Connie Scovill Small

The First Lady of Light

By William O. Thomson

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Connie Small, "The First Lady of Light" will soon ...

In May of 1998 President George H.W. Bush referred to Connie Scoville Small as his eleventh point of light. President Bush was the guest speaker at the Island Institutes Ceremony in Rockland, Maine, when twenty-six Maine lighthouses were turned over to Maine historical societies and municipalities. Connie Small was the honored guest. She is known as the First Lady of Lighthouses.



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Connie had to climb straight up this iron rung ...

Connie's lighthouse experiences are filled with remarkable deeds. Isolation, intrigue and danger were all part of her daily life. Since retiring, Connie has devoted her life to lighthouse preservation, restoration and education.



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Elson and Connie Small after he transferred from ...

From 1920 to 1948 Connie Small lived on lighthouses. She has seen it all — time spent without electricity, telephone or refrigerator, and a time in which she ate preserved foods, which she had grown on barren soil and canned. She then prayed that her supply would not give out so that she and her husband would not go hungry.



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Avery Rock Lighthouse, Maine where Connie and ...

Connie was born June 4, 1901. Since her birth she has had a life that followed the sea. When I interviewed Connie she enjoyed reminiscing about her family and some of her experiences. Her grandfather was a sea captain, her uncle was a shipmaster and a lighthouse keeper, her sister married a lighthouse keeper and Connie's dad was the third man in charge of the crew at Quoddy Head Life Station in Maine.



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Connie Small feeding the chickens at St. Croix ...

Connie married Elson Small, a man who had sailed since he was 14 years old and had salt water in his veins. Elson made a career working for the U.S. Lighthouse Service and the United States Coast Guard as a keeper of lighthouses. Connie worked at his side.



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Lighthouses and light stations come in all shapes and sizes and Connie Small served on them all. At one time she spent some time on Lubec Channel Light in Lubec, Maine. These light stations, like Lubec Channel were often referred to as "Spark Plug" lights, due to their distinctive shape. Built on pilings, these formidable structures seem to

pop up out of the water. Most round light stations were known as “stag stations,” a station manned by two or more men who split the duty time. Stag stations were not built with family quarters in mind.

One of the problems in living in this type of tower is reaching the living quarters. Scaling the first ladder to reach the small steep platform seemed endless and could be extremely treacherous, especially in inclement weather. The ladder had 30 rungs to the first little platform and then another 15 more up to the main deck. Cold steel, ice, dampness and any type of moisture could cause a hand or foot to slip and a possible tumble into the sea. Falling into the rushing water below usually meant death. Tides would run fast and the victim could end up being washed away. The first time Connie climbed the ladder, she felt she could not get to the top. Her husband, Elson, directly behind her said, “You can do it, always look up and never look down.”

Connie has lived her lighthouse life with the philosophy of always looking up and never looking down. Her positive attitude, logic and basic truths have given her a wisdom that has served her well.

Elson and Connie’s second assignment was at Maine’s Avery Rock Lighthouse located at the southern end of Machias Bay. It was built in 1875. Approximately three miles out to sea, it was on a very open and exposed location. This rocky ledge was a navigational hazard. The ledge was so small and conservation of space was so important that the lighthouse was designed to have a beacon jutting from the roof to the main house. The seas were furious. During storms, tons of water would bury the house and tower. Three-inch thick shutters had to be secured around the main dwelling to keep the glass from being taken out. Just down from the main house, a barrier was built that resembled a snow plow. Its purpose was to split the surf. It worked as a bulkhead. This was washed away many times. Connie and Elson would spend four years on this bare, barren, and bleak rock. The experiences gained here were truly that of lighthouse keeping, which cannot be realized in today’s modern age.

Connie learned what self-reliance meant. You had to be self confident, independent, and have lots of spunk and courage to run a lighthouse. You also had to be able to conquer loneliness and at times a feeling of being forsaken.

Other Maine light stations were to follow in their career. The remote Seguin Island Lighthouse at the mouth of the Kennebec River was an eerie lighthouse to be stationed at, with its thick fog and hauntings. Then came St. Croix River Lighthouse, the first lighthouse of the first lighthouse district, a station that sadly is now a Lost Lighthouse, lost in the pages of time.

Connie and Elson’s last station was Portsmouth Harbour Light Station in New Hampshire, a historic station located at Fort Constitution, the oldest fort of the government of the United States and the site of the first overt act of the Revolutionary War. In 1948 Connie and Elson left Portsmouth Harbor Lighthouse, leaving lighthouse keeping behind them. They had lived a life few people would ever experience.

Through her lectures, teaching, writing, speaking, numerous TV appearances and newspaper interviews, Connie has touched the lives of thousands of people. Her book, The Lighthouse Keepers Wife has been a best seller in Maine for years and a ‘must have’ for anyone with even the slightest interest in lighthouses or history.

Elson died in 1960. Since 1960, Connie has been very active in education, serving as the Dean of Women at the University of Maine in Farmington. When she left the University, she decided to go on the lecture circuit. Since then she has given over 550 volunteer lectures to schools, from grade schools to college, to the little known small schools to the prestigious ones.

As of this writing Connie is ninety-nine years of age and still going strong. Her enthusiasm and positive attitude is contagious. Connie has appeared on every major television network. When the word lighthouse is mentioned, Connie Small’s name is synonymous. She is the spirit of the lighted beacons she so faithfully served. When you meet Connie you will never forget her. She is the symbol of hope, trust and security.

She truly is “The First Lady of Light.”