

Just after sunrise, light strikes the Winter Harbor Lighthouse and clouds race overhead. “The sky and wind told me a gale was on its way,” recalls William Holden who took the picture in 1998. PHOTO BY WILLIAM C. HOLDEN III

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Life on Mark Island and lighthouse inspires memoir

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WINTER HARBOR — Roaring Bull, a ledge awash in only 3 feet of water at mean low tide, lies in eastern Frenchman Bay. When it’s blowing hard from the northwest and a heavy sea is running from the south, the waves strike the shoals, sending the white foam up and billowing back like a bridal train.

Roaring Bull's show, which occurs in a strait called the Middle Ground, has come to be known by some as "the Bride of the Middle Ground."

That particular display of the North Atlantic's might is just one of the many dramas and memorable moments William C. Holden III experienced while living for much of the year for a decade on Mark Island off the western shore of the Schoodic Peninsula. The largely treeless isle also is home to the Winter Harbor Light, which was deactivated in 1933.

During his years on the island, Holden poured his energy (and money) into restoring the lighthouse, lighthouse keeper's house, workshop, oil house, henhouse, outhouse, boathouse, ways and pier. He also read, cooked, painted and even lazed around a bit. All was recorded in a daily diary kept most days.

Twelve years after selling the island in 2004, Holden has produced a book chronicling his decade-long adventure. "Mark Island Lighthouse Diaries: Songs of a Dreamer" (Blurb.com, $22.19-$32.19) is a rich compilation of diary entries, photos, paintings, to-do and shopping lists, diagrams and drawings.



"Spring on Cadillac," enamel on board, William Holden

Whether writing in the thick of a storm or about the Albert Russell & Sons winch used to haul boats up the ways (rails), Holden captures the beauty, delights and dangers of living on Mark.

"Oh, that surf — sounds and color; silence, then rumbling, then escalating, rumbling, then a crash," he wrote in his diary on Thursday, July 2, 1998. "Spray 20 feet in the air, hissing, hissing, hissing, then a gentle sound of swirl-like puddles, to be repeated over and over. This is now no joke."

"Mark Island Lighthouse Diaries: Songs of a Dreamer" is sprinkled with sayings and quotes that express the author's continued quest to live fully and chase his dreams.

"To look at everything as though you were seeing it for the first or last time. Thus is your time on Earth filled with glory," is one such line from Betty Smith's "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn."

From the Schoodic shore and end of Grindstone Point in Winter Harbor, where he spent many summers, Holden used to sit and gaze at Mark Island and its lighthouse. At 6 a.m. on July 29, 1995, his phone rang and it was a local property manager Larry Smith. Did he want to buy the island and lighthouse? He recalls "my heart began to race."

Holden, who had quit Boston's financial world years before, to devote his time to personal pursuits from ocean cruising to farming in the York County town of Goodwin's Mills, didn't hesitate. Less than a month later, he and two of his three daughters, Betsy and Jenny, with two sheep in tow alighted on "the island no one can ever land on."

Two miles from the mainland, Mark isn't easy to set foot on. When Holden acquired the island, the only options were to land on the boathouse's ways or time the ocean swells and leap — bow line in hand — onto a 10-foot swath of ledge when the sea surge peaked.

"Death at the ways on Mark is no fiction. Four times or more since the lighthouse was built in 1856," Holden relates. "And [Winter Harbor fisherman] Doug Torrey's grandmother's husband drowning off the north shore of Ned [Island] many years ago."

For those who are mechanically inclined or like to work with their hands, "Mark Island Lighthouse Diaries" makes absorbing, entertaining reading.



"Boathouse legs," enamel on board, William Holden

Holden's immediate challenge was accessing the island more easily. The boathouse's rails had to be replaced and a system devised for a pier, ramp and float that would withstand the elements in the exposed, hazardous area.

Drinking water was another issue. Made in Switzerland and used by the International Red Cross, the Katadyn Table Top Filter System proved the solution. The system produces six gallons of pure drinking water per day from "raw" water collected from the roof and cisterns under the house. All contaminants are removed as part of the process.

"When drinking the water, I try not to think about the seagull droppings on the roof," quipped the author in his memoir.

When he bought the island, Holden found the light tower's window panes had long since blown out and old wooden doors had been lashed to the iron frames. Sea spray and rain had poured in, heavily rusting the iron spiral stairs and wreaking other damage.

"Half the ships in the U.S. Navy are held together with rust converter," a local lobsterman told Holden who orders a couple gallons of Gempler's Rust Converter for $110.

No matter how small the project, the author supplies all the details from the original hanging kerosene lamps, equipped with counter weights for raising and lowering to desired height, to installing a fixed light to the tower. The latter involved a car-top orange light, 12-volt battery and six miniature Fresnel lenses.

"It was powerful enough to be seen two miles away by the townspeople of Winter Harbor," he notes. 'And that was really only what I cared about."

Part of the pleasure of reading "Mark Island" is its intimate scrapbook quality. It is not one continuous story broken by chapters. Holden's sequential diary entries, kept from 1995 to 1998, form the thread moving the memoir forward. Entire pages of the handwritten entries were scanned from the journal in their raw form. Sometimes, the writing is all uppercase.

Sept. 15, 1996.

"Was awakened at 1 a.m. by the sound and feel of the surf pounding the shore. Waves, swells generated by Hurricane Hortense hundreds of miles away," he writes. "The waves and swells finding first landfall under my window. The pounding can be felt as well as heard. My bed vibrating!!!!!!!"

The entries are mingled with color photos of the island's paths winding past grazing sheep and through fields of daisies, foxglove, wild iris and rosa rugosa. Red, white and blue dish towels dry like pennants on the clothesline.

Interspersed among the images of sunsets, sea birds, wandering chickens and daughters Kim, Betsy and Jenny are Holden's stark paintings that perhaps capture best the island's solitary nature.

In his enamel-on-board paintings, he effectively breaks down the island, tower, shore, sea and sky — a dory, the ways, hay bale or another element sometimes tossed in — into broad planes of solid color. He uses tape to block out the overall composition.



Maine artist and illustrator Betsy Thompson eyes the pair of lambs brought out just a week after her father acquired Mark Island west of the Schoodic Peninsula.

While Mark's remoteness captivated him, Holden does delve into the island's previous inhabitants including the nine lighthouse keepers — Frederick Gerrish, Richard Higgins, Amaziah Southard, Allen H. Cole, James Wright W.N. Wasgatt, Benjamin Maddox, Adelbert Leighton and Lester "Cap" Leighton. The Winter Harbor Light was replaced by a lighted whistle buoy and deactivated in 1933.

Like Holden, the property's previous dwellers were dreamers too. Such as writer Bernice "Bunny" Richmond and her sociologist husband, Reginald Robinson. As a girl, she had visited Casco Bay's Halfway Rock Light and fancied having her own lighthouse.

Children's book authors Rene and Pat Prud'hommeaux lived there year-round for 18 years, collecting wood from nearby Ned Island to fire their woodstove. During their tour, a Christmas tree was put in the tower for the fishermen. Hollywood playwright and director Gerald Kean followed.

Holden not only brought the Winter Harbor Light back to life, but also put the tower and its various structures on firm footing for many years to come. But the outpost takes a beating from Mother Nature every year and its upkeep is relentless and unforgiving.

So Holden, too, had to pass the job on to new guardians. He still spends plenty of time gazing at the island from his Winter Harbor home.

His memoir is a lot about realizing dreams and the journey there.

“I have never felt that anyone ever ‘owns’ Mark Island,” he reflects. “I became in my mind nothing more than a caretaker entrusted with a gift.”

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