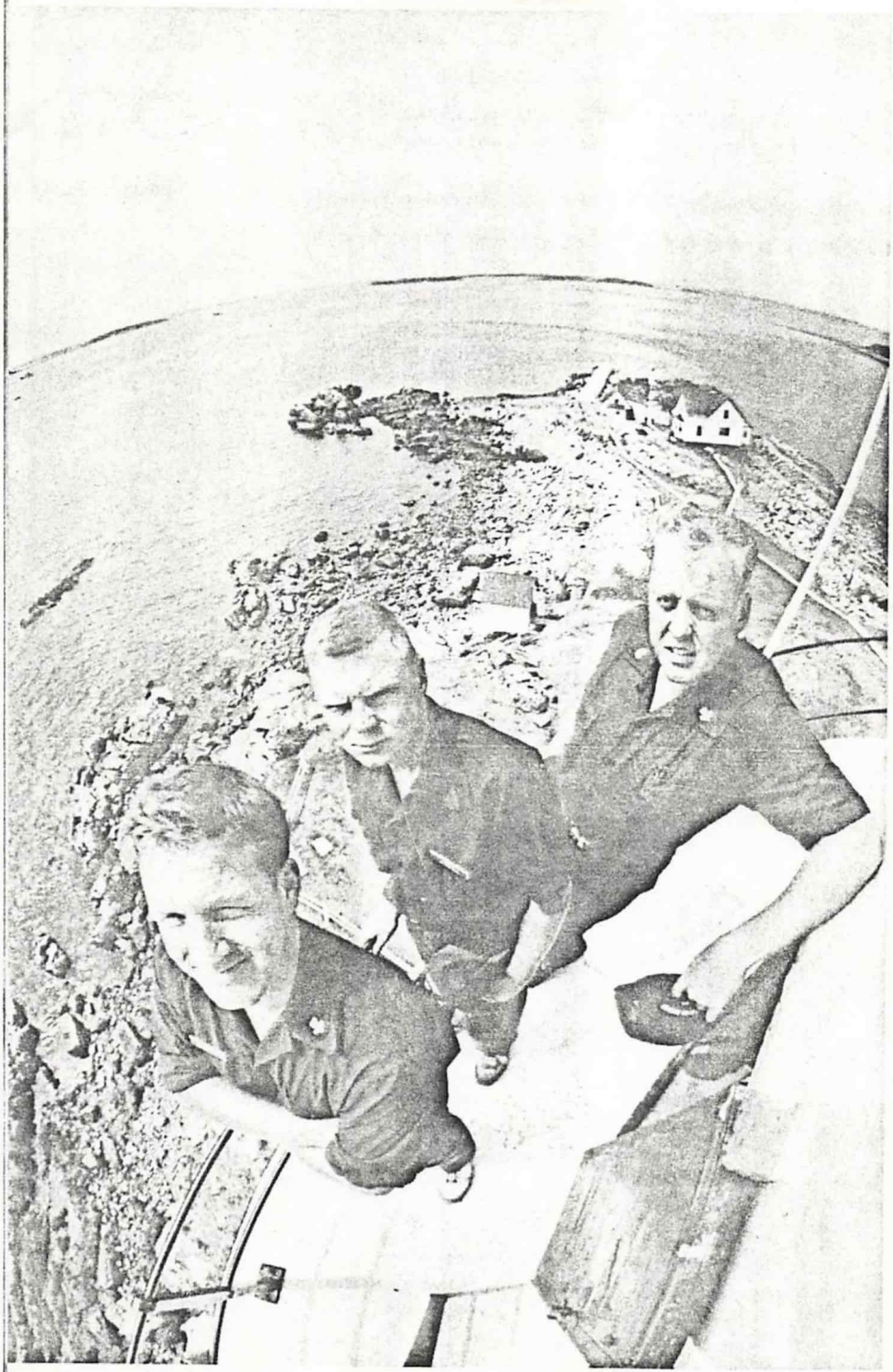
TURN OUT THE LIGHTHOUSE, THE PARTY'S OVER: KEEPER JOE LARNARD STOICALLY AWAITS AUTOMATION

