

Prologue

The Path to Grand Lake Stream

*“ . . . and everything is green and blue
and everybody smiles at you,
and Daddy, can we stay a few more days?
I never want to leave this place.”*

—from “One Road In” by Randy Spencer

I don't know how long I sat on my guitar case on the Grand Lake Stream town dock that June afternoon thirty-six years ago. I wondered how I was going to make the final twelve miles of a journey that began eighteen hours earlier in Maryland, but it didn't seem like an emergency. The view stretched forever and I was lulled.

There wasn't a soul in sight until an orange Duratech emerged from a cove across the way and moved toward me. As the boat approached the dock it turned broadside to reveal a bedraggled, sixtyish man with an even more bedraggled Pug pooch in his lap.

“Can you play that thing?” he hollered over the outboard. I nodded and gave him a thumbs-up.

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“Where ya goin’?”

“I’m supposed to be at Darrow Camp today, but I don’t know how I’m going to get there.”

The man—Warren Arthur Whiting—got up and weighed the boat’s fuel tank in his hand.

“Tell ya what. You play, the dog and me’ll listen, and if you’re any good, we’ll get you to Darrow’s.”

This looked like the only game in town, so I threw my lot into the hands of a complete stranger, never bothering to ask what might happen if I didn’t pass the audition.

Stepping into that orange boat was one of the most fateful decisions of my life.



Grand Lake Stream, Maine, is a tiny, six-street village surrounded by eleven interconnecting lakes in northern Washington County, 35 miles from the Canadian border. “GLS,” as it is colloquially known, has a population of 125 people.

The road to Grand Lake Stream began for me in Annapolis, Maryland, where I had moved not long after graduating from Elon College in North Carolina. I shared a rented house with a college pal and was trying to be a club musician. There I met a special girl named Shelley and her beautiful three-year-old daughter, Erin. On the Maryland music scene, I met David Mack, who in the summer worked as a camp counselor at Darrow’s. He told me about a job opening that sounded idyllic. George Darrow owned a wilderness canoe camp on The Birches, a completely self-contained island with generated power, located



Photo courtesy of Randy Spencer

My brother Al Spencer (left) and me on Peabody Pond in 1953. Our visits served as a pressure valve for my father.

twelve miles by water from Grand Lake Stream. George needed someone to meet up with canoe groups at different checkpoints and resupply them. I'd have a van and all the gear they'd need to complete their trips down Maine's storied waterways. Escaping the Maryland summer heat was a big draw—I didn't ponder long.

Maine, after all, was already forged into my fiber. My father, Kerwin Alton Spencer Sr., had taken his three sons to his brother's camp on Peabody Pond in Sebago since their births. Dad was working his way through the white-collar labyrinth of the Connecticut banking hierarchy. One by-product was stress, and the Sebago camp was his pressure valve. There, at all hours of the day and night, he fished and taught his sons to fish. Landlocked salmon were the most prized quarry, and nothing put a perk in his gait like a chilly morning with a good "salmon chop" on the lake. Rowing, paddling, swimming, hiking, frogging, trapping bait, and fishing were the stripes we earned thanks to Dad and Mom. Although for Mom, to call those trips



Photo courtesy of Randy Spencer

My parents Kerwin and Harriett Spencer at Peabody Pond in 1981. My father imparted his love of fishing to me.

vacations might be a stretch. She worked as much as ever, only without plumbing and electricity.

And so it was that in June of 1973 I loaded a VW bug and headed for the state where my happiest memories were born. I would turn twenty-five in Grand Lake Stream and that sounded fine to me. It was a withering 700 miles for the poor, battered VW bug that had taken me through college and beyond. Like all elderly travelers, it now needed more stops—stops to cool down those four overworked cylinders and give the crankcase a drink of oil. Once in Maine, I made the mandatory stop at L.L. Bean in Freeport to make sure I was equipped to catch a salmon,

and to feed the VW one more quart of oil that surely would get it the rest of the way. It did, and when I reached the town dock five hours later, I felt that my faith had been requited by the steaming, crackling Beetle parked there humbly under the tall pines on its too-smooth treads.

