Memories of a Lighthouse Childhood

The Inspector Pays a Visit

Libby Island, two miles off the Down East coast below Machias, was the childhood home of Philmore B. Wass, whose father took over the duties of head lighthouse keeper in 1919. On the tiny, treeless island, the young boy and his four siblings lived an isolated existence, their only company the families of the two assistant keepers. Suggesting the demands and regulations of lighthouse duty, Wass, now a retired University of Connecticut professor, recalls the momentous occasion of a surprise visit by the U.S. Lighthouse Service inspector.

THE "guvment," as we referred to the U.S. Lighthouse Service, was an all-pervasive force in our lives on Libby Island. We lived in a government house, used government supplies to keep it painted and cleaned, heated with government coal, and lighted the house with government kerosene. When we went ashore for mail and supplies, we used a government boat and kept to a time schedule that the government decreed — six hours, from departure to return, and any delay had to be reported. Off-island vacation time was thirty days a year, and each leave had to be approved.

This outside force, which seemed to have such great influence on our daily lives, had a major impact on me as a child. We always knew who the lighthouse inspector was, because both my father and mother often referred to him. The earliest one I remember was Inspector Luther. To me he was an all-powerful figure who had a great deal to do with my father's state of mind, which in turn affected my mother's state of mind and the happiness of the whole family.

Another great force which I was early taught to respect and fear was God who also played a major role in determining our activities, especially on Sunday. There was a time during my early years when these two all-powerful forces, God and Luther, became confused in my mind. The only difference was that Luther occasionally appeared in uniform. Twice a year the lighthouse inspector would come to inspect the station. This was a time of great excitement, mixed with anxiety. The inspection was very thorough, particularly in the early years. It not only included all the signaling apparatus — the light, fog signal, and all related equipment — but the houses as well. No one was sure when the inspection might take place. Even the presence of the *Hibiscus*, the lighthouse tender, was not a sure sign. She might be on other errands, such as delivering supplies. But the keepers had one way of getting warning of the inspector's arrival. Nearby, to the east and west, were two other lighthouses, Little River, in Cutler, and Moose Peak, off Jonesport. If the tender arrived at either of these stations and the inspector was aboard, indicated by the flying of the inspector's flag, the keepers would immediately call my father.

When this call came, my father's resulting announcement would set off a flurry of excitement and activity. Although Father maintained a good station, everything had to be shipshape for inspection, and each of us had a special job to do. Mine, I remember well, was to clean all the brass in the house, including doorknobs. I can still smell the polish. The womenfolk would clean the house from top to bottom, washing and dusting until, along with the brass, the whole house shone. Father and the other two keepers cleaned the signaling apparatus, with the glass prisms and brass framework of the lens taking the most time.

OF all the events we experienced on Libby Island, inspection surpassed all the others in sheer excitement. When someone shouted, "The *Hibiscus* is coming," we would all dash outside, and there she would be, a black hull on the horizon with a black plume of smoke rising from her stack, indicating she was coming full speed ahead for Libby. Until my first visit to Hawaii, I never associated the word *hibiscus* with anything except this familiar black ship which so often brought excitement to our lighthouse island.



The author, in sailor cap and curls, posed with his parents at Libby Island Light Station in the early twenties.

By the time the *Hibiscus* came to anchor near the the boathouse, all of us had assembled, usually high on a bank where we could see everything. Father had a lighthouse keeper's uniform that he seldom wore, but this was one of the occasions. Over it, he would don new overalls and a blue denim jacket because this was not wholly a ceremonial affair. One of his first jobs was to rush to the boathouse to start a fire under the boiler to get up steam for the steam donkey hoisting engine. As the soft coal ignited, the acrid smell of coal smoke filled the air.

All eyes were on the *Hibiscus*, anchored off the boathouse, as we waited for the yawl boat to be lowered. The yawl was a big bluff-bowed boat capable of carrying large quantities of supplies. The water drained off the end of our slip at low water, so the captain must have read his tide tables carefully, to arrive when the tide was high and rising.

Once Inspector Luther debarked, every eye was riveted upon him and my father as they shook hands, then turned and marched through the boathouse and up the grassy path to the houses. The urge to follow was too great to resist, so, keeping a safe distance, we all fell in behind — mothers with babes in arms, the children, and, often, the horse, cow, and dogs. It was quite a parade.

As soon as we reached the houses, we older children turned and ran back to the boathouse where more excitement was about to begin. Usually, when the *Hibiscus* brought the inspector, she also brought supplies, coal being the bulky cargo. By the time we got back to the boathouse, she would already be unloading. Soon the yawl would again approach the slip, coming at full speed. The donkey engine, hissing great belches of steam and smoke, would whisk her to the top, where the crew would jump out. I do not know where these crewmen came from, but most of them were much darker skinned than we were, and we called them "guineas." I suppose they were from

coastal Massachusetts cities, where many Portuguese immigrants had settled, but to us they were demigods.

The coal came in heavy burlap bags that we called crocus sacks. Each of these must have weighed over a hundred pounds when filled. One of the first things the crewmen did was to take an empty sack and push one of the bottom corners into the other to form a hood. This they wore on their heads and backs for protection, making them look like giant elves. These men worked like fiends. Carrying a full sack, each crewman would run, or go at a running walk, up the steps, through the boathouse, and outside where a pile of coal would quickly accumulate. When he reached the summit of the pile, he would turn with his back to it, and another crewman, with a very sharp knife, would slice the restraining cord at the mouth of the bag, which was carried upside down. The coal would go streaming out while the man ran before it, strewing coal behind him. Without stopping, he would head back for another bag, making an endless chain of men who became blacker by the minute. They did not stop until the yawl was empty and had to return to the *Hibiscus* for another load. For weeks afterward, we would use old grain bags to make hoods for our heads and play "unloading the coal," using some steep-sided knoll for a coal pile.