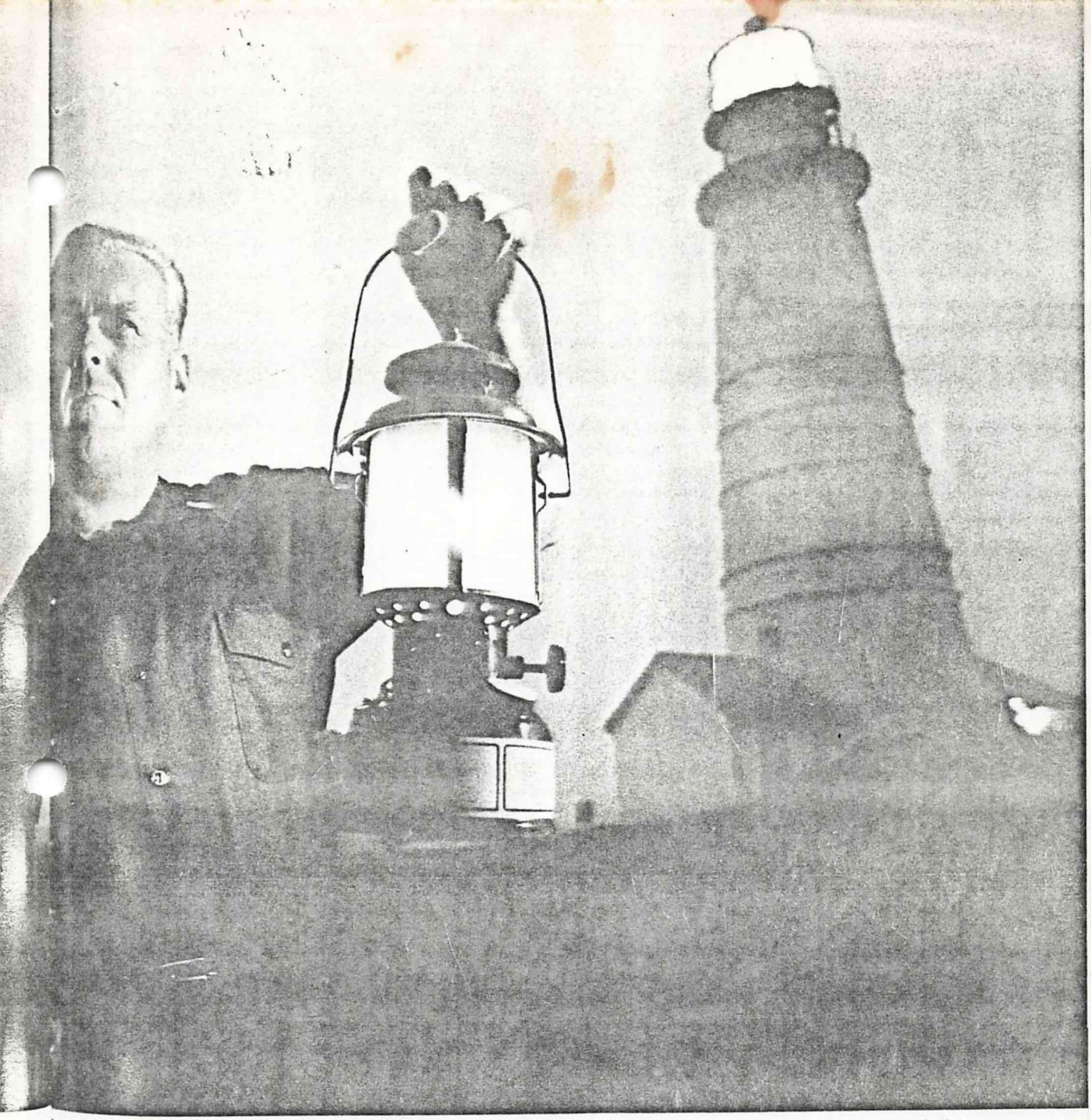
by Ron Arias



"When we filled out our 'dream' sheets for jobs, we all asked for lighthouse duty," says Joe Larnard (right), with Boston Light crewmen Don White (center) and Tom Corcoran.

Photographs by Andy Levin

It's almost dusk on Little Brewster Island and Joe Larnard, keeper of the Boston Light, hikes a few hundred yards up to the windblown promontory that juts into the Atlantic. With his good-natured mongrel, Fera, the station's mascot, by his side, Larnard enters the small room at the base of the light tower and performs the time-honored duty of switching on the light. Seventy-six stairs above, in the cupola 102 feet above sea level, the 1,000-



t night it's an eerie place," keeper Larnard notes. "I used to think the ghost stories were true, what with the wind and all."

