



A humble Menemsha landmark. *Tim Johnson*

An Ode to Menemsha's Red Shanty

Michael McAuliffe *Thursday, November 30, 2023 - 10:00am*

The red fishing shanty in Menemsha is a humble structure. It lists a little, like it's leaning backwards, and the water can lap at its corner during the harvest moon. The main beam that runs below the roof's ridge sticks out in front, as if it should be hung as an ornament. The exposed portion of the beam surely has a purpose, but it escapes someone like me. The shanty has a better side, but there's no consensus about what side that is. It occupies a thumb print of land and has for decades.

Other fishing shacks along the row may have better equipment, and one or two might boast a colorful door or buoy, but none have the *je ne sais quoi* of the only entirely red shanty in the area. At this point, even if a neighbor received a quart or two of red paint, it wouldn't make the jump from quaint to iconic. The designation's already been made with thousands of photographs preserving the red shanty's agreeable likeness in prints, albums and videos throughout the country, possibly the world.

The red shanty may be one of the most photographed buildings up-Island on Martha's Vineyard. It has an owner (a friend of mine), but he thinks of his role as more caretaker than master. He inherited it from his father. The shanty isn't fit for sleeping with fishing gear and lines stuffed in and around its weathered shell. The boat tied to the dock outside isn't a pleasure vessel, but its name is a testament to a wife and partner off the water.

Generations of fishing folk in a working harbor with their things and places would be a simple story of stability by way of longevity. Only Menemsha along the way became celebrated with Islanders and tourists arriving to experience the sunset from the beach, complete with applause once the orb disappears (as if it has a choice in its performance). On any given day from late spring into fall, a crowd will settle on a dock bench or the deck itself, slurping oysters and testifying to the place and its food as heaven on earth.

Eventually, most visitors make their way around the heel to the far side of the harbor, with ice cream served through an open window being the draw, but there's nowhere to sit or park. A short stroll up the adjacent dirt lane ends near the red shanty. The candid will readily admit to an instant emotional reaction upon seeing its floating barn-like doors just above eye level. Its front elevation gives the shanty a happy, tired appearance, which matches most of the tourists who wander by. It's a wonderful gift in the moment that costs absolutely nothing.

The Gazette and other publications have run its likeness online or in print for as long as I can remember — many dozens of times. I email the owner each and every time I notice the shanty again making a published appearance. I always ask whether it's his shanty. I already know it is, but I enjoy having him confirm it, as if the verification also is affirmation of the mystical powers of its image.

“Yes” becomes “Yep, she's the one and only!”

I wonder whether the shanty will outlive me. I won't be offended, but I'm a little jealous over the prospect. That red shanty has staying power. Its soul is simplicity. It has understated gravitas. Not bad for a modest collection of wood. Even something to aspire to, I reckon.

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