

On the narrow neck of land  
between Crystal Lake and  
Vineyard Haven Harbor sits a  
little cottage with a long story.

TOM THUMB  
HOUSE

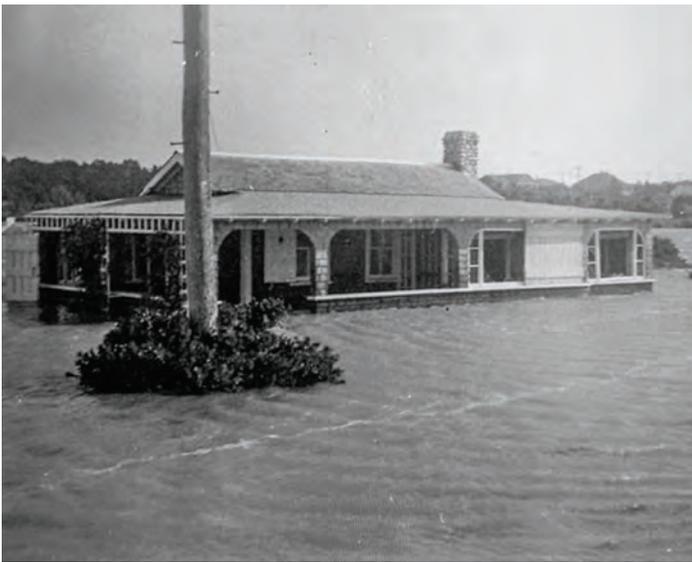
# Short and...Sweet!



BY GARRI SAGANENKO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEANNA SHEPARD





COURTESY DAN HOGAN

In 1954 floodwaters from Hurricane Carol surrounded the home.

**A**t Dan Hogan's summer home on East Chop Drive in Oak Bluffs, there is a watermark on a leg of the kitchen table that is roughly four inches high. The watermark serves as a reminder for Hogan and his partner, Jane Valley Lawson, that when they walked into the kitchen sometime in late winter of 2018, they probably should have brought their skates. "We literally could have skated," recalled Hogan. "If we had skates on, we could have skated." Of course, this wouldn't have been difficult for Hogan, who once captained the ice hockey team at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire before going on to be a starting defenseman at Yale University. Yet it would be inaccurate to say Hogan and Lawson were delighted to see their home, which is known as the Doll House and sits on the northern shore of Crystal Lake, transformed into an ice rink. "It was pretty heartbreaking to see the house in that condition," shared Lawson. "We had to wear our seaboots to break through the ice."

But if the history of Hogan's home – a history that he has awakened a general interest in since purchasing the property in 2008 – has proven to him one thing, it is that a flood is not a cause of ruin, but rather an opportunity to rebuild. After all, the northeaster that battered the Island in the winter of 2018 wasn't the first instance in which a storm brought water into the home. Hogan has seen pictures from 1954 in which floodwaters from Hurricane Carol approach the roof, and a refrigerator, which has gone belly up in the water, remains attached to the house by only a power cord plugged into an underwater outlet.





Brick floors throughout the house are intended to minimize damage in the event of flooding. Above the kitchen table, bumpers have been installed on the low beam to cushion potential impacts with passing heads.



The Crystal Lake-adjacent backyard features multiple hangout areas, including a shed that's been converted into a dining space.

And so in this most recent of postdiluvian periods, Hogan went to work. “We found all sorts of electrical problems that, for safety reasons, were good to find. We then put brick down; there are now eight inches of brick around the entire lower level of the house as well as out on the porch. It raised everything up four inches.” In addition to the masonry, major plumbing work was completed by Haynes Plumbing in West Tisbury, and the kitchen was restored by Lou Ann Burgess and Rich Carl of iKitchens Etc. in East Falmouth, the same duo that completely remodeled the kitchen in 2012.

