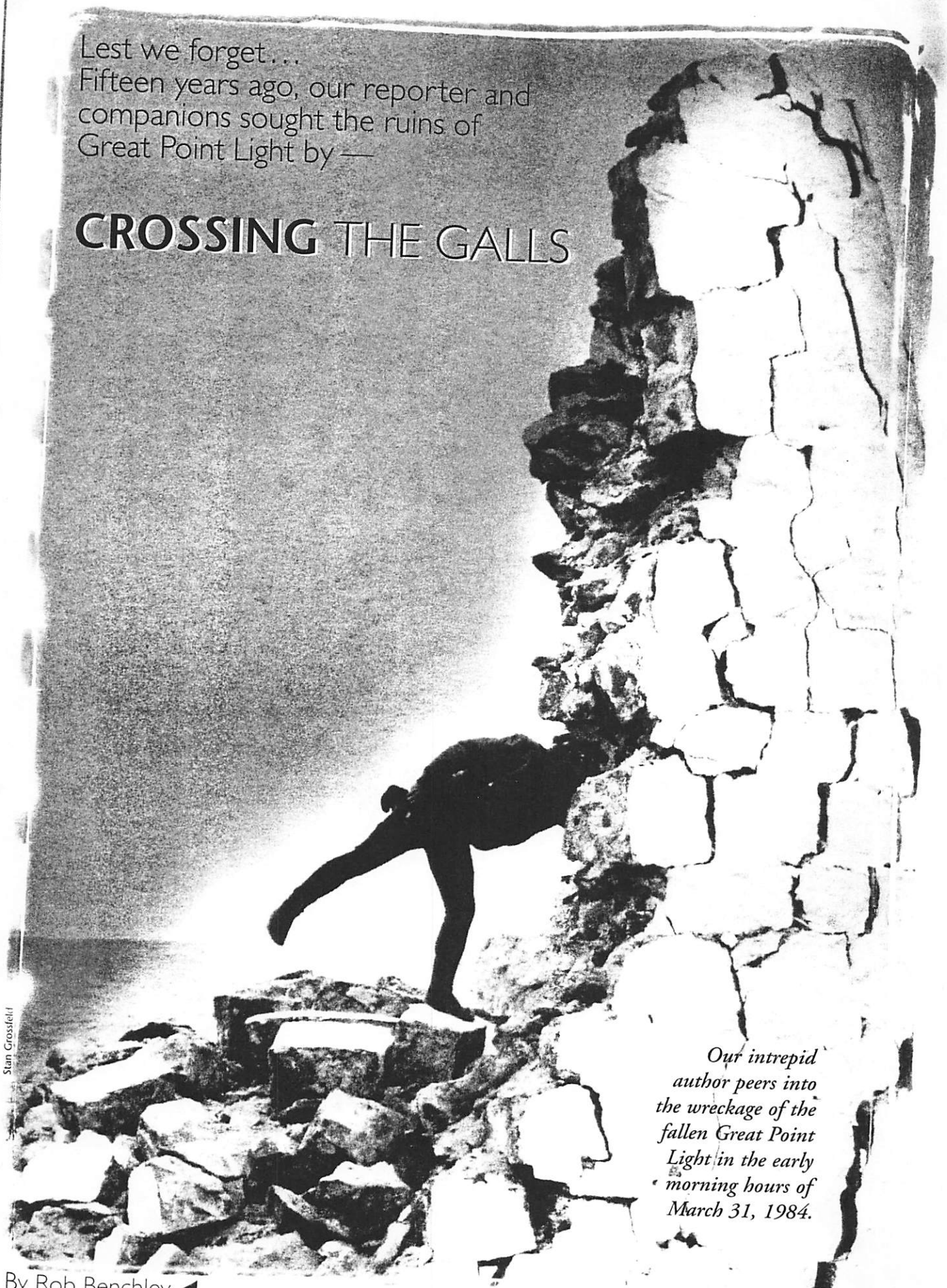
Lest we forget...
Fifteen years ago, our reporter and companions sought the ruins of Great Point Light by —

