

Half Staff – Matthew W. Cooney Jr.

September 20, 2005

Matthew William Cooney Jr., beloved husband of Leslie (Bowers) Cooney, died peacefully Tuesday afternoon, Sept. 20, 2005, surrounded by his family, after having waged a courageous battle against lung disease. He was 78 years old. He leaves a legacy of laughter, good will, and an appreciation for all that is Cape Ann. He was born in Gloucester, the son of the late Matthew and Etta (Tarvis) Cooney.

Matt, or “Duddy” as he was called by his childhood friends, served as president of the Gloucester high school class of 1944. He rose to the rank of major in the ROTC in high school, and entered the U.S. Navy the day after graduation. He served aboard ships and in the Solomon Islands during World War II. As a radio operator, he had the honor of being the first aboard the USS Vincennes to learn, and to convey to others, that the war with Japan was over.

Thanks to the GI Bill, Matt attended Dartmouth College. He earned graduate degrees from Edinburgh University in Scotland and Victoria College in New Zealand.

He taught at Gloucester High School for many years before joining the English Department at Salem State College, where he taught for 37 years, before retiring in 1995.

From the age of 14, Matt worked on the waterfront: first as a cleaner of fish, then as a lumper and stevedore. His love for this work and his hometown inspired him to write a book about his experiences, “East and West of Duncan Street.”

Matt was a dedicated and active supporter of his community. He served for many years as chairman of the Rockport School Committee, on the faculty senate and various committees at Salem State. He was also a contract negotiator for Gloucester waterfront workers.

For all his travels and adventures “over the bridge”, Matt still enjoyed home, family and friends the most. He looked forward to hauling his lobster pots off Lane’s Cove, reading on his deck or at the beach, sharing food and conversation with friends, talking politics and sports at the transfer station, and finding every opportunity for laughter. His vicarious spirit inspired all who knew him. His passing leaves a hole in the hearts of a community.

In addition to his wife, Leslie, Matt leaves eight children, Martha Cooney, Claire Cooney, wife of Roger DeRocher and Matthew Cooney, all of Gloucester, Carol, wife of Tim O’Connor, Katherine Cooney, John “Polo” Cooney and Michael Cooney, all of Rockport and Peter Cooney of Otis, Maine; four grandchildren, Jessica Sullivan, Matthew, Meredith and Ethan Cooney; two great-grandchildren, Joshua and Christian Sullivan; his former wife, Jean (Sawyer) Cooney; an aunt, Barbara Olson; several cousins; and many beloved friends.

The Boston Globe:

Matthew William Cooney Jr. was an authority on Chaucer and Shakespeare, but he was a longshoreman at heart.

“He was a college professor, but he was also a rough-and-tumble guy who worked with his hands,” his wife Leslie said yesterday.

Mr. Cooney, 78, who worked on the Gloucester docks before, during, and after the 37 years he was an English professor at Salem State College, died of lung disease Sept. 20 in Salem Hospital.

“He had two steady jobs. Somehow he arranged it so he only had afternoon classes so he could work on the docks in the morning,” William Pierce, a retired Gloucester longshoreman said yesterday.

The son and grandson of barbers with shops in Gloucester and Rockport, Mr. Cooney cleaned fish and worked as a lumper, unloading boats on the Gloucester waterfront in his youth. His fellow dockworkers called him “The Little Professor”, a nickname both playful and prescient.

“He was a well-educated guy who knew how to act amongst us common folk,” James “Moe” Moses, a retired Gloucester longshoreman said yesterday.

Moses said the longshoremen sometimes resented Mr. Cooney, but they always respected him. “I have to admit it sometimes bothered me when he said: ‘I have to go now. I can’t work too long. I have to go to school.’ ”

Pierce said Mr. Cooney could be feisty at times and relished the give and take of life on the docks. “He never looked down or talked down to anybody,” he said.

“It was tough work, but there was a camaraderie,” Leslie Cooney said. “They handled things themselves.”

Mr. Cooney was a practical joker. Pierce recalled one instance when Mr. Cooney had a disagreement with a fellow longshoreman. Mr. Cooney sneaked out to the parking lot and put the man’s car up on blocks. “He raised it just high enough so the wheels wouldn’t touch the ground,” Pierce said. “When the fellow got into the car and put it in gear, the wheels spun.”

A member of ROTC at Gloucester High School, Mr. Cooney enlisted in the Navy the day after he graduated in 1944. As a radio operator aboard the heavy cruiser USS Vincennes in the Pacific, he was the first to tell the crew Japan had surrendered.

He graduated from Dartmouth College, where he studied on the GI Bill, and did graduate work at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and Victoria College in New Zealand.

“Rotary Club scholarships allowed him to study overseas,” his wife said. He attended Victoria College because he fell in love with New Zealand, which he visited while in the service, she said.

Mr. Cooney taught at Gloucester High School before joining the English Department at Salem State College, where he taught until his retirement in 1995. He was an advisor to the school newspaper, The Salem State Log.

He was a resident of Rockport, where he was a member of the School Committee for several years. He held a lobster license for many years and had recently been hauling his traps off Gloucester.

A small, wiry man, he enjoyed hauling his trash to the Rockport Transfer Station, where he chatted

with locals and talked sports with foreman Mel George.

Mr. Cooney had recently completed a memoir he titled "East and West of Duncan Street." The book details his view from the front-row seat as the Gloucester waterfront declined from a bustling seaport to a ghost of its former self. "He said he never retired from the waterfront; the waterfront retired from him," Leslie Cooney said.

Arrangements: A memorial Mass will be celebrated in St. Ann's Church, Holy Family Parish, Gloucester on Friday, Sept. 30, at 10 a.m. Relatives and friends are cordially invited to attend. There will be no visiting hours. The burial will be private. In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made in his name to the Rockport High School Alumni Association Scholarship Fund, c/o Janice Ramsden, 2 Phillips Ave., Rockport, MA 01966 or to Gloucester High School Alumni Scholarship Fund, c/o Dr. Joseph Sullivan, 32 Leslie O. Johnson Road, Gloucester, MA 01930. Funeral arrangements are being conducted by the Burgess and Mackey Funeral Home, 201 Main St., Rockport.