WHITHER SANKATY HEAD LIGHT?

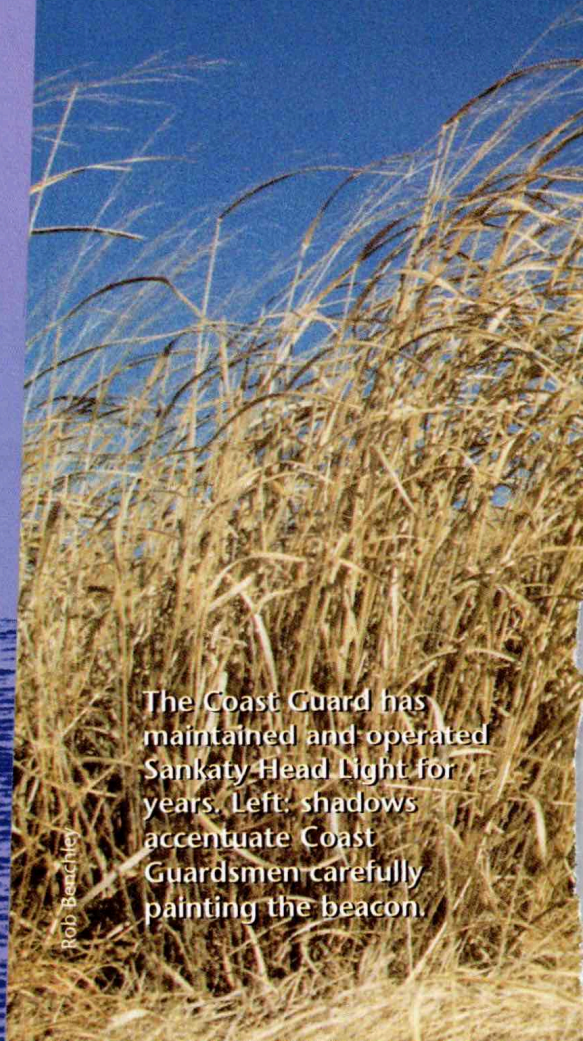
FOR NEARLY 150 YEARS, IT HAS BEEN A BEACON, A LANDMARK, A TREASURED PART OF THE ISLAND

BY ROB BENCHLEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROB BENCHLEY, JOHN ALLEN, AND KRIS KINSLEY



John Allen



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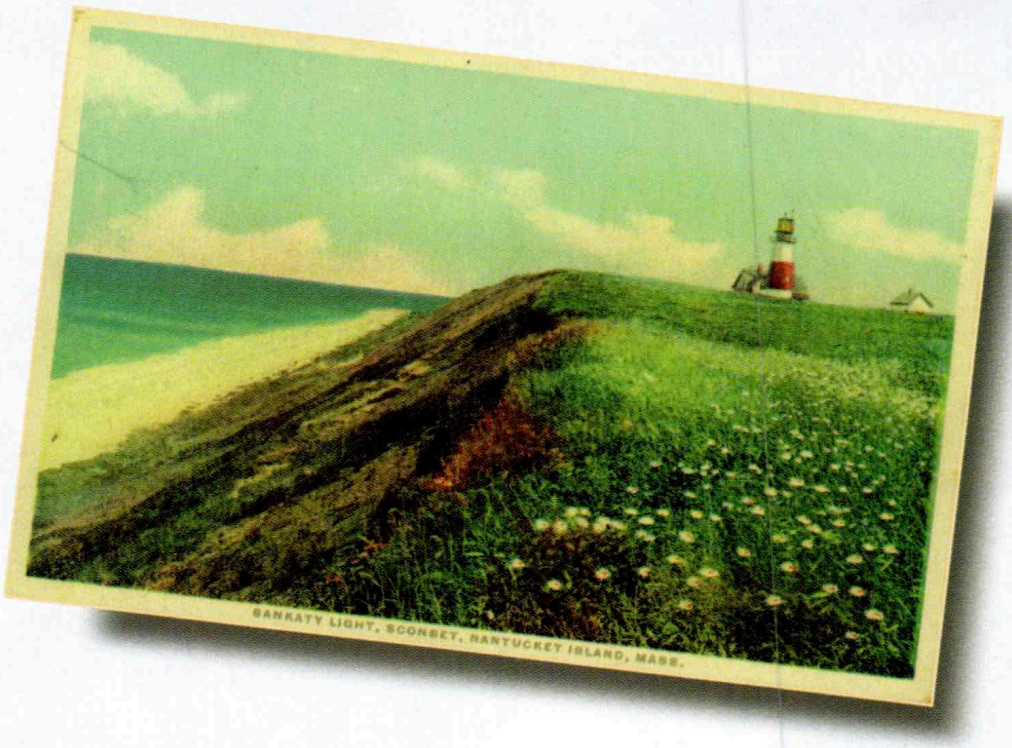
The Coast Guard has maintained and operated Sankaty Head Light for years. Left: shadows accentuate Coast Guardsmen carefully painting the beacon.





