`HAD I LOOKED DOWN, I WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST'
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MEMO:
VOICES OF NEW ENGLAND / CONNIE SMALL

TEXT:
PORTSMOUTH, N.H.

It's been nearly 50 years since Connie Small said goodbye to her 28 years as a lighthouse keeper's wife, but the 96-year-old's memories of her romance with the sea are as vivid as the beacons she once guarded with her husband, Elson. He died of cancer in 1960, but Connie Small has made sure those memories are preserved. In 1986, at age 85, she wrote "The Lighthouse Keeper's Wife," a book that won her international acclaim. Small, a native of Lubec, Maine, recently spoke at her apartment in Portsmouth with Globe correspondent Alice Giordano. An edited excerpt of her remarks follows:

I was always so frightened of water, boats, and especially heights. And here I was with one foot on the boat, the other on a ladder, with the boat going this way and that way, and the tide going swiftly by me. And I'm going up to this big lighthouse. I look up that 30 feet of black iron to the place I got to go. I said to Elson, "I just can't do this." He said, "Oh yes you can!" He says, "You take a hold of the ladder and you look up. Don't you look down, look up and I'll be right behind you." Well, I went up fine. And that has been my motto all my life since. Look up and don't look down. Had I looked down, I would have been lost, but as long as I looked up, I made my way. That left quite an impression on me. We were married three weeks later. The year was 1920.

That was the Channel Light in Lubec. Another lighthouse, Dochet Island Light, which watched over the St. Croix River, in Calais, Maine was my favorite. We had a garden, cows, chickens -- everything. It was like paradise to us after being surrounded by just ocean. The Avery Rock Light was just a couple of rocks in Machias Bay. The Seguin Light was the only one we had any earth on before Dochet.

I had a traumatic experience there, my worst ever. I was only 22 years old. Elson took sick. I took his temperature and it was 103. I knew he was very sick, but I didn't know what to do. Nobody could get to us and of course, there was no way to get in contact with anyone, as we had no telephone, nothing, not even electricity. We didn't have electricity, no refrigeration, until the Portsmouth Harbor Light.

Elson went delirious. I got him in bed and he went into a coma. I was all alone, trying to keep the fog whistle going. I had to keep the light going. Tons of water were washing over me all the time. I did everything I could think of to try to get some kind of response from him. I even lifted his legs, but there was nothing. I know as sure as you're sitting there, that he was gone. A storm kicked up and I had to go out and put the light out, so I started to go up to the tower. I went as far as the door and I stopped. I leaned against the door sill and said, "I've done all I can, you have to help me Lord."

I went up the stairs and put the light out, took care of it. I came back and I know I stood in front of that closed door for 20 minutes while I could get courage enough to open it because I was certain I had a dead person in there, and what was I going to do with it? I remembered my mother. When I was a child they used to keep the bodies in the home and the neighbors used go in and tend to them. My mother used to do that. I remember watching her ringing out cloths in alcohol and I thought I can do that and cover him because we have plenty of alcohol for lighting the lights.

I got the alcohol and opened the door and went in. All of sudden, he opened his eyes just the least little crack and says "I'm hungry." That was my miracle.

We were on Seguin Island, which is still at Popham Beach, from 1926 to 1930. They're talking now of taking the lens out, I hope they don't. It is the largest in the state and one of the largest in the country. It's 12 feet high, 6 feet in diameter and it's all crystal. It would take probably eight to nine million if you had to replace it.

I see the lighthouse as a spiritual symbol because everytime that light flashes it was like something coming from within inside of me, saying "I'm saving lives and property."

The lighthouses should never be forgotten. It's one of our oldest, protected symbols and it's also one of the seven wonders of the world.

The Coast Guard is a wonderful service, but it should not be running the lighthouses. I felt very badly when they took people out of the lights. I almost feel it cost less to keep the keeper there and they did much better than by putting the lighthouses on electronic device. The housing went to pieces, in some cases, it was destroyed the minute the keepers were taken off. That's what happened to my little Dochet Island. Two boys were robbing the cottages and they went out there, built a fire inside the house and burned everything. There's nothing left now.

They're restoring them back now. That's the object of Save The Light Program; the person or persons taking it, they have a deed to it, it doesn't cost them anything, but they do have to keep them in repair on their own.

When we lived in the lighthouses, I never had an opportunity to join clubs or go out socially. We never had children. One day I was sitting out on the rocks and I got to feeling sorry for myself when I happen to look down and saw this tiny little creature, a sea urchin, between two rocks in a puddle of water. I picked up and looked at it and I thought, "Why I am feeling sorry for myself when I've got the whole world in my hands?"

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CAPTION:
PHOTO

Connie Small outside Portsmouth Harbor Light: ``I see the lighthouse as a spiritual symbol.'' / GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / FRANK O'BRIEN

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