And it was there that I first met Warren Arthur Whiting, he of the orange Duratech, and who from that day on treated me like his long-lost son. And how could I avoid being intrigued by a man who could whittle a model ship, hook a wool rug, build a solid camp with hand tools, and write a good poem, all on a steady drip of Narragansett Lager Beer? And, as if that weren't enough, he had once met Hank Williams. From our many conversations that summer, I ascertained that in the distant past there had been a family. Pain, loss, estrangement—whatever the details were, they only made themselves known in the lines of his face at certain times. I never pressed the point. Warren gave me a history lesson on his native Grand Lake Stream replete with recitations of local poems and songs. He taught me a host of wilderness shortcuts and tricks that would behoove any traveler in those woods to know. He bought me a new guitar and an amp and bade me write a song about Maine's infamous black flies, those "devils in disguise." In return, Warren asked for something valuable to him in his solitary life—a visit whenever I was passing through.

Every now and then, I come across the birch-bark postcard I fashioned and mailed to Shelley back in Annapolis that summer, thinking it might impress her. She later agreed to take a chance on me for life, so it couldn't have hurt. We both still marvel that the postcard actually made it through the U.S. Postal Service maze intact. On it I had written, "for as far as the eye can see, the world here is green and blue."

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That entire summer's labors yielded only \$350. But the outdoor skills I learned, the 1957 Old Town river canoe I restored, the salmon I caught trolling a fly as I paddled "downlake" on leaving day, the messages the vast wilderness whispered—they all made their indelible imprint. I'd leave Grand Lake Stream, but I sensed that it would not leave me.



During that summer of 1973, absence played its fond role for Shelley and me. By fall, after three months apart, we knew we were destined to be a team. So back in Maryland, we immediately laid plans to relocate together to New England. Shelley continued to waitress as Erin started preschool. On a lead from David Mack, I traveled to Woodstock, Connecticut, to investigate work, rents, and schools. I shared a lake house that winter in beautiful northeastern Connecticut, supporting myself by playing club dates in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Woodstock seemed like an excellent place to raise children, with its rural character, farms, lakes, and streams. Shelley visited a few times and agreed.

Our plan was interrupted that spring by two deaths. The owners of the Sebago camp, my father's brother Henry and his wife Ethel, had succumbed to asphyxiation from a propane refrigerator gas leak while staying at the camp. They were found dead on the floor by a family friend. The camp would go to my parents, but my father was not emotionally ready to take on the project and all the work needed. Shelley and I volunteered.

That June we made the journey that would begin our life together as a family. Great sadness had given way to great happiness as we settled into the lake house and became attuned to the beauty of that place. Shelley quickly found work at a local inn open to summer tourists and I started playing in area pubs. That scheme afforded Erin a good babysitting schedule—one of us was always available and on duty to take her swimming or fishing or hiking.

The end of summer brought school considerations. The work we were doing, lucrative while the summer lasted, would shortly dry up. Erin needed a school and a home base. We returned to Woodstock and found a fixer-upper farmhouse with insufficient heat, little to no insulation, and years of neglect. We traded the owner elbow grease and improvements for rent. We both knew we would find work, and did—Shelley at the Publick House in Sturbridge, and me in any gin joint of my choosing, playing the guitar and singing. Every spare penny went into paint, fuel, and home improvement tools. I also landed a job at a golf course as a greenskeeper.

Our Connecticut years were punctuated by several life-changing events. Shelley had emergency surgery for an ectopic pregnancy and while recovering decided to enroll in nursing school. This led all the way to graduation from Worcester State College with a bachelor's degree and an RN. While still performing nights and weekends, I became a certified greenskeeper at the golf course, and we built a home in Woodstock.

