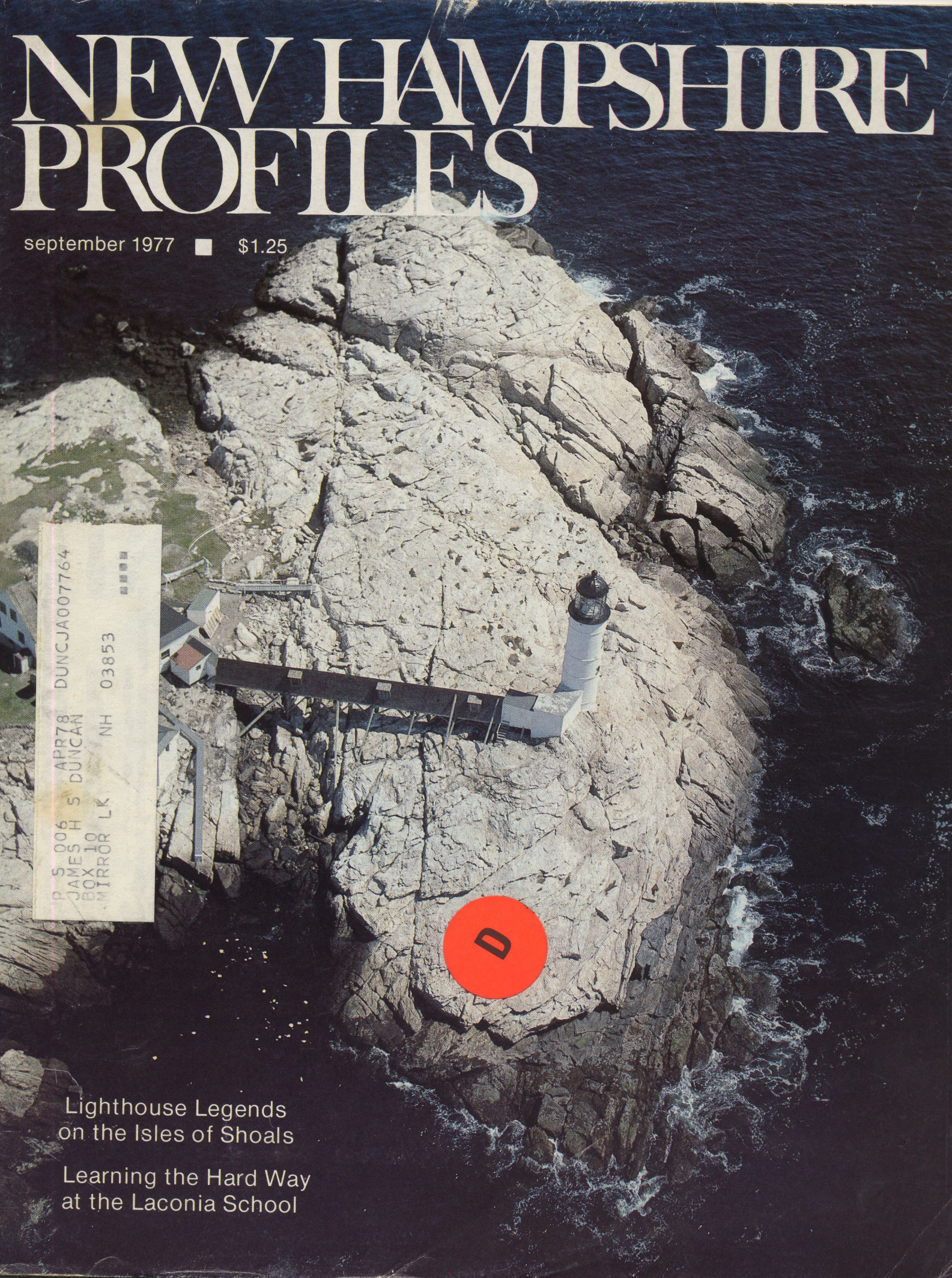
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Lighthouse Legends on the Isles of Shoals

Learning the Hard Way at the Laconia School

The Light of the Shoals

by W. Scott Storer

FOR over 150 years the flashes of the White Island lighthouse have guided mariners safely past the rocky coast of the Isles of Shoals; the red and white lights have been a brilliant beacon to ships passing through. But some travelers paused, for one reason or another, to visit at White Island, and they found that the lighthouse was manned by people whose personalities and adventures were only a little less colorful than the light itself

White Island was once one of the more dangerous islands off New Hampshire's coast. For years the rocky Isles of Shoals presented a great threat to navigation. Many vessels met their doom on treacherous ledges, and many lives were lost. And so in 1821, after a long period of agitation for adequate protection of ships in the area, the first Isles of Shoals light was built.

