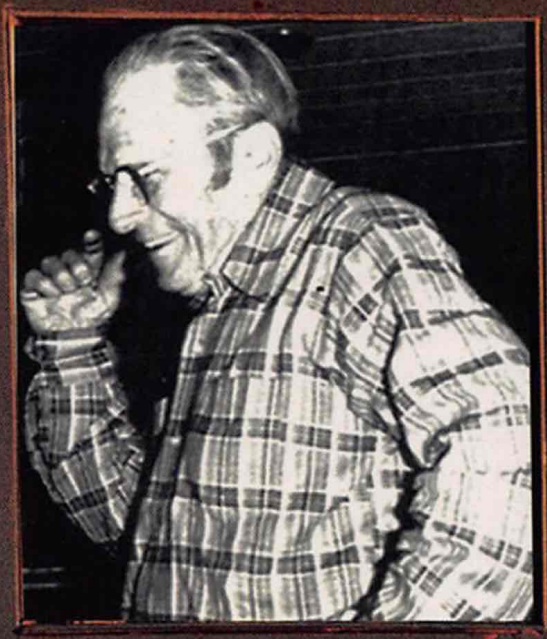
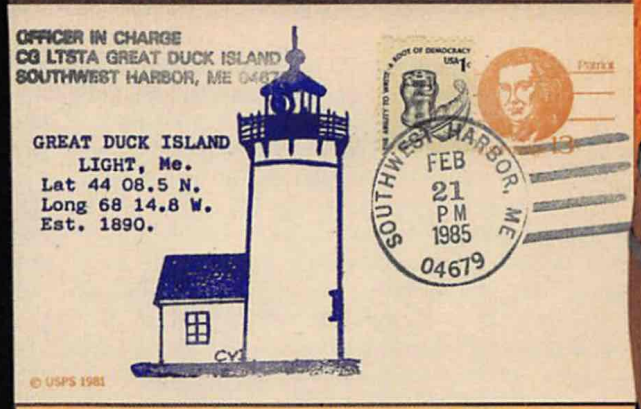
Lighthouse Keeping on Duck Island

An Interview with Dalton Reed by Robyn Haas



Dalton Reed as he appeared in the 1978 interview with Robyn Haas for Homegrown Magazine.



This interesting collectible is from the archives of the American Lighthouse Foundation from that last keeper at Great Duck Island Lighthouse.

This interview was published in 1978 in Homegrown Magazine, a student publication of Ellsworth High School. It has been over 25 years since this story was seen in print. And since it is such a valuable part of lighthouse history that must be told and preserved for the future, we are privileged to share this with our readers, for the first time.

"I don't think it would hurt anyone to live on an island. Out on an island you get away from the hustle and bustle. You are not trying to keep up with the rest of the world, which is going too fast. Out on an island all you breathe is good salt air.

Dalton Reed, one of sixteen children, moved out to Duck Island when he was a young boy and lived there for ten years of his life.

