3/78

DESERT[illegible] R[illegible]

After 147 years of lightkeepers, Mount Desert [illegible] auton[illegible]

—By John P. March

SEEN from the top of its light tower, seventy-five feet above the ocean, Mount Desert Rock dilates with the tides like an eye resting on the water's surface. As the tides rise and fall, alternately covering and exposing a sloping border of rockweed, the small island contracts and expands by several acres each day. This green-fringed granite ellipse rises from the ocean floor twenty miles seaward from Mount Desert Island and is the site of the furthest offshore light station on the coast of Maine. Manned (or "attended," as the former expression went) continuously since 1830, Mount Desert Rock Light Station witnessed the end of an era when lightkeepers were withdrawn for the last time during the week before Christmas. As part of an ongoing Coast Guard effort to automate as many light stations as possible, the Rock had been converted during the preceding summer and fall. Following a shakedown period and a final technical inspection, it was relinquished to the machines on December 21, 1977.

It has been the custom to describe Mount Desert Rock in stark terms — "barren," "lifeless," "isolated," "lonely" — but almost invariably these are the descriptions of those who have not lived there (or those who, like the enlisted or married men of the Coast Guard, lived there only grudgingly in recent years). For those who have willingly come to Mount Desert Rock, it is a place of surprising beauty and full of life.

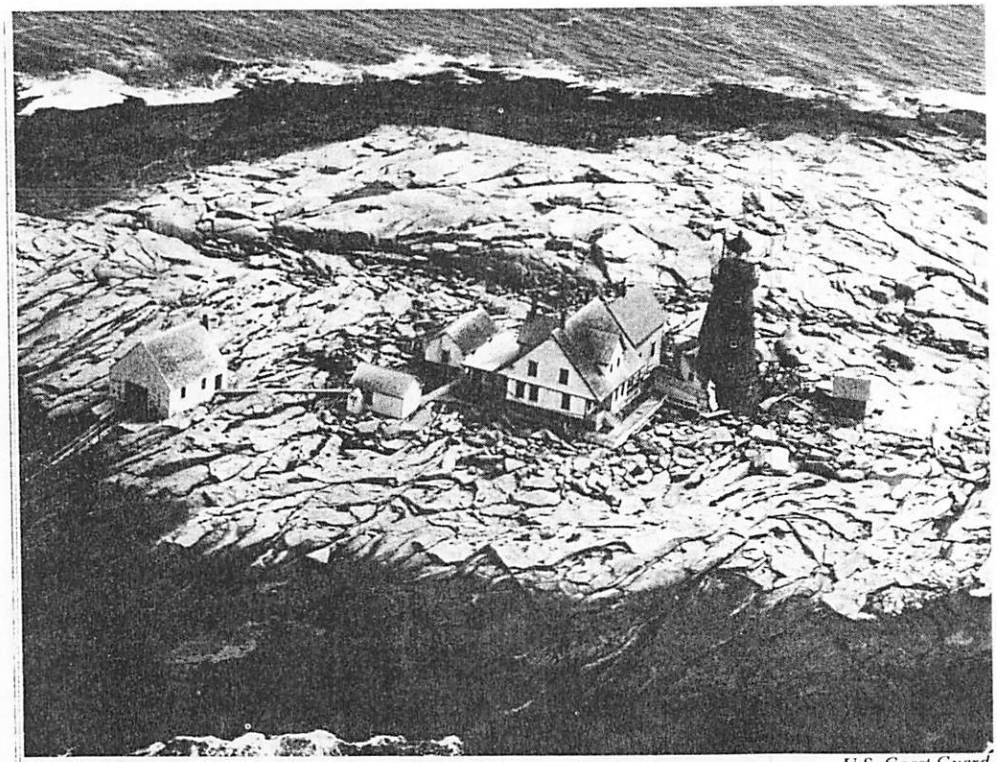
At different times of the year, for instance, the Rock is host to more than seventy species of birds. In the spring and fall it is a welcome resting stop for land and shore birds on migration. Swallows nest in the rafters of the boathouse and cut rapid circles over the length and breadth of the island as they feed on the Rock's insect population. Phalaropes number[illegible] thousands sometim[illegible] enormous rafts just off [illegible]

Summer brings wh[illegible] and small, to the rich [illegible] plankton lying off the [illegible] addition to attracting [illegible] humpback whales, the [illegible] surrounding the R[illegible] frequented by pilot, fin, [illegible] whales, as well as dolph[illegible] harbor porpoises. The le[illegible] off the northeast point su[illegible] small rookery of harbor se[illegible] can often be seen bobbing [illegible] waters off the boat slip.

