

## EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY'S MAINE

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All I could see from where I stood  
Was three long mountains and a wood;  
I turned and looked the other way,  
And saw three mountains and a bay  
*Opening of "Renescence"*



Emilie C. Harting

The Whitehall Inn, where Edna St. Vincent Millay began her career as a poet, is nestled along a treelined road leading north from Camden, Me. Though it has been more than 70 years since the girl from the nearby fishing village of Rockland read "Renescence" at an August talent show for guests and employees, her legend lives on, and the inn is still an ideal place to enjoy the Maine celebrated in those lines. The mountains, wood and bay are within easy reach, and day trips to Bar Harbor, Acadia National Park and the Lake Country are popular.

At first glance the inn is another of those typical New England structures - white with black shutters and well-manicured lawns. In fact, a large portion of the movie "Peyton Place" was filmed there during the early 1960's. Built up from a sea captain's house dating back to the 1830's, the inn originally had a full view of Penobscot Bay. It is surrounded now by a thick copse of trees twice its height and that view of the bay is

dotted by the Whitehall's two Victorian guesthouses, one of which is open during the off season.

The inn's 41 rooms are decorated with antiques, Oriental rugs and paintings by Maine artists. Each has two comfortable reading chairs and a desk. The antique telephones, the old-fashioned wallpaper and the absence of television create a tranquil atmosphere. One has to go across to one of the guesthouses to catch favorite programs, but few guests bother.



Millay actually did her recitation on a back porch that stood behind the present dining room, a spacious area with many windows looking out over a courtyard where guests often gather before dinner. There is also a new spirits room, or cocktail lounge, and a brightly renovated side porch for relaxing over drinks. Excellently prepared breakfasts and dinners are served to the muted sounds of Mozart, Chopin or Bach.

Dinner at the Whitehall is often the climax of an eventful day, a time for relating highlights - the scenic ride, the antique find, the goings and comings of a windjammer down in the village. It is also a time for elegant, old-style dining and quiet contemplation. Interwoven between accounts of today's activities and tomorrow's plans are snippets of the Millay legend: "Why, she grew up right down in Rockland" . . . "No, she never worked at the inn. You see, she came by one evening when she was 16 and recited right here in this very dining room" . . . "Brilliant girl. She's always been my favorite poet. . . ."

The innkeepers, Ed and Jean Dewing and their grown children, are all involved in the daily operations. One daughter, Heidi, formerly a pastry chef with the Ritz Carlton in Boston, makes the desserts and runs one of the guesthouses during the off season. Others, along with the regular staff, greet guests, help prepare food, or run errands. A son takes long-term guests (and there are many who return each season) on boat trips to the inn's own Little Green Island, which has a game preserve and lobsterman's shack.

Some eat dinner early and take in performances at the Bok Amphitheater, the Camden Opera House or the Thursday evening chamber orchestra concerts in Rockport. Yet, on a warm, clear night the wicker chairs on the wide porch that spans the length of the inn's front are full. The atmosphere is cordial. Often, as guests meander out from the dining room into the front sitting rooms with their overstuffed chairs and magazine tables, acquaintances are formed and conversations continue as they go outside to sit or take an evening walk.

The menu, New England and modified French, changes nightly and typically offers a choice of three salads, a poultry entree, two beef entrees and several seafood dishes. Lobster is served several times a week. Each evening the array of desserts includes homemade ice cream, one classical French dessert and one New England dessert. There is also an extensive list of California, French and Italian wines. In the morning a

traditional American breakfast with choices of eggs, cereal and hotcakes is served along with homemade biscuits and breads.

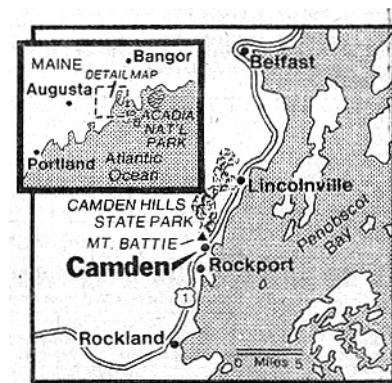
The grounds extend across the road and beyond the guest houses with their rolling lawns. Just up to the north, a road slopes downward past the tennis courts to the inn's own piece of coastline on Penobscot Bay. It's typical Maine swimming (cold, with sneakers needed for the rocks). A world-renowned summer harp colony occupies one of the houses on the water so anyone who spends time here is likely to be serenaded by melodious sounds coming through the trees. Each August the musicians come up to the inn to give a concert.