Today the home has a look and feel of “comfortable camping,” shared Hogan, in which “it’s not so important that the furniture all match” as it is that “the spirit of the house and its history, which is that of a traditional Island camp-style home, is kept alive.” For Hogan, Lawson, and visitors alike, the home is a place where, Hogan said, if “you want to put your feet up, you can put your feet up.” And instead of water, all that flows through the house these days is an ocean breeze that makes the house and grounds about five degrees cooler than the rest of the Island, by their estimation. “We have an air conditioner that we bought maybe three years ago during

a hot spell, but we never have to use it,” boasted Lawson. “The breeze just flows in.”

Speaking more broadly about the relation between the Doll House and other summer homes on the Island, she said, “What’s important to remember about this particular house is that at the turn of the twentieth century and into the 1920s, ’30s, ’40s, and even ’50s, this is what a Vineyard summer house looked like. And with a lot of the houses around the Island, it’s the same story. Some of them have been torn down and bigger ones built in their place, but this is what a Vineyard summer cottage was, and a lot of them just don’t exist anymore.”

Still, it must be said that the Doll House would not exist in the condition that it does today without Hogan’s vision for a home that, just ten years ago, looked very different. A visitor to the Vineyard since the 1970s, Hogan’s uncles and aunts once owned a couple of homes off of South Road in Chilmark, where one of his aunts recently retired to, and his sister has a place in Edgartown. Hogan, who spent many years working as a licensed psychologist, management consultant, and, most recently, as executive director of the music venue Club Passim in Cambridge, thought he would never be able to afford his own



Dan Hogan and Jane Valley Lawson on the roof deck they added, which features panoramic views.

place on the Island, let alone a property on the water. Then one April day Hogan decided he was going to look at some houses and the real estate agent, going on a gut feeling, took him to a place that wasn't on the agenda.

"It was different," recalled Hogan. "Totally different, and I just thought, 'Well, I can't look at anything on the water,' but it was priced pretty low, had been on the market a long time, and was in pretty bad shape." This last fact, Hogan shared, might have scared off most people, but his prior vocational experience in home renovation and architectural preservation provided him with the requisite knowledge and patience to bring the Doll House, whose origins trace back to 1900, into the present day.

What made the project all the more difficult is that Hogan couldn't even live in the home at first. In order to afford the property, he had to rent out the home between the summers of 2008 and 2013, travelling between the Greater Boston area and the Vineyard to complete renovations during the spring and fall. "The first summer I owned the house," said Hogan, laughing, "one cancellation is the only reason I could stay here." But in those periods when the weather was agreeable and the house unoccupied, Hogan enlisted the services of many local contrac-

tors to achieve his vision. It began with the unenviable task of replacing a septic system that, he learned, was allowing rainwater to seep in. It cost more than 50 cents per gallon to empty. "In some ways I was stupid," Hogan confessed. "The septic issues would have stopped most people." But the drip dispersal system that Vineyard Land Surveying & Engineering devised was the perfect solution. The work consisted of repurposing the two 1,200-gallon "black water" tanks and placing them just eighteen inches below the ground, much more shallow than the five to six feet required for standard septic systems. It was a bit of an innovation at the time, given that the system was the first of its kind in Oak Bluffs and only the second in use on the Island.

Since then, and with the help of Island carpenter JC Vermynck, Hogan has replaced all of the windows and doors, converted a storage shed into an intimate space for meals and reading, refloored the guest house and the main house, converted the tool shed into an artist's studio (for Lawson, who is a painter), and repainted the interior and exterior of the house on several occasions. Hogan's greatest addition to the house is the roof deck, which was designed by Chuck Sullivan of Sullivan + Associates Architects in Oak Bluffs and built by Doug Best

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of D. Best Construction. The spiral staircase that leads up to the deck required special permission from the Oak Bluffs Building Department and the town conservation commission, but the payoff is that from this vantage point one is afforded a panoramic view of Vineyard Haven Harbor, Vineyard Sound, the East Chop Lighthouse, as well as Crystal Lake.