During the annual fall [illegible] migrations, the Rock is visi[illegible] merlins and kestrels. These [illegible] swift hawks perch on the [illegible] tower and prey on smaller bird[illegible] warblers, who, caught up in [illegible] own migration, have been bl[illegible] out to sea by strong winds. (M[illegible] these smaller birds arrive in [illegible] exhausted state and have l[illegible] chance of reaching the mainl[illegible]

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U.S. Coast Guard



Pho[illegible]

RT IN HE ROCK

Desert Rock, newly automated, has once again become a desert isle

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HE light tower was raised from
e Rock's native granite in the
century, though evidence
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57, but a metal plate plainly
g the date 1847 is mounted
er the tower entrance. The
tower superseded a previous
built in 1830. This first
was supported by timbers
into the roof of the original
's dwelling and stood fifty-
above the water.

The first lightkeeper at Mount
Rock was Esias Preble, and
at that time was furnished
es of eight argand oil lamps arranged in a circle, each lamp backed by a metal reflector. In 1857 a new lantern was installed and equipped with a Fresnel lens which produced a far more powerful light beam and represented a great advance in beacon efficiency. At this same time, a fog bell was conveyed to the Rock and mounted on a tower of its own. Both the light and the bell were operated by a system of descending weights much like those used in a grandfather clock, and 'winding up the weights' was a several-times-nightly practice. As the weights descended, they drove a system of gears that rotated the lantern and, on foggy days, struck the bell. Subsequent improvements included a second house, a boathouse, workshops, and an engine room. In 1889 the fog bell was replaced by a steam-powered foghorn, and in 1932 a radio beacon was installed which transmitted a signal that enabled mariners to fix their positions with greater accuracy.

Until 1939, when control of U.S. light stations was transferred to the Coast Guard, Mount Desert Rock Light Station was under the jurisdiction of, alternately, the Departments of Commerce and the Treasury. During these years it was usually attended by three keepers and their families. The larger of the two houses was divided by a wall down the center of the building and accommodated two families, while the third family lived in the smaller house. Usually one family at a time would take shore leave, although in the winter, when landings were rarely possible, everyone remained on the Rock. The men lobstered and attended to the horn and beacon, while the women cooked, sewed, and looked after the children. The

(Continued on page 55)

The last Coast Guard crew to operate the now automated Mount Desert Rock Light were airlifted off the island.





Photographs by John P. March

DESERTING THE ROCK
(Continued from page 43)

keepers and their families took great pride in the appearance of the station, and regular inspections rarely found anything out of place.

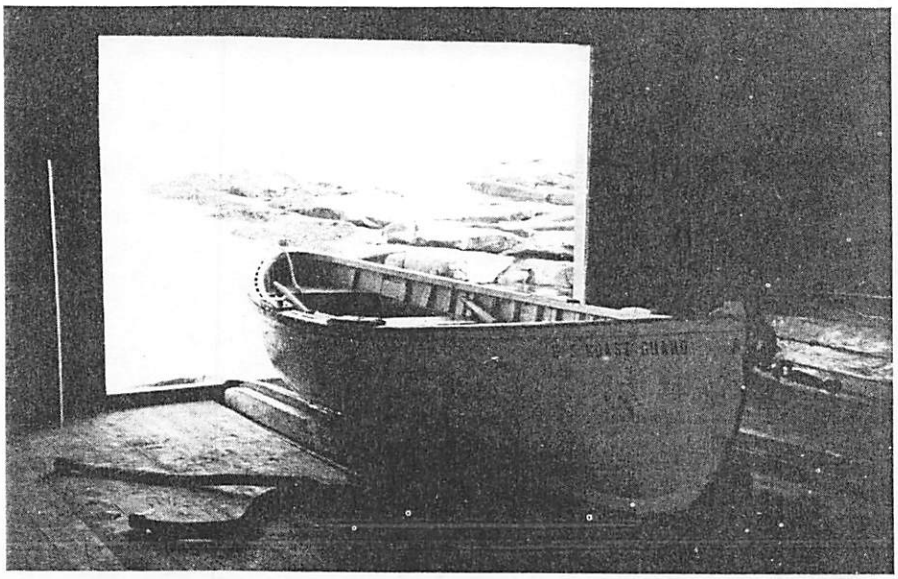
The Lighthouse Service furnished schoolbooks to those families with children, and two weeks out of every ten a government schoolteacher would arrive to take the children through their lessons. Mrs. Robina Smith of Manset, whose father, Vinal O. Beal, was a lightkeeper on the Rock in the early part of this century, remembers having her mother attach a line to her waist when she went out to play. At the other end of the line was a loop that slid along a clothesline suspended between the house and a derrick at the island's edge. In this way, she and her sisters and brother were prevented from being washed away while out of their mother's immediate care. The children would dress up spare lobster buoys as dolls and sail toy boats, carved by their father, on the puddles that collected in the Rock's numerous shallow depressions.