Ethel Larsen Hamilton, who was born at Sankaty lighthouse in 1920, remembers summers with her siblings and friends, walking barefoot down the bluff through the scotch broom and fragrant rosa rugosa.

"We'd run all the way down," she says of her girlhood days, "and end up in the water."

Today, such a gambol down to the Atlantic would probably end with a few broken bones. What was once a gentle slope to the sea along Siasconset's North Bluff is now a steep, eroded escarpment. Dramatically increased erosion over the past fifteen years has presented a menacing situation for private and public properties in general; for the 149-year-old Sankaty Lighthouse it has been particularly threatening.

Ethel Hamilton probably has a different perspective of Sankaty than most other people—past or present— because her father Eugene N. Larsen was the keeper of Sankaty for the better part of thirty years.

EUGENE LARSEN CAME TO NANTUCKET IN 1914 WITH HIS WIFE Edvardine and two children. Five more daughters (including Ethel) would be born at the light during the next twenty years.

Larsen made the station one of the "most outstanding" on the East Coast; in 1939 he received the Lighthouse Services highest accolade, the Commissioner's Pennant. "It was quite an honor for him," Ethel remembers. "He flew that pennant every day on the pole under the American flag.

"I think it was a wonderful experience," she says of her days living at the light. "We were brought up by Mother and Father, and we were with them all the time. We did a lot of reading and in fact I'm *still* reading a lot. . . . We were a close family and we always could go over the moors, or go down to Sesachacha Pond where we had camps and everything. . . . We had friends in 'Sconset, too, and we'd ride our bikes over there."

Through the years Sankaty Head has seen a number of different dwellings, barns, and outbuildings, including the original brick keeper's house, which was replaced in 1889 with the white Victorian-style home seen today in the older photographs of Sankaty. This duplex (the other unit housed the assistant keeper) was where Ethel Hamilton was born and where she grew up: "It was a wonderful house," she remembers. "It was a nice warm house, and I don't know why they tore it down. But that's the government, you know."

After the memorable old house was demolished in 1961, a modern ranch-style duplex was built by the Coast Guard. Five years ago, after a period of more runaway erosion, that dwelling was split in two and recycled to the Nantucket Housing Authority's property off Miacomet Road.

Today, all the buildings are gone. The site is bare except for a chain-link fence and the light itself, which stands about 100 feet from the edge of the receding bluff.

Since the early 1980s, nearly eighty horizontal feet of bluff has been lost to erosion. And when erosion began taking its bite, the Coast Guard began divesting itself of its lighthouses all over the country for two reasons: 1) severe budget cutbacks greased by the official theory that 2) lighthouses, as navigational devices, were obsolete. Sankaty was on the hit list.

"Oh, it's just awful," Ethel Hamilton laments of her girlhood home and the graceful red and white tower that has

become a Nantucket icon. "It's so discouraging, but what can they do? I don't know what's going to happen to it."

LOSING GROUND

IT'S NOT AS IF SOMEBODY SUDDENLY NOTICED LAST WEEK THAT 'Sconset has an erosion problem. Fifteen years ago homeowners began moving their houses back from the creeping edge of the bluff, a movement that continues today. (Not to mention Codfish Park to the south, where a third of the houses have either been moved or swept away since 1992.) And from the perspective of the Coast Guard, it might be time to start thinking anew about moving Sankaty Head Light.

"We've got three of them under our belts right now," says Ted Dernago, property branch chief for the Coast Guard's Civil Engineering Unit in Providence, Rhode Island. "Should it be necessary to do [Sankaty] we'd share the wisdom we've gained over the past three moves." Those moves include last year's move of Cape Cod's Nauset Light; Highland Light in North Truro, which was moved in 1996; and Southeast Light on Block Island. All three were moved for the same reason: pernicious erosion.

