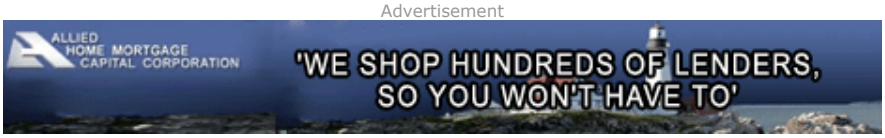
Light keepers share stories

By Kate Irish Collins
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SACO (July 27): Tammy Burnham will never forget the night of Nov. 29, 1960. Thatâ€™s the night she almost drowned while members of the Coast Guard tried to take her to the mainland for medical treatment from her home at the light keeperâ€™s house on Wood Island.

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Although she was only 2-years-old at the time, Burnham, who lives in Saco, will never forget the feeling of going into the water, or the cold she suffered while Seaman Edward Syvinski struggled to save both their lives.



Tammy Burnham and her mother, Lily. The women shared the story of Tammy's dramatic rescue at the annual meeting of the Friends of Wood Lighthose last weekend. (Photo by Kate Irish Collins)

Burnham lived on Wood Island with her parents, Laurier and Lily Burnham, and her baby sister Holly. Laurier Burnham was the lighthouse keeper on the island for the four years between 1959 and 1963.

On that fateful night 47 years ago, Tammy Burnham had a high fever and was complaining about her belly hurting. Lily Burnham, scared by her daughterâ€™s symptoms, called a doctor on the mainland, who told the family Tammy needed to get medical treatment right away as the symptoms Lily described sounded like appendicitis.

Rough sailing

Unfortunately, a storm had come up with high seas and dense fog. It was also cold, with the water temperature estimated at about 45 degrees. Nonetheless, the Fletcherâ€™s Neck Coast Guard cutter headed to Wood Island to get Tammy.



Wood Island Lighthouse in years gone by. (Image courtesy of The Frank family)

The girl's grandparents had been called to meet the boat at Biddeford Pool and take Tammy to the hospital. Her parents couldnâ€™t leave the lighthouse unattended, especially in bad weather.

When the Coast Guard cutter got as close as it dared to the dangerous shoals surrounding Wood Island, Syvinski and another seaman, Bill Raymond, took the dinghy and rowed it to shore, where there was a ramp leading up to the boathouse on the island.

â€œI remember being very scared. I didnâ€™t want to go with those strange men,â€ Tammy recalled at the annual meeting of the Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse on July 21.

The event was also attended by Tammy's mother and sister, along with other former light keepers and their families. Group members met to share stories of living on the island and manning the lighthouse.

Tragedy strikes

Syvinski and Raymond set out for the Coast Guard cutter anchored offshore with Tammy. It was then that a large swell capsized the boat, sending all three into the water.

Raymond took off swimming for the Coast Guard cutter, while Syvinski, hanging desperately onto Tammy, tried to keep a hold on the overturned skiff. Syvinski recalls going under the water three separate times.

He and Tammy had made it to Negro Island, which was the closest neighboring island to Wood Island. But Syvinski didnâ€™t have enough strength to pull them up out of the water. They would surely have died of hypothermia if Tammyâ€™s father hadnâ€™t disobeyed a direct order and taken the pea pod Wood Island was equipped with to go out looking for them.

Lily Burnham remembers they got a call from the Coast Guard cutter, which had successfully rescued Raymond. The boat chief told Lily about the accident and said, â€œ I guess weâ€™ll go searching for the bodies in the morning.â€

Daring rescue

Thatâ€™s when Tammyâ€™s father swung into action. He took the pea pod out and the first island he checked was Negro Island. Unfortunately, that island, too, had dangerous shoals.

He waited for his opportunity and rode into shore on the â€œperfect wave,â€ Lily Burnham said. Laurier soon came across Syvinski standing in the water, trying his best to hold Tammy out of the waves.

Laurier got the two of them into his boat and to the mainland Afraid to bend her because she was so cold and wet, they laid her out in the back seat with her head on her grandmotherâ€™s lap.

