

On the anniversary of the Hurricane of '38, memories that never die

By Jack Stewardson, Standard-Times staff writer

NEW BEDFORD -- Perhaps Mabel Small had a premonition. The day before a storm now known as the Great Hurricane of 1938 swept New England with death and destruction, the wife of the Palmers Island lighthouse keeper attended a sewing circle of the American Home Committee at the Rose Standish House in Fairhaven.

After the noon luncheon, as others settled into needlework projects, Stella Hay Rex saw Mrs. Small walk over to the east window and stare out nervously into the harbor.

"Mabel, what is worrying you?" Mrs. Rex, now deceased, recalled in a 1988 story in *The Standard-Times*. The article was part of a 40th anniversary look back at the monster storm that hit Sept. 21, 1938; the 61st anniversary is today.

Replied Mrs. Small, "Oh, the sea is so rough, I'm afraid Arthur won't be able to row over to get me if I wait for my ride."

A while later, Mrs. Rex took Mrs. Small early to the Pierce & Kilburn landing where her husband, Capt. Arthur Small, was waiting.

"See you girls next week," Mrs. Small yelled, as she and her husband rowed back over to Palmers Island Lighthouse.

It was the last time friends would see her alive.

Mrs. Small was one of 88 people in Southeastern Massachusetts -- and one of 680 throughout the Northeast -- who died in the hurricane, still viewed by many in these parts as the Storm of the Century.

The New Bedford area, like the rest of the Northeast, was blindsided; no one had predicted a storm of such magnitude.

A weather bulletin in The Standard-Times that day called for the storm center to pass over Long Island and Connecticut on the night of Sept. 21, with winds no greater than 50 to 60 mph.

Instead, the storm skirted Cape Hatteras, and headed north at an unprecedented speed of 70 mph, slamming into an unsuspecting New England in the late afternoon of Sept. 21.

It brought with it sustained winds of 120 mph with gusts as high as 175 to 186 mph recorded at the Blue Hills Observatory. A tidal surge of 14-18 feet left what today would be \$3.6 billion damage in its wake.

The hurricane destroyed 57,034 homes, uprooted 275 million trees, knocked out 20,000 miles of electrical power and telephone lines, smashed 20,000 automobiles, and sank or damaged nearly 6,000 boats.

The Smalls were just one of countless hundreds of people thrown into life and death struggles by the storm.

Whole summer colonies, the East Beach and Horseneck and Westport Harbor areas of Westport, Sconticut Neck and Wilbur's Point in Fairhaven, Crescent and Pico Beaches in Mattapoisett, and Swifts Beach in Wareham were nearly wiped out.

Fishing boats and other craft were dashed into kindling along the Acushnet River and industrial plants were flooded out. In the South End, Dan's Pavilion was destroyed and an old roller-coaster was blown down. A huge oil tanker, the Phoenix was driven ashore in Somerset.

Capt. Small, a native of Brockton, began a long love affair with the sea at age 14 when he first shipped out aboard a Maine fishing schooner. In a seafaring career which included a stint in the Navy in the around-the-world cruise of the Great White Fleet in 1906, he sailed in everything from merchant ships to coasting schooners, to freighters and packets.

He and his wife came to Palmers Island with their two sons in 1922, and he spent about 18 years as keeper of the lighthouse.

Nothing would ever compare to the afternoon and evening of Sept. 21, however.

Everett S. Allen's "A Wind to Shake the World," a book on the 1938 hurricane, quoted from Mr. Small's report to his superiors. "The keeper made preparations all during that day, securing everything as far as possible, carrying extra oil and lamp equipment to the tower. ... This station felt the full force of the gale, the seas reaching clear across the island."

Shortly after dark on the 21st, as the storm raged, Mr. Small left

to light the fog beacon. He told his wife to stay in the cement-block oil house, located at the highest point of the little island.

Water was already 3 feet deep as Capt. Small sought to reach the lighthouse. He was swept off his feet by the surf, but managed to regain the shore.

However, when she saw her husband in trouble, Mrs. Small made her way to the boathouse and tried to launch a lifeboat, The New Bedford Mercury reported.

Still floundering in the raging surf, Capt. Small grasped iron grill work. From there, he could only watch helplessly and horror-stricken as the boathouse collapsed on his wife and swept her into the churning harbor.

Injured and dazed, Capt. Small struggled to the lighthouse where he kept the beacon operating throughout the tragic and lonely night.

He was found there the following morning. Still dazed but coherent, he was taken to St. Luke's Hospital and treated for bruises and exposure.

Harold D. King of the Bureau of Lighthouses later called Capt. Small's performance during the storm "one of the most outstanding cases of loyalty and devotion that has come to the attention of this office."

Meanwhile, a woman's body which floated ashore and was carried to the Hathaway-Braley Wharf in Fairhaven was later identified as Mrs. Small.

She had been carrying the couple's life savings -- \$7,500 in a canvas bag tied around her waist -- but neither the bag nor the money was ever found.

Franklin Ponte, an assistant lighthouse keeper at Boston Light who lived in New Bedford, was chosen temporary keeper at Palmers Island while Mr. Small convalesced at the Chelsea Naval Hospital.

The Pontes lived on the island for about six months, with Joseph Ponte, now 77, of Fairhaven, serving as his uncle's assistant.

"There was nothing left outside except the oil house and lighthouse itself," said Mr. Ponte. "The house and boathouse were both gone.

"At first we lived in the tower, and that was for almost a month, and then the Coast Guard sent over a two-stall garage which was converted into living quarters.

"I think I was too young to understand the depth of what had happened. My folks, of course, did," said Phyllis Ponte Strong of Signal Mountain, Tenn. The daughter of Franklin Ponte, she was then 10 and today still fondly recalls her stay on the island.

Arthur Small never returned to duty at Palmers Island. The memories were too painful.

Today, a plaque honoring him and his wife is embedded in a rock tablet at Fort Phoenix. And the lighthouse beacon shines anew, re-lit recently during ceremonies commemorating the lighthouse's 150th anniversary.