But if the Coast Guard has been unloading its lighthouses, who owns Sankaty now? Dernago explains that, for the moment, the Coast Guard does. In the early 1990s, when the Coast Guard announced its intentions to cut back its lighthouse budget, the Nantucket Historical Association sought ownership of the light through a congressional transfer, which was approved. But the NHA then realized it couldn't afford to move, much less maintain, the historic structure.

Maurice Gibbs, now the director of the Nantucket Life-Saving Museum, was then the president of the NHA. He explains that the perspective of the NHA was "we can't afford to do anything, but we can be a facilitator; we can get people into the room talking to make this happen."

At the same time, the informal but feisty Save Our Sankaty (whose Morse code acronym tapped out a clever "SOS"), a group of 'Sconset summer and year-round residents, kept the pot stirred. Its members, led by the late Gene Horyn, took the perspective that moving the light was most likely in everyone's best interest.

SOS approached the membership of the venerable and very private Sankaty Head Golf Club. If the light were to be moved (and saved, for the meantime), a possible location might be toward the club's fifth fairway, a short distance inland. This made sense to some members—after all, the lighthouse is practically a trademark of the club. Its red-and-white-and-black symbol is emblazoned on every piece of the club's artifact golf balls, matchbooks, polo shirts, hats, napkins, door prizes, and stationery. A putt on the ninth green just wouldn't be the same if the light had slipped over the bluff on some moonless night.

SOS eventually went to the 'Sconset Trust, which accepted the challenge of saving Sankaty Light. The trust, formed in 1984, was designed to acquire open spaces in the 'Sconset area, much like the Nantucket Conservation Foundation, but on a much smaller scale. It has grown to more than 400 members and holds almost 65 acres. "We are a very small organization," says trust chairman Susan Ruddick. "But there was nobody else to do it, so we agreed to do it."

The agreement between the Coast Guard and the 'Sconset Trust transfers ownership of the light from the Coast Guard to the NHA (whose name remains in the original legislation) and then immediately to the trust. "You're going to have a successive transfer, at the same time," explains the Coast Guard's Ted Dernago.

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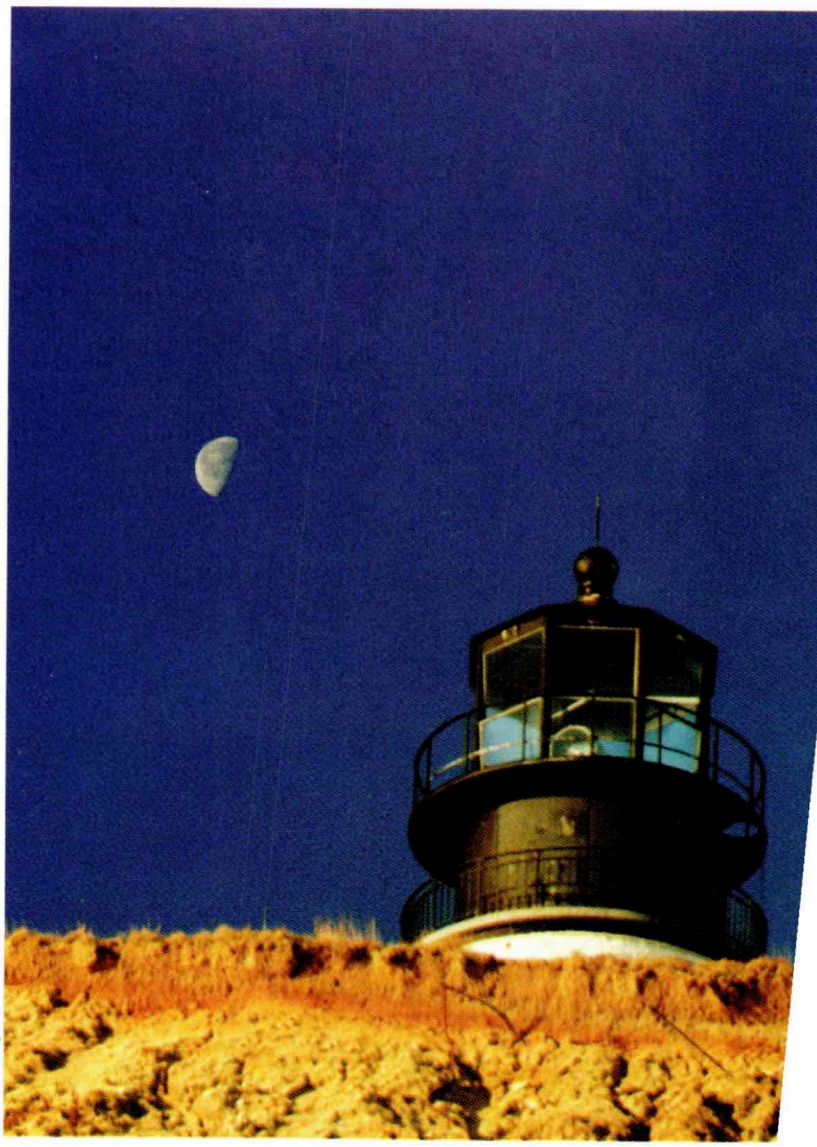
"Its amazing," Susan Ruddick says of the arrangement. "The Coast Guard has been so cooperative.

