AUNT DOT'S LIGHTHOUSE MEMORIES

by Donna Gronros

My aunt Dot is our family historian, and one of the most interesting people I have ever known. She has lived in Maine lighthouses, sailed on coastal schooners, and raised her family on a farm in Union, Maine. The farm holds a lot of fond childhood memories for me, and I still enjoy visiting my aunt and listening to the stories she and my mother tell about their early experiences in a Maine that was very different from the Maine we live in today. Here is Aunt Dot's story.



Robbins and Joanna Dobbins with baby Davis.

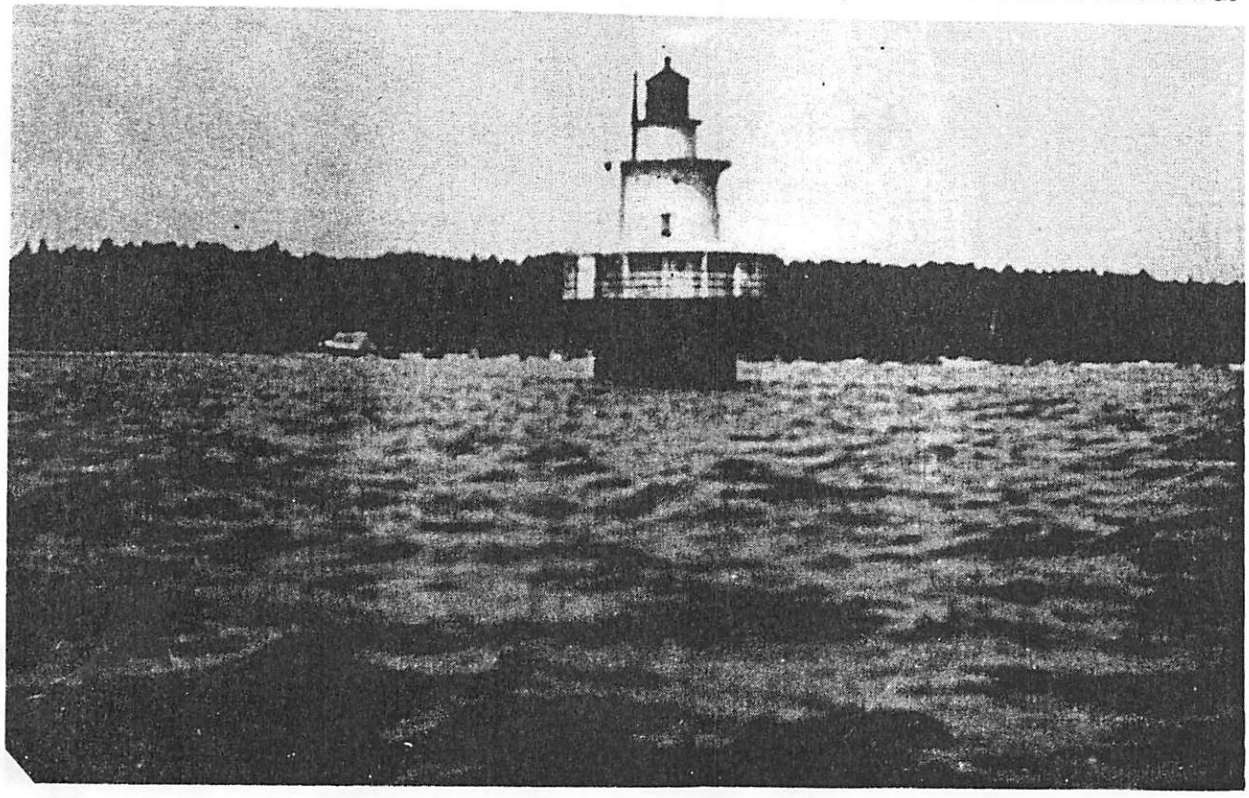
"I was born at Hancock Point, on August 15, 1903, in the home of my mother's parents, Captain and Mrs. Charles F. Chester. At that time there were no bridges there and the doctor had to come across from Sullivan in a rowboat to attend me; he had to come across quite a piece of water, the upper part of Frenchman's Bay. I was the first child.

