The Best Years of Their Lives

A Keeper's Daughter Remembers Libby Island

By Jeremy D'Entremont

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Keeper Jasper L. Cheney on the boat ramp at Libby ...

Libby Island, way down east at the entrance to Maine's Machias Bay, is quiet today, except for the cries of gulls and the occasional bleat of an automated foghorn. Only the granite lighthouse and a fog signal building remain at a light station that dates back over 180 years. But there was a time that the island was full of cheerful activity, with three keepers and their families sharing the work and fun. "It was a happy, wonderful life for adults and children alike," says Ella Cheney Robinson, daughter of Keeper Jasper L. Cheney. Ella now lives in Calais, Maine, where her father retired from lighthouse keeping in 1957.



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Jasper L. Cheney, a Maine lighthouse keeper from ...

Jasper Cheney was born in White Head on Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick, Canada in 1893. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen later in Lubec, Maine. In 1928 he joined the Coast Guard and spent two years as a surfman in South Portland. After an honorable discharge from the Coast Guard, he joined the Lighthouse Service about 1931 and was first stationed at Maine's Rockland Breakwater Light.



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The Cheneys in front of Libby Island Lighthouse ...

In 1933 Cheney, his wife Tryphena Tyler Cheney, their five-year-old son Roland and three-month-old daughter Ella all moved to their new home on Libby Island. Also with them was Keeper Cheney's teenage son by a previous marriage, Forrest Spencer Cheney, who later became a lighthouse keeper and also served on the Nantucket Lightship. "The island was one mile in size," recalls Ella Cheney Robinson, "with no trees."



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A view from the top of Libby Island Lighthouse ...

Harvey Wass, who had been at Libby since 1919, was the head keeper at the time. Avid readers of lighthouse books might know that the Wass' years on the island were chronicled by Harvey's son Philmore Wass in his 1987 book Lighthouse in My Life. In that book, Philmore Wass described Jasper Cheney: "He was competent, a reliable worker, and always wore a smile." By the time the Cheneys arrived, all of the Wass children had grown and left for the mainland. The third family at Libby Island at that time was that of Assistant Keeper Gleason W. Colbeth.



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Libby Island Lighthouse today. The solar panels ...
Photo by: Chris Ledwith

There was no electricity or indoor plumbing, but "nobody seemed to mind," says Ella. Farming on Libby Island dates back to around 1760, well before the light station was first established in 1822. (Some sources say a lighthouse stood on Libby as early as 1817, but that one was apparently privately built.) Farming continued as a way of life for the lighthouse families. "The men all worked together and every summer they had a large vegetable garden," Ella remembers. "The vegetables were canned by the three wives and then put in the cellar for the winter months. No one could get off the island for supplies. There was also a big cranberry bog and that was harvested every summer. Everyone helped, kids and all."

There were also a couple of cows on hand for milk and butter — and there were bulls. An episode recounted in Philmore Wass' Lighthouse in My Life concerned a run-in Roland Cheney had with a particularly ornery bull named Mike. "Everywhere he went to try to get up on the island," wrote Wass, "the bull blocked his way." Roland finally found a fence to put between himself and the snorting bull. Ella remembers that the bull was "the ugliest thing. Everybody was afraid of him." Jasper Cheney and the bull eventually came to an understanding after the animal was struck by a rock thrown by the keeper. Mike the bull even served a useful purpose - he was used to haul coal uphill to the light station.

It's no surprise that fish comprised a large part of the families' diet. "The men and the older boys fished a lot," says Ella, "and they built large racks to salt and dry the fish on." Ella also remembers that the local lobstermen would "drop off a basketful about every day or so when they pulled their traps."

The kids found plenty of ways to have fun on Libby Island, which is technically two islands connected by a sandbar with a total of about 120 acres. Ella remembers a swimming hole created by the men, who dynamited some ledges so that each incoming tide filled the hole with salt water. "The sun would warm the cold seawater so we could swim in it. It was a place where young and old all spent lots of hours cooling off and getting tanned. Needless to say, everyone on the island had tans that would take all winter to fade."

It wasn't all play all the time for everyone, of course. "The men worked very hard on the island," says Ella. "Every building was kept in A-1 shape always. Painting was an endless job both inside and out. The foghorn and light were gone over every day to make sure they were in perfect order. It's odd, but when the foghorn was running at night and stopped because it ran out of fuel, all three keepers would awaken and be there in a matter of minutes."

When they reached school age, Ella and her brother lived on Libby Island in the summers only and went to school in Lubec the rest of the time. "It was a big day when school closed for the summer," she remembers. "At 1 o'clock Mother, Roland and I would be in the car heading for Starboards Creek to meet Dad and Mr. Colbeth, who would be waiting with the big boat to take us to Libby for the summer. We would meet the Colbeth family and all pile in the boat, all excited to go to the island once again." The children enjoyed the chance to go barefoot all summer. They always returned to Lubec about a week before school started, and that meant "we had to dress our feet for the first time since vacation started," says Ella.

Ella only got to spend two Christmases on Libby Island, but she remembers the Flying Santa, Edward Rowe Snow, who dropped gifts for the families each year. In the years when she wasn't on the island for the holiday, Ella says, "When Dad would come home on liberty he would bring the gifts that had been dropped by the Flying Santa. It was like having Christmas twice every year."

Jasper Cheney remained stationed at Libby Island until 1949. He requested a transfer to Whitlocks Mill Light, an onshore station near Calais on the St. Croix River. "It was the first land station he had been assigned to where we could all live together all year long," says Ella. Roland and Ella were both married in 1953, and Ella's wedding took place at the Whitlocks Mill Lighthouse. "Our Mom and Dad were finally alone after all those years. They both just worked nonstop inside and out to make our house and the lighthouse a place of beauty, and it sure was!" Despite the lighthouse's isolated location, says Ella, "Many, many tourists visited in the summer and all agreed that it was just breathtaking with all the flowers in bloom and the scenery."

Jasper Cheney retired from the Lighthouse Service in 1957 because of poor health. In 1974 Libby Island Lighthouse was automated, and under the Maine Lights Program it was turned over to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1998. About eight years ago, Ella visited her childhood home with her husband, their daughter and grandson, and another couple. They brought along a basket of lobsters and a pan to cook them in. When they arrived at Libby, shock was mixed with the nostalgia.

Ella remembers her reaction. "Our old swimming hole, the lighthouse and the fog signal house are all the same as they were, but everything else is gone. I was told the other buildings had been burned. All the foundations had been filled in and grassed over by that time. All the wooden planks were gone and even the boathouse. Just the slip was left. I felt so bad I cried."

Ella sees nothing good about automation. "I can't understand the reason for it. The lighthouses that are surrounded by water should have someone on them. If a boat gets into trouble the light alone can't save their lives."

The years the Cheneys lived on Libby Island were "the best years of our lives, and there is so much more. Our parents are both gone now, but thanks to them and the lighthouse on Libby Island, we had the happiest childhood any person could ever want. It is etched in our minds forever."

Her lighthouse girlhood is never far from Ella's mind and heart. "When I drive to Cutler," she says, "there's a place where I can park my car and see the light on Libby Island shine. I can't seem to pull away until I see it. I always think that Dad should be there lighting it like he did for so many years. I would move on that island in a heartbeat if only I had a chance."