White Island, a surf-swept mound of rock five and a half miles off shore, was chosen as the best construction site. The lighthouse was constructed of rubble stone, and upon completion stood ninety feet above the water Its revolving light was of patriotic character, showing red, white, and blue flashes. The blue was soon removed, however, because of its extremely low range of visibility

This lighthouse retained its position as the islands' sentry until the Civil War began, and danger from blockade runners and Southern gunboats precipitated the building of a new structure. At that point the old rubble stone walls were replaced by solid granite two feet thick. The new tower, slightly shorter than the first, measured fifty-eight feet above the ground and eighty-two feet above the water This tower, with a few minor modifications, is the present White Island light. One other change consisted of the erection of a new keeper's residence in 1877, at which time the old stone building was left to be used as a storehouse.

One of the most interesting and colorful characters to make his home at the lighthouse, Thomas B. Laighton, did so a long time before these improved structures were built.

A member of a highly respected Portsmouth family, Laighton surprised the community in 1839 by agreeing to become lighthouse keeper Many believed he was forfeiting a promising future as a mainland businessman, and over the years the legend grew that he had left the city because he had lost the election for governor of New Hampshire. In fact, he never ran for governor Five months prior to assuming his White Island duties, Laighton and a partner had purchased four of the islands, and he had secret plans to revive the fishing industry and to develop a tourist resort.

He also expected to be named postmaster of Portsmouth when his friend, Abner Greenleaf, retired. Two years on the lighthouse would be good interim duty, he felt, and would give him time to develop his plans for the islands.

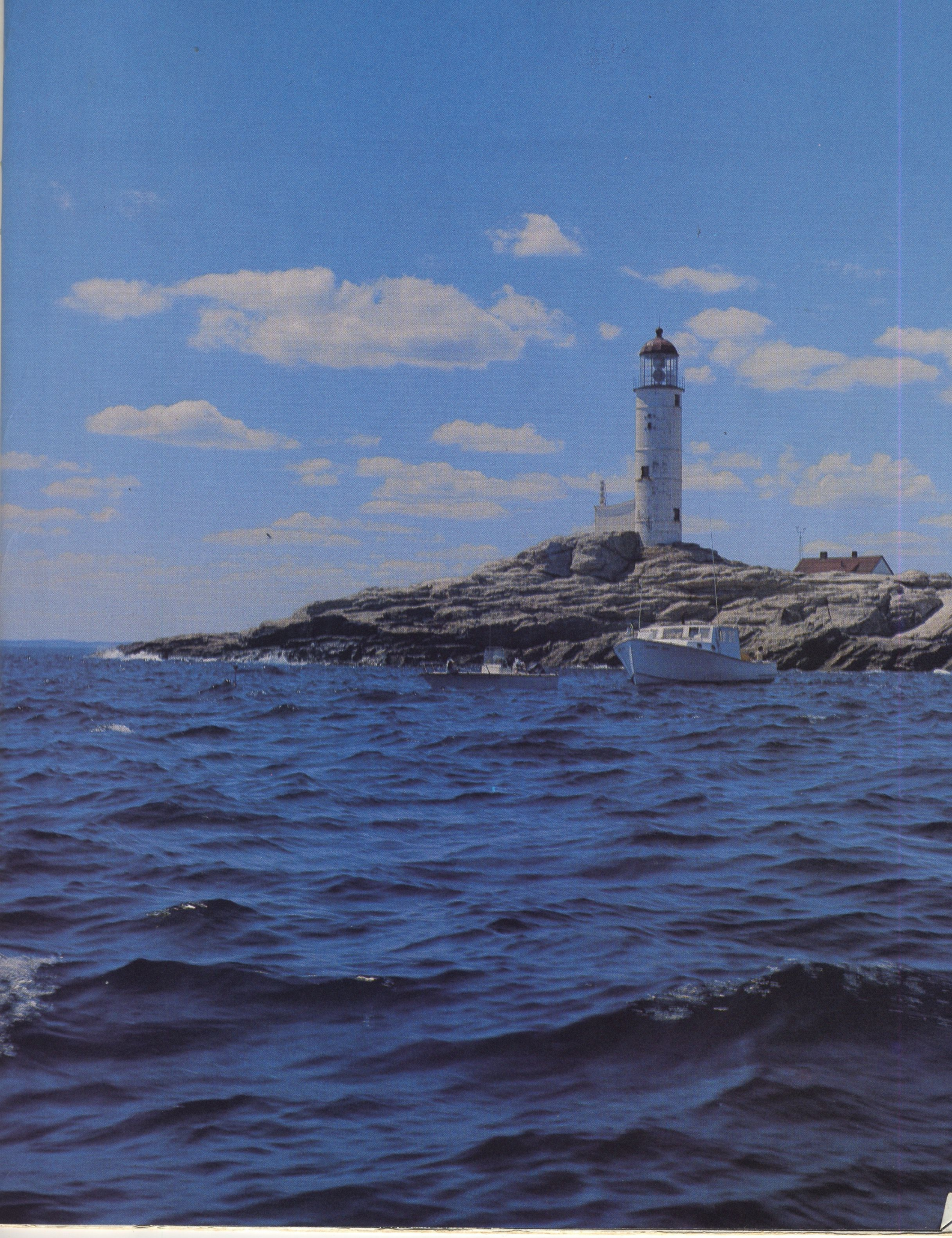
Although he was never appointed postmaster, Laighton did serve as a selectman from his isolated outpost. He also developed the islands into one of the most popular summer resort areas on the New England coast.