Meanwhile, I had taken Warren's suggestion to write a song about black flies, and it was scheduled for release in the spring of 1981. I couldn't wait to send the acetate master recording of "Black Flies" to Warren just before it came across his local radio station. The single came out the same week Shelley and I were

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married—the first week of May. It had caused such a ruckus by the day of the ceremony that the band and I hit the road the very next day, putting a honeymoon on hold. By June, a monster had been created and the phone went crazy.

In July, singer Harry Chapin was killed on the Long Island Expressway in a tragic tractor-trailer collision. We were asked to perform at a benefit concert for Harry's impassioned cause—world hunger—and it was there, on a stage in Hartford, Connecticut, that “Black Flies” reached a wider audience. From there, we rode the storm out for all it was worth.

The song, released as a mere novelty, topped radio charts in two countries, and no one was more surprised than me.

By Labor Day weekend I was ready for a break, and Shelley was eight months pregnant with our son, Ian. We decided on Grand Lake Stream for some R&R, and called ahead to let Warren know we were coming. On Shelley's and Erin's first visit to the place I'd been raving and writing about for years, we were met with a line of children at the Pine Tree Store, all wanting their copy of “Black Flies” signed. These were the final days of the vinyl, 45 rpm single, and there was a stack of them on the counter.

The store owners, Robert and Bonnie Gagner, let us use their camp uplake for our stay. With Warren's orange Duratech and some coordinates from Robert on how to find the place, we set out with a guitar, a fly rod, and enough food for three days. I owed Shelley a honeymoon and this one would've been difficult to top. The weather smiled. The salmon cooperated. Robert and Bonnie's camp was fully appointed and comfortable. Even Ian, preparing for his final descent, seemed mellowed.

One day, the three (almost four) of us hiked the jagged shoreline until we were surprised by a ramshackle camp almost hidden from view by overgrowth. Hemlocks and jack pines



Photo courtesy of Randy Spencer

This is the cabin that I stumbled upon while biking with the family. I was able to buy it, and it helped change my life.

enshrouded the place, and it was clear no one had ventured there for a long time. When I pressed on the door it creaked open. On the table in the middle of the very dark, main room was a note. It read, "Please leave as found. Kindling in the woodbox, few staples in screen cupboard. Thank you—the owner."

Shelley and I had recently been to Concord, Massachusetts, to see Walden Pond and Henry David Thoreau's cabin. This place was its first cousin. There was a main camp and a smaller camp, both built with cedar logs. In the larger was a wood cookstove, a wood heating stove, a sink and pitcher pump, a rough-hewn table and benches, and two double-sized bunks accommodating eight. I stayed there far longer than Shelley's lower back would've liked, but I was caught up in a daydream. I was looking not at the holes in the floor and in the roof, not at the log sills sunk low in the mud, not at the mouse batting in

those old camp mattresses, but at what it all might look like with some intense TLC. We finally left, but once again I had the distinct feeling that this place wasn't going to leave me.

One day that fall after Ian was born, Shelley said out of the blue, "Why don't you find out who owns it and write to them?" How did she come by these strange powers? Apparently, I'd been staring into space more than usual. Her words ignited a blitz of research that yielded a name and a New Hampshire address. I wrote a spare note, trying not to reveal that I'd be crushed if the response was negative—it was, and I was.

Seven months later I was still staring into space.

"Write again," Shelley said. "Water under the bridge, changes, who knows?"

This time, I penned a more honest representation of what was in my heart. I praised the place despite its disrepair. I wrote about the feeling I had when I saw it, about my family, and about our ideas for giving the place a new future. I also made a modest offer with consideration that Shelley was in nursing school and I was playing Mr. Mom to Ian and Erin.

I remember trembling holding the return mail that came so quickly. The envelope was thicker than the previous response. As I read the smooth hand of the widow who owned my dream, my eyes welled up. She confessed that she had never seen the place. Her husband, a banker just like my father, had used it as a sporting hideaway until he became too ill to keep it up. They had a handicapped son whom she had hoped would be able to use the place one day, but over the winter, following my first letter, she had done some soul-searching and realized that those ruminations outreached reality. Yes, she would accept my offer, and she was happy to think it could bring so much joy to someone.

