

Rampant Curiosity — Edith Iglauer

Edith Iglauer is not an easy person to interview. While she graciously welcomes me into her home on Garden Bay in north Pender Harbour, her more than 60 years of journalistic investigation compel her to ask rather than answer questions. With laser beam inquisitiveness she asks me the who, what, when and how. Repeatedly, I remind her she's the subject — not I. It's evident Edith has been blessed with "rampant curiosity," as her second son, Richard Hamburger, describes her thirst for knowing. That passion also underpins her incisive *New Yorker* articles on air pollution, the World Trade Center's foundations, and Pierre Trudeau, as well as books on Inuit cooperatives, an ice road in the Northwest Territories, Canadian architect Arthur Erickson, and *Fishing with John*, the best-seller narrating her love for John Daly and their life together on the sea.

Edith lives in the brown-planked, yellow-trimmed house she shared with John until his death in the late '70s. From the dock, with its small runabout ready to tour the bay, it's a steep walk up a path fringed by pink sweet peas and a handrail of rebar painted green. Edith greets me on the broad deck lined with potted roses, violets, geraniums, basil and rosemary. She's a handsome, diminutive woman, outfitted elegantly in white linen slacks, a soft blue blouse, matching ceramic necklace and dangly silver earrings. She frequently puts on and removes glasses whose frames resemble Joseph's coat of many colours. Her hair is a white aureole, although her trademark eyebrows are still black. She talks to me about her on-deck herb and flower garden, then points to a deep, claw-footed bathtub on the deck. Copper tubing sticks through the wood slats leading to the bright brass faucets, red geraniums surround the tub. She flashes a mischievous smile, "That's where I can bathe *au naturel*."

We talk in her spacious kitchen and although Edith has installed a large fridge, the kitchen displays the practical touches a fisherman used to ocean swells might add. Next to the hefty, old-fashioned cooking stove, canted shelves clutch a series of variously-sized pot lids. Hooks clasp a collection of pans. Groups of cabinets line the walls. Next to the kitchen, a narrow living room is clad in coffee-coloured, diamond-patterned spruce, with a long, sagging shelf crammed with an eclectic selection of books running the length of one wall. Lived-in furniture, heirlooms, bits of china and paintings make the room welcoming, a place to call home. More hand-built bookshelves occupying every bit of vertical space between doors crowd the hallway.

Edith began life 85 years ago in Cleveland, Ohio. At Wellesley College, she read Lincoln Steffens's autobiography describing his relentless investigations of municipal corruption and vowed to pursue the same career. After graduating, she parked herself every day outside the offices of Cleveland's three daily newspaper editors, giving each one two hours. She came to be recognized by every newspaper employee, but it didn't result in a job, thus that fall, she enrolled at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism and began writing freelance articles. During World War II she prepared radio broadcasts for the Office of War Information and covered Eleanor Roosevelt's weekly press conferences. Toward the end of that conflict, Edith joined her then husband, *New Yorker* war correspondent Philip Hamburger, and sent dispatches

to the *Cleveland News* from Yugoslavia (“... everything was rationed, food ... medicine, clothing, and freedom”).

Her lucid, well-researched writings led to assignments for *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and eventually, *The New Yorker*. Because she freelanced, her career allowed her enough time to raise two sons, Jay and Richard. Sometimes she chose article topics — such as the one on New York City's mounted police — that allowed her to take the boys along to the horse barracks. But when her marriage failed, her New York life lost its sheen as well. “I found it very tough in New York after my divorce. When I wrote stories about Canada's far north and the Inuit cooperatives, I met many people who said that if I liked the Arctic, I'd like British Columbia even more. So in 1969, I rented a station wagon, and with my boys, three air mattresses and some sleeping bags, set out to visit B.C. No one told us we'd need a tent for west coast deluges so we spent a lot of time sleeping in that station wagon. A wonderful trip. We camped all over Vancouver Island and I fell in love with British Columbia.”

One place she visited was Simon Fraser University in a Vancouver suburb. Dazzled by the architecture, Edith tucked away the architect's name — Arthur Erickson — for future reference, and returned to New York. Then in 1973, her friend, the author Paul St. Pierre, offered to rent her his Vancouver apartment. She crossed the continent again with a *New Yorker* assignment on Erickson in hand, a task that provided a superb entrée into Vancouver's creative community. Shortly afterwards, she met John Daly, a commercial fisherman, who'd spent as many years catching spring salmon as Edith had writing. He told her he felt at one with the sea and the mountains and was part of the B.C. coast. She fell in love with his outdoor vision and with him, and for the next five fishing seasons Edith shared John's life on the *MoreKelp*, his 41-foot troller. Winters, they lived in Pender Harbour.

How can a sophisticated city dweller, accustomed to a life rich with artists, writers and musicians go fishing for months on a boat without a head? “I just loved John,” Edith says simply. She also believes her childhood experiences prepared her to adapt to changing circumstances. “My father had a cabin in the country. When I was growing up, we'd go out there on Sundays. My mother loved my father so she put up with the terrible cabin and its outhouse and no running water. We washed our plates in the stream. That stayed with me. When I went to the Arctic, people asked how I could do something so different, but I was just following in my father's footsteps. I'd been taught never to complain ... I loved the whole business of using kerosene stoves and eating dried food. I was able to wash dishes in less water than anybody. So later, life on John's boat was an extension of that early training.”

