

Bid to automate lighthouse raises seaside town's ire

By Marnie Samuelson
Special to The Inquirer

LUBEC, Maine — Dicky Denbow is standing in Howie Jones' general store and gas station posing for a photographer. Every few minutes the door opens and a neighbor or acquaintance comes in to buy a lottery ticket, or some liquor or groceries, and teases Denbow about breaking the camera. One man calls to Denbow to show his teeth to the camera. "Tooth," Denbow replies good-naturedly.

Denbow, 62, a retired fisherman, is unfazed by the ribbing. He is also accustomed to attention.

The spotlight has come to rest here over the last few months as the tiny town does battle with the U.S. Coast Guard.

This year, if the Coast Guard has its way, the candy-striped lighthouse that graces the nation's easternmost point of land will be automated. The lighthouse keeper and his family will depart, leaving the operation of the light and fog horn to modern switches and alarms and maintenance to visiting Coast Guard personnel.

Denbow and two friends got Lubec's save-the-lighthouse campaign started. In August, Denbow, Jones (who is also a town selectman) and Morris Babcock, son of the last civilian lighthouse keeper at Boston Light, circulated petitions that in a few weeks were signed by more than 800 people.

The petitions, addressed to Maine's U.S. congressional delegation and the commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, request continued manning of the West Quoddy Head Lighthouse.

Since 1808, when President Thomas Jefferson commissioned West Quoddy Head, the town of Lubec has had a love affair with its lighthouse. But it isn't mere sentiment behind the town's efforts on behalf of its beacon.

Nor are the townspeople opposed to progress. They acknowledge that since the introduction of electricity, the lighthouse keeper's job has become cushier. They are aware of the sweep of the Coast Guard's automation program.

By the end of the decade, the last manned lighthouses in the country are to be automated. Most people seem to accept the Coast Guard's contention that substituting machinery and electronics at the country's lighthouses will save taxpayers money.

"Automation isn't the dirty word," says Babcock. It's "unmanning" of the station that has Babcock and others worried.

Townspeople all agree on the problem: vandalism, which seems as un-

Report from a fishing village

checked in these parts as in some of the country's toughest inner cities.

According to locals, summer homes and hunting camps left vacant are routinely broken into and stripped of their contents.

The lighthouse stands in a remote location, about three-quarters of a mile from its nearest neighbor and 20 minutes from the town center. Its parking lot is a popular meeting place for drinking teenagers. Some early mornings, the current lighthouse keeper, Boatswain's Mate First Class Malcolm Rouse, has been alerted by the barking of his dog, Henry, and found people scaling the fence of the compound.

Townspeople are so certain that an empty lighthouse will be vandalized, says Babcock, that "they would bet their paychecks that if something doesn't happen in the first year, it will in a very short period."

The waters are treacherous between West Quoddy Head Light and Great Manan Island, about 10 miles away. Water temperatures drop to 30 degrees in winter and never get much above 46 degrees. Tides in the Lubec area, which sits at the mouth of the Bay of Fundy, are the largest in the country — about 27 feet between high and low water.

