

Living and Working on Wisconsin's Sand Island

by Jacqueline Briggs Martin

In actual fact, I lived on Sand Island in the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore for twelve days. But it is also true to say I lived and worked on Sand Island for two years while writing the book *On Sand Island*.

My time on Sand Island began with an Artist-in-Residency. My husband and I spent those days watching the lake, walking the paths, picking blue-berries by the lighthouse.



We wrote in our journals stories the park rangers told us: how fisherman Harold Dahl was lost in a spring storm in 1928; how Burt Hill could fix any boat or motor and his wife was one of the best cooks on the island.

But our twelve-day stay was just the beginning of my "residency" on Sand Island.

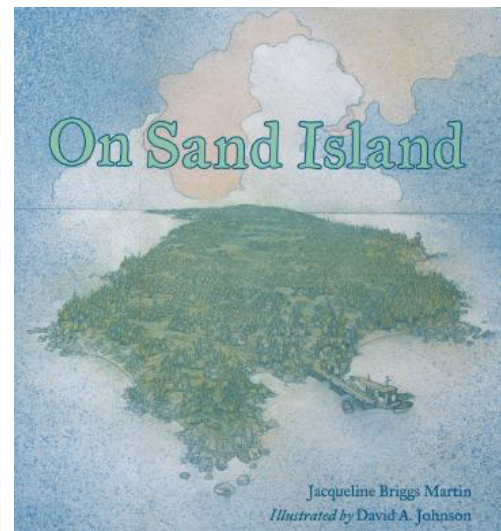
I realized early that I wanted to write

about the fishing and farming community that had existed on the island from the 1880s to the early 1940s. In order to do that, I had to *live* there. But how could I live in a community that was nothing more than a weedy road, a rusted hay rake, a few building foundations, and occasional apple trees?

I read. And I read again.

From Fred Hansen's *Diary of a Norwegian Fisherman* I learned the seasons of this island--when the nets were mended, when there was time for music and dancing. From the lighthouse log kept by Ella Luick and her husband I learned the importance of the mail and the connection with the mainland. From Burt Hill's mimeographed memoir I learned of the necessity to "make do," to use what's on hand. From Park Service interviews I learned of good times on the island.

The details, the voices in the readings were the boards and nails that helped me re-construct a place where I could live. I sat at my desk in Iowa and on Hill's dock at the same time.





Part of my living on Sand Island was done on the mainland - in Bayfield.

When Carl Dahl (grandson of Harold, who was lost on the lake) told me of his love of boats I wanted to write about such a boy as he had been.



The story of Sand Island would also be the story of a boy building a boat. I knew then I'd have to make a boat. Carl brought out Burt Hill's old tools and "on-hand" boards. We worked in his sister's dooryard to build a model of his boyhood boat.



Building the boat was the real-world parallel to the reading. I had to build the community in my head -- know where the houses were, how the nets were mended, when the first fish were caught. Then, I could find the story and invite others to enter this world.

I hope students will enjoy reading the story and "living" on Sand Island. Maybe they'll even take a ride in young Carl's boat.



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Jacqueline Briggs Martin has published 14 children's books, including the 1999 Caldecott winner, Snowflake Bentley. On Sand Island was released by Houghton Mifflin in 2003.

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