CROSSING THE GALLS

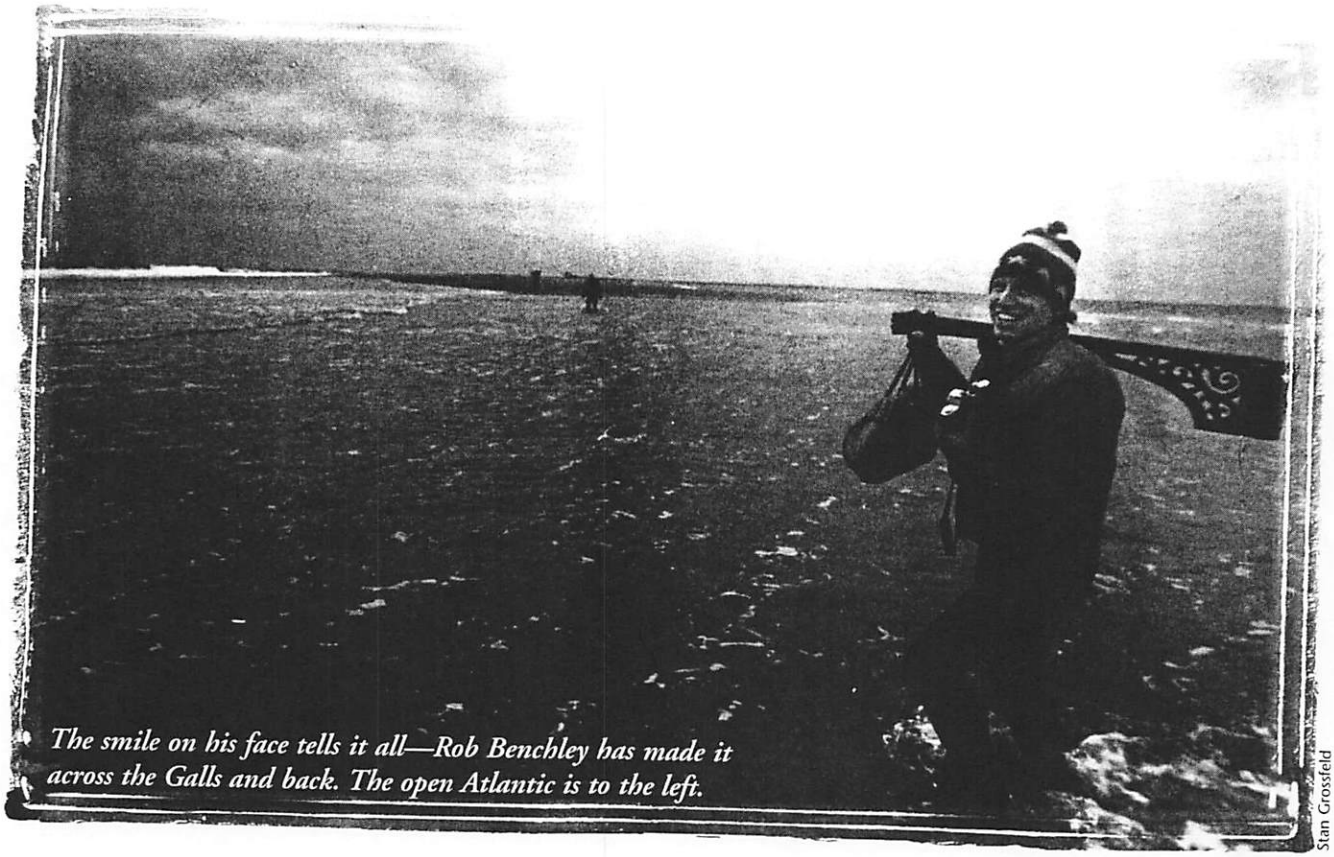


Stan Grossfeld

Our intrepid author peers into the wreckage of the fallen Great Point Light in the early morning hours of March 31, 1984.

By Rob Benchley ◀

▶ Photos by Stan Grossfeld



The smile on his face tells it all—Rob Benchley has made it across the Galls and back. The open Atlantic is to the left.

Stan Grossfeld

OUT HERE, AT THIS EASTERN SHORE OF NANTUCKET, WE HAVE A NAME FOR AN OCCASIONAL AND UNEXPLAINABLE SHUDDERING THAT RUMBLES THROUGH THE FOUNDATIONS OF THESE OLD HOUSES AND THE MARROWS OF THESE OLD BONES. IT HAPPENS AT THE MOST UNEXPECTED TIMES.

It's more of a feel than a sound—where the whole of your chest and the length of your spine resonate in a *wha-wa-whump* kind of a way.

We call it the "'Sconset Noise," and most of us out here are pretty sure it comes from shifting layers of sands, way down deep below this fair village—close (we like to imagine) to the epicenter of the universe.

Nobody is sure what they heard fifteen years ago, on the night of March 29, 1984. But when dawn broke on the 30th, there was no question that the lighthouse at Great Point had fallen.