As the tide fell, more and more of the slip would be exposed. Whenever our government boat was lowered, we used the greatest care to make sure that her propeller did not hit on the rocks. The *Hibiscus* crewmen, however, showed no such concern. When the coal was unloaded, they piled in, cast off the restraining lines, and went plummeting down the slip, hitting the water with a great splash. As far as we were concerned, these were brave, if somewhat reckless, adventurers. No other performance, circus or otherwise, has ever thrilled me as much since.

WHEN the *Hibiscus* would weigh anchor and head away from Libby, there was not one of us children who did not dream that someday we might join her crew. On one of her visits, I managed to realize a bit of this dream. I heard a new inspector, Mr. Sampson, ask my father if he would follow the *Hibiscus* into Starboard, the mainland village three miles from Libby Island, and drive him to Machias where he could get the train for Portland. My father, of course, agreed. Immediately an idea hatched in my mind. Why couldn't I leave on the *Hibiscus* with the inspector, stay aboard for the short trip to Starboard, and then, when my father came alongside, be taken off with the inspector?

When I proposed this idea, I fully expected to have it rejected, but Father readily agreed. Since then, I have often thought, how many fathers of that generation would have risked having their sons do something that could have reflected poorly on their reputations with their bosses.

I quickly cleaned up, changed my clothes, and was ready when the inspector mounted the ladder to the yawl. I could hardly believe it when I followed him, but I was disappointed when our ride down the slip was not really fast, though we did go much faster than our usual cautious descent. We were soon beside the *Hibiscus* and were hoisted up to deck level, where we debarked. This was all like a dream. Since earliest childhood I had seen this, to me, gigantic ship from a distance; now I was actually on her deck. No one instructed me so I began a leisurely inspection on my own. A half hour later, a steward appeared and said, "Mr. Sampson wants you to join him for dinner." I cannot remember what was served, but I do remember a meticulously clean white room and my feeling that this man I had held in awe must have a very kind heart. Shortly afterward, the *Hibiscus* again lowered her anchor, and the inspector and I climbed down a ladder into the boat Father had skillfully brought alongside. One of many unforgettable experiences had come to an end.

WHENEVER I hear anyone say that the government cannot run anything without a great deal of waste, I have to tell them a few stories about the lighthouse service. The government supplied all basic items related to the operation and maintenance of the station. This included not only such items as coal and kerosene for signal operations and heating, but also such minor supplies as soap, cleaning cloths, dustpans, brooms, and paintbrushes. Careful invoices were kept on everything that was semidurable, so my father had to be able to account for all existing stock. When something like a paintbrush needed to be replaced, the worn-out item had to be turned in when the inspector came, otherwise no new ones would be issued. Boxes of these items were off-loaded to the *Hibiscus*. We never knew what happened to them, but we presumed that at some point they were dumped overboard. It is alleged that one keeper, to be sure he always had used equipment to return, would watch with his spyglass to see where they were dumped. After the tender was out of sight, he would go and retrieve them.

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of a light station passing into an individual's hands are almost nil. "Our belief," Lieutenant Ganser asserts, "is that the light stations are better off in the hands of a local group that is right on top of the situation." Ganser has, in fact, spent considerable time over the past four years ensuring that buildings adjacent to lighthouses are being licensed to these kinds of organizations.

Equally eager to involve local participation is the Coast Guard station in Southwest Harbor, whose territory stretches from Port Clyde to the Canadian border. This region's sparser population and less affluent economy have, however, hampered efforts to transfer unneeded lighthouses out of Coast Guard's inventory. "We haven't been really successful in getting civilian groups to take over lights," confesses Captain John Sproat, commander of the base. "It's a matter of economics. Down East communities generally aren't well-to-do enough to take over a lot here. That's why I'm enthusiastic about the media attention they're receiving." Due to these financial realities, private ownership or lease of a lighthouse's ancillary buildings is more possible down east. "We have some light stations that would be available," states Sproat. "They're very remote, but very beautiful." Sproat's major concern currently is finding organizations to take over the buildings at the West Quoddy Head and Fort Point lights before they are automated.

If life of an elemental and solitary nature is part of the allure of the light stations, personal comfort is seldom a characteristic. Many lighthouses lack even electricity. The Burkes are installing a septic system at the Isle au Haut Light, but are opting for the cozy authenticity of original gas lights. On Goat Island off Biddeford, a Coast Guard family depends on rain for their freshwater supply, in dry times relying on water delivery by tanker. Another concern in acquiring a lighthouse is the very equipment the tower was built to house — its light and foghorn. The light is tolerable. The horn can be dangerous. Automation by the Coast Guard has, in many cases, included installation of "pure tone" fog horns which can cause painless damage to the hearing of people more than two hundred yards behind the horn or even several times that distance in front. Generally speaking, Environmental Protection Agency regulations prohibit habitation within the signal's danger zone.

The fate of the light stations remaining in Coast Guard control will likely be argued for years. And the issue is too complex to allow simple solutions. But the simple fact is that an era is ending. The automation of the last manned lighthouse in Maine is scheduled to take place in 1989 — the two-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the U.S. Lighthouse Establishment. □