Dumpling Rock Lighthouse Memories

By Seamond M. Roberts

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When I was a child my father and mother told me, time and time again, about how they survived the great New England hurricane of 1938. Today, many years later, those stories have left me with a legacy of hope.

Octave and Emma Ponsart were lighthouse keepers at Dumpling Rock Lighthouse, Massachusetts, "a rock in the ocean" as they used to call it, off Padanaram in South Dartmouth. Their story, never before told completely in print, began on that gray Wednesday, September 21, 1938. My parents, my elder sister and my cousin were scheduled to leave "the rock" for a long-awaited vacation, their first since the Depression.

They had scrimped for years, as only "Depression Folks" knew how, and had finally acquired a new car and some vacation clothes which Mom said were good enough to go on a cruise to Europe.

The assistant keeper at the Dumpling Rock Light Station was Henry G. Fontaineau. His wife May, a good friend of my

mother's (as she was the only other female there), helped Mom with the packing and supplied gentle chatter as they were about to row ashore.

They had the suitcases in the dory, ready to go, when the wind suddenly rose and the water got really rough. The storm came on quickly, "Just like that!" they would say, with a snap of the fingers.

Dad was not about to launch the dory in that kind of weather and headed Mom, my sister Bette and cousin Connie back to the house. He and Henry tried to secure the dory, but their efforts were fruitless and the boat was swept seaward.

Dad and Henry abandoned their effort and headed for the oil house and light tower to secure things. The task of securing anything quickly became impossible and they headed for the keeper's house as waves began to wash the rocks, quickly flooding the first floor.

My father said he was hanging onto a doorknob on the front door and hollering to my mother, sister and cousin to get upstairs and go to the assistant keeper's rooms on the lee side of the building. The dog, Rexena was swimming in the living room. Dad said Henry pointed seaward, and all they could see was foggy foam and mountainous combers headed directly for their rocky island.

From what they could see, the waves got progressively larger, and Dad said even the first ones coming in appeared as though they would engulf the tower. At that point, they were both sure they would not survive.

Henry said, "Octave, I think we're going to lose the light." Dad nodded and they headed for the upstairs to be with the women and children. There was nowhere else to go. My father had served on lightships and said he had never seen such a "quick sea" develop.

In quick succession, many waves hit, breaking completely over the house and lighthouse.

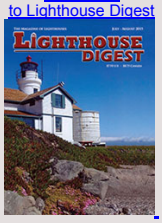
The keepers had been doing carpentry on one of the bedrooms and had nails and boards ready. They nailed boards over the windows and braced the floors with the biggest spikes they had in the tool box.

The window glass was quickly broken and the whole house was wet inside. Outside boards were being torn from their nails and the screeching noise was terrible.

Pieces of the roof tore off. The house would shudder with each wave, and the side facing the sea caved in and was leaning. Henry and May talked of lashing

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themselves to a mattress to “make it to Round Hill.” Dad argued they would never last.

My mother, sister and cousin were in shock, huddled on the bed wrapped in sheets. My cousin had a massive nosebleed (apparently from fear), and while Dad was trying to help her there was a noise “like a freight train or what an earthquake must sound like,” as Mom described it. Then came a tremendous, long-lasting blast of water and a huge pounding shock with a splintering of wood. Those on the bed were hurled to the floor.

Henry and Dad knew something more drastic than ever had happened. The water in the first floor was now almost up to the ceiling. They opened the bedroom door and peered around the whirling water to see a bit of sky through the side of the living room wall, and a massive obstruction where just before the ceiling and walls had been.

A huge piece of Dumpling Rock had been torn free by the hurricane waves, lifted up and hurled through the side of the first floor living room. Now it sat there, actually anchoring the house and lighthouse to the rock. It had opened up a channel through the house, easing the flow of water entering and exiting the building without much of an obstruction.

Henry and Dad turned to report this and May cried and cried.

Blow after blow came after that, and yet the rock in the living room held firm. Mom later said when she sang the hymn “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,” it had a new and much more personal meaning.

The six remained upstairs through the dreadful night, and when morning came and the waters receded, they ventured downstairs. Nothing was left, nothing except Rexena, who had spent the storm in the linen closet, going to the top shelf as the water rose, evidence of which was shown by the dog’s prints left on each shelf. The waters that swirled around Dumpling Rock was filled with debris, telephone poles, pieces of homes, trees.

There was seaweed atop the light tower. The keepers quarters were in a shambles. There were no clothes or home furnishings left, except for a few canned goods still in a closet. A pile of canned goods were also found weeks later, wedged between the rocks below the tide line, as well as one silver spoon inherited from a Quaker grandmother.

On shore, Dad’s new car, which had been parked at the boat launch at Round Hill, was gone, probably washed into Buzzards Bay.

A few hours after surveying the damage, Dad turned to Mom and said, “Well at least we have our vacation money (their entire savings had been drawn out of the bank for this bang-up vacation), and we can buy some things that we will need to start over, by using that.”

Dad had given the money to Mom to put in her pocket for the trip in the dory to the mainland. Mom cried for hours before finally admitting that she was so afraid that they might swamp in the dory, she had taken the money and, at the last minute, put it in one of the suitcases.

At this point they had nothing; no clothes, no worldly possessions, no money, no car. Materially, they were worse off than in the Depression. But they still had three wonderful things; life, each other and hope.

I was born out of that hope in 1940, a child of the lighthouse, and I lived with them “in the ruins,” as Mom rightfully called it. The government did not take them off Dumpling Rock until the start of World War II.

The Coast Guard also did not repair much of the station pending what would happen to the lighthouse. The repairs that were done, Dad and Henry did themselves.

I learned to walk on the very rocks of the place that the 1938 hurricane should have made a death trap for my parents and my sister. We stayed there until the next assignment; after the Dumpling Rock station was closed, Dad went on to Butlers Flat Lighthouse in Outer New Bedford harbor for about a year, and then was assigned as keeper of Cuttyhunk Lighthouse from 1943 to 1946.

We were there during the 1944 hurricane and helplessly watched the Vineyard Sound Lightship go under with her crew of 11. We moved later to West Chop Light on Martha's Vineyard, where Dad was the head keeper until he retired in 1957.

These days, whenever things are not going quite right, I think of my parents telling me their story of the 1938 hurricane. I think of them losing everything they had in the world, and then always of Dad's ending words, “But, we had each other — and we had hope.”

This story appeared in the August 2007 edition of Lighthouse Digest Magazine. The print edition contains more stories than our internet edition, and each story generally contains more photographs - often many

more - in the print edition. For subscription information about the print edition, click here.

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