Keeper Laighton worked hard on the lighthouse, alternating watches throughout the night with his assistant, Ben Whaling. As well as keeping a constant vigil for ships in distress, they had to keep the lamps filled with oil so the light would not fade, and wind the giant, weight-driven hour clock that revolved the light.

As Laighton became involved in the planning of the hotels he was building on Appledore and Smuttynose Islands, his younger daughter Celia, later to become known as poet Celia Thaxter, took a more active part in the running of the light. She polished the reflectors, cleaned the glass windows surrounding the beacon, and on several occasions lit the lamps and stood watch. She also helped her parents entertain the many visitors who enjoyed Laighton hospitality, among them such literary figures

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Douglas Armsden photograph.



Shoals *(cont. from page 28)*

as Richard Henry Dana, author of *Two Years Before the Mast*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who later wrote about the islands in his *American Notes*. After the Laightons relocated on Appledore Island, Celia's parlor group was joined by other artists from James Russell Lowell to John Greenleaf Whittier

In 1847, keeper Laighton resigned from the lighthouse service and moved to Appledore Island, where his new hotel was completed and ready for business.

Although life was seldom boring for the keepers who followed Laighton in the 1800s, it was more than fifty years later that one of the most dramatic incidents in the history of White Island took place.

During a wild March hurricane in the early 1900s, John Bragg Downs, of the famous New Hampshire Downs family, performed one of the most thrilling sea rescues in the history of the New England coast. Downs and a friend agreed to stand watch at the lighthouse while newly appointed keeper Captain Haley went ashore to make arrangements to bring out his family.

Shortly after Haley departed, a northeast storm began to brew For nearly a week the northeasterly winds prevailed, and to make matters worse, a great snow storm hit with furious intensity. On the seventh day the turn of the tide brought giant waves surging all the way up to the keeper's residence, and the two men were forced to retreat to the tower for safety

Around midnight the assistant said to Downs, "What would you think if someone were to knock at the door now?"

"Think?" Downs replied. "I should think it was the devil himself, for no human being could land on White Island this night and live."

Just then, as if in answer to his statement, there came a knock at the door Both men froze and stared at each other in awe.

Then it came again. Unmistakably, there was a knocking at the door But what could it be? Downs lit a lantern, walked wearily to the door, and opened it slowly

There, almost filling the doorway, stood a giant black man. Bleeding from numerous cuts and gashes, and soaking wet, the man stood before them on the verge of collapse.

"Sorry to trouble you, sir, but there's a brig ashore on the rocks below the light."

"How do you know?" asked Downs.

"I just came off'n it," he replied.

John Downs and his assistant helped the man inside, and while they tended his wounds, the man described the wreck.

The captain of the vessel, which was a brig bound for Salem with a load of hides and tallow, had supposed himself to be over a hundred miles from land and was overwhelmed when the ship ran aground. But the crew, spotting a large light overhead, realized they had crashed near a lighthouse, and they dispatched this volunteer to lower himself over the rocky ledge to make it to shore for help.