"The alternative is to give the light to the GSA (General Services Administration, which among other things sells off "surplus" government properties), and they could sell it to whomever they wanted to. It could become a souvenir shop, God forbid."



Rob Benchley

Goodnight moon. Goodnight Sankaty?

THE 'DE-WATERING' PROJECT

AND IF THINGS SEEM TENTATIVE, IT IS SO BECAUSE OF A THIRD entity, on whose success the agreements may hinge. The group has come to be known as the 'Sconset Beach Preservation Fund, whose actions (and dollars) are at work on the Atlantic side of the lighthouse with an ambitious project to stall erosion from north of the light all the way south to Codfish Park. The "de-watering" project, as it is called, has been operating on and off since 1985. Its followers see some improvements to the shoreline profile.

What's encouraging at Sankaty Head is that the severe erosion pattern, for the time being, appears to have slowed down. "We have the great good fortune that we have not lost any footage between the base of the light and the edge of the bluff in the past four to five years," Ruddick says. "It's the one area where beach de-watering does, in fact, seem to be working.

"We have been intentionally dragging our feet to a certain extent," she says of taking title and moving, or not moving, the light. "The 'Sconset Trust is prepared to take title to the lighthouse at some point in the near future, and if there were any immediate danger, that would move the near future to the immediate future.

"There are those who think we should move the lighthouse now, and have it over with. (Our) feeling is, is that as long as we monitor it closely, we will have all our ducks in a row to move it if necessary," Ruddick noted.

From the point of view of bluff resident Helmut Weymar, not attempting to do something about the erosion might be as bad as the erosion itself. Which is why, seven years ago, he helped form the 'Sconset Erosion Committee (today it has evolved into the 'Sconset Beach Preservation Fund the SBPF). Residents were getting nervous about the alarming rate of erosion along the North Bluff (an Army Corps of Engineers study shows seventy feet of bluff-edge loss from 1981 to 1991 at Sankaty Light) and beach nourishment was hailed as the solution. A special tax district for the North Bluff was proposed, but the idea became divisive and was abandoned in favor of private funding.

Weymar, whose own summer home on the bluff is threatened, was able to raise enough money from a handful of 'Sconset residents to launch the beach de-watering project. Weymar says research, development, construction, and operation of the system have cost about $3 million so far.

At three stations along the beach between Codfish Park and Sankaty Light, enormous arrays of pipes and high-volume electric pumps are buried under the sand. Seawater beneath the beach is drawn down, collected, and pumped offshore. The theory is that by keeping the beach less saturated, less sand is transported away by the alongshore currents. If more sand stays put then, over time, there is deposition, rather than erosion (and during storms, the beach has more sand available to "sacrifice"). As long as the pumps stay working.

Weymar admits that the pumps have not been working fulltime. "In general, when we've had long periods of time with the pumps operating, the erosion seems to be very minimized, if not stopped, during those periods," he said.

"It's a kind of a statistical process that you have to look at over a long period of time. The jury's not in; there are mixed results. They are promising, but not conclusive," Weymar says. "The treated beaches have out-performed the untreated beaches, but not by a lot."



