

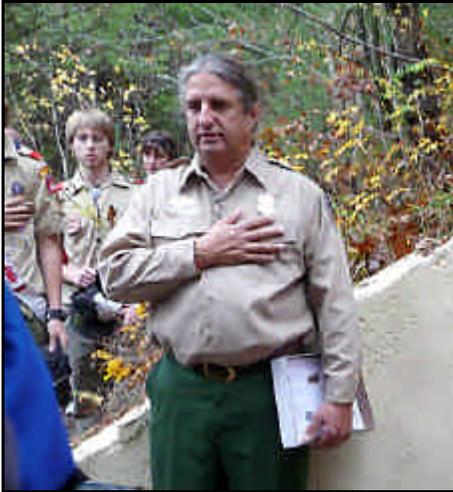


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Steve Gammon at Bunker N-9 dedication.



Steve Gammon with former Navy officer George Neat at Visitor Center exhibit.

Former Park Boss Steve Gammon Recalls Past Job “My Wompatuck Tale”

By Steve Gammon

Wompatuck News editor Jim Rose asked me to write something for the Wompatuck News reflecting on my years at Wompatuck and some humorous and interesting stories.

I began working at Wompatuck as a seasonal “conservation helper” on April 10, 1974 for The Massachusetts Department of Natural Resources. But it all started before that. I would explore the abandoned houses and buildings. One day (I was about 15) I was at the railroad transfer station (an open and abandoned building) and met up with kids. When the patrol jeep came along, we just had to start yelling and throwing rocks and of course, running. The ranger driving the jeep was Ernie Nadeau. As I grew up a little, I would ride my bike with my girlfriend or camp with my brother in Wompatuck. So, a few years later, when I was able to work at Wompatuck, I was psyched!

The First Crew:

My boss was Tom Lavoie. Tom was serious about Wompatuck and worked us hard but also liked to celebrate his free time with his staff. “Work hard, play hard”...and we did!

The crew was most colorful. Tony Del’Ofano was the assistant supervisor. He lived in the first house in Wompatuck with his wife May. They were in their 50’s and treated us all like their own children.

Bill Nolan was the skilled laborer and was a

Hingham boy. Bill acted beyond his young years and treated everyone with respect. Bill left Wompatuck and became a Hingham fireman.

“Joe” Vernon Eldridge came to Wompatuck from the Mass DPW. Largely misunderstood, Joe seemed to be abrasive and insulting, but when you got to know him, his humor was insanely hilarious. I worked with Joe for 17 years.

Bruce Ulvilla was fresh back from Viet Nam and was happy to be home.

Kenny Elliot was my age. Kenny was thirsty! He liked booze.

Jimmy Kelly was a mentally retarded guy who was truly part of the gang.

Also, but not least, was Charlie Salani. Charlie was the fireman in the Norwell Tower, but on rainy days, he worked with us. Charlie’s eyes went in different directions and we used to joke that he could see 360 degree vision. Charlie was one of the original DNR employees and was a wonderful and generous old guy.

Larry Lincoln worked at Ames Nowell, and in the winter, he would work on regional supplies out of Wompatuck. Larry grew up on Beechwood Street in Cohasset just outside of Wompatuck and his grandfather had owned the Mt. Blue Spring Water Co. Larry was later assigned to statewide supply and worked out of the transfer station building until he retired af-

ter 43 years of service.

Last, but certainly not least, was Ernie Nadeau who ran the campgrounds. He was a tough acting old WWII vet who loved his staff and campers and had a huge following. Sometimes I would work with Ernie and enjoyed his many stories. One day in the summer of 1975 (after I had worked with Ernie for over a year) we were doing a patrol at the end of the park. The McDonald’s kids lived right outside the back gate. When we approached, Ernie got out and started scolding them for something they had done. Upon his return, they were yelling at him and he was walking towards me with a big smile. When Ernie got back in the truck I commented; “what a bunch of little --- -----” Ernie looked at me grinned and said “at least they weren’t throwing rocks”!!! All that time, Ernie had recognized me from years before, and concealed that knowledge until that perfect moment! So, it was my already secure love for Wompatuck and this unique and welcoming staff that hooked me into a life at Wompatuck.

Lots of Good Work:

Shortly thereafter, Tom was transferred closer to his home and a new boss arrived, John Hart. John had a lot of enthusiasm and his philosophy was more like “no job too big.” Because of that, John acquired all sorts of equipment for us to work with. John recog-

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Old Scituate Lighthouse and the “Army of Two” marker.



Ruth Todd at Bare Cove Park dedication.



Lester Gammon in his Grenadier uniform.

“My Wompatuck Tale” (continued from page one)

nized my skills with equipment operation, welding, plumbing and electrical so in 1976, I was hired on a year ‘round basis.