Tammy said her grandparents, who met the boat, stopped at the newly-opened Notre Dame Hospital, where Tammy remembers spending about three days.

The irony of the whole adventure is that Tammy didnâ€™t even have appendicitis.

Boyhood adventures

In addition to the Burnhams, Steve Frank, whose family lived on Wood Island and kept the lighthouse from 1952-1956, was also present at the Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse event Saturday.

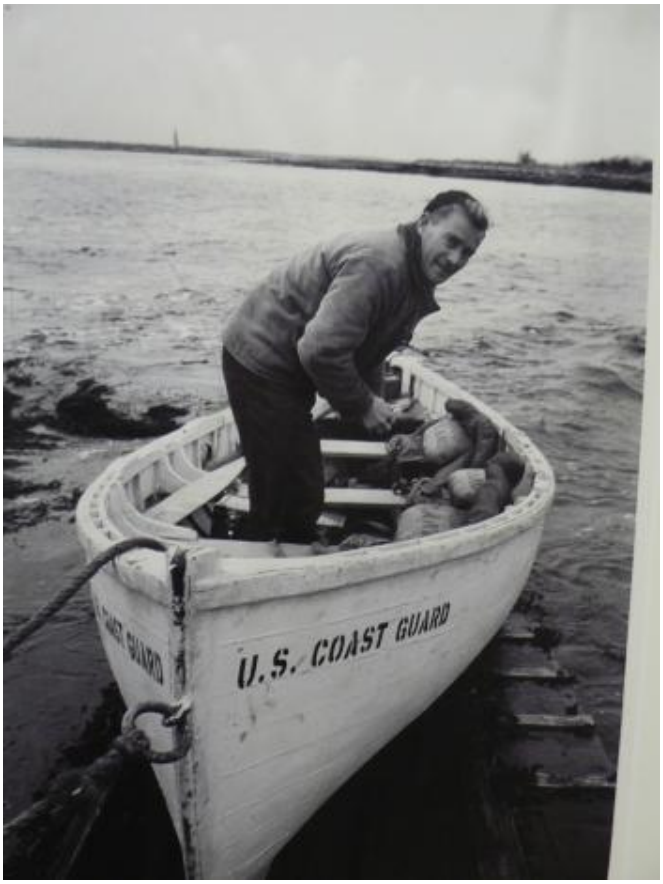
Frank, whose mother Eloise and sister Michelle were on hand as well, showed slides of photos that were taken by his father and mother, as well as a photographer from Life Magazine, who came out to the island while the Frank family was there to document the life of a light keeper.



Steve Frank's father Ed, the Wood Island Lighthouse keeper from 1952-56. (Image courtesy of The Frank family)

Steve Frank was only 10 days old when his father was posted to Wood Island and spent the first five years of his life on there.

Steve Frank mostly remembers getting into trouble, so much so that his parents finally fashioned a leather harness and staked him out in the yard like a dog so they would know where he was at all times.



(Image courtesy of The Frank family)

He also remembers getting badly burned one day as a 2-year-old, when he reached up for something and ended up knocking a hot iron off the stove and onto his wrist.

There is now a raised, wooden boardwalk from the boathouse to the lighthouse on the eastern end of the island. But when the Frank family first arrived on Wood Island there was no boardwalk and the family had to haul its groceries and other goods overland.

Powered by hand

In the 1950s and 1960s when the Frank and Burnham families lived on Wood Island and tended the lighthouse, everything they did had to be done by hand. There was no electricity and Lily Burnham remembers they had a gas-powered refrigerator.

The light and the fog bell were both semi-automated, but the families had to tend cranks to make sure the light would revolve and the bell would sound.

The first Wood Island Lighthouse was built sometime in 1806 or 1807. In 1806, the U.S. government purchased land at the eastern end of Wood Island with plans to build a lighthouse there to help guide mariners into what is now known as Biddeford Pool.

The Friends of Wood Island Lighthouse offers boat tours out to Wood Island and limited access to the lighthouse. The hope of the group is to one day have a museum with memorabilia and artifacts from the lighthouse.

Go online to www.woodislandlighthouse.org for more information.

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