Kris Kinsley

Mira Jube, Myrrha Andersen, and Amanda Seward enjoy the view atop Sankaty.

Whether or not to move the light (there's less than a hundred feet left between it and the bluff) and concerning the interlocked arrangement among the SBPF, the 'Sconset Trust and the Coast Guard, and considering the fact that the real culprit here is the inexorable rise of sea level, Weymar is unflinching: "There's definitely time to prove all this out—it's not an immediate crisis. But on the other hand, it's not as if we've got a huge surplus of land there to begin with."

Weymar, who has his detractors, now has another antierosion plan before the Conservation Commission, the local authority that issues permits for such work under the state's Wetlands Protection Act.

"Massachusetts has tended to be extremely conservative with regard to permitting anything new or different," Weymar says. "But I think to buy as much time as we can before having to move (the lighthouse) makes a lot of sense."

MOVING METHODS

AND IF THE LIGHTHOUSE IS TO BE MOVED, THE 'SCONSET Trust has a company in mind to do it. The International Chimney Corporation from Williamsville, New York, a Buffalo suburb, has moved three lighthouses in the last few years, and is in the process of moving a fourth.

In July of 1996, ICC moved the 142-year-old Highland Light on Cape Cod. According to the Cape Cod *Times*, which gave the move nearly daily coverage, the 430-ton lighthouse was moved 450 feet over a three-week period. The 68-foot-tall tower was bound in a corset of wood and cable to give it support, hydraulically jacked up onto rollers, and nudged along a railway of 6x6 timbers and steel I-beams.

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While the shoreline at the beach itself is eroding, so is the "toe" of the bank behind the beach. When the toe erodes, the bluff above it slumps, bringing down vegetation, homes, and lighthouses. The SBPF is proposing to install Geotube and Duneguard, two products designed to trap sand, at the base of the bank from north of the light to half a mile south.

From another perspective, many people (including some members of the ConCom) don't agree with the workings of products like Geotube (or any other sand-trapping devices) because they interrupt the transfer of sediments, causing more erosion "downstream" of the treated site. It's the same theory that inspired the state to put a ban on "hard" structures like groins, breakwaters, and bulkheads.

Last year the same company moved Nauset Light in North Eastham (it's the same lighthouse seen on Massachusetts license plates and bags of potato chips). Now owned by the Nauset Light Preservation Society as a "private aid to navigation," the Cape Cod *Times* reported that the light was only thirty-six feet from the edge of the eroding bluff. ICC also moved Southeast Light on Block Island,

where workers had to move not only the tower but an attached brick keeper's house as well.

Cape Hatteras Light, on North Carolina's Outer Banks, was relocated last February (ICC's most recent lighthouse move). The National Park Service, which owns the light, took the "move it or lose it" point of view. It was not a question of whether to preserve it, it was an issue of how best to preserve it.

There was sentiment to do nothing about Hatteras. One Internet website dedicated to options other than relocation contained this message: "If it is to go, let the sea take it, not man."

Last August the New York *Times* reported that the 2,900-foot move had a projected price tag of $9.8 million.

In 1996, the Highland Light was moved for $1.5 million, according to the Cape Cod *Times*. The 'Sconset Trust has gotten a rough estimate of $1.5 million as well. "Somewhere between a million, and a million and a half," says Susan Ruddick. "Actually, it will cost less today than it would have. Every time [International Chimney] has moved a lighthouse, they have learned new things, and those new things have lowered the cost rather than increased it.

"But we have not yet embarked on any fund-raising for that," she said.

An argument for not moving Sankaty Light, aside from the cost, the disruption to the neighborhood, not knowing exactly where to put it, or the possibility of a collapse, is that wherever it would end up, it would be on lower ground, away from those heights where a century's worth of lightkeepers leaned against the wind.

> A bluff can take only so many days of terrible weather; as the lower parts are torn away, the upper parts lose their footing, and eventually it all comes sliding down.