"Grandpa Chester was, at that time, keeper of Crabtree Ledge Light Station, located in the northern part of Frenchman's Bay, near Hancock Point. It was built in 1890 and sometime during the 1930s it was demolished and a bell buoy took its place. Crabtree Ledge Light Station was what the Coast Guardsmen now call a spark-plug light. It was a round tower, built on an underwater ledge, with no visible land around it, so I think it did resemble a giant spark plug!

"As the lighthouse was a cylinder, all the rooms were round. The kitchen and living room were on the second level. The third level was the bedroom. Above that was the lantern deck. The lowest deck was the basement, where rainwater from the roof was caught in a cistern and provided the water supply. Coal and water were also stored there.

"At first the illumination was an oil lamp, about two-and-a-half feet high, with a round wick which had to be trimmed precisely to give it an even flame and prevent smokeouts. This was enclosed in a huge glass prism lens. Later the lens was lit by a lamp with a mantle like an Alladin lamp. It was lit at sundown and extinguished at sunrise. Everything had to be kept spotlessly clean. The oil and other supplies were delivered by lighthouse tenders, large boats with names like Geranium, Hibiscus and Lilac. The keeper had a house on the mainland where he spent his daytime hours, after he finished his many duties at the lighthouse. He rowed from the mainland in a small boat and climbed a ladder to the landing deck. I don't know what he did with the boat if there was a bad storm. Perhaps there was a way to store it in the lighthouse. Most of grandpa's nights were spent in the lighthouse, although the house on the mainland was located so the bedroom window faced the light so he could see that all was well. If the light went out, as it sometimes did, grandpa would dress quickly, rush down to the little boat and row out to the light. If there was a smokeout, everything would be all covered with soot and it would take all day to clean it up.

"My paternal grandfather, Charles Dobbin, was keeper of Moose Peak, or Moosabec Light, on Mistake Island. It was one of the earliest, being built in 1827, when John Quincy Adams was president. The lighthouse is still standing but the house has been demolished. The light is automated now like all the others and is tended by the Coast Guard. When I was

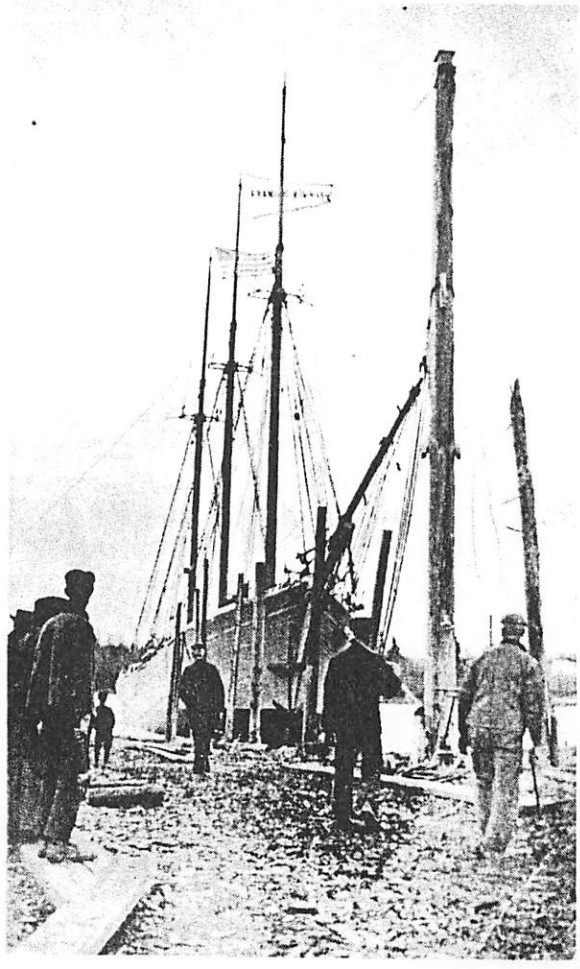


The Crabtree Ledge Light.