Beginning that first summer and for the next sixteen years, Shelley and I shepherded our children to the woods and waters of Grand Lake Stream where they too earned their outdoor stripes. For the first ten years it was almost all work, trying to reclaim the two buildings and give them a second wind. From our primary residence in Connecticut, we made the trip at least once each season of the year. Once in Grand Lake Stream, our first stop was always Warren's. We nicknamed him "Cowboy" because of his tireless hobby of recording and chronicling classic country and western songs. Shelley and the kids grew close to Warren who seemed to love having a family around him.

By the mid-1990s, we were visiting Grand Lake Stream up to ten to twelve times a year. Bags would remain unpacked between trips. I began to see that we were viewing Grand Lake Stream the same way my father had viewed Sebago—as a pressure valve. Shelley had been promoted to the top positions of her career as a registered nurse. The work now had less to do with patient care and more to do with clerical duties and endless forms. I was creating music-based marketing campaigns and making regular trips to Manhattan to produce George Plimpton as a voiceover artist and company spokesperson.

A new conversation topic made its debut: a major life change. Talking about it was like painting on a blank canvas. It was both therapeutic and heartening. Sometimes, the very prospect of such a change seemed like a riddle we had to solve before we could act.

The dialogue continued for months until July 1994, when there was news from the north, and it wasn't good. Warren, my friend of twenty years, was dying. He had held his own against emphysema for nearly ten years, but the toll had caught up with him. I had kept up my promise to visit him each time I went to



Photo courtesy of Randy Spencer

Warren Whiting and his dog, Pepe.

GLS, and now, with a huge lump in my throat, I prepared for my final visit.

I flew out of Hartford to Bangor, rented a car, and drove straight to the hospital in Calais, where Washington County borders Saint Stephen, New Brunswick, Canada. When I saw Warren in his room, the gleam in his eye was there as usual. A nurse with a dour expression on her face came into the room talking baby talk to him. He looked at me impishly for a reaction and I rolled my eyes. That made him smile, and I knew he was not in any great distress.

After the nurse left, Warren said, “Stop the world, I want to get off.”

I didn’t respond right away. “Are you sure?” I finally asked.

“I’m sure,” he said.

I’d learned years before that when Warren’s mind was made up, it was like a block of granite. He had smoked too much in his life until he decided not to, and that was the end of tobacco. He had drunk way too much Narragansett in his day until he decided not to, and that was the end of alcohol. This time, he had decided to stop eating, and no doctor or nurse was able to dissuade him. I tried, too, until I saw that my admonishments were upsetting him.

Warren had made other decisions, too, some of them a long time previous. The cemetery in Grand Lake Stream slopes gently eastward, and on its easternmost border is a modest grave with a veteran’s stone commemorating Warren’s service as an aviation cadet in the U.S. Army Air Corps. He requested the stone, and he requested that a flag be placed there each Memorial Day. He wished to be cremated, and he wanted his ashes scattered at the mouth of Oxbrook Stream where his most joyful, youthful memories lived. He wanted no funeral or memorial service. And, in the simple will he had drawn up eight years earlier, he had specified that he wanted his house and property to go to Shelley and me. All that time, he had been carrying a key to our future. I believe today that this knowledge brought him consolation in his final days. Warren had been painting on a canvas of his own, and he had an uncanny talent for solving riddles.

Perhaps the biggest riddle that could face anyone was the one I was facing then. Warren had seen to it that a door would open for me and that I would be confronted by my own dream. Was it real or had it simply been a useful fiction? Had I really meant it, or was it merely a concoction that served some purpose as an imagined escape from reality? Shelley’s and my nightly conversations now turned to mapping out a plan.