Had it not been for almost two centuries of westward movement of the Great Point peninsula, and had it not been for thousands of years' worth of steady rise in sea level, the lighthouse would have turned 181 this year.

IN 1818 IT WAS BUILT IN THE CENTER OF THE PENINSULA. Right before it went down (can it have been fifteen years already?) it was standing on the beach, only a few feet from the Atlantic.

The cause of death was a three-day nor'easter—one of those typical comma-shaped, unnamed winter cyclones that comes out of the west, stalls offshore, and then hammers Nantucket with gale-force winds, horizontal rain and, of course, relentless surf. The lighthouse simply couldn't take the pounding.

If anyone had been standing there, one might have heard what sounded like the 'Sconset Noise.

That Thursday morning, the news shot through the streets and over the phone lines. I remember people feeling quite sad.

For me, it was a sobering example (and there were many more such examples to come) of how fickle, unannounced, and destructive the ocean can be. It also presented itself as an opportunity, for at the time I was writing and shooting photos for the *Inquirer and Mirror* and, having a firm grip on the obvious, this was a news item not to be missed. Never mind using it as another chance to go out and get knocked down by the wind and see how much salt spray my camera equipment could take.

Stan Grossfeld

When Nantucket gets under your skin, that's just how you behave here; the worse the weather the harder the wind is blowing or the snow is drifting get up, go out in it, and feel that wind! (Mother used to take us down to the beach during hurricanes. We must have looked like little desert nomads, towels wrapped on our heads, dodging flying flotsam and jetsam, sand tearing at our exposed skin. We all should have been spanked.)

The only problem about getting photos of the fallen light (and claiming the bragging rights of getting there first) was that you couldn't get there, from anywhere. The Galls—that low, narrow strip of sand connecting the Point with Mainland Nantucket—was under water.

We didn't know it, being the Innocents that we were, but this break-through was not so cataclysmic as it seemed. Nor'easters (big ones) frequently push the ocean over the Galls. It's just that this time, the ocean had exploded *through* the Galls.

Co-reporter Steve Sheppard and I enlisted the help of Robert Young to drive us out there in his Jeep (those were the days when not everyone had four-wheel drive). Yes, we'll just drive out there, get our pictures, take our notes, and come home. No big deal.

Arriving at the southern edge of the Galls, however, we realized we had a problem. There was this very wide, angry-looking, surf-pounded inlet between us and Great Point. It hadn't been there the summer before. The lighthouse should have been about a mile farther up the beach, its familiar white granite tower and capped black lantern jutting out of the dunes. It wasn't there.

The three of us sat in the red Jeep at the edge of this New Sea, quietly watching the surf roar from left to right, being bounced about in the wind that was still blowing 40. I started to think: "There must be a way . . . "

For Stan Grossfeld, whose affection for the island was made obvious in his book *Nantucket: The Other Season*, the destruction of the light was a sad and awful event, but being chief photographer for the Boston *Globe*, it meant another assignment on Nantucket—not that he needed an excuse.

Grossfeld, who arrived that Friday, had the same problem Steve Sheppard and I had: a wide stretch of angry water. No skipper in his right mind would take us across by boat, no Jeep was going to make it (although someone who tried after the Halloween storm in 1991 did not make it), and we didn't want to fly over it.

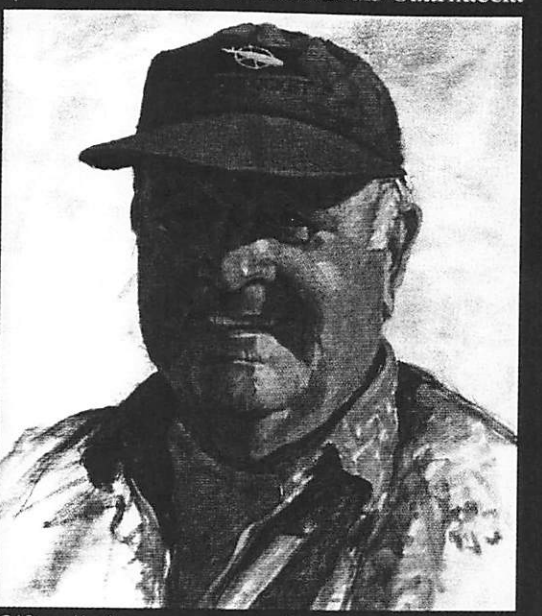
"Anybody can get a picture of this from an airplane," Grossfeld said. "It'll be much more dramatic from the ground."