While serving tea in delicate china accompanied by homemade blueberry cake, Edith tells me how John and the boat changed her life and her values. Spending fishing seasons on the narrow *MoreKelp*, she learned nautical and fishing terminology — a language of its own. She discovered binnacles and wildly-coloured plastic lures, trolling rigs, gurdies, and learned that red salmon was more valuable than white. She found that John's height, 6-foot 4-inches, allowed him to clamber aboard the *MoreKelp* with ease, while hoisting her 5-foot 2-inches frame above the freeboard from a dinghy was a life-threatening exercise. Using the VHF radio for the first time turned into a sweat-provoking experience. She found out that a vinegar-water solution combined with a scrubber made from newspapers cleaned the boat's pilot house windows better than

Windex. She created an “ergonomic” writing place on John’s bunk, using pillows, folded long underwear, a blanket, a floater jacket and a hard dishpan as back support so she could reach the typewriter perched on a board.

She caught a few fish and cleaned them, but never took to killing fish. Only slowly did she reconcile herself to what she called, “death in the cockpit.” Not liking the destruction of living things, yet knowing people need to eat, she told John one day, “I have accepted your philosophy. I have accepted my place in the food chain to which every living creature belongs.”

Although Edith cherished her time with John on the *MoreKelp*, along with the salty air, sunsets, and the beauty of the B.C. coast, running the boat did not come naturally. “I’m not safe steering a fishing boat by myself,” she says. “I wish I’d started on the water earlier.” She recalls how the fishermen’s union boss once saw her prowl around the vessel. “‘Edith,’ he said, ‘don’t ever let go of one thing until you’re holding onto another.’ Best piece of advice I ever got.” She adds that John reminded her often that the “sea is out to get you and don’t you forget it.”

John also taught her to put things back in their place. “I didn’t do that when I first got on the boat,” she chuckles. “I put tools, pots and cups down where I happened to drop them. He told me we could drown if things were in the wrong place in an emergency. It’s a habit now. I still put things back.”

What she thoroughly enjoyed about the fishing life was getting to know the coastal people who earn their living from the sea. “I don’t think appearances matter much any more. I began to see that when I wrote about Inuit cooperatives in the Arctic. But until I came to British Columbia I’d never known people who could do things like build houses. I’d grown up to be professional and to be around professionals ... I was a snob. I’d never been with fishermen. I learned they were the most wonderful people in the world. I found that people who work with their hands, who keep going no matter what, are marvellous. I prefer them most of the time.”

During the fishing seasons Edith continued to write, completing the Erickson profile, which later became a book. “John wasn’t interested in architecture the way I am,” she says, “but he was a good listener and critic.” While learning how much a fisherman needs to know — navigation, meteorology, tides and currents, mechanical skill, boat handling, fishing and, of course, handling fish properly until they’re delivered — she began taking notes on the intricacies of a fishing career. Along the way, she and John married. She still titters at the memory of his purchase of a sky-blue, wooden toilet seat for the beat-up galvanized pail that served as the onboard head. That seat was part of his marriage proposal.

A heart attack took John’s life in 1978 at a dance in The Pas, Manitoba, where the couple had gone to visit John’s son, Sean. Two years later Edith began composing *Fishing with John*, which many readers regard as a love story. It is, on many levels: the love of a man and a woman for each other, a love of the fishing life, a deep appreciation of the sea, an everlasting delight in the British Columbia coast, a love of life. The book was nominated for a Governor General’s Award. “I spent eight years writing it. I was so desperate without him. So I went into my room and lived with him while I wrote it. He’s still very much a part of me.”

She also made B.C. her permanent home. As she wrote in *Fishing*, “...with the new pair of eyes that John had given me, I could not go back to what I had been before.” She added a modern office to the house, and a screen plastered with faded *New Yorker* covers and the framed

original drawings illustrating her articles recall her earlier life. A few years ago she met former logger Frank White, who offers “wonderful companionship.”

She’s active in many Pender Harbour community activities, still writes short pieces and compiled *The Strangers Next Door*, a compendium of her work. Her phone rang continuously after the September 11 terrorist attack, when journalists from around the world asked for her insights on the Trade Center towers’ foundations. Thirty years ago *The New Yorker* published her seven-year study describing the monumental effort of digging, reinforcing and waterproofing the ten-storey-deep foundations, sometimes called the “Big Bathtub.”

Edith looks back over her long life with composure. “I didn’t actually feel at all old until people got up and let me have their seats on buses,” she says in her deep voice. Her health is good, although cataract operations two years ago added some unwanted clarity. “I looked in the mirror and asked myself, ‘Who is this person with these lines in her face?’ I thought I was the only woman to have reached the age of 80 without wrinkles. But I don’t find growing old so bad — it’s very interesting and a challenge. And I’m still curious. I want to know everything all the time. I find the world infinitely amazing, beyond imagination and irresistible.”

Edith Iglauer died in 2019 just short of her 102nd birthday.