He lowered himself to the ledge and, gripping the barnacle-covered rocks, pulled himself toward the

(continued on following page)

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Shoals *(cont. from page 45)*

shore. Time and time again the waves threw him against the rocks, forcing him to cling to the ledge for his life. Finally, after a long struggle, he made it to shore and knocked on the lighthouse door

Downs threw one end of the rope to the stranded sailors and instructed them to secure it. He tied the line around his own body, and told the sailors to pull themselves to shore, as he stood strong against the raging surf.

Leaving the injured man in the care of his assistant, Downs went out into the storm and down to the rocky shore where the ship was wrecked. The vessel was suspended on a pinnacle of rock, and it was easy to see that it could go to pieces at any moment. Realizing he must act immediately, Downs got a rope and waded waist deep into the wild surf He then threw one end of the rope to the stranded sailors and instructed them to secure it. Downs looked frantically for an object to which he could secure his end of the line, but was unable to find one. He then tied the line around his own body, and instructed the sailors to pull themselves across to shore. Downs stood strong as each one of the sailors pulled his way through the raging surf to safety.

While rescues may still be made near White Island today, they are rarely as dramatic as Downs's, because in 1941 the Coast Guard, with its trained personnel and modern equipment, took over the job of running the lighthouse. The romantic days of the civilian keepers who weathered storms and faithfully kept the lamps burning are lost and gone forever

Today, the White Island lighthouse projects its 170,000 candlepower light out to sea. Though its importance has been somewhat reduced by the changing of shipping routes and the improvement of ship navigational equipment, its distinction as one of America's oldest lighthouses and its illustrious and exciting history are things that, like the light, will never fade.□

Survival *(cont. from page 26)*

LaPointe says, "It seems like I've always been climbing. Most people start with a clothesline, and they should, but I just got out there and I knew I could do it. I've been climbing ever since."

But Mr LaPointe, the teacher, does not encourage—in fact does not permit—his students at Brewster Academy to begin by using what he refers to as the "stretch a rope and go method. The wilderness course starts with the premise that the students know nothing about rock climbing, wilderness, or any outdoor skills," he says. "We begin by saying, 'This is a pack. This is a tent.' We erase anything anyone might know and start from scratch, so that I know techniques and information are being taught correctly, with the help of printed literature and exhibitions. The classroom plays as big a part in the program as the outdoors, and if my students haven't been properly instructed it might cost a life—mine as well as theirs."

LaPointe determines proudly that at least eighty percent of his students could survive on their own in the wilderness, and that most students who start with ten-foot rocks master fifty-five-foot rock climbs by the end of the semester

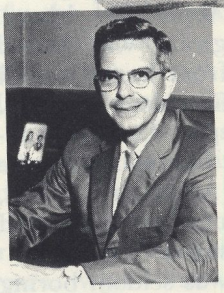
"I would like to climb Mount Everest in the winter, and I would like to sail around the world in a twenty-eight-foot sailboat."

"The final exam for this course, though, is nature itself," he says. "Each student designs his or her own endeavor and carries it out." For example, one young man will be alone for three days in a winter survival situation. Another student, a young woman, will attempt her first ice-climbing ascent. LaPointe says, "If a student says he or she can't do it—and I hate to hear it—I say, 'If you think you can't, you won't!' "

But the students do not mind LaPointe's scoldings. Says one student, Mike Adams, "He's not

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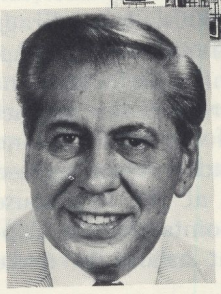




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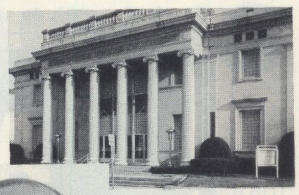
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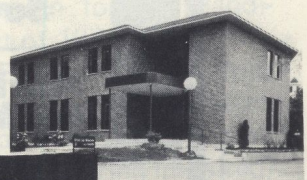
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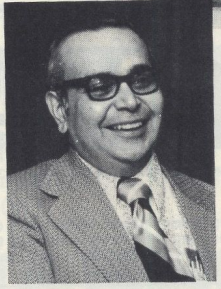




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Survival *(cont. from page 46)*

like a teacher We call him Terry—we call him Mr LaPointe when we're mad at him—and he's more a friend than anything. He believes in us, pushes us, and rewards all our efforts. We know he's always there. The most important thing he's taught us, I guess, is to look ahead, not backward. He pays attention to every little detail. He tells us to keep a constant momentum, and he gives us confidence."

