SOUTH PORTLAND-CAPE ELIZABETH Sentry

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Light of his life

Everyday Maine: Jack Roberts, keeper of the keys

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John "Jack" Roberts Jr., a member of the Rotary Club of South Portland – Cape Elizabeth who spearheaded restoration of the Portland Breakwater Light, more popularly known as "Bug Light," poses inside the little lighthouse with the lens the Rotary Club installed in 2002. (Duke Harrington photo)

SOUTH PORTLAND — Visitors to South Portland's popular Bug Light Park often say a silent thanks that someone thought to preserve the little lighthouse that stands at the end of the breakwater, guarding the entrance to Portland Harbor. But few know who, in particular, they should thank.

That man is John "Jack" Roberts Jr., who served as South Portland's director of public welfare for 35 years, and who, as a member of the Rotary Club of South Portland – Cape Elizabeth, spearheaded restoration of the Portland Breakwater Light almost 25 years ago.

Now retired and living in Scarborough, Roberts, 67, still leads the Rotary Club's efforts to maintain the lighthouse, making him the "keeper of the keys," as he likes to joke. On June 15, in an interview conducted inside the lighthouse, Roberts took time to speak to the *Sentry* about his service to the city, and how the Rotary came to be the guardians of Bug Light.

Q: Where and when were you born? A: I was born in Bangor in 1948.

Q: And what was it like growing up in Bangor?

A: Oh, it was a great place. I loved it. But then, it was all I ever knew.

Q: Where did you go to school?

A: I went to John Bapst in Bangor and then the University of Maine. I actually got a teaching degree in secondary education for sociology.

Q: Did you ever do any teaching? A: After student teaching, I decided, no, that was not for

me (laughs). I realized I was just not going to be a good enough disciplinarian.

Q: So, what was your first job out of college?

A: My first job was working for K-Mart for six weeks. Then I got a job in the Bangor welfare department. I was there for a couple of years and then I got hired as the welfare director here in South Portland. That's essentially what the general assistance administrator is today. But this was in 1974 and the official title at the time was director of public welfare. I was in that job 35 years. I don't move around much.

Q: So, you lived in South Portland for a lot of years.

A: Actually, no. When we first came down we lived in Portland, and then we moved to Cape Elizabeth. I did not want to live in the same community with the folks I was working with. I did not want to have neighbors coming in needing help. And I had seen situations with other public welfare directors. One in Bangor that worked for, his son was constantly coming home with problems. If parents didn't get what they wanted at the welfare office, they'd go home and complain about it and their kids would go to school the next day and beat up his kid. Then, this woman in Old Orchard Beach, she had three daughters all come home with black eyes in one week and so, she said, that's enough, and left.

So, I was very dedicated to the city of South Portland. I always did my job as if I lived right here. But I did not want to subject my family to those kinds of issues I had seen.

Q: How did your job change over the years?

A: It became more state-controlled, with more and more state regulations even though the city bears all of the administrative costs. A lot of people think almost everything spent on general assistance gets reimbursed by the state, but there are only a few communities that get the 90 percent reimbursement, and then only after they spend a fortune. So, South Portland gets 50 percent of what it spends on welfare, but still has all the costs of maintaining the office.

Q: Were there any changes over the years in the types of people who asked for assistance, or the amount of need?

A: I found that over the years, that people began to feel more entitled. And, the laws were written so that the people who were trying to make it on their own and get ahead were eligible for less assistance than the people who were willing to just sit back and do nothing and let others take care of them. I know I'm being blunt. The majority of people who came into my office were the nicest people you'd ever want to meet. But there was a certain percentage, and it increased over the years, who really tried to take advantage of the system. That was frustrating, that part of it. But fortunately there were enough people who I really helped — and sometimes not even in the G.A. office, but in making referrals to other agencies — to help get them back on track, that I found that part rewarding.

Q: Why did you stay with it for so long?

A: I enjoyed what I was doing. Plus, my wife had a very good job and it got to the point where I wasn't going to move anywhere else in this area. I certainly did not want to go over to Portland just for more money. I was very happy here.

Q: What was your greatest success story during your time as South Portland's welfare director?

