CLIPS
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
SOURCE
JULY 8, 1987
DATE

Lighthouse Keepers Are Fast Fading Out, But Lights Stay On

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Coast Guard Budget Squeeze Automates a Way of Life; A Maine Town's Big Issue

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NUBBLE LIGHT, Maine—Soon there will be silence at the Cape Neddick lighthouse.

For more than a century, men have lived here on this tiny island just off the craggy Maine coast. They have maintained the foghorn, which sounds like a low C on a French horn no matter how stormy the day, and have turned on the light, which has guided mariners past Roaring Rock Point and Bald Head Cliff for generations.

But later this month, Russell Ahlgren, the last keeper at the Cape Neddick lighthouse, will lock the light tower, close up the Victorian house with the gingerbread latticework, steer his boat to shore and drive away. The Coast Guard is automating the last 18 manned lighthouses in the country, and Cape Neddick is the next to go. In two years, none will be left.

A Lonelier Sea

So will disappear the keepers of the light—men who lived on the provisions the government sent them by ship, drank the rainwater they gathered in downspouts and buckets, and lived amid fog and ocean spray for months on end. And the sea will become a much lonelier place.

"We are a dying breed," says Malcolm Rouse, the keeper of the light at West Quoddy Head in Lubec, Maine, an international light way down east on the Canadian border. "There won't be a human face behind the light."

The human faces behind the Cape Neddick light, situated along a migratory route for humpback whales, are those of Mr. Ahlgren; his wife, Brenda; and their two-year-old son, Christopher. For 18 months, they have lived at this light, so evocative of maritime New England that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration sent a picture of it into space aboard Voyager II.

It is a budget crunch that is sending the Ahlgrens and the other lighthouse families packing. The Coast Guard says the costs of helping to fight the drug war, for example, are so high that economies have to be made elsewhere. One result: the end of the era of the keepers, once so important that the jobs were presidential appointments.

But all the Coast Guard's talk about costs and budgets has failed to quell an outburst of public sentiment here and at other sites in Maine, which treats its five dozen lighthouses—the most of any state—the way California treats its endangered condors. The man who is installing the $45,000 automation equipment at the Cape Neddick light is so afraid to tell the tourists, mariners and residents on shore why he is going out to the island that he has invented a story. He tells them he is fixing the Ahlgrens' bathroom.

"It's the biggest issue in our little town," says William Thomson, who operates the Whispering Sands Gift Shop in



The Ahlgrens

York Beach, about a mile from the 108-year-old light station. "I can't remember people getting so upset about anything since World War II broke out."

The Ahlgrens and the seven other families still clinging to their lighthouse homes in this state are remnants of a solitary, independent life style—rich in rigor and romance—that is fast fading into Maine's past.

"This kind of life can't be lived in any other setting," says Philmore Wass, a retired University of Connecticut professor who grew up on Libby Island at the entrance of Machias Bay in northern Maine, where his father was the keeper between 1919 and 1940. "The family, all of us really, were lightkeepers."

Melancholy Prospect

So it was with the Ahlgrens. He stripped the paint from the generator building, she applied the new coat. He polished the brass, she polished the windows. Sometimes it was so stormy they had to take turns scraping the ice from the light, hour after hour, all night long and into the morning. Sometimes it was so windy he had to hold her as she read the hand-held anemometer to measure wind speed. "This," says Brenda Ahlgren, "is a two-person job."

Farther north, at the mouth of the Penobscot River 40 miles downstream from Bangor, Larry Baum and his wife, Valerie, live by the same ancient rhythms in a white clapboard house attached to the square brick tower of the Fort Point light. Next May, Fort Point will be automated, and Mr. Baum is already melancholy about it.

"Do you know what I do?" he asks. "I turn the light on and I turn the light off. I paint the building. I mow the lawn. There is no stress. My boss is 80 miles away and I see him three times a year. You can't find a better job."

But though the keepers are going, the light stations themselves will remain. One, at Isle au Haut, Maine, on a granite ledge of a six-mile island, has been converted into an inn and now is owned by the daughter of a keeper. Another, the spark-plug-shaped Sakonnet lighthouse off Little Compton, R.I., was decommissioned after a hurricane and has been restored and preserved through a nonprofit tax-exempt group.

In all, the Coast Guard has licensed two dozen keepers' quarters to local governments and nonprofit organizations. "We hope this will prompt the growth of a new mini national-park system run at the local level," says Valerie Nelson, the executive director of the Lighthouse Preservation Society in Rockport, Mass.

Vandalism Feared

The restoration effort has spread across the country. The Del Norte Historical Society in northern California maintains its lighthouse with spaghetti dinners, while the fund-raising effort on Martha's Vineyard, Mass., included a benefit with appearances by Sen. Edward Kennedy and singer Carly Simon.

Still, preservationists are worried. Many of the remaining structures have become brittle. Without keepers, they could become the target of vandals. Without regular maintenance, they could disintegrate.

The historic wooden complex at the Portland Head light in Maine, commissioned by George Washington, has been encased in aluminum siding, trapping moisture and endangering the structure. At the Cape Neddick lighthouse, Mr. Ahlgren worries that once the heat is turned off, the horsehair-and-plaster walls will crack and tumble to the floor.

"I'll be afraid to bring Chris back to see where he lived," he says, "because it is going to fall apart."

As the nation approaches the 200th anniversary of the Lighthouse Act of 1789—the ninth bill signed by President Washington, which established the federal role in maintaining lighthouses—two Democratic senators are raising their voices in protest. George Mitchell of Maine and Donald Riegle of Michigan, a state whose Great Lakes shores make it another center of lighthouse lore, are working to win a three-year appropriation of $15 million so that the National Park Service can assist in renovation and preservation efforts.

"It would be tragic," says Mr. Mitchell, "if these historic structures were left to crumble."

But now Russell Ahlgren is preparing to join a search-and-rescue crew on Block Island, R.I. The area where early explorers once searched for the Northwest Passage will lose its watchman. The Cape Neddick light, which the 19th-century New England poet William Hale eulogized as a "glowing crimson eye," will go on and off by itself.

"We're going to be the ones who close the doors," says Brenda Ahlgren, "and that makes us feel kind of special."