Grandfather Was the Light-Keeper

By Diane Roesing O'Brien

Comments?



>> Click to enlarge <<
cutlines Celia and Foster Reed. Foster Reed ...

In 1922, the year Barbara Gamage was born in East Boothbay, Maine, her grandfather reported to his new post as keeper of the Indian Island Light at the mouth of Maine's Rockport Harbor. Accepting that assignment probably determined the course of his new granddaughter's life as much as anything else.



>> Click to enlarge <<
Indian Island Lighthouse, Maine from a photograph ...

Foster Reed's career in the Lighthouse Service had taken him to at least two other Maine lights, Halfway Rock and the Cuckholds, both in the Cape Newagen-Boothbay region. Halfway Rock did not have family quarters, so Foster's wife, Celia, and their three children, Irma, Clifton and Esther, lived ashore in East Boothbay during that time.



>> Click to enlarge <<
Barbara Gamage with her doll at Indian Island ...

It was there that Irma met and married Lawrence Gamage in the early 1920's. The young couple and their baby, Barbara, followed Foster and Celia to the Midcoast, finding a house in Camden, Maine. Indian Island Light had family quarters, so Celia, Foster and Clifton lived on the island. Esther was home only occasionally as she was working most of the time. After Clifton joined the Coast Guard, Celia and Foster were alone.



>> Click to enlarge <<
Fuller girls and other friends on Indian Island. ...

Young Barbara's parents soon decided to part ways, and Lawrence returned to Maine's Boothbay region. (It was on a visit to her father many years later that Barbara met her husband-to-be, Albert Mathieson. Albert, who grew up in Montville, Maine was in Boothbay running a family summer business.)

Irma remarried Allison Ames, a Camden man. Irma, Allison, and 5-year-old Barbara lived together in Camden. Through this time of uncertainty and change, the little girl had one constant — her grandparents and the lighthouse.



>> Click to enlarge <<
Celia and Foster Reed in Maine's Indian Island ...



>> Click to enlarge <<
Indian Island Lighthouse, Maine in a photograph ...

From a very young age Barbara spent weekends and vacations with Celia and Foster on Indian Island. "Just the minute school was out, I was down there," Barbara, now of Morrill, Maine, remembers. To get to the island, a visitor went out Beauchamp Point and cut through Orchard Farm and some woods to the shore. A long horn was kept there to summon the keeper to his boat.

Foster hearing the horn blow, would come across from the island in his skiff. On the occasions that the young, unmarried Clifton was in town for the evening, Foster would lie awake half the night waiting to hear the horn, then row across to pick up his son.

Barbara had her own room in the keeper's house, a room facing the sea. Her grandparents used their own furniture, which had been brought to the island. The house was heated with wood and coal. Once in a while, Barbara remembers, a boat brought coal and the men unloaded it in wheelbarrows.

Celia kept the house spick-and-span. The Lighthouse Service came unannounced to inspect the facilities, and everything, including the keeper's house, had to meet high standards. Her grandmother was a good cook, Barbara says, and baked a lot - bread, pies and cookies. They ate clams, fish and lobsters from the sea and kept chickens, for their eggs and meat, in a small outbuilding. Foster's workshop was in another outbuilding.

Almost every night Barbara went up in the tower with her grandfather to light the light. It ran on kerosene, so it was a constant job to keep the glass clean of soot. The light had been a beacon for the lime boats that went in and out of Rockport's harbor in the first decades of the 20th century. The kilns that lined the harbor burned wood, and as the supply of wood close to the coast was used up, wood scows came down from Canada carrying the necessary fuel.

By Barbara's childhood the lime industry was about finished, though other traffic was picking up. While other lights along the coast were modernized, Indian Island wasn't considered that important and so remained kerosene-fueled. Whenever the Boston boat went by, the steamboat that traveled between Boston and Bangor everyday, Barbara got to ring the big bell to greet it.

Barbara's grandparents left the island occasionally, Foster to visit other keepers along the coast and Celia to attend a meeting at the Methodist Church in Camden. Foster kept a car in a field near where they landed the skiff for errands ashore. He'd likely row when visiting the other lighthouses.

What did a young girl do alone on an island with only her grandparents for company? Barbara never remembers being lonely on the island. There wasn't a tree on the island in her childhood, and she wandered the beach, looking for things or digging clams. She played with grandparents' dogs, especially a brown spaniel named Pal. Celia made all her dresses; little girls rarely wore pants then, so Barbara was always in a skirt.

Foster retired from the Lighthouse Service in 1933, and he and Celia moved to Camden, Maine. Barbara attended the school that later would bear her teacher's name, Mary E. Taylor, and graduated with the Class of 1940 from Camden High School.

On her graduation day Barbara went to see her grandfather, who hadn't been feeling well. She remembers him standing outside by the door to see her off. Later that night, her graduation night, Foster Reed died, his job of helping to raise a little girl finished.