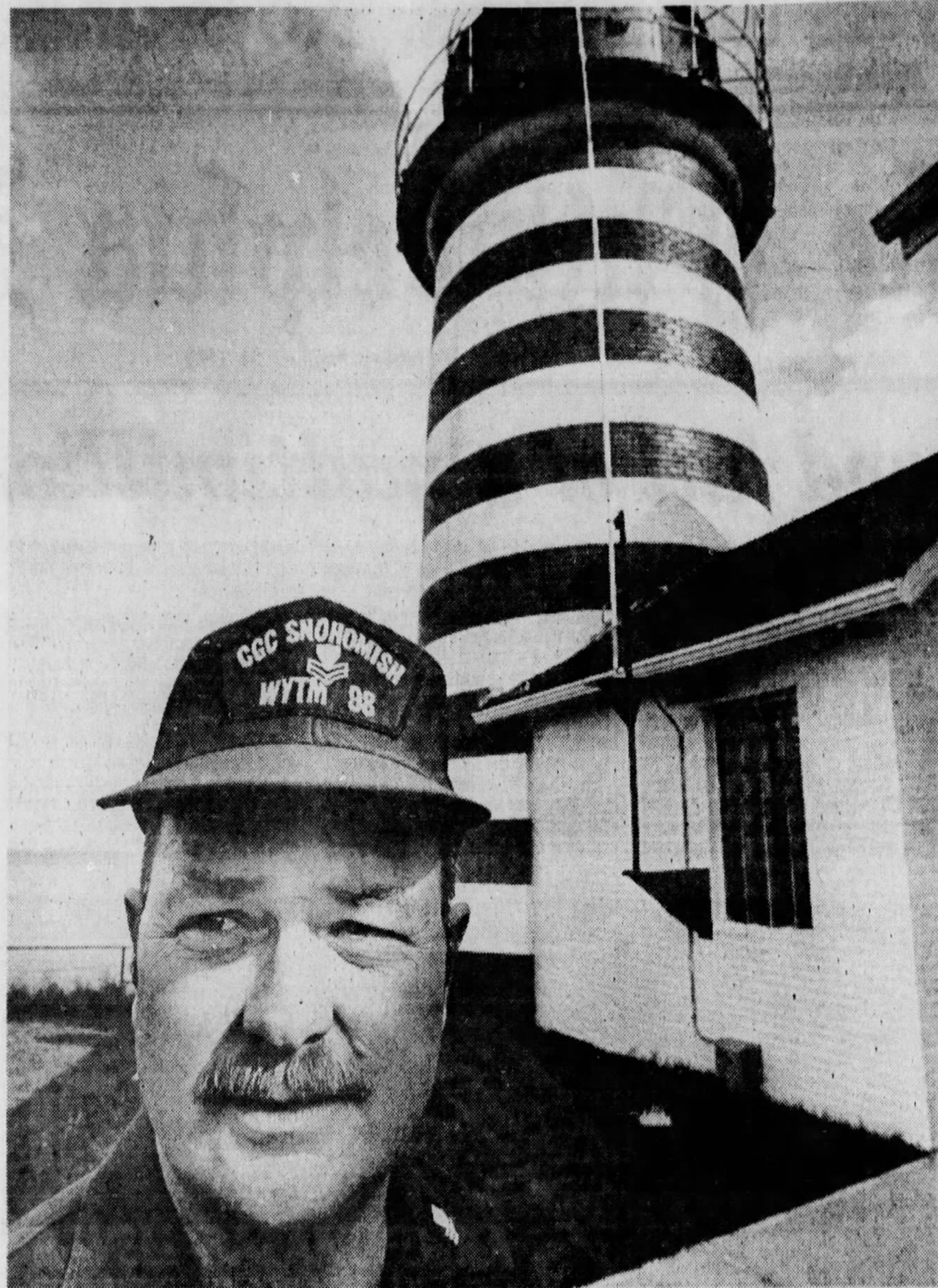
Any mishap to the light or other navigational aids could mean disaster for fishermen, says Bud Northrup, who, like many other local fishermen, plies these waters in a small, open boat with little sophisticated direction-finding equipment.

Townspeople upset at the lighthouse-automation plan aren't only worrying about the area's small fishermen, however. Many are also worried about their own pocketbooks and about the town's ability to provide basic municipal services.

Lubec, population about 2,000, is a depressed area. About one in five people who list themselves as workers are unemployed, according to the town manager. Fishing, once king in these parts, is declining. There are only two sardine packing plants in town (down from seven), and they are open only seasonally. Lubec's harsh climate and remote location — miles from markets — make it a poor choice for new industries.

It's a hand-to-mouth existence for many of Lubec's residents. Hunting here is more than a pleasant pastime: it's a way of getting through the winter with meat on the table.

While tourism may be a dirty word in some wealthier coastal communities, in Lubec, it is a glimmer of hope



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Keeper Malcolm Rouse and the lighthouse, which is at the easternmost point in the continental U.S.

on an otherwise bleak economic horizon.

Automation at the lighthouse, townspeople fear, would severely hurt their budding tourist trade. Sealed doors aren't inviting. Neither are beer bottles, graffiti, broken windows or other signs of vandalism.

"Anytime a person comes into Lubec and changes a \$10 bill, he is aiding the town," Babcock says of the area's fledgling tourist traffic. As many as 400 people a day visit the lighthouse in high season. "If they each spend a dollar [here], it's helping someone in town pay his taxes."

At West Quoddy Head, lighthouse keeper Rouse is continuing his routine chores. He files a weather report every three hours, keeps up with what he calls endless paper work and complains about the swarm of flies drawn into the light room to escape

the cold weather. But he says he has stopped some seasonal indoor tasks, such as painting. What's the use, he asks, since the building is soon to be sealed up and left uninhabited?

Since the early '60s, under the Lighthouse Automation and Modernization Program (LAMP), the Coast Guard has completed installations at hundreds of lighthouses across the country. West Quoddy Head is one of only 14 that continue to operate under the care of a lighthouse keeper.

Since receiving Lubec's petition on behalf of its light, Maine's U.S. congressional delegation has taken up Lubec's call for assistance, requesting that U.S. Coast Guard Adm. Paul

Yost make West Quoddy Head light "an exception to the Coast Guard's LAMP policy."

That seems unlikely, but the Coast Guard has acknowledged the town's concerns about vandalism and is seeking a tenant for West Quoddy Head who will agree to maintain a year-round caretaker on the property.

What will happen if automation occurs, and no one steps forward to maintain the facility?

"We won't be worrying about it long," town manager Ed Collins says grimly, "because it won't be there. It will be burned down or vandalized beyond recognition."

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