A walk about the grounds of the Doll House today reveals a property lush with plants and habitat native to Crystal Lake. Such vegetation will often attract a family of mallard ducks that waddle their way right up to the foot of the kitchen door, where Lawson leaves a bowl of feed upon which they can snack. Some days a muskrat will scurry across the lawn, spooking the family of ducks and clearing the way for a doe and her fawns to come nibble on what has been left behind by the squirrels and birds. For Lawson, the scene is reminiscent of a secluded lake in Maine and a far cry from the more industrious days of Crystal Lake, which has become somewhat of a forgotten natural landmark. Among other things, the lake meets the criterion for a great pond (ten acres or larger), is technically accessible by the public, and was once home to the Oak Bluffs Ice Company, Carnie's Day Camp, and a footbridge that connected the northern and southern shores. All in all, Crystal Lake remains a rare example of a region of the Island that has become less commodified as time has passed. And its history is inextricably tied to that of the Doll House, which has stood as a witness to it all and now acts as a sort of portal into its past.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Hogan keeps handy a copy of *Reflections in Crystal Lake*, a pamphlet-sized work compiled by Ruth S. Nerney that tells the story of human activity on the lake over the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Nor is it shocking to learn that Hogan holds the distinction of being the official “steward of Crystal Lake,” an honor given to him by the East Chop Association. It is a role he has earned and has duties for which Lawson is a perfect complement. Both Hogan and Lawson are concerned about the health of the lake, sharing that the recent ban on the use of herbicides has led to the growth of aggressive, nonnative phragmites. It is their hope



WELCOME TO THE VINEYARD







that in the coming years the careful, calculated application of safer herbicides might protect the ecosystem of the lake from permanent disruption.

Sitting on their porch, which faces away from the lake and toward East Chop Drive, Hogan and Lawson often hear the sound of joggers, walkers, and cyclists traversing what Hogan believes is the nicest stretch of road on the Island. “It’s such a lovely run, walk – this whole stretch – going down by the beach, up to the bluffs, back to the harbor. I like the quiet and peacefulness here, but I also like being close to Circuit Ave. and Main Street in Vineyard Haven.” When summer is in full swing, Hogan and Lawson will hear a tour bus come to a stop in front of their home. The driver’s voice is faint, but Hogan is still able to make out what they are saying. “They tell a story about how this was [General] Tom Thumb’s house. Another story they tell is that Lucy and Sarah Adams, who were also performers in the Barnum & Bailey Circus, lived here.”

But Hogan does his research, often utilizing the archives at the Martha’s Vineyard Museum to confirm or deny the latest tale that is told about his home. He is neither quick to believe nor dismiss what he hears about the history of the Doll House. He is just careful not to let hearsay enter its canon. All told, the story of the Doll House traces its origins to a mere fishing shack built by Harold Totten in the early 1900s before passing from the Fales family to the Metcalf family, who lived in it for more than half a century before it came under the stewardship of Hogan in 2008. And then, after meeting each other in 2016, Lawson as well. The two are the perfect caretakers of the property and bonded over their love for folk music, eventually collaborating to form a musical duo called The Crystal Lake Ice Company. In the summer of 2019, they could be seen busking in Oak Bluffs’ Post Office Square.

When I shared with Hogan and Lawson that, in preparation for the interview, I read that a person claimed one of the Munchkins from *The Wizard of Oz* had lived in the house, they both burst into laughter. “That’s a riot,” said Lawson. “I think a tour bus driver probably made that up,” added Hogan. And yet I got the sense that Hogan was not yet ready to outright deny this claim either. After all, there are two wooden signs fastened to the railing of the roof deck. One reads “Doll House” and was discovered by Hogan when cleaning out the tool shed in preparation for renovations. The other reads “Tom Thumb House c.1900” and was made by Hogan as a nod to the extensive, sometime fanciful, history of the home. From their position up on the roof deck, the signs, which are painted purple and adorned with an emblematic cluster of grapes, are visible to all passersby, whether on foot or on a bus. Together the two signs function as a reminder that history is always a lot more fun when it includes a little bit of lore. ♦