We decided we were just going to have to walk across, and perhaps get a little wet doing so.

We planned this trip by borrowing a Wagoneer and then began rounding up waders, slickers, wetsuits, plastic bags for camera equipment, and a couple of six-packs of courage. (Someone should have thrown in a straitjacket for good measure.)

Somebody thought to check a tide chart; our only window of opportunity (daylight for film exposure, low tide for relative dryness) was going to be around 5:30 the next morning.

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Cal Simms (detail) oil on linen 24" x 18"

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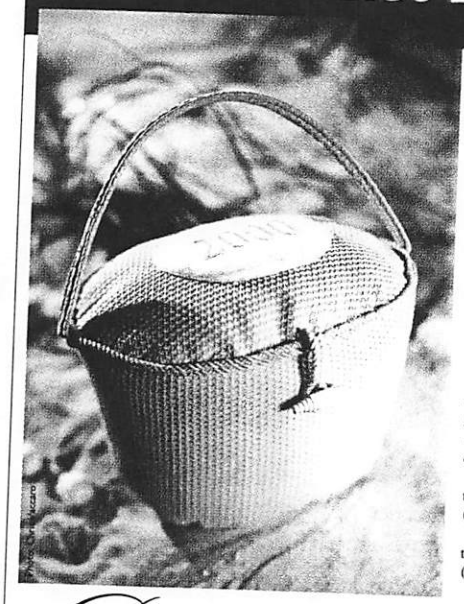
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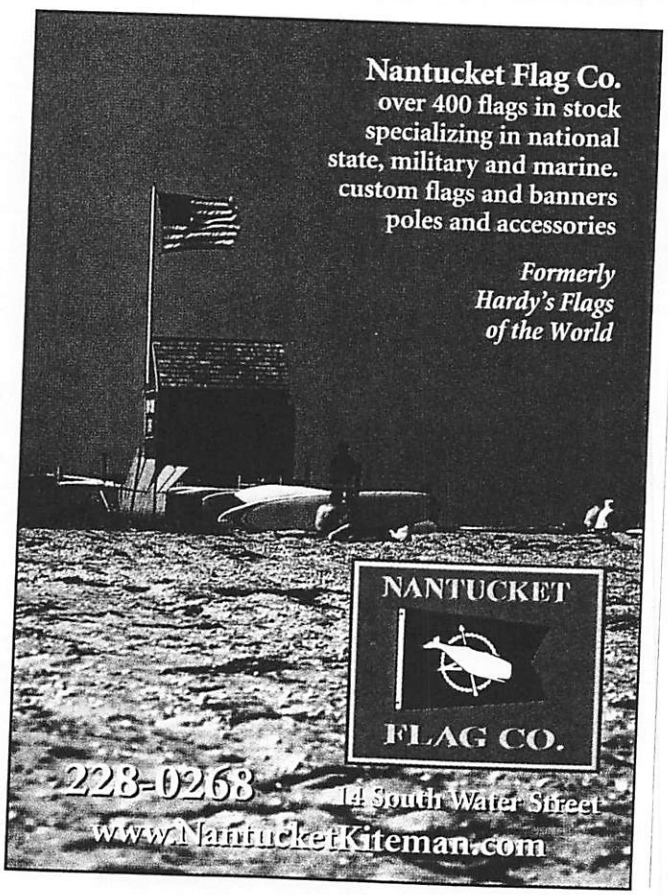
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WE PREPARED FOR GETTING UP BEFORE THE CRACK OF DAWN by staying up until just about the crack of dawn. There was a Marvin Hagler fight on HBO that had to be watched first, and it didn't come on until midnight. (I don't remember who won, but the ref had this funny way of moving his hands up and down that made it seem like he was saying "Shut-up, shut-up, shut-up!" I haven't watched a fight since.)

Somehow we made it up and out, and during the long drive up the beach in the darkness, everyone was very quiet. At the Galls, the scene from the day before was only a little different. The wind had died some (to 35 mph, perhaps?); the water looked a little less angry, but it was still uninviting.

We were five: Grossfeld; Sheppard and his wife-to-be Karin Ganga; a friend from Michigan, Joan Tuit; and I. Our plan was to cross during the last half-hour of the falling tide, run to the light (in *waders?*), get our pictures, return to the landing spot, and recross the Galls before the tide had a chance to flood too much. Not wishing to be stranded (not to mention having the waders fill up and getting sucked under a wave), we did not want to become a part of the story.