a baby my father, Rollins Dobbin, was assistant keeper and remained there until 1907. There was a two-family house on the island and my mother told me it was a lonely place. Mistake Island is near Jonesport, and the keepers got their mail and supplies from there. During the winter the keepers had a hard time getting back and forth to the mainland. The shoal waters around the many islands sometimes froze over and it was necessary to go around Head Harbor, by Mark Island, and up through the Reach to Jonesport. In the summer the course was laid differently, for the keepers had good open waters and were also landlocked when taking the main channel by Steels Harbor Island and out by Spectacle Island. There was good lobstering then around this light station, and the keepers spent some of their time fishing and tending their traps. The keepers' wives gathered the little red cranberries, which grew abundantly on most of the islands, and made the most delicious sauce and jelly. I was so young that I really can't remember much about living there. I remember mama saying they had a dog that went mad while we were there, foaming at the mouth, and father had to shoot him.

"My father and mother had five daughters. Eleanor was next to me. She was born while we were living at Moosabec Light in Jonesport. My mother had to get in their little sailboat to come up to Jonesport, to Grandma Dobbin's house, when it was time for the baby to be born. My sister Belle was born two years later in the same house. Myrtile was born in a house we had rented in the center of town. My sister Frances was born in a house they had bought in West Jonesport. My father had become captain of a three-masted coastal schooner and he was drowned two days after Frances was born. On February 22, 1912, he was down in Provincetown, Mass., and he went ashore to see if she had been born yet. It was a stormy, windy night and the boat capsized. The sailors on the vessel tried to save him, but they couldn't, and he was drowned. They never found his body for 30 days and then it was sent home and he was buried in Jonesport.

"My father had the schooner built in Millbridge in 1907 on shares. It coast $27,200 to build, and the Sawyer family, who had taken a liking to my father, were the main shareholders; she was named the *Frances V. Sawyer* and my youngest sister was named for her. After Belle was born I was four years old, and for four summers after that we went with my father. It had a nice little cabin, even a flush toilet. We'd go to Boston, New York, Philadelphia. I never went any further south than that, but in the winter he used to go down to Nassau and the Bahamas. At that time he got ice in Rockport and took it to southern waters. In the summer he carried lumber to Philadelphia and other eastern ports. Once he went up the Delaware River to Burlingham to load on tile. A tornado struck and blew things all over the place; my mother lost all the laundry she had just done, but it never damaged the vessel. On another summer evening I'll always remember we were anchored in the river and an oil barge that was



The launching of the Frances Sawyer: 1

tied up at the dock exploded and caught on fire. It was ablaze and so was the oil on the water, and it started drifting downriver towards us. We dressed and packed our trunks and papa tried to get a tugboat to tow us away but they wanted a lot of money. Finally the captains of other vessels that were anchored near us took their launches and towed us off just in time. Shortly after that the blazing barge fetched up right where we had been! Now that was exciting! I also remember sailing down the St. Lawrence and tying up next to many other schooners. One captain gave me a bunch of big Canadian coins and another gave me a bundle of funny papers. Those summers were wonderful!

"After my father died, my mother was left with five small girls to bring up. We owned a house in West Jonesport at that time. It was a nice house with four rooms down and two up. We burnt wood and coal and we had kerosene lamps. We had a well and we had to draw water out of it because we didn't have a pump. My mother did dressmaking and went out and cleaned houses for people by the day and took care of us girls. Myrtle died the next year after my father was drowned. She was three and she had pneumonia and whooping cough. We lived simply; we were poor, but I never was hungry or cold. In those days there was no electricity or indoor plumbing. Every morning we filled the kerosene lamps and cleaned their chimneys. The outhouse was a little building behind the barn. We bathed in basins and sometimes a galvanized washtub by the kitchen stove. We've only had electricity in this house in Union for 40 years, and we've had indoor plumbing less than that. For entertainment we went on family picnics. Grandmother and all her children went, aunts and uncles, cousins. Sometimes we'd go to the islands and have a picnic. Sometimes on the shore. The boys would dig clams and we'd take a lot of good food with us. We'd play on the shore in the summer and skated and sledded in the winter. Sometimes we'd have parties in Grandma Dobbin's house. She had a large house and we'd play post office. Sometimes we'd have taffy pulls there. Taffy was made out of boiled molasses and soda. You'd boil it and then pull it and pull it until it got all white. Then you'd flatten it and cut it up into little slices. Grandma Dobbin at that time had five boys at home. She was a widow. She worked in the sardine factory and took care of the children. She worked at Underwoods in Jonesport. This was around 1912-1915. What she did was pack the cans in boxes; pasteboard boxes were used in those days. She worked there for years, until she was real old, until she was almost blind. She took care of her family; they always had enough to eat. We had aunts and uncles living around there on farms and they kept us supplied with butter, milk and vegetables. Milk was around 10 cents a quart then. We never had a garden ourselves. We never had any animals, no pets or anything. We went without question to Sunday school and church every Sunday. Religion has always been important in my life.