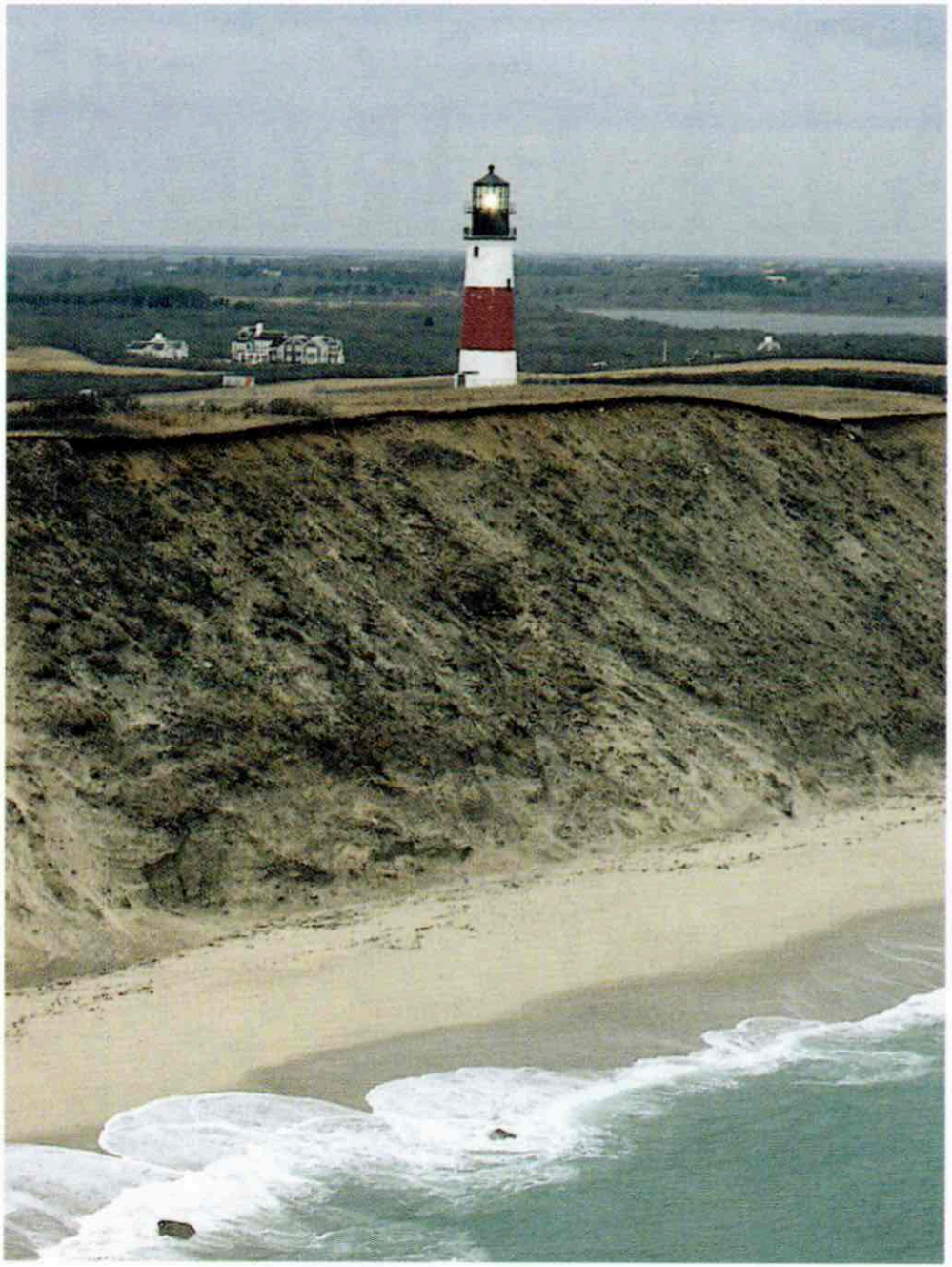
"It's not quite the same as having it up there as the sentinel," Ruddick notes.

POINT OF VIEW

DOWN BELOW THE BANK, ON THE BEACH A HUNDRED FEET below the sentinel, it is another world entirely. Here is a place where ocean and the foundation of Nantucket meet; another place that conjures yet another perspective.

Eastward from this spot is the vast Atlantic, calm and understated on many days of the year; inviting even. In the other direction, a recent geological history older than civilization rises up out of the beach, revealing layers atop layers of old beaches, seafloors, and harbor bottoms (in one stratum, a giant bed of quahogs is found, their paired shells still in vertical alignment). Higher up, thick layers of glacial deposits expose sand, gravel and, here and there, rounded boulders that are the calling cards of the mile-thick ice sheet that helped form the Cape and the islands.