A: I put in a city work program back in 1977. Then I went to the legislature and lobbied like hell to get enabling legislation, because we were already doing it (laughs). I figured it might be nice if was legal.

Q: And what made you proud of that program?

A: I had more people who would go into the workfare sites, do a good job, and then use that as a reference to get a job. That was what I found the most fulfilling. Because most of these people just didn't have any skills, they didn't have a resume, but they were good workers. We were able to place people in every single city department. At one time, we had five different people working in five different departments in the city who had started as workfare workers. That, to me, spoke volumes. We had another fellow we put to work compiling a genealogy using city clerk and library records. He then used the reference from the library to get a full-time job in anther area library. That was the best part of my job, seeing people be able to get off of the system and support themselves doing something they really wanted to do.

Q: Were there any drawbacks to the program?

A: Well, of course, it was an administrative nightmare. You've got to have supervisors who were willing and able to monitor what people are doing. And, of course, a lot of the time, you'd have someone scheduled to go to a job site who would not show up, so those supervisors would get mad at you for wasting their time, and some would be less willing to take on these folks again.

Q: When did you retire?

A: I retired in 2008, I think it was. I had had major back surgery, and when I got back to work, from sitting there all day long — and it was a high stress job anyway — by evening I couldn't move. I was just shy of being 62 and being able to take my Social Security, so I said, I guess I'm out of here.

Q: How have you filled your retirement years?

A: Well, I've got five grandchildren, I'm active in the Rotary, I love working around the yard. I have coffee with someone most every day. I have no trouble staying busy and I haven't looked back one day.

Q: When did you join the Rotary Club?

A: In 1976. Ron Stewart was the city manger who hired me and he suggested that I ought to join Rotary. And I loved it. I had looked at other service groups, but Rotary was for me, I found, because it was a more of a professionals' group. Plus, my father was the King Lion in Bangor and my grandfather was president of the Kiwanis Club there, so I figured somebody ought to cover Rotary (laughs).

Q: What have you enjoyed most about the Rotary Club?

A: I loved the projects that we got involved in, doing stuff for the community. And I've stayed in it even after I retired because of the fellowship, the camaraderie. It's the friends you build over the years as part of the club. I think I'd go crazy if I didn't have that social network through the Rotary Club. I'd be eligible to join the Scarborough Rotary Club now, but I don't want to give up my key to the lighthouse (laughs).

Q: How did you and the Rotary Club come to be the stewards of Bug Light?

A: Totally by accident. By working at the city and Dana (Anderson, director of parks and public works at the time) knowing I was in Rotary, he asked if it was something we'd like to be involved in.

Q: What did Bug Light look like at the time?

A: Oh, this place really looked awful. It really looked like it should have been bulldozed. The fence had all fallen off. We had to fix all the metal work, we completely stripped all the outside paint after putting scaffolding all around it. It came off in quarter-inch pieces and, of course, none of it could get into the harbor because it was all lead-based paint, and layer after layer after layer of it, because this had been here since 1875. We've put a number of coats of paint on it since we've been doing it. It doesn't last long in this environment on the cast iron. The wind, the saltwater, you can imagine if this was your house sitting right here.

There was a federal grant that Sen. George Mitchell co-sponsored to fix it up, but it required a local match. I was president of the Rotary Club in 1989. Each president has money they can put toward whatever they want for a project and we all agreed that would be a pretty good project to do. The money needed was a lot, but we arranged to give $6,500 the first year and $6,500 the second.

The work finally got done and the light was rededicated in 1991.

Q: But the Rotary stayed involved even after the rededication, correct?

A: Yes, eventually. A few years later, after we got it all fixed up, I'm guess this was maybe 1997 or so, the city wasn't doing anything and it was starting to look pretty seedy again. I went to Dana (Anderson) and I said, "What's going on? Why aren't you taking care of it?" He said, "Because we haven't got the money. Do you want to take care of it?" and he held the key up. So, I went back to the club and said, "Is there any interest in taking care of the lighthouse on an ongoing basis?" It was unanimous. Everyone said, "Yeah, that'd be a great project." So, we've been doing it ever since.

We provided in the first benches that they put in, to get that started. And, before this area even was a park, we assisted with some of the funding to build the walk from the light out to the boat ramp. Almost every spring we come down with a crew to clean up all the debris that blows in and try to make it look presentable.

