Lighthouse Keeping at Mount Desert Rock

An Interview with George York

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George York at the time of the interview with ...

This 1978 interview by Vicki King with Maine lighthouse keeper George York was printed in Homegrown Magazine by the students of Ellsworth High School in Ellsworth, Maine and printed by the Ellsworth American Newspaper. The heading in the magazine reads...



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George York served as head lighthouse keeper at ...

We woke up
We looked around
We saw the things that had come from machines
Very quickly made, bought, used, and gone.
Now we understand the lasting things
The best are HOMEGROWN.



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The York family reading hour. From left to right: ...

We hope you enjoy this nearly lost part of the lighthouse history, the memories of Maine lighthouse keeper George York.



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Mt. Desert Rock, 1928. Photo courtesy of Shirley ...

Reprinted



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Bill and Shirley, 2003. Photo courtesy of Shirley ...

“Since today everything is becoming automated, eventually there will be no lighthouse keepers at all. To me, if there are no lighthouse keepers there is no lighthouse service. It's like a ship without a captain, a hospital without a nurse; you can do but what are the results? Those old sea captains on

those old schooners would agree with me, but there are none of them left."

George York worked as a lighthouse keeper on Mount Desert Rock from 1928 to 1936. In our interview with George he told us he has definite ideas about the lighthouse service, however, he did not want to criticize in any way the government or any individual.

To give us an example of the importance of the lighthouse keepers, George told us several stories.

"In 1902 a towboat was towing a barge and it went aground in a snowstorm at night on Mount Desert Rock. There were 18 men in that crew, but no one could get to them until morning. In the morning as soon as it got light, the keepers got to the towboat. They rescued all but one of the crew. He was frozen to death. It was in December and it was really cold. This couldn't possibly have happened under automation."

"Another time, Roy Skofield was lost in a boat out of Corea. Nobody knew where he was or what had happened to him.

"The boat was broken down because of motor trouble and had blown off course some 30 miles. The Coast Guard telephoned out to Mount Desert Rock to see if we had seen him.

"On the second night while I was up in the tower I spotted him. He sent up a flare, only one, around nine o'clock. I called the Coast Guard and they came out at midnight. The next morning I spotted him from the tower with a pair of glasses. The Coast Guard notified a cutter from Rockland. They came to the rock and I led them to where he was.

George went on to tell us that "the Mount Desert Rock lighthouse is about 100 years old. It is located 21 miles south of Mount Desert Island. During a normal sea, the size of Mount Desert Rock is about two acres."

During a stormy sea, it is different. "We had some awful storms while out there. During a bad storm there is danger if water washes right over it.

"The tower is secured to the rock and the base of the tower is four feet thick all the way around. Because of its conical shape the water strikes it and shoots up in the air.

"In a storm in 1933, the water came in and under the door of the house. About three hours before full tide, I called the assistants and their families and told them to get food and water, and to come to the tower as soon as possible." A girl by the name of Flavilla Lamb was living on the rock with the first assistant and his wife. She was 13 years old and composed the following poem about the storm of 1933.

The January Storm

The morning was dark and stormy

And on a far off light

A storm was coming our way quite fast

Since the sun shone red last night.

As I ran to the shed I noticed

The seas were rolling high

The white caps, they were waving

To the storm clouds in the sky.

As I stood in the window and listened

To the pounding of heavy seas

I thought of many a sailor

Who sailed the wintry sea.

The storm broke out at noontime

It came on the full of the tide,

The seas came higher and higher

And lashed the towers side.

The wind was blowing from the east

The fog it came in showers

So the keepers on this lighthouse

Had to stay up in the tower.

It was just at the hour of midnight

And the winds had continued to blow

When I heard the keeper saying,

“To the tower we must go.”

We were up and ready in a second

And provisions we all shared

We knew not what was ahead of us,

As we climbed the tower stairs.

We watched from the stone cut window

The pounding seas, which were rough,

And watched the thundering billows

As they crashed the rocky bluff.

The men kept watch of the place all night

And just at the break of dawn,

We looked from the tower window,

And found one building gone.

The storm had ceased its power

And the day was bright once more,

But the boat house roof was missing,

Many windows, shingles and doors.

“After a heavy storm, a northwest wind would blow. My wife and I would go watch the surf for hours. The waves would be high and as the sun hit the waves it would shine through the spray.”

When George worked on Mount Desert Rock, he worked as an assistant for a year and a half, then he was made head keeper. Two other people were also employed on Mount Desert Rock and there were two houses for the three people.

George's family lived with him on Mount Desert Rock. “We had two children. My wife was their teacher. She graduated from Farmington Vocational School. The State furnished the books she needed to teach with.

“The government inspected the lighthouse twice a year, spring and fall. When there were inspections there were stars given out. Five or six stations would get a star. Every year I was keeper my station was a star station. There was a pennant for the best station in the district. The next to the last year I was keeper, I got the pennant.”

“There was a telephone cable put on the rock during World War I. I have heard it is the longest single cable in the world running to one phone. Once in awhile during a storm, rocks would break over it and cut it off. This happened, perhaps three times while I was there. When it broke I would grapple and splice it together. You had to get it perfectly tight or it would snap. There was a cable boat that tended to cables but it wasn't always around. A station boat brought our supplies when we needed them. The boat belonged to the government. In the summer we would use that; in the winter we would hire a boat at our own expense to bring supplies to the rock.

“When we lived out there, I didn't want to come ashore. The rock was my home. I never had time to get lonesome. In the summer the days were not long enough. Of course, I fished and lobstered at the same time I was working as a lighthouse keeper.”

“In the summer, early in the morning at daylight, the gulls would be hollering, fish would be jumping out of the water and there would be schools of Pollack that would cover a whole field. It seemed as though there were acres of them.

“I would get up and go out fishing. That's how I made my living. It was during the depression. I would haul traps, catch, dry, and salt fish and take them ashore and get anywhere from a 100 to a 150 dollars for the fish and lobster I had to sell.

“I had a 16-foot peapod boat. I could load all that you would care to put into it in an hour with cod and Pollack. I could make 10 or 15 dollars before breakfast. I loved fishing.

“One time I went out fishing with Everett Quinn, who was second assistant. He and I were hauling traps each in a peapod boat. Once in awhile we'd get a trap hung down, when we started lobstering. He got one caught down and pulled up on the trap and went over backwards. He had pushed the boat away and couldn't swim. I said, 'Can't you swim?' He said, 'I can't swim a damn stroke.' I had a gaff and pulled him up from under the water.

“Mount Desert Rock was an interesting place to live. No two days were the same. The sea was always changing. I would study the sea, watch it, and see how it acted. Sometimes I would see whales. I loved to watch them.

“There was plenty to do on the rock. When I first went on as lighthouse keeper we had vapor lamps run by air pressure. You had to pump up air to run them. In 1931 or 1932, a radio beacon was put on the rock. It was all electric from then on. There were also two transmitters, two generating motors, two motor generators, two fog signal engines, and one light. I would have to make sure these were all working.

“During the eight years I was there, there was a radio station run by a man by the name of Bob Emery who was better known to us at the lighthouse as Big Brother.

He gave a special program once a week just for the lighthouse keepers and the Coast Guard. We always looked forward to it.

“His show always ended, 'You will find names of gold on that bright honor roll for the Coast Guard and the keeper of lights.'

“While I was on the rock, I always had the feeling I was doing something worthwhile and noble, more than anything else I ever did.

“I left the rock because my wife became sick. She died three years after we left. However, those eight years I can truthfully say were some of the best and happiest years of my life.”