THERE THE INNOCENTS STOOD, LOOKING ACROSS THE GREAT divide, trying to decide. Was it a quarter of a mile across, or was it a half?

BLAME IT ON THE SIRENS, BUT I FOUND MYSELF IN THE water, charging for the other side. The four other idiots followed and soon we were pushing through ankle-deep water, calf-deep water, and then thigh-deep water. We weren't a quarter of the way across, and it looked like it was only going to get deeper.

Every dozen or so waves there would be a thirteenth, which would splash thirty-eight degree water in our faces.

Every dozen or so waves there would be a thirteenth, which would splash thirty-eight degree water in our faces. Would the water get up to our waists, our chests? The current pushed hard on our legs, washing out the sand from beneath our feet. Had we told anybody we were doing this? When would they start looking?

Then it started getting shallower. It was still a good hundred yards to the other side, and the legs were burning with the fatigue of exertion and anxiety. But soon it was ankle-deep again, and then we were on the beach. And then we saw them.

FOOTPRINTS. TWO SETS OF FOOTPRINTS. SOMEONE HAD beaten us across the Galls. Imagine. We learned later that it was the late Bruce Killen and his son. Okay, if you're going to get scooped on this, we thought, it may as well be by Bruce Killen.

We still had a fair hike ahead of us, and the clock was ticking loudly. Everyone stripped off the waders and changed into regular shoes and we headed north in a half-trot.

IT MAY HAVE BEEN ANOTHER HALF-MILE UP THE BEACH, BUT it felt like two. And then the honorable old lighthouse revealed itself for what it had become, a pile of rubble. Hearts immediately sank. That's enough now, we've seen plenty, let's



What they saw—the ruins of Great Point Light

Stan Grossfeld

go back. Maybe we shouldn't have come here.

It was only a lighthouse, one of the country's oldest. It was only a lighthouse that had witnessed 166 years of storms, shipwrecks, and rescues. It was only a lighthouse that served as a familiar backdrop for fishermen, picnickers, families, and lovers. Who didn't remember a bonfire and a moonrise there on a warm summer night? You might have, your parents might have; your grandparents, even your great-grandparents may have.

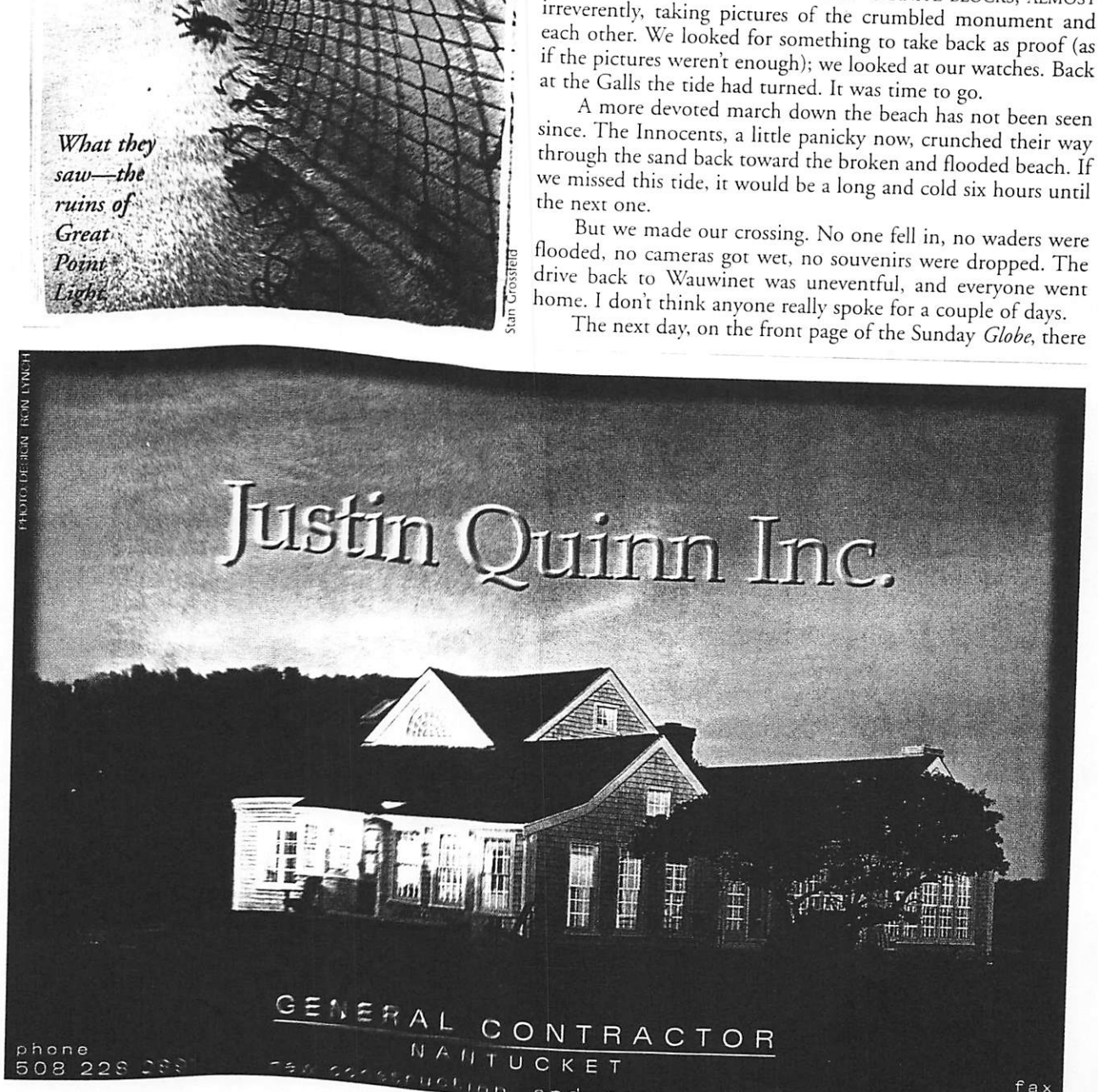
Now here were all those memories and all that history rudely spilled onto the beach. There was a harsh cold light on the scene, and the air seemed to be saying, "Something terrible has happened here." Yet, like viewing a corpse in a coffin for the first time, the incongruous crosses your mind and you think, "It looks so peaceful."