It is evident the students appreciate Terry LaPointe's work on their behalf They showed this when they voted him the Brewster Community Award, given to the teacher they feel has contributed the most to the Brewster community. LaPointe was honored and surprised, up until the last minute, he says, "everyone knew but me."

"I will gamble with just about everything—the rocks, the mountains, the water—but I won't gamble with someone else's life."

Before LaPointe was part of this Brewster community, he spent time in Alaska, England, South America, and wherever else his search for adventure led him. But he always returned to New Hampshire, the state for which he has an enduring affection. "I will always come back here," he says. "New Hampshire has everything: the lakes, the ocean, mountains, wind, and rain. Everything except the desert, and I can do without that. Here, I can be reasonably alone, or with people if I choose. Other places, like a city, you don't have those choices."

When LaPointe opts for solitude, he usually takes to the rocks at Cathedral Ledge in North Conway. "I enjoy soloing," he says, "because it's just me and nature. It's the ultimate in non-competitiveness. I just think, smell, feel, and look all around me and enjoy the peacefulness.

"But it's important to keep at least ten feet ahead of yourself It's necessary to economize energy, to gain a balance between foot and hand movements. Self-control, foresight, gracefulness, and energy are essentials. So when I'm not giving full attention to the art of climbing, I just sing to myself It's communing with nature in the truest sense. You put yourself in a space with nature, and nature always has the upper hand, the edge over humanity "

What about nature's lack of forgiveness? "I've been tense at times, and been involved in accidents. But if I were to worry all the time about dying, I wouldn't cross the street. And it seems the worst happens when you least expect it. In the meantime, I am doing something which gives me a sense of being, enjoying, and accomplishment."

LaPointe also prefers soloing because "I will gamble with just about everything—the rocks, the mountains, the water—but I won't gamble with someone else's life." LaPointe says he sets high standards for himself, and that he doesn't feel justified in subjecting his co-adventurers to the same risks and standards. As long as his life is the only one in danger, he is willing to take risks, if "it'll increase my ability or knowledge. I have confidence in myself and a strong survival instinct."

While LaPointe was on vacation from Brewster over the summer, he and partner Eric Rasmussen performed exhibitions at schools and organizations in New Hampshire and other states as far west as Colorado. In his free time, he "relaxed" with sports from softball to karate (he has a black belt), worked with an ambulance service, and pursued other diversions from poetry writing to gardening to baking bread.

Back at Brewster, he confides he has planned some interesting adventures for his students next winter—like leaving three students on a frozen Lake Winnipesaukee to survive the best they know how ("after instruction, of course").

LaPointe feels we live with too many assumptions, and for that reason an exercise in living with the basics is significant and educating. "We use artificial light, hear artificial sounds, we even burn artificial fuel. It's important to get out and have these assumptions lifted from under you."

LaPointe sees nothing progressive or benevolent about our industrial society, and as far as medicine is concerned, he quips, "Well, we're almost up to ancient Egyptian standards. I think we would be a much heartier race of people if we stepped back a few years. We're out of shape and out of touch with nature. This table," he adds, placing his hand on a wiggling metal table, "will last an eighth of the time a table built years ago [would] Everything is temporary I mean, a prefab house is good until the wind blows."

LaPointe feels we are soon to become the victims of our own society, slaves to consumerism. He doesn't even own a stereo, and says that all his worthwhile possessions have been obtained through trading. "Y'know, an ice axe for some snowshoes."

With his ice axe and snowshoes, LaPointe has tackled the Alps of Europe, the crags of England, and the peaks of New Hampshire. Are there any challenges left?

Of course.

"Now there is a more daring breed of climbers," he says. "This is the golden age of mountaineering and we're beginning to realize there is a limited supply of virgin mountains and crags. Adventurers now set out to do something someone else has done, only better, with different techniques, more courageously

"Half Dome, a rock face in Yosemite, was just clean-climbed for the first time two years ago," he continues. "That means no pins, minimal protection. They said it couldn't be done.

"We're trying to see how far we can push ourselves. It's not competitive, it's just us against nature."

What about Terry LaPointe's future accomplishments? He has two primary goals: "I would like to climb Mount Everest in the winter, and I would like to sail around the world in a twenty-eight-foot sailboat."

Asked if he would ever give up his confrontations with nature, he replies, "Ever see those movies where the man is in love with the woman and he keeps coming back, time after time? Well, that's me; I'm in love with the rocks, and adventure."

And it is reasonably certain that LaPointe's love of adventure will carry him on to new heights, both inside and outside New Hampshire. □