At that time, Mt. Desert Rock was serviced by the lighthouse tender *Hibiscus*, which delivered food, medical supplies, and other necessities. The food stocks included dried beef, stalks of bananas, barrels of apples and potatoes, and many jars of pickled beets, most of which were stored on shelves that lined the whitewashed cellars. Supplies were irregular, recalls Mrs. Smith, and sometimes the men ran out of tobacco and smoked tea. Rain water was collected then, as now, for domestic use. Hard coal was burned in the stoves, and kerosene lamps provided light.

Soil was understandably scarce on the Rock, and each spring barrels and bags of earth were brought out from the mainland for the planting of flower and vegetable gardens. The earth was packed into fissures in the highest ground, and later in the year the Rock bloomed with unexpected loveliness. Winter storms would sweep away nearly all the carefully husbanded soil, but each spring the effort was taken up again.



Bangor Daily News

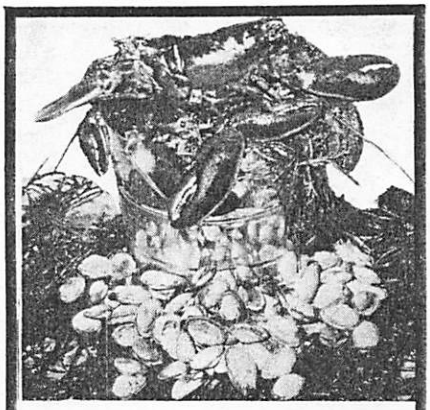


John P. March

A peapod (below) symbolizes one reason for automation: difficulty in getting to or from the island during storms. Above: Aftermath of Hurricane Daisy, 1962.

THE storms that batter the Rock are severe and on occasion awesome. In 1842 the Superintendent of Lighthouses in Maine noted in a report that "the officers of the cutter just returned from Mount Desert Rock informed me that they there measured one stone that was thrown out of its place by the sea and found it 18 feet long, 14 feet wide, and 6 feet thick, weighing about 57 tons." At another time it was stated that a rock weighing seventy-five tons had been moved sixty feet during a storm.

During a fierce storm in the early morning of December 9, 1902, the tug *Astral* with a large barge in tow, grounded upon the northeast ledge. The cold was extreme, and ice more than a foot thick had coated the pilothouse. Heavy seas were running between the Rock and ledge making the stretch between them impassable. Keeper Fred M. Robbins and his assistant were finally able to get a line across to the tug at low tide and saved all but one of the eighteen badly frozen members of the crew. Billowing sea smoke was so thick



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"Child in Pink," from painting by William M. Prior, c. 1840, Bath, Maine. Handpainted on #18 or 14 mono canvas with Paternayan yarn for design and background. $75 postpaid.

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that the men on the wooden schooner barge could see nothing of what was happening and assumed that the tug had simply dropped anchor to ride out the storm. Two days later, the storm abated somewhat and the men on the anchored barge, aware by this time that the tug had run aground, hoisted sail for Rockland. Upon their arrival, the news was passed to Boston and a rescue vessel dispatched to bring the stranded seamen off the Rock.

The worst damage in its 147 years of existence was visited upon Mount Desert Rock Light Station by Hurricane Daisy on October 6, 1962. Waves washed entirely over the island, carrying away two empty 1,500 gallon fuel tanks, a paint locker, concrete walkways, and the covered structure connecting the tower and the main house. The three Coast Guardsmen stationed there took refuge in the light tower, where they spent the night on the fourth floor. They awoke to find the engine house destroyed and a four-ton boulder resting in the boathouse. A hole in the roof above showed clearly where the sea, passing over, had released it.

That day at sunrise a Coast Guard plane dropped a radio, food, and sleeping bags to the three men. Later on the same day a cutter from the Coast Guard base in Southwest Harbor came out and took them off. Men from the buoy tender *Laurel* set up an emergency light and horn powered by twelve-volt batteries, which ran until the generators could be restored. Walter Moulton of West Tremont was commanding officer on the Rock during Hurricane Daisy, and though he is partial to manned light stations, he feels that it was right to automate Mount Desert Rock, given its remote location. He foresees only one drawback: "Automation has no eyes," he says, "for someone who capsizes."