Q: How much does the Rotary Club invest in Bug Light on an annual basis?

A: Well, the work we've done in the last year has included over $4,000 for painting and we spent close to $2,000 on new historical signs installed in the last few weeks, along with a plaque listing the names of all the lighthouse keepers. It's typically not that much, but the maintenance is fairly expensive. I've had to have the fence fixed several times. About four or five years ago we found the concrete was all corroding underneath the lighthouse. We had a fella who agreed to do it for the cost of the concrete if we'd help lug it out to the lighthouse.

Q: Why does it cost so much to paint the lighthouse?

A: For a number of years we've had inmates from the Cumberland County Jail come down and paint it. They did a very good job and when they did it, it only cost us $750 for the paint and some decent sandwiches for lunch. The only problem is the paint wasn't holding up. This spring we came down and it looked awful. There was rust everywhere. I was like, we've got signs up saying the Rotary Club is taking care of it and it looks like the devil! I couldn't believe it had changed that much over the winter. So, this spring we used a new Coast Guard-approved epoxy paint. For that we couldn't use the jail inmates because, with this paint, once you put the first coat on, you have to apply the second coat within six hours in order for it to bind and mix. But it's supposed to have a really good life expectancy, even in this environment. So, I've got my fingers crossed. I'm hoping we get at least five years out of it.

Q: Bug Light was put back into operation in 2002 as a private aid to navigation. Did Rotary restore the original lens?

A: No, we have no idea where it went. It was not here in 1991. That's part of the reason it was in such disrepair at that time — it really wasn't a lighthouse. It was just the shell of a lighthouse, and nobody had taken care of it particularly. It probably would have been torn down if it had gone much longer. Other things disappeared over the years. The original ventilator ball was stolen at some point, we think because some of them used to have platinum in them. But all anyone got here was a useless ball. One thing we'd also like to replace is the bell that hung over the side. No one knows were it went — it must have been hard to cart away because we know the last one here was a 1,000-pound bell — and a replacement is impossible to find. We've checked with every lighthouse group we can think of.

Anyway, through the Spring Point Ledge Light Trust and the city of South Portland, we were able to petition the Coast Guard to let us set this up as private aid to navigation. The old light was a No. 6 Fresnel lens that flashed red. What we put in was a modern 215-millimeter solar optic lens that flashes every four seconds. No one can even see the solar panel that powers the battery, which helped satisfy Maine Historic Preservation, which was concerned we might destroy the historic integrity of the lighthouse. We take care of replacing the bulbs and doing all of the annual inspections. But it has seven bulbs and is set up to switch over to a new one automatically if one burns out.

Q: How often is the lighthouse open to the public?

A: Well, I wish we could staff it every weekend, but we just don't have the resources for that. We do open it up for many weekends, and for most major events in the park. And, of course, any time I'm here it's open.

Q: When you give tours, what is your favorite factoid, or anecdote to share with visitors?

A: Just the length of the breakwater, that it was nearly 2,000 feet long and, before this area was filled in to create the shipyards during World War II, that was all open ocean on either side. A lot of people look at what's there now and it's hard for them to comprehend that what they see is all fill, and what a hardship it used to be for the lighthouse keeper to get out here, in an ice storm and such.

Q: What has working on Bug Light over the years meant to you?

A: It's just been a real pleasure. Especially watching the little kids come in and then leave with these great big, wide eyes, so excited. They can't get into Spring Point Light —they're not tall enough — they can't get into Portland Head Light — they're not old enough — then they come here head hanging, figuring they're going to be refused again, and we let them in. It becomes their lighthouse. It's a nice-sized little lighthouse for them.

Q: What advice would you give to a young person?

A: My advice would be to get involved with a service club, whether it's Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, or something else. You create great social networks and get to do a lot for your community, but you end up getting a lot more than you give when you do that kind of work.

Everyday Maine is an occasional feature spotlighting those who have spent their lives living, working and serving the area, sometimes making vital contributions behind the scenes, but often simply being part of the fabric of the community. Although they've rarely made headlines, the Sentry feels they, too, are worth chronicling in its pages. If you have a person you'd like to nominate as a feature subject for this series, email ***news@inthesentry.com****.*