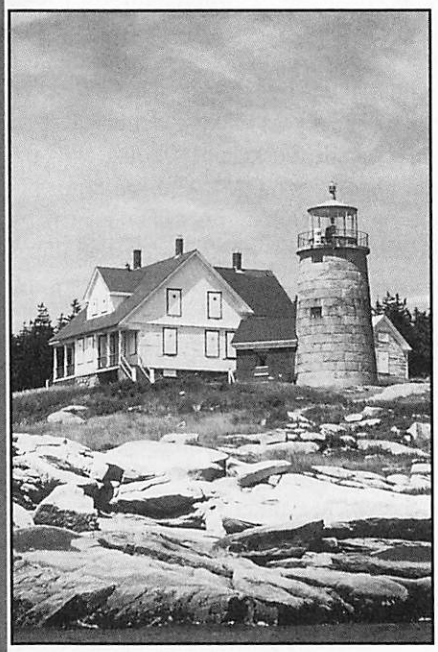
White Head Light Station

Childhood Memories



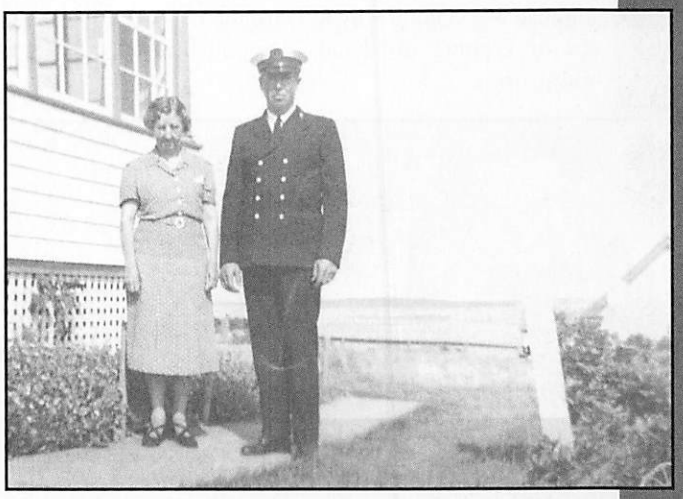
White Head Light Station as it appears today.

By David A. Gamage

My lighthouse life began at an early age living with my grandparents at White Head Island Light Station in Maine. My grandfather was Keeper Arthur Beal who served 21 years at White Head. He had previously served nearly ten years as an assistant keeper at the barren and isolated Matinicus Rock Light Station before his appointment as head keeper of White Head in 1929.

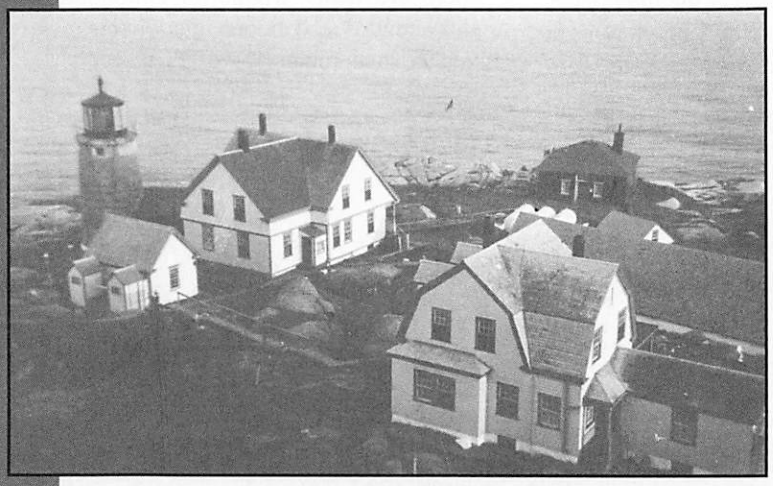
White Head is a 70-acre island prominently located at the southern end of the Muscle Ridge Channel, a favored entrance from the Gulf of Maine to the West Penobscot Bay area of the mid-coast region. Since 1804, White Head Light Station has served to identify the narrow channel entrance for coastal sail and steam vessels approaching the bay, and has helped guide vessels leaving the bay area by this narrow and hazardous eight-mile long channel.

The island is within a mile from the mainland, and with a Coast Guard Lifeboat station on this island, transportation was readily available for the keepers. This new island home for my grandparents was much larger than the Rock, and had acres of wooded area, open fields and places for growing vegetables and flowers. The island was abundant with raspberries, blackberries and blueberries, and in the fall, succulent red cranberries. Picking berries and helping my grandfather hoe potatoes are among my first memories of life at this lighthouse.