As a necessary step toward automation, a helicopter pad was constructed on the Rock in 1974. The pad was made of an especially heavy South American wood called greenheart that was chosen for its weather-resistant qualities. When the first beams were brought by boat to the Rock, they were simply

"Automation has no eyes," he say "for someone who capsizes."

dropped in the water in expectation that they would fl and could be easily pulled ash Instead the wood promptly s without so much as a gesture flotation. The beams proved to beyond recovery, and subseque pieces were delivered helicopter. Over the next summers the automation gear w ferried out and installed.

The three former die engines have been replaced by t ten-killowatt generators mounted huts which rest on a large frame the base of the tower. The th pendulum clocks which toget helped synchronize the ra beacon with others on the co have been removed to Great Du Island, where a new radio bea has been established. Instrument the Coast Guard base in South Harbor monitor the operation of Rock's new machinery. The instruments are similar to those us to monitor offshore oil wells include fire and intrusion alar The buildings on the Rock ha been equipped with automatic fi suppressant systems, and th former engine room now serve an emergency survival she furnished with fresh water, rations, blankets, and a kerose stove. Plans call for the main ho and the boathouse to be razed, w only a small protective structure around the boat winch which be maintained for emergency landings and the resupply of fuel the generators. Responsibility radio weather reports form broadcast by the men station the Rock has been assumed by th at the Great Duck Island L Station, which is itself scheduled automation in the near future.

IT seems possible that in future the only observers o Rock will be observing not wea but whales. Recognizing its uni virtues, students in a ma mammal workshop at Bar Harb College of the Atlantic establis

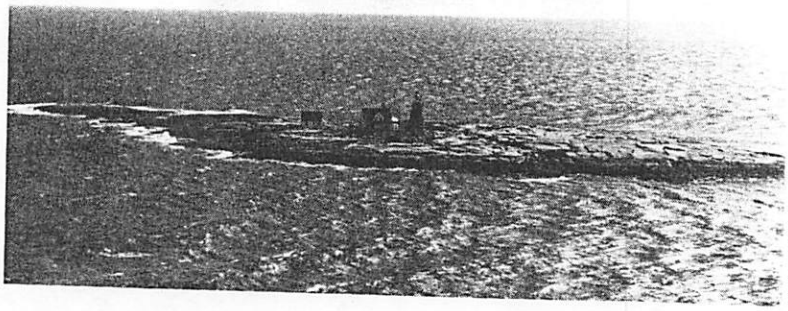
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Lighthouse Score:

MACHINES, 55 — PEOPLE, 22



Robert Hylander

Mount Desert Rock Light Station on a fair day.

Automation of formerly manned light stations is the latest development in the history of the U.S. Lighthouse Service, which had its beginning in 1790 during the administration of President George Washington. For the next century and a half, maintenance of lighthouses was a civilian function, alternately under the jurisdiction of the Treasury and Commerce departments before being taken over by the U.S. Coast Guard in 1939. Civilian lightkeepers were retained at some light stations until eligible for retirement. Maine's last civilian keeper was Richard Skolfield, who stepped down in 1966 from his duties at Squirrel Point Light Station on the Kennebec River. All light stations in Maine which have not been automated are maintained by uniformed personnel, either a Coast Guardsman and his family or a crew of two or more Coast Guardsmen.

At present, there are seventy-seven light stations and light structures along the Maine coast from the Isles of Shoals on the New Hampshire border to West Quoddy Head at Lubec. Of this number, fifty-five are automated and twenty-two are manned, twelve by Coast Guard crews and ten by Coast Guardsmen and their families. The family stations are Bear Island at Northeast Harbor; Fort Point, Stockton Springs; Owls Head; Brown's Head, Vinalhaven; Squirrel Point and Doubling Point on the Kennebec River; Portland Head, Cape Elizabeth; Goat Island, Cape Porpoise; Wood Island, Biddeford Pool; and Nubble Light, Cape Neddick. Several stations are scheduled for automation this year and next, among them Matinicus Rock, which, after Mount Desert Rock, is the outermost light station on the Maine coast.

Allied over the years with the Lighthouse Service in providing aid to mariners was the U.S. Lifesaving Service, which was officially created in 1878. Before that, rescue operations along the coast were conducted by volunteer crews at lifeboat stations maintained at first privately, later with some government assistance, by the Massachusetts Humane Society and other benevolent organizations. In 1915 the Lifesaving Service and the Revenue Service were consolidated to form the U.S. Coast Guard.

Former lifeboat, or lifesaving, stations, which once dotted the Maine Coast from Portsmouth Harbor to Quoddy Head, have long since been discontinued. Their function has been taken over by the Coast Guard's Search and Rescue division, operating with helicopters and surface craft from bases at Portsmouth, Portland, Boothbay Harbor, Rockland, Southwest Harbor, Jonesport, and Eastport.

— J.M.B.