"After several years at Crabtree Ledge Light, Grandpa Chester was transferred to Owls Head Lighthouse. This was built during the early years of the 19th century, during the presidency of John Quincy Adams. When I was 13 years old I came to live with my grandparents and I spent three very interesting years with them. It was during World War I. There was a long covered walk that led from the house to the light tower. I remember the echoing footsteps as we plodded up the long stairway, and when we reached the tower there was a spiral staircase. There was a red brick house where the oil was kept in drums, and a tall pyramid-shaped bell tower, with a bell fastened to a framework outside. The bell was operated by a weight which had to be wound up by hand. During a fog the weight was released by a lever, and as it slowly lowered, the bell would ring every few minutes. Grandpa had rigged up a wire from the bell tower to the porch, and a pull on the wire would release the lever or shut it off, saving a trip to the bell tower.

"At that time they burned coal in the lighthouse and sometimes they had smokeouts. Grandpa would have to get up in the middle of the night and go up in the light and clean the lenses and the windows so the light could shine out through again. They never had electricity while he was there. I was married in 1920 and I think it was after that they got electricity there. I was there at the light during World War I. It was exciting hearing them talking about different things but the war didn't affect me much. It was worse for the older folks because of the rationing; so much sugar, so much flour. We looked out the window to see a submarine but I never saw

any. Grandpa had to keep watch for German U-boats. There were never any wrecks while I was there but there was one off Moosabec Light while Grandfather Dobbin was there. It never did sink and they went out and got dishes and stuff off it; I have one over there. I think all the men on it were saved.

"My mother married again after awhile and we went to live on a farm in Union. We had a cow, horse, pigs and a fairly large orchard. We cut our wood for the winter. We had a really big garden and canned vegetables, fruits and berries. We tapped maple trees in the spring and made maple syrup. We carried our water uphill from the spring, even for laundry. But it was a very healthy way of living.

"I was 17 when I got married. The happiest times were when my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren were little. I enjoyed them so much. If I had to do it all over again I wouldn't get married so young and I would have more education, finish high school. I went up to the ninth grade in a one-room school in Owls Head. It was in the village, about a mile from the light, and I walked every day. I went through the ninth grade twice because I couldn't go to high school. When we moved to Union I could have gone to a place and boarded and gone to high school, but I was timid and didn't dare to. I don't think that my children had any better life than I did because I was always satisfied with my childhood. My children always had a father when they were growing up, and that makes a difference, although I was so young when my father died. My best advice to young people today is to develop a strong Christian faith."

Aunt Dot has written many poems and here are two favorites.

The Deserted Farmhouse

There's an old deserted farmhouse at the end of a country lane
blending in with the landscape, going back to nature again.
Lilacs try to conceal it, roses climb all over the sill,
one corner sags a little to follow the line of the hill.
Wood vine hides the woodshed, hollyhocks reach the eaves,
the only sound is the murmur of twirling poplar leaves.
Once it knew happy laughter and the sound of children at play.
Now it knows only memories at the end of a summer day.

Christmas At Grandma's

We are going to Christmas at Grandma's, there'll be turkey, pies and a tree.
There'll be chestnuts to roast by the fire, and candy for Elly & me.
The big tree will be in the parlor, all covered with tinsel and toys,
With presents galore for the grownups and good things for we girls and boys.
At evening we'll sit by the fireplace and tell Christmas tales and pop corn,
And Grandma will sing at the organ of the night the Christ child was born.
There'll be peace, good will and contentment, the house will glow with good cheer.
And when we go home we'll be planning on Christmas at Grandma's next year.