Last lighthouse keeper leaves Nubble

by John Breneman

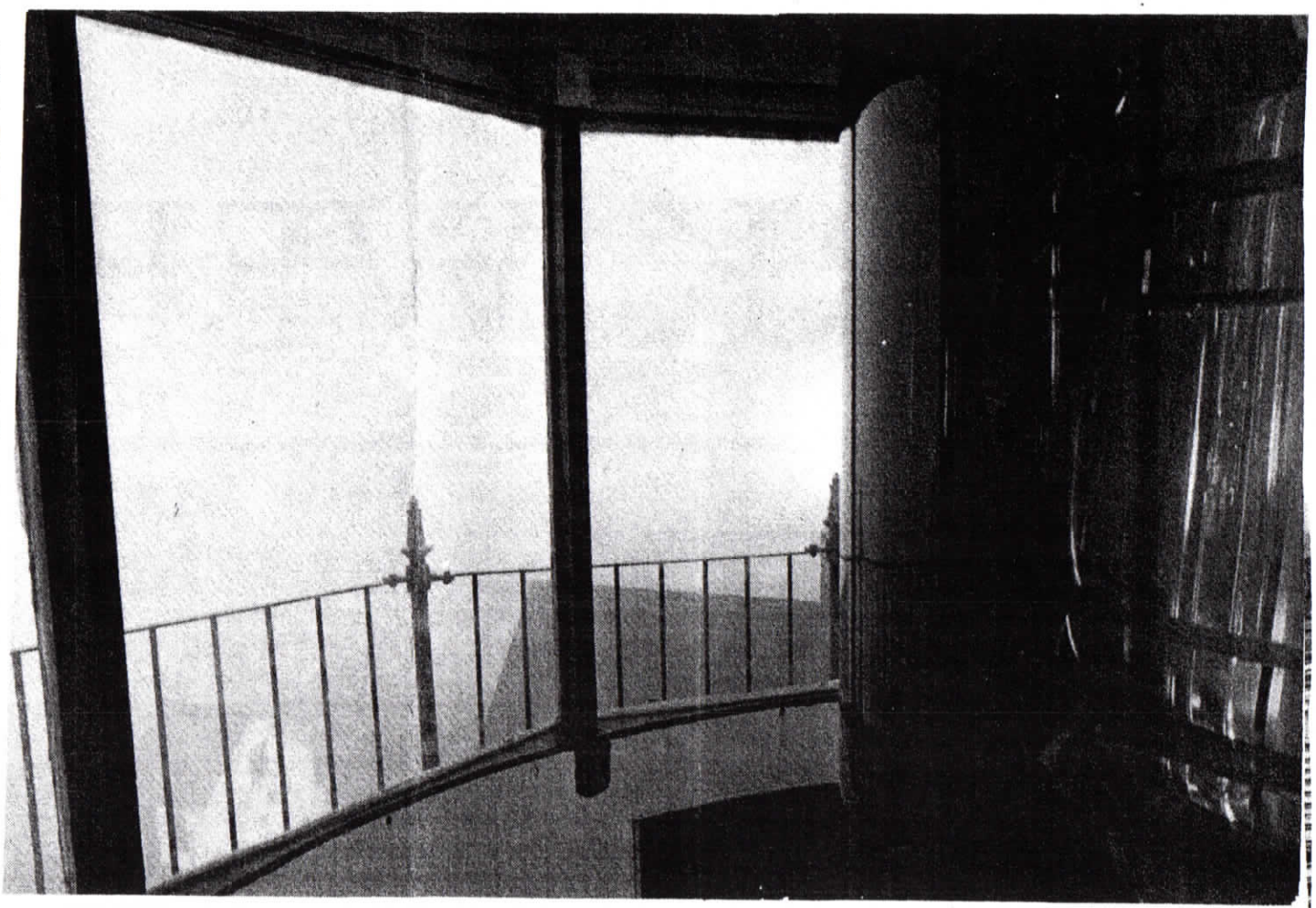
Fog, the vision-impairing atmospheric condition Nubble Lighthouse has helped countless mariners navigate through, shrouded the historic beacon Monday morning, providing the perfect setting for a United States Coast Guard "unmanning" ceremony.

As the now-automated foghorn droned its warning message through the thick air and the familiar red light winked atop the 41-foot Nubble tower, Coast Guard lighthouse keeper Russ Ahlgren lowered the American flag there for the last time and presented it to York Selectmen Chairman Virginia Spiller.

