumped in to save those people. Had they not, the ending of the story could have been much, much worse.

I think it's interesting what became of some of those young people. Pam (Buttura) Hebert became a nurse. She and her husband, Joe, have a home on Joe's Pond. Joe Colombo became a policeman. He now lives in Maryland, but he said he still has a deep affection for Joe's Pond and returns whenever he can. Ron Gauthier has a cottage on Joe's Pond and he told me he's been an EMT for 15 years. Roland Laperle lives in Florida but looks forward to coming to his Joe's Pond cottage for a few weeks every summer. Roland's cousin, Priscilla (Belanger) Messier is now the Zoning and Planning Administrator in St. Johnsbury.