During a nor'easter, this place is a maelstrom of crashing waves. Pushed by three days of fifty- to seventy-mile-per-hour winds, the great swells force their way over the ancient offshore shoals that usually protect the eastern shore, exploding at the base of the bluff, consuming tons of material with each surge. The water turns brown in its voraciousness, thickened into a



Rob Benchley

horrible, churning, dark gravy of clay, clumps of soil, and rocks. A bluff can take only so many days of this indignity; as the lower parts are torn away, the upper parts lose their footing, and eventually (in a few hours, a few days, or even a few weeks) it all comes sliding down. Geologists like to call it "catastrophic failure."

On a still morning in January, just before sunup, the beach below Sankaty is frozen; it's like walking on a broad terrace of gritty flagstone. There is a cold smoke rising off the quiet water. A little south of the light, where the bright sandy cliffs shoot vertically toward the sky, particles of clay, fine grains of sand, and small pebbles are locked in a frozen glaze on the cliff face. The sun comes up, and all of it sparkles.

Now the sun is only ten degrees above the horizon, but it warms the air slightly, forcing the ice to loosen its delicate grip. Then the cliff begins to move. One-by-one, grains of sand begin to sprinkle out of the cliff's face, followed by tiny stones and then small granite marbles, worn round in glacial streams.

Now it is a waterfall of little rocks, a parched river of moving sediment. But there is no water here, no wind, no waves, not a nor'easter in sight. These pieces of worn-down mountains are simply falling out of this great cliff, unleashed secrets (and maybe even thoughts) that have been locked away for thousands of years.

Unfrozen as well is a memory and an image of the light-keeper's daughter, who skipped down a fragrant winding path here on a warm summer's day, only half a lifetime ago.

The written as well as the geological record show that

things are always changing at Sankaty. How it is interpreted simply depends on your point of view.

CAPTAIN HENRY WINSLOW WAS APpointed lightkeeper in 1861, beginning the second decade of Sankaty's history. His grandson, Arthur Elwell Jenks, spent much time there as a boy himself. As an adult, Jenks would become a contributor to the *Inquirer and Mirror,* where he was often credited as the writer of the weekly obituaries.

The year 1899 was a bad one on Nantucket. The harbor had frozen over, and by the second week of February, there were already thirty inches of snow on the ground. (A squib in the paper mused anonymously that "It is safe to say that no one now living remembers Nantucket as badly blocked with snow as now." A week later this same person wrote: "The beautiful snow grows beautifully less.")

The following fall, in the November 18, 1899, edition, Jenks penned a letter to the paper after his boyhood memories of "Sankoty," as it was spelled then, had been nudged by a former lightkeeper's idle comment. He wrote this as the lighthouse approached its fiftieth anniversary. His words are now a hundred years old:

How can one describe the magnificent sunsets at lighting time? It was then that all the moorlands were bathed in royal purple, and crimson the setting sun's afterglow!

After many days I stand once more on the dear old height. The once familiar brick dwelling is no more; even the tower is much changed in its stolid face; a modern house for the keepers has usurped the site of the former windblown homestead; but the November gale, spiced with the aroma of an Indian Summer day, greets me here, as of yore.

Jenks had this perspective: *The sturdy lightkeepers and their families have passed on. Ofttimes retrospects sombre shadows but make more intense the sweeter lights of memory. And the way thither how changed! Large, somewhat pretentious houses line the steep bank, where once only grazing sheep were wont to roam unmolested. But foreign builders can never invade the precious memories of boyhood days. Their millions piled upon millions, and all in gold, can never outshine the brilliance of Sankoty's beacon eye, whose lightning flash bids the mariner beware of Nantucket shoals!*

"How can one describe the magnificent sunsets at lighting time? It was then that all the moorlands were bathed in royal purple, and crimson the setting sun's afterglow!"

FEBRUARY 1, 2000, LESS THAN A YEAR from now, will mark the 150th anniversary of the Sankaty Lighthouse. It also coincides with the turn of a millennium. To celebrate those important events, what will be said, what will be written, what will have been done about Sankaty Light? It will, no doubt, depend on the perspective.

Rob Benchley lives in 'Sconset near the comforting beam of Sankaty Head Light. He is a free-lance photographer and writer.