Ahlgren, the last official Nubble lighthouse keeper, turned over responsibility for the lighthouse to the Coast Guard's Portland Aids to Navigation team, which will make periodic maintenance visits to the 108-year-old beacon and its support buildings.

Later that evening, Spiller and the other selectmen appointed a committee to negotiate with the Coast Guard to lease the government property and perhaps station a local caretaker on the island in the Victorian keepers quarters Ahlgren, his wife Brenda, and two-year-old son Christopher have occupied since January 1986.

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ATOP THE spiral staircase inside the Nubble Lighthouse is the beacon itself — two special 1,000-watt bulbs (one a backup) enclosed by thick glass magnifying prisms held in place by solid brass fixtures. The light is surrounded by a shell of red plexiglass.
Photo by Dean Rock

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Across the narrow spit of water that separates the Nubble island from Sohier Park on the mainland, a large group of people strained to see the shadowy figures on the front lawn of the keeper's house. In the parking lot, a Mayflower moving van waited to transport many of the Ahlgren's belongings to Block Island, Rhode Island, where the former lighthouse keeper will begin "search and rescue" duty August 1.

"It's been an honor to be out here and to be part of the history of this light," said Ahlgren, who will take a "much-needed vacation" before reporting to Block Island. "We've got some real good friends in town that we're going to miss," said Ahlgren.

Ahlgren said he will also miss the solitude of the island, where he has occasionally been marooned for up to 10 days by fog and stormy seas, but will not miss cutting the sloping Nubble lawn, an arduous two-and-a-half-day task.

After the Ahlgren's move out on Wednesday, York Police Chief Douglas Starbird said the department plans to "increase our patrols" in the area to insure that people don't trespass on the famous island.

Television crews and newspaper people made their way across slippery rocks covered with seaweed, snails, starfish, and barnacles at low tide for the ceremony, which featured remarks by Portland Coast Guard Station Commander Angelo Arecchi and Lieutenant Timothy Youmans.

"For over 100 years Lighthouse Service families and Coast Guard families have lived here and tended this light," said Arecchi, noting that now "technology has made it possible to operate this light without a full-time keeper."

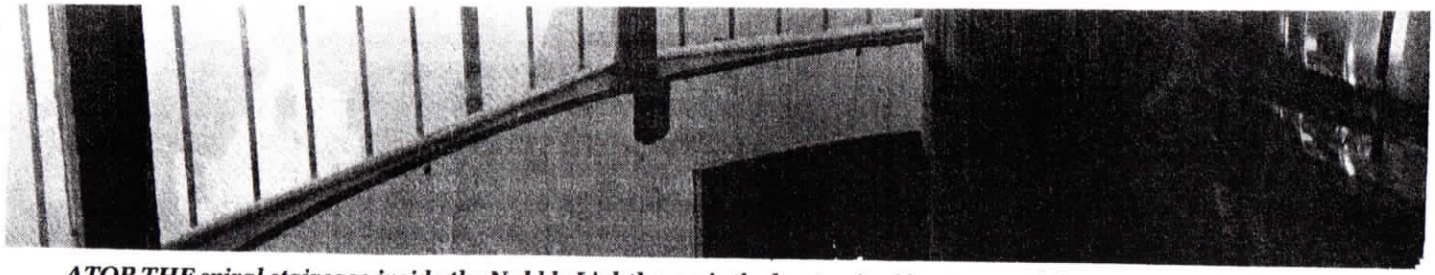
Arecchi said 22 of the 27 lighthouses in his jurisdiction - from coastal New Hampshire to Penobscot Bay - have been automated and unmanned.

The Nubble Lighthouse, constructed in 1879 of steel and brick, is recognized by many as the Town of York's most identifiable and oft-photographed landmark. A picture of the lighthouse is among 116 photographs aboard two Voyager satellites sent into space by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration with a recorded message by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter.

Several fundraising events are scheduled to benefit a town fund established to care for the Nubble.

Saturday, July 25, at Sohier Park, the York Recreation Department is planning a Rocking Chair Marathon. Also, a Vintage Fashion Show and Silver Tea is scheduled for Sunday, July 26, at the First Parish Church Hall.

For tickets or information, call the recreation department (363-2723) or York Days organizer Verna Rundlett (363-3078). The Yorks Chamber of Commerce plans its second annual March for the Light this fall.



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