Keeper Arthur Beal and his wife Mabel, outside the keeper's house.

Although this light station was my playground, I did "help" with many of the lighthouse chores. In the early morning, I would often go with my grandfather up the spiral metal stairs to the lantern at the top of the 1852 granite tower. There we would dust and clean the prisms of that amazing Fresnel lens, brilliantly glistening in the early morning sun. We carefully covered it with a linen shroud and drew the storm pane shades, sixteen in all. It was a treat to go outside on the lantern balcony where I could see for miles. Though only 75 feet above the sea, it seemed much taller. We would soon leave the tower and I would get the flag from the whistle house. We would meet at the flagpole near the edge of the white granite ocean cliff to put up the flag, or as grandfather said, "display the colours."

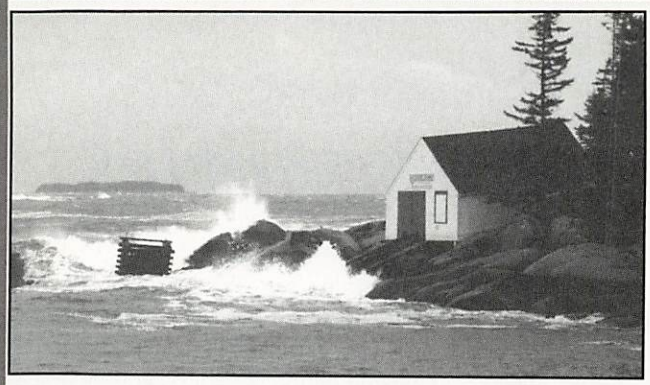


View of the dwellings, as seen from the air. The house to the right no longer stands.

The next chore was to start the generator that was run each morning to recharge the many rectangular glass wet cell batteries, which were mounted in rows along one inside wall of the whistle house. Grandfather prepared the engine and then I pushed the start button. Generators were installed in 1933. The light station was then, for the first time, supplied with electricity for lights in the keepers' dwellings, and for the new electric light that replaced the faithful old I.O.V. mineral oil lamp inside the 3rd Order Fresnel lens.

During the day my work assignment was to help my grandmother with household chores such as hanging out the laun-

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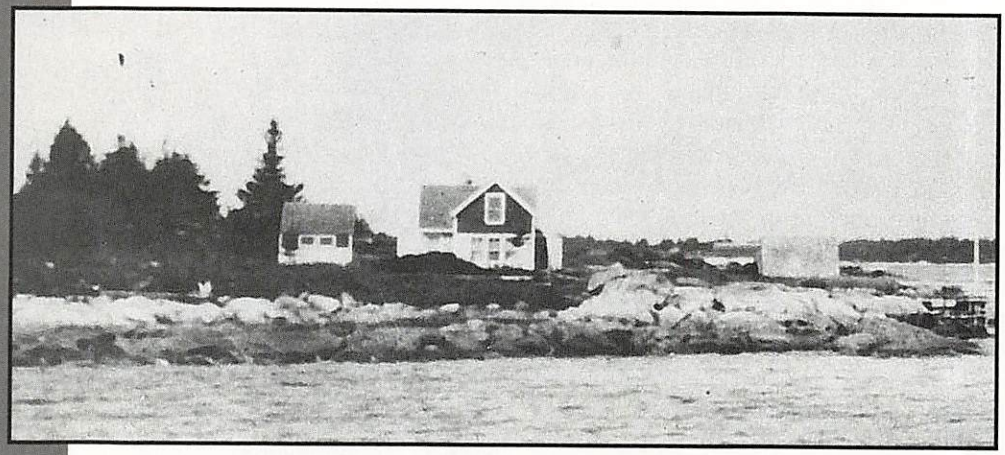


The boathouse endured the brunt of weather and ocean waves.

dry and taking care of her flower gardens. I do not believe she needed my help but it did serve to keep me out from under foot of the keepers who were busy with lighthouse maintenance tasks. I also became adept in the use of brass polish, which I suppose was a good way to learn the benefit of keeping my hands off polished brasswork.

The head keeper's house was a Dutch Colonial style dwelling built in 1899 after the staff was increased from two to three keepers. In the kitchen was my grandmother's Atlantic cook stove and sitting on top was a copper boiler, a covered container for heating water. A small pantry attached to the kitchen had a sink and a pitcher pump to draw water from the rainwater cistern in the cellar. There was a living room and dining room on the first floor. At the other end of the house was a shed that also served as a laundry room where my grandmother washed and rinsed clothes in two metal tubs with a hand wringer between.