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The Edna St. Vincent Millay room in the Whitehall Inn

Camden is a busy harbor town rimmed with quiet parks, fine specialty shops and restaurants. To explore the island and bay, one has a choice of short sightseeing cruises, fishing charters and day sails. Many people go down to the dock on Monday morning to watch the launching of the windjammers or late Saturdays to watch them return. The inn has bikes available for exploring the quiet country roads in the area. One popular destination is Megunticook State Park, to the west, with its freshwater swimming and fishing. Another is Camden Hills State Park, to the north, where the sea slaps up against rugged cliffs and boulders.



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Mount Battie, where Millay was inspired to write "Renesance," rises sharply north of the inn. At its summit is a panorama of the Lincolnville-Camden-Rockport area, that 10-mile stretch of coast often described as one of the prettiest along the Eastern seaboard. On a clear day one can look, as Millay did, to the mountains west and north, over the bay and

islands to Acadia to the east, and down to Camden Harbor and Rockport to the south. Near the small observation tower is a map identifying the islands that dot the bay, and a plaque commemorating Millay. "Renascence" ends with her lying on the solitary mountaintop discovering how easy it is to be in touch with the universe.

The Edna St. Vincent Millay room at the inn is also the front sitting room, which leads out through the north front entrance. Many stop to look at her high school diploma hung on the wall amid the photographs of her at various ages. Some go further and read the handwritten copies of her poems. Still others ask to see scrapbooks of Millay memorabilia, which include copies of an entry from Millay's diary and a letter to the inn from her sister Norma, articles about Edna and copies of a number of chatty letters she wrote from New York to her childhood friend Gladys Mills of Bangor.

Her sister Norma, then a waitress at the inn, had a hard time persuading Edna to come to the talent show at all. The scene must have seemed somewhat foreign to Edna, the shy, retiring daughter of Cora Millay, who supported her three daughters by working as a practical nurse.

As Norma related the events of the evening in 1912, she herself won a prize for the best dancer, and Edna won first prize for her pirouette costume. After Edna was talked into reciting "Circus Rag," a nostalgic little piece she had written, there were pleas for more. She then sat down on a piano stool and recited "Renascence" through to the end.

There was a hush as she finished, and a number of heated discussions about her undiscovered talent as guests spilled out into the front parlors. Edna was persuaded to return the following evening to recite additional poems. A few days later, Caroline Dow, a guest and dean of the New York Y.M.C.A., called on Edna and her mother to work out plans for her to come to New York and prepare for the Vassar entrance exams.

After Vassar, Millay supported herself as a short-story writer, actress and playwright while she continued to write poetry. By 1923 not only had she won acclaim from the top critics, but she had also become one of the country's most well-known poets. That year she won the Pulitzer Prize for her collection of poems, "The Harp Weaver." Known as the darling of Greenwich Village, she was also a favorite on college campuses with her proclamations of undying youth and her image as a modern emancipated woman unafraid of shocking the older generation.

After she married Eugen Boissevain, a Dutch businessman, and moved to a mountainous retreat in Austerlitz, N.Y., she led a reclusive life and her poetry of the 30's and 40's tended more toward themes of social injustice, past loves and death. However, Millay never lost her affection for Maine. She often visited Camden in the summers, and spent long periods of time at her rustic summer cottage on Ragged Island in Casco Bay. There she would often swim long hours along the rocks. Millay died at Austerlitz in 1950. She was 58.

And today, whether back in the inn's dining room, near the spot where Millay read in 1912, or out in the front room where her pictures hang, her presence lingers on.

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Camden, Maine Chamber of Commerce: [www.camdenme.org](http://www.camdenme.org)

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