The Department of Environmental Management of Boston Harbor Islands State Park had opened and the staff were stationed at Wompatuck. Ron Clough was hired as the supervisor. During the winters, the islands crew would work in Wompatuck. Ron was like a big brother to me and we drank a lot and had some hilarious times in the campgrounds.

Wompatuck got a brand new saw mill and I was trained to operate it by the factory representative. By then Glenn Holmes, who was transferred up from the Armstrong Rink, would operate the loader, feeding me logs while the crew felled trees and skidded to us. I got a lot of great experience during those years.

During the following years, budget cuts, staffing cuts and an overall DEM sponsored anti-Wompatuck sentiment caused paralysis. This seemed to be endless.

Eventually, Wompatuck’s biggest assets (it’s patrons) began to emerge. It was 20 plus years ago when I met Bill Boles. Bill had recognized that I needed help. We collaborated and started a trails advisory group with a few interested park patrons. New England Mountain Biking Association joined in with our efforts and we started holding volunteer trail events and getting a ton of work done. At the same time, the federal government had shown interest in cleaning up old buildings and bunkers.

Military Cleanup:

One of the most interesting eras in my career was when the federal government decided to demolish the ammo bunkers after a young couple were injured in a fall. The plan, developed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to remediate the danger, was functionally acceptable but would leave large, exposed cement walls and surfaces.

As the project got underway, I began to work with the stakeholders. Hingham’s Con Com officer Pine DuBouis, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers environmental engineer Bob Davis and sub contractor Rudy Pompeo. I worked with Pine and Bob on wetlands issues.

Both of those people were exceptional and they shared their vast experience with me. I looked forward to work every day!

As the project continued, I knew that the remediation design should change. Getting U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to change their own designs wouldn’t be easy.

At one point I called upon NEMBA to set up many thousands of feet of turtle fencing to keep turtles from migrating into the construction area.

I started talking to Pine about it and then Bob. They offered strong support. What was most surprising was that when I talked to Rudy Pompeo, he also felt the same. He said “I’m a local contractor and I want it to look good. I’ve been coming to Wompatuck for years”. Most contractors would take the cash and run. With the help of Pine, Bob & Rudy, we got the design changed.

A lot was learned about wetlands, conservation and collaboration.

A New Age:

As my career was drawing to a close, things were looking good but I wasn’t aware what was going to happen next. DCR had decided to redistrict the entire state. Wompatuck was to be reassigned to the Harbor Islands District. I knew the district manager Susan Kane a little from conferences and meetings but not really well and I didn’t know what to expect. In my first interview I was a little shocked. Susan seemed to be positive and encouraging. What was this! Susan quickly became a staunch supporter of me and Wompatuck. Not just a supporter, she proved herself to be one of our strongest advocates ever. With FOW and Susan’s support, more projects were accomplished than I could have ever dreamed possible, including the Whiney Spur Rail Trail and the opening of the annex area.

Editor’s Note:

Outside of Steve Gammon’s dedication to our Commonwealth, his family has a long history of patriotism going back generations.

His mother Dorothy’s side of the family, surname Bates, arrived at the South Shore in the 1600s not long after the Pilgrims landed.

One of the Bates family’s biggest claim to fame traces back to the “Army of Two” during the War of 1812.

In 1814, a British naval raiding party were tricked into retreat by 15-year-old Abigail and 21-year-old Rebecca Bates playing a fife and drum loudly from the Scituate Lighthouse. The Brits were fooled with an impression of a superior force of town militia waiting to overwhelm them. They quickly made haste.

Rebecca was quoted in a magazine about their ruse many years later: “I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” says I to my sister. ‘Look here, you take the drum and I’ll take the fife.’ I was fond of military music and could play four tunes on the fife. Yankee Doodle was my masterpiece. ‘What good’ll that do?’ says she. ‘Scare them,’ says I. “All you got to do is call the roll. I’ll scream the fife and we must keep out of sight; if they see us they’ll laugh us to scorn.”

The Bates family served in all our country’s wars starting with the Native American King Philip War of 1676.

In World War II, Steve Gammon’s father Lester fought the Nazis in the Battle of the Bulge. His anti-aircraft unit was one of the first troops to cross the Rhine River at the bridge of Remagen, Germany despite coming under intense fire from artillery, Stuka dive bombers, and ME-262 jets. He died in 2012 at the age of 96.



Lester Gammon Sr.

Steve Gammon’s aunt Ruth Todd, *nee* Bates, was honored in 2009 at Bare Cove Park for her dedicated work in the Administration Building at the Hingham Naval Ammunition Depot during World War II.

Steve’s brother Lester is a re-enactor who performs as a Grenadier in His Majesty’s 1st Foot Guards who fought in the Colonies during the American War for Independence.

Steve and his family’s story are a fitting tribute to honor upcoming Patriot’s Day. Thanks Steve! ■