Upstairs in the house were three bedrooms. In one bedroom was a large walk-in closet with one window. This was my room when I was living at the lighthouse. I clearly remember lying in bed at night in my little room and listening to the continual sounds of the ocean waves crashing on the rocks nearby. And there was the clanging of the bell buoy anchored at a ledge in the channel that would lull me to sleep. In the morning I would pleasantly awaken to the aromas of breakfast rising from the kitchen below through the floor register openings, especially when grandmother was making donuts.



This house at Rocky Hill Point was once the owned by Isaac Grant, Abbie Burgess Grant's husband.

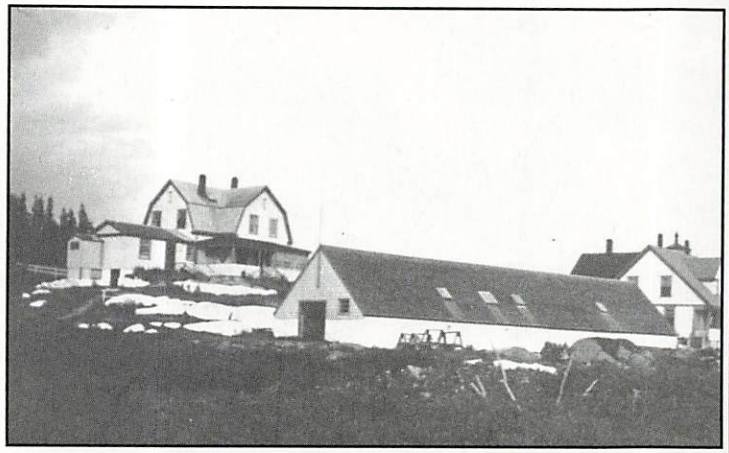
In front of the keeper's house was the rain shed, a long A-frame building that was built to collect rain water for use by the steam boilers when the fog signal was a steam whistle. It was an interesting place to explore. Inside were three coal bins, one for each lighthouse family. There were two small rooms: a workshop and a paint locker, both off limits for unescorted exploring. Stored in the rain shed was an old Model A Ford that was once used to haul coal and supplies from the landing. Two of the Coast Guard guys fixed it up and got it running only to be relentlessly pestered by all the kids and some of the adults wanting rides.

On the low hill behind the light station was the Coast Guard watchtower. In the watch room at the top was a telephone switchboard with lines connecting to phones on the island. The phone for the lighthouse was in my grandmother's kitchen. My grandfather once told me the most important job of the guy standing watch was to keep an eye out for the approach of the lighthouse inspector. Beside the watchtower was a tall flag tower for displaying storm-warning flags. Nearby was the brick oil house still in use for fuel storage, though no longer needed for a lamp in the light tower.

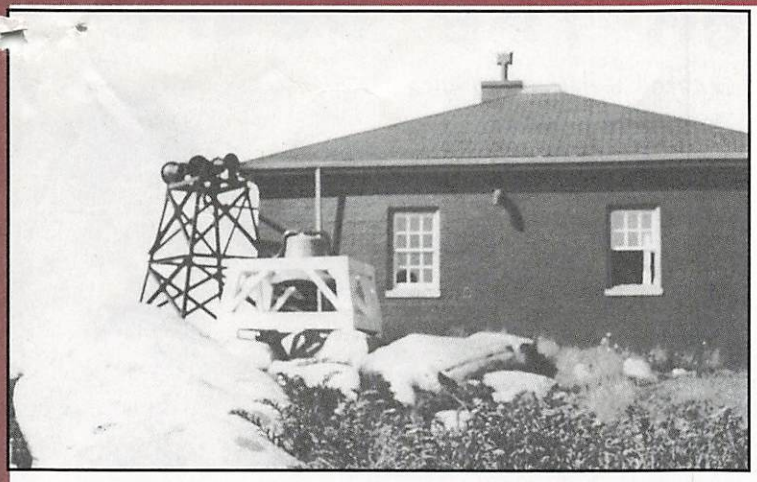
There are many wonderful childhood sights, sounds and odors interwoven in my cherished memories of this special

In early evening, near sunset, my grandfather and I would help lower the colours for the night and then go to the top of the tower to help uncover the Fresnel lens and raise the storm pane shades. I was allowed to switch on the light.

The 1891 duplex dwelling beside the light tower was home for the two assistant keepers, one half for one family and the other half, a mirror image of the first, was home for the other family. Behind this house was a small building, that years before was the one-room school for the island children.



This view of the station really shows how spread out the complex really was.