WE CLIMBED ALL OVER THE PILE OF GRANITE BLOCKS, ALMOST irreverently, taking pictures of the crumbled monument and each other. We looked for something to take back as proof (as if the pictures weren't enough); we looked at our watches. Back at the Galls the tide had turned. It was time to go.

A more devoted march down the beach has not been seen since. The Innocents, a little panicky now, crunched their way through the sand back toward the broken and flooded beach. If we missed this tide, it would be a long and cold six hours until the next one.

But we made our crossing. No one fell in, no waders were flooded, no cameras got wet, no souvenirs were dropped. The drive back to Wauwinet was uneventful, and everyone went home. I don't think anyone really spoke for a couple of days.

The next day, on the front page of the Sunday *Globe*, there



was a big vertical photo of the fallen lighthouse. It didn't look much like a lighthouse: a pile of granite blocks on one side, part of the broken white wall on the other; but it must have been because that's what the caption said. And there was Grossfeld's byline under the photo, and there I was in the middle of the photo, looking inside. I guess we really were there, the lighthouse really had fallen, and we really did cross that waist-deep roiling water. We should have been spanked.

IN THE MONTHS THAT FOLLOWED, THE site was fairly well salvaged. People carted away pieces of the lighthouse by truck and by foot, and even by front-end loader. The largest pieces of granite were eventually remortared into the replicated Great Point lighthouse, which you see out there today (getting a little closer to the shore every year, by the way).

Bricks and the smaller pieces of granite you'll find in houses and along driveways all over Nantucket. The old lantern top, with its black ball and lightning rod, can be seen at the Life-Saving Museum on the Polpis Road (they are in the process of putting together a fine exhibit there, complete with the light's original Fresnel lens). A few lucky people have whole pieces of the old wrought-iron spiral stairway.

So Great Point Light really isn't dead after all; it's just spread out some.

TODAY THE ONLY THING LEFT ON THE original site is a brick cistern and some big chunks of concrete, and a lot of memories. For some reason, the fishing in that very spot is excellent.

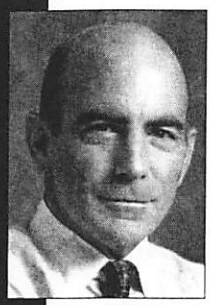
Since then, Grossfeld has been all over this planet, photographing places and people in the best of situations, and in the worst of situations, and he has mementos from many of them.

"I have a little piece of the Great Wall of China, and a little piece of the Berlin Wall, and a little piece of Great Point," he said recently from his desk at the *Globe*. "I like the Great Point one the best."

Yes. But still, we all should have been spanked.

Rob Benchley went on to become an award-winning photographer for the Nantucket Beacon. *He still gets his camera equipment wet chasing nor'easters.*

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