★ Whaleback Light ★

By Dorothy M. Moulton

For eight days at a stretch two or three men stand watch at a Coast Guard station whose isolation is augmented by its proximity to the mainland.

Although Maine and New Hampshire are separated at the seacoast by a good-sized river, there is no little confusion about where the one leaves off and the other starts. Most people understand that the "Portsmouth Navy Yard" is entirely in Maine. Almost no one understands which of the several Isles of Shoals belong to which state. And fewer yet know whether Whaleback Light is in Maine's or New Hampshire's half of Portsmouth Harbor.

Actually a Coast Guard map will show it is in Maine (just as it will show that its correct name is Whaleback, not Whalesback, local opinion to the contrary notwithstanding.) But as Portsmouth embraces the shipyard, so it considers the tiny light station its own, map or no map.

To the men who live and work there, Whaleback seems like no state at all, for theirs is a life of isolation—at relatively short stretches—on a rocky ledge that is barely large enough to hold the equipment and living quarters that comprise the station.

Aside from the life of seclusion, the chief complaint of the keepers is the fog horn and the compressors which supply its power. A sound that can be heard for five or six miles is unbelievably loud when you're cooped up in the same building with it, and it takes a seasoned veteran indeed to sleep soundly through a foggy night.



Business end of the foghorns at Whaleback. The pattern of sound created is like no other foghorn on the Atlantic Coast.

Photos by Robert Jeeves

Whaleback Light — *continued*

But there are compensations. The view from the tower, some sixty feet above the water, is lovely on a calm summer day: to the east, the vast ocean sparkling in the sunlight, rimmed by the horizon; to the south, the low-lying coast of New Hampshire; New Castle and the Harbor Light Station to the west; and to the north, the islands and coves of Maine with Mt. Agamenticus rounding up in the distance.

The light structure itself is another thing of beauty with its eight sets of prisms and its four magnifying lenses, clear and shiny. These lenses are so powerful that they must be shielded during the daytime by a tarpaulin, for their concentration of the sun's rays could easily start a fire and crack the glass.

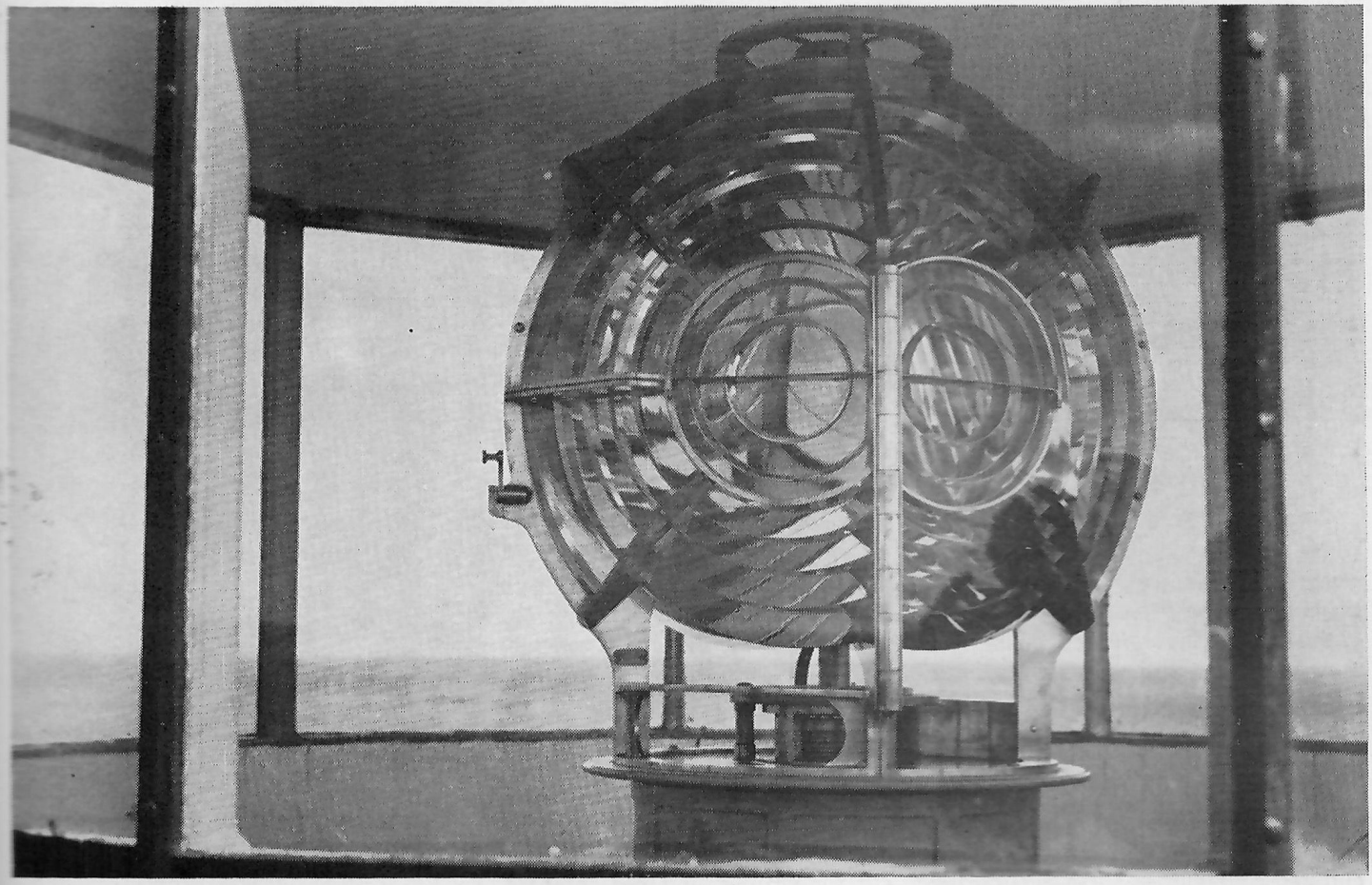
Surprisingly, the light itself is only a 150-watt clear bulb, which seems rather puny, considering the enormity of its task. But with its considerable optical assistance, it produces a 37,000 candle-power beam, visible for thirteen miles.

Anyone who thinks Whaleback is only a stone's throw from the mainland should tell it to Engineman 3rd class Francis D. Hickey. On last December 31st he attempted to make the fifteen-minute run to shore, lost his power, and drifted six hours before a cutter found him.

But 128 years of service to shipping on the Whaleback station have produced a breed of men who take such mishaps in their stride.



Because of its isolation, Whaleback has all its equipment in duplication—batteries, generators, compressors—and there is a manual apparatus for turning the light and kerosene power for illuminating it in case the electricity should fail. "Tank" at right houses power equipment.



Lens at Whaleback is kept mirror-clean, for it is the lens, rather than the bulb, which produces most of the candlepower. Should the light go out, an alarm bell warns the Coast Guardsmen. Present lighthouse structure has been standing since 1872.



Inside the "tank" temperatures may rise to 145 degrees, and compressors make deafening racket. There are quarters for four men at Whaleback, but usually only two or three are on hand at the same time. They have two days' leave for every eight on duty.