THE METROWEST DAILY NEWS

The lighthouse keeper's daughter

Irene Tibbetts Dumican celebrates a century of life

By Nicole Muller
GateHouse News Service
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DENNIS — Irene Tibbetts Dumican was born into a rare and beautiful world in which whistling winds and lapping waves were her first lullabies.

Their music has accompanied the seasons of Dumican's life for 10 decades.

"My family lived on Spectacle Island in Boston Harbor where my father was the lighthouse keeper," says Dumican, who will celebrate her 100th birthday April 9. "He brought my mother by boat to Medford Hospital, where I was born in 1908."

When Dumican was 4, the island's wooden range lighthouses were closed, and her father was transferred to Highland Light in North Truro, launching his young daughter's 96-year love affair with Cape Cod.

Life on the North Truro shore was a solitary one of sand, wind and sea, with few visitors except in summer. During these years, Dumican developed her passion for gardening and for the glorious sunsets that still inspire awe in visitors to the famed Highland Lighthouse and Highland House Museum.

Although she's spent a century surrounded by water, Dumican never learned to swim. "When I was a little bit of a thing I she saw a boy drown in a riptide," she recalls. "I've always had a healthy fear of the sea."

At 16, Dumican graduated from Provincetown High School. "In those days it was a big privilege to go on to higher education, but money was scarce," she says. "I was a passionate reader, and being a teacher just seemed the thing to do. I wanted it enough to earn my way."

Dumican spent five years as a waitress at North Truro's Highland House, a popular restaurant and hotel, to save enough money to pay her tuition, room and board at Hyannis Normal School, from which she graduated in 1928.

"I was very, very fortunate to be hired right away to teach second grade at Dennisport Graded School," she says. "I boarded at the Gill family's boarding house in West Dennis." That's where the young schoolmistress met Fred Dumican, a master electrician who came from Wrentham in the late 1920s to help wire Cape Cod for electricity.

When in 1930 Dennisport Graded School burned down, Dumican was transferred to West Dennis Graded School. The following year she joined seven other teachers as the original faculty of Ezra H. Baker Elementary School, which opened in September 1931 under the guidance of Principal William McLin. She taught second grade for another five years before marrying Dumican in October 1936.

"The rules in those days prohibited married ladies from teaching school, and I was forced to leave," Dumican says. Over the next 13 years, while raising her children Barry and Martha, Dumican wrote a 140-page memoir that includes life at the Highland Light and other observations of life on the Outer- and Mid-Cape during the first half of the 20th century. In 1949, she returned to Ezra Baker, teaching second grade for 25 more years before retiring in 1974.

For many summers Dumican sold tickets at the Hyannis Theatre, where she met a variety of celebrities, most notably President John F. Kennedy and his wife Jackie. "I wanted to get in enough hours at another job to protect myself when I retired," she says. That prudence took on extra significance when Fred died in 1965.

Life after retirement

In the early years of retirement, Dumican substituted at Ezra Baker and traveled several times a year to St. Croix to visit her daughter Martha, who taught high school English there.

"I gardened and crocheted and spent time with church activities. And I love to visit thrift shops and auctions," she says, eyes sparkling at the notion. "For many years I collected old oil lamps, milk glass and furniture. Martha still takes me to the Treasure Chest in Harwich on Saturdays."

With much amusement, Dumican ponders the expected question: What's the secret to living to 100? "I really don't know," she says. "I was thrifty. And for years I walked 1 1/2 miles a day each way to school." Dumican ate plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, and admits to loving ice cream, "but never

in excess." Her recipes for clam stew, baked stuffed lobster and sea clam pie are legendary.

Over a lifetime, Dumican has walked hundreds of miles across the sands of Cape Cod beaches, has read voraciously, and has cherished memories of the many interesting people who have touched her life.

As Martha and Barry Dumican prepared to celebrate their mother's birthday, a special treasure was unearthed. "I found an old Liberty Head half-dollar on a local beach while out with my metal detector," Barry says. "I dug down several feet and came up with this amazing silver coin from 1908, the year Mom was born!"

For a long moment, Dumican gazes intently at the tarnished coin nestled in her small hand. "Time goes so fast — I just don't know how I got to be this old," she says. "My journey has been one of many treasures, and I had such fun discovering them all."

All are welcome

What: 100th birthday party for Irene Tibbetts Dumican
When: 2-4 p.m. Sunday, April 13
Where: South Yarmouth United Methodist Church, Fellowship Hall, 322 Old Main St., South Yarmouth
RSVP by April 9 at 508-398-2495 or 508-362-6908
No gifts, please, but cards would be wonderful. Cards can be mailed to Irene Dumican, P.O. Box 727, West Dennis, MA 02670.

