Capt. Joseph M. Gray

Memories of a Maine Lighthouse Keeper

Comments?



>> Click to enlarge << 23Kb
Lighthouse keeper Captain Joseph M. Gray who ...

The following is from an interview by Henry Buxton published in May 1938, with 71-year-old retired lighthouse keeper Capt. Joseph M. Gray. It is a fascinating story that recalls a life at a different time and era.



>> Click to enlarge << 73Kb
The assistant keeper's house on Great Duck ...



>> Click to enlarge << 10Kb
Maine's Crabtree Ledge Lighthouse was Capt. ...

An adventurous and often dangerous life was the lot of Captain Joseph M. Gray, 71, who was in the lighthouse service for 40 years and who, in his young manhood years, spent six summers fishing off Grand Banks.



>> Click to enlarge << 10Kb
Maine's Marshall Point Lighthouse as it would ...

He retired in March 1938 to his snug little cottage at Tremont, Maine, to spend the rest of his days doing the things he wanted to do.

When the captain entered the lighthouse service, modern conveniences such as the telephone, radio, motorboat, and regular mail delivery were unknown as far as keepers and their assistants were concerned. Frequently, in bad storms, keepers and their families were marooned for long periods and cut off from the rest of the world.

In one such storm, the captain was isolated for six weeks on Mt. Desert Rock while lashing seas snarled about the light station, and two-ton rocks were rolled about like marbles by mountainous waves. Just before the storm abated, the captain managed

to get aboard a Nova Scotia schooner where he was shocked to learn that during his isolation his father had died and been buried and President McKinley had been assassinated.

In those days the only means of transportation between Mt. Desert Rock and the mainland was a 16-foot sailboat and in rough weather it was a perilous voyage to and from the light.

Captain Gray was born February 15, 1867 in Brooksville, the son of Jesse Gray, a farmer and fisherman. The captain began going to sea at the age of 11 as a cabin boy on the coasting schooner Henry Chase out of Brooksville. The Chase was skippered by Captain Van Black.

“Later,” he said, “I went to the Grand Banks on the schooner Lillian and skippered by John Dorr of Bucksport, Maine. I also made two or three trips to the banks on the schooner Quiner, mastered by Captain Donald Nickerson and engaged in shore fishing out of Portland and Vinal Haven. Before I left the sea, I was skipper of three fishing schooners, the Rose Bright, the Tenniscot and the Lillian.”

A Welcome Change

“I welcomed my appointment to the Lighthouse Service in 1898 because I was rather weary of the uncertainties of the sea. I went to Crabtree Ledge as assistant keeper. Crabtree is only about three hundred yards from the mainland and there was very little excitement during my service there.

“I ran into plenty when at the end of two years I was transferred as assistant keeper to the Mount Desert Light Station. Twenty miles at sea and the target for all of the bad storms that whip the North Atlantic. The head keeper there then was Thomas Mylan who spent a total of 20 years at this windblown and gale-lashed light. Soon after I arrived there, Mrs. Mylan told me that she hadn't visited the mainland for seven years, and said she rather enjoyed the isolation. There is no soil on Mount Desert Rock but Mrs. Mylan had some barrels of earth brought from the mainland and each spring she planted a garden, raising lettuce and other garden greens and many beautiful flowers.

“There were two assistant keepers on Mount Desert Rock and the other besides myself was Bert Richard of McKinley. The keeper and both us assistants were married and there were a total of four children on the rock.”

Tough Place to Live

“During winter gales, the rock was nothing less than an inferno of the sea. Giant winds rocked the station and angry combers flung tons water over the bare granite ledges. Icy spray whipped across the quarter of a mile wide rocky shelf like steel-pointed hail. I have seen huge boulders weighing two tons or more shoot across the ledges as if propelled by giant bowlers and the force of the wind was so terrific it was dangerous to venture outside in the storm.

“During sunny days, the glare of the water was so intense that colored glasses were needed to protect the eyes. My wife's eyes were nearly ruined by her sojourn there. We always kept a year's supply of provisions on hand so that we had nothing to fear from a food shortage during protracted storms. A 16-foot sailboat was our only means of reaching the mainland over a 20-mile stretch of turbulent water. Once in the winter I had started for Southwest Harbor, and had gone halfway when a northwest snowstorm dropped down, and for hours I had no idea of my location. By luck more than anything else, I finally sailed into Southwest Harbor.”

Better Assignments

“After a year on Mount Desert Rock, I was transferred to Great Duck Island Light as an assistant keeper and after serving three years in that capacity was made the head keeper. I remained 18 years at this station and enjoyed every minute of the time I spent there. I had two assistants. There was a schoolhouse for the children, and the attendance at the school ranged from six to ten youngsters. We planted a garden every spring, and there were plenty of berries for canning on the island.

When I first went there we used a sail boat, but later a motor boat was assigned to the station.

“During the World War eight navy boys were stationed on the island to look out for enemy submarines and we boarded the men at the lighthouse. These lads sighted no subs but they certainly had a happy, carefree life while they remained on the island.”

The Wreck and Final Assignment

“My next assignment in the Lighthouse Service was a keeper of the light at Marshall Point in the town of St. George, near Rockland. While there I saw the concrete steamer Pelias strike on Silly Ledge. It was spitting snow and beginning to get dark when I saw the concrete boat run afoul of the ledge. The ten men aboard piled into a small boat, which capsized, and they were drowned. If they had remained aboard the steamer they would have been saved, as the craft did not sink. In fact it remained hung up on the ledge for years. From a distance she looked as though she was lying peacefully and safely at anchor with nothing in the world the matter with her.

“In 1921 I was transferred to Bass Harbor Head Light, and remained there until my retirement.”