If Shelley was going to be a nurse, she made it clear, she wanted to do nursing, not paperwork in a cubicle far from any patient. Surely nurses were needed in the far reaches of eastern Maine. For my part, the Internet had taken hold by 1998 in even the most rural Maine haunts. I could continue my commercial music recording and transmit music files to clients by e-mail. Erin was living in Washington, D.C., and soon to be wed. Ian was a sophomore in high school and enthusiastic about a move to Maine. Supporting ourselves and Ian seemed plausible. And, once we hit the ground in GLS, I would work quickly to become a Registered Maine Guide, a goal that was crystallized for me because of one George Lee “Sonny” Sprague.



The man with the same initials as Grand Lake Stream was known far beyond its borders. The fact that film documentaries and feature stories had been done on Sonny Sprague served mostly to amuse him. He had been in the Philippines during World War II. He had worked the woods camps in his home environs. He had owned sporting camps. He had followed in the footsteps of his father to become one of a handful of renowned craftsmen who built “Grand Lakers,” the twenty-foot, square-sterned, cedar and ash canoes invented in Grand Lake Stream. While the image and persona of this rugged individualist and freethinker was known far from his native Grand Lake Stream, Sonny himself rarely left home. He embodied the very essence of the place he loved above all others, and so, who better to sport a personalized license plate that read “GLS”?



Photo courtesy of Randy Spencer

The one and only, Sonny Sprague.

It was not long after acquiring our camp that I first met Sonny, whose daughter, Bonnie Gagner, co-owned the Pine Tree Store with her husband, Robert. Sonny was then in his late fifties. He invited me to accompany him on a number of unspecified adventures, and it was a privilege. I watched him start fires in gales and in gully-washing rains. I watched him build quiet winter sanctums in the middle of windswept lakes using spruce poles and tarps. I saw him produce ice-fishing rigs out of pucker brush and playing cards. I followed him as he blazed new trails home after I had given us up for lost. His sense

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of direction was fabled in those territories where hunters sometimes left the camp door never to be seen again. Sonny navigated in the deep woods as though an inner azimuth guided him wherever he wanted to go, and home again. I never once saw him use a compass.

Sonny, a working guide since his late teens, became my mentor and friend. When it came time for me to take the state of Maine's fourteen written exam sections and three oral boards in order to become a licensed guide, Sonny laughed, saying, "I'd flunk that test with flying colors." In his day, the process was different. Then, you had to get a Maine game warden to vouch for you and you could then become licensed to guide for hire. Sonny believed that the brains to pass the test and the brains to do the job were two entirely different things.

I learned from Sonny that the relationship between a guide and clients, or "sports" as clients are known, is unique because it takes place in a vacuum—in this case, a twenty-foot Grand Laker. Things that are said between sport and guide are held sacred in an unspoken rule of confidentiality, much the same as with a psychiatrist or lawyer. I learned that beyond hiring Sonny to put them over fish, these people were placing their lives in his hands. Dramatic, sometimes violent weather could befall them at any time, and they needed to be confident that in his care, they would return safely. It took brains, indeed.



When our Connecticut home sold in May of 1998, renovations on Warren's place, including a recording studio, weren't



Photo courtesy of Randy Spencer

The house on the right is the one left to me by Warren. By the time of this picture in 1998, we had begun making renovations.

finished yet. We went anyway. We planned to stay at our camp for the summer and work on the house in the village. We hoped to be moved in by the start of school. Not quite. Taking baths in the lake in mid-October is a story you may want to tell your grandchildren, but at the time it was something other than exhilarating. Ian will always remember doing his first homework assignments in a remote camp under a gas light, and that'll be a story for his grandchildren, too. Relief came just as temperatures were dipping into the twenties at night—we finally moved into a working home.

We had executed the major life change that had headlined our conversations for the previous two years, and our new life had begun. Shelley applied for work at the same Calais hospital where Warren had been a patient. The studio was set up and ready for me to resume commercial recording from my new,

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northern outpost. And, I mustered the brains to pass the state's exam to be a Registered Maine Guide. Now it remained to be seen whether I could muster the brains to do the job.