Excerpts from Irene Tibbetts Dumican's memoir

'Cape Cod Through a Lighthouse Window'

I, too, cruised into Provincetown Harbor on the good ship Mayflower, practically 300 years following the voyage that made our history what it is today. In a sense, I was a Pilgrim, too, and along with that I was deadly seasick. I recall that at that moment even the length of the Provincetown Monument rising out of the morning mist evoked no enthusiasm from my family; they, too, had succumbed. If the Mayflower in this instance was the property of the U.S. Lighthouse Department, well, it was still the Mayflower, and I, with my parents and brother and sister, was a Pilgrim entering a strange land about which we knew practically nothing. …

Yes, I was a light keeper's daughter, and as such, have a rather intimate knowledge of things "Cape Coddish," for I have always listened and observed intently when possible. From the time I was four years old … my address was Highland Light, or officially, Cape Cod Light Station, one of the most important lights on the Atlantic coast. …

More folks than it is comfortable to think about have a very peculiar idea of lighthouse keepers and their offspring. For instance, there was the lady who gushed just before I met her, "How thrilling! I've always wanted to see a real lighthouse keeper's daughter!" and the young man to whom I had taken a fancy, "A light keeper's daughter, WHAT a novelty." And last but not least, and this is the whole truth, cross my heart, an inquisitive female shading her eyes with her hands, nose plastered against one of the windows of our house, peering in and saying excitedly to a friend, "Why, it's a real house, and there are REAL people in it." Another lady peering in our window: "Oh, come and watch 'em feed."

* * *

We had some interesting little neighbors living near us at the light, cliff dwellers in the truest sense of the word: bank swallows, a class of birds very nearly extinct, I believe. They made their homes in nests burrowed into the cliffs. I used to watch them fluttering back and forth. … It was pathetic to see the number of various birds often found at the base of the tower, killed by having flown blindly against the light, the very instrument that had attracted them proving their destruction.

* * *

Have you ever stood on the cliff at Highland and watched the surf come thundering in in all its mad glory? Have you watched the landscape suddenly begin to darken until all around you it was like night? These sights are not easily forgotten; they are what make one feel really insignificant.
I have heard the wind howl around that light with an unmistakable intensity; my bed has been literally rocked by the force of the gale as I lay in it trying to sleep. During one summer storm, when the wind blow over 80 mph I saw trees uprooted and much damage done by the fury of the gale. Near the light, an old bathhouse blew over in such a gale. Later, a second wind blew the bathhouse back to its former position, a bit wobbly, but still, back to its homeport.

* * *

Back in 1927 or '28, we had a terrible winter with several offshore catastrophes. I was at school at the time, intent upon a really good shore collection for my biology class. While at home one weekend, partly in the interest of my collection and partly because I always liked walking on the beach, I went

down to commune with nature. It was after a particularly hard wind, resulting in a veritable upheaval from the depths of the sea. The surf had thundered tumultuously on the sandy ocean floor, bringing forth secrets long hidden from our prying eyes.

I saw a coat such as seamen wear, and I pondered over that a bit sadly. I saw quantities of whitened bones, giving me a lot to think about. I found much for my collection, all mute relics cast up from the maw of the ocean. …

Don't you love the shells you find on the beach? There's the curious sand dollar, circular with intricate fairy markings, seemingly pricked into this fascinating design by tiny pins. I played that they were real dollars when I was a youngster, searching practically daily during the summer to see how many dollars I could accumulate. Ah, that was a game worth playing and netted me as much pleasure as if they had, indeed, been negotiable.

* * *

When I was younger, we found obstacles to contend with [in Provincetown] besides narrow streets: artists here and artists there, deaf, dumb and blind to everything save their art. Calmly they parked on collapsible campstools, easels in front of them, no whit discomfited by mere passersby. A barrage of tooting horns was nothing to them. … They used to come, even as swarms of bees, while I lived at the light and were as difficult to shake off, too. They parked themselves where'er their fancy took them: back steps, front steps, on porches, on running boards of cars. Their paraphernalia was everywhere, and WE were regarded as the intruders!

* * *

One sees, and sometimes has the pleasure of meeting, some interesting people when one lives at a lighthouse. It was here that I met and listened to a man whose unbelievable and wholly beautiful command of the English language left me spellbound. … Such a man was Henry Beston (Sheahan). He came to visit one of the assistant keepers, George Smith. He took long tramps alone, made friendly visits with the coast guards and walked with them during their oft'times dangerous patrol. …

When in 1927, Henry Beston built his now-famous little "Fo'castle" on a lonely sand dune on Nauset Beach and stayed the winter there with the wind, the surf, the animal life, some good books and an occasional visit from the coast guards … he fashioned with sympathetic understanding and rare ability that masterpiece so aptly known as "The Outermost House."

* * *

In my extreme youth, I wrote my name and address on a paper that I enclosed in a bottle, heaved it with might and main into the vast Atlantic, and proceeded to wait for a reply. It came, all in good time, but not quite as I expected, for in the reply I was advised to be a good girl and do what my mother and father told me to. I felt chagrined and very let down. Long afterwards, I found that my bottle … floated back in and was found by one of the boys at the nearby radio station, hence the reply.

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