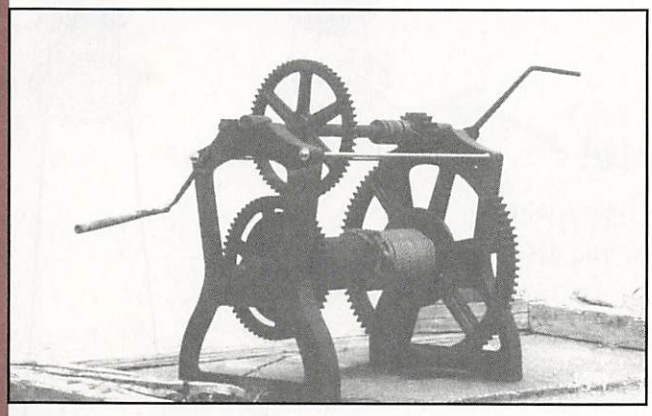
The White Head Island whistle house.

lighthouse. Even the fog horns, bring to mind, mixed feelings about those sometimes obnoxious and intrusive horns. In 1933 diaphragm air horns and air compressors had replaced the steam fog whistles and coal fired steam boilers. At first I was deathly afraid of the horns, avoiding them even when idle. In time I became brave. In the intervals between horn blasts I would run to the long rain shed near the keeper's dwelling and then hurry through to the other end of the shed to wait for the horn blasts. Then I would run full speed past the three large diesel fuel tanks in the yard and to the sanctuary of the whistle house.

Safe inside the whistle house I would often sit in a rocking chair and absorb all the sounds and vibrations of the big compressor, painted dark gray with brass accoutrements, working steadily to charge the air tanks. I remember the big flywheels turning so fast the spokes were a blur and the idler attachment on the top of the engine spinning like a top. And when the compressor engine increased speed and changed tone I knew the air tanks had reached pressure. In a few seconds came the clicking and snapping of the clockwork, a brief hiss of air and finally those tremendous three second blasts of the horns, one blast then another and the compressor would be back working again to replenish the air.

I lived in Rockland with my parents during the school year. I can remember very clearly the times when the wind was right and often during snow, I could hear distinctly, though faintly, those once feared foghorns ten miles distant. It was as if they were calling me to come back to my island and my lighthouse.

White Head Light Station had mechanical fog bells from 1829 until 1869. After the first steam whistles were installed a large bell was retained for emergency use. It was mounted in a white wooden frame near the whistle house to be rung by hand if the fog signals failed. I secretly hoped for such failure so I might ring the bell during fog. This did not happen, but instead, vessels passing the lighthouse would often sound their horns. The keepers would answer them by ringing the bell and sometimes I got to ring the bell on these occasions.



The old boathouse winch is still on the island.

The Fourth of July was a special event on the island. During the day there were family picnics with lobster as the main course, cooked on a wood fire at the rocks near the shore. In early evening, everyone at the lighthouse and many of the guys from the Coast Guard station would gather beside the whistle house for a fireworks display provided by the lightkeepers.

The light station had a small boathouse at a sheltered cove a quarter mile away at the end of a road through spruce woods. Inside was a large hand operated winch to haul the peapod up the launch ways. On occasion, my grandfather would unhook his peapod and I would ride down the lard-lubricated wooden ways into the water. It was a great ride when the tide was low but more work to haul the craft back up between rides. The little boathouse had a special meaning to me because this was where I experienced the joy of returning to the island and sadness when leaving my island and my lighthouse.

My grandfather retired and left the light station and the island in 1950. He was the last of a long line of civilian keepers and assistant keepers. White Head Light Station was then manned by the Coast Guard until automated and de-staffed in 1984. The head keeper's house that was our family home is now a granite lined cellar hole filled with rubble. Gone also are the bell, the large fuel tanks, the long rain shed and the fabulous Fresnel lens. Modern electric sound devices have replaced the obnoxious foghorns, once feared but now dearly missed.

At the cove near the boathouse there is a small house at Rocky Hill Point that was once owned by Keeper Isaac Grant and then Keeper Elmer Reed. It was later occupied at various times by Coast Guard families. My grandfather bought and restored this house shortly before he retired. This has become my weekend summer home for many years.

When staying on the island, we go to the light station at least once each day to stand near the tower to absorb the spectacular ocean panorama. And we go there at night to enjoy seeing lights from other lighthouses, lighted channel buoys and fishing boats on the horizon, and with the occulting green light at the top of the tower flashing above our heads. We often can feel the presence of the many keepers and their families who lived there, who were born there and some that died there. This is a strange and eerie feeling yet this is a somewhat comforting part of this light station, this lighthouse of my life.