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b, the thick, 12-sided lens starts to
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ozen beams of light will sweep over
e sea like the giant spokes of
me glowing, celestial carousel.
gorgeous piece of work," says
rnard, 36, a boatswain's mate first-
s in the Coast Guard. "It's just
ame she's going to be automated
d then nobody will be here to take
re of her."

Over the next two years, Larnard explains, the Coast Guard will automate the last remaining 16 manned lighthouses of the 450 it maintains. In 1989 Boston Light, the nation's oldest lighthouse site (the first tower was built in 1716), will become the final station to be converted to remote control and run from the mainland. The occasion will also mark the 200th anniversary of the Lighthouses Act, signed by George Washington in 1789. "When that happens," muses Larnard, "a whole age of keepers, generations of us, will come to an end. But who knows, maybe some private group will take over the keeper's quarters and the boathouse. There really ought to be someone out here to keep the place up, show people around and watch out for vandalism."

A ruddy-faced, burly bachelor, Larnard was born in Newburyport, Mass., and recalls watching Coast Guard >

boats on the Merrimack River as a kid. "That's when I first wanted to be a Coastie," says the 16-year veteran. Though he's been in charge of Boston Light for only six months, over the years he's pulled duty on the ships that maintain scores of other New England light towers and buoy flashers. "The biggest drawback of getting a keeper's post," he says, "is that this is a stag light. No girls. The other ones with people all have families."

Larnard, who lives with his three-man crew in a two-story, wood-frame house at one end of the five-acre, rectangular islet, admits that Little Brewster's panoramic view of the Boston skyline, five miles to the west, can be tantalizing. "We know we're missing out, so we stop looking," he says. "It's like being on a ship at sea, only we're on a rock that doesn't roll." All the men work a two-weeks-on, one-week-off schedule, so that three of them are always on duty. Steve Stark, 24, who is married and has been at Boston Light for 16 months, is the group's short-timer, due to leave in October. "I'll get to see my wife every night," says Stark, "and I'll try to forget the work. Hell, I think I've scrubbed, scraped and painted everything out here at least once. But I won't forget the view from the lighthouse, the sunsets, the foghorn blowing, even the storms we had."

Over the years, some of the storms have proved fatal. In 1718 the light's first keeper, his wife, his daughter and two men drowned when their boat capsized less than 100 yards from the island. In 1861 the square-rigged passenger ship *Maritana* went down in a snowstorm, with only 12 survivors. Ten years ago, a nighttime gale forced a small sailboat aground in nearby shallow waters; those on board refused Coast Guard help and in the morning were found drowned near their capsized boat. "Nothing else has happened lately," says Larnard. "But you never know. Even with buoys and all the equipment boats have nowadays, a hurricane or a big nor'easter can blow anything right up on the rocks. All the shipwrecks around here speak to that—even a ghost or two, if you believe in spirits."

Nights on Little Brewster can be eerie, especially if a cold wind is whipping up the sea and the door to the water-cistern shed is banging open and shut. On such a night, just after arriving on the island, Larnard recalls, he was in the house watching TV with the others. His back was to a window and out of the corner of his eye he glimpse some white flashes. "At first I thou they *were* ghosts," he explains. "T out they were gulls swooping down But it's still a bit scary at night. Goi up to the lighthouse alone—you p attention more."

That aura of mystery, plus the is land's beauty and history, make Li Brewster worth protecting for pub enjoyment, says Valerie Nelson, e utive director of the Lighthouse P ervation Society in Rockport, Mas "The Coast Guard will keep up th light," Nelson says, "but some gr could maintain the site as a living seum, with the guide wearing old keeper's clothes, cleaning the le and maybe trimming the wicks o lamps."

By then, Joe Larnard will be go and perhaps his only lament will that he wasn't the last keeper of ton Light. "There'll be one more Guard keeper after me," he says would be nice to be the last, to b of history. But I guess it's enoug next to the last in a long line of v trimmers and bulb changers. Th guys were a tough bunch, so I'm company." □

Though Larnard admits to an 18-handicap golf game on the mainland, he says, "I'm not half bad on my own 100-yard hole."