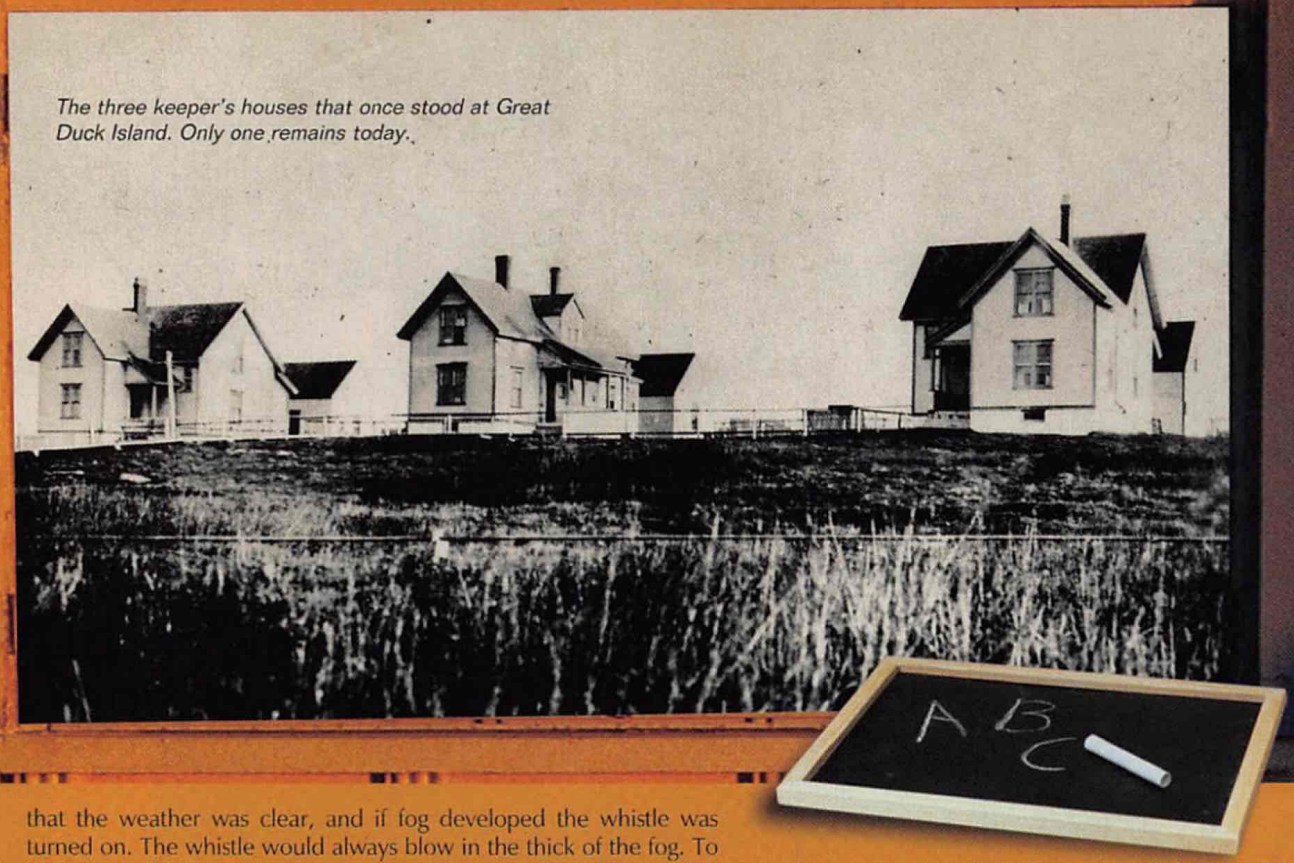


His father, a sea captain, gave up traveling to be closer to his family. When Dalton was seven, his father accepted a job as one of three lighthouse keepers on Big Duck Island.

Big Duck Island was divided into two sections. There was a government side and a private side.

The Reed family lived in one of three houses located on the government side. Dalton's father shared responsibilities for lighthouse keeping with two other men - William Stanley and Joe Gray.

Lighthouse keeping was and still is an important job. "One man had to be on watch at all times. Watch meant making sure that the light was on,



The three keeper's houses that once stood at Great Duck Island. Only one remains today.

that the weather was clear, and if fog developed the whistle was turned on. The whistle would always blow in the thick of the fog. To blow the whistle, steam pressure would have to build up and in between a bell would be rung.

Dalton told us "the government would send inspectors once or twice a year to check the lighthouse. "You could always tell when they were around because their boat was a steamer. The inspectors were usually retired navy commanders. They would wear white gloves. They would wipe their hands on the white walls to see if there was any dirt. Everything in the whistle house had to be polished for inspection because it was all brass. "They would also come in and check out our house to see if it was neat and clean. I saw them do that myself. They checked our house because it was government property. My mother taught all the girls to be good cleaners."

As a boy living on Duck Island, Dalton found plenty to do. One of his favorite pastimes was catching fish. "Down by the whistle station when the tide was low, there was a gully full of flounder. I would go down there with a spear that I made myself, put it right into the kelp and spear me a great big flounder. Let me tell you something, the meat was real good. "If we wanted other types of fresh fish, we would go out in a small peapod about twelve feet long and get our own fish. We would catch cod, haddock and Pollack. We used to dry the fish. We would salt them down over night. They would go well with potatoes. "I used to like dried fish when it became cheesy; that is, after the maggots and worms had been at it. We would put pepper on the maggots to kill them."

In the winter months, Dalton went to school. "There wasn't a school on Duck Island until my family came there. Since we had so many scholars in my family, my father insisted that there be a school built. He had a hard time getting it but we got it."

"If he hadn't gotten the school then all of us children would have had to go to the mainland for school. His family wouldn't be with him. He had to contact Augusta and go through quite a few channels to get one. Our schoolhouse was a large storage shed. A nice building. They took part of it and made it large enough for a schoolhouse. It had one of the old fashion wood stoves like they used to have a long time ago. We also had desks, chairs, and blackboards. All total, we had eighteen children attending school. There were two children on the north end of the island and the second keeper had two children, besides our family.

"The teachers boarded with us at the lighthouse for two terms. My sister, who was a Castine school graduate, was one of my teachers. Her name was Renay. Two other teachers who taught out to Duck Island were Maude Morse and Violet Gott.

"I didn't mind a bit that the teachers boarded with us. Sometimes we would play checkers in the evening. I love to play checkers.

"We had jobs or chores to do at the school. My brother and I were the janitors; we kept the place clean. I also used to get up in the morning and start the fire. Then, the whole Reed family would move in."

There were two summers when Dalton didn't live on Duck Island. The first summer he left the island, he worked on Eban Clark's farm in Bass Harbor, Maine. Here he hayed, took care of the horses, milked the cows, cut the wood, and did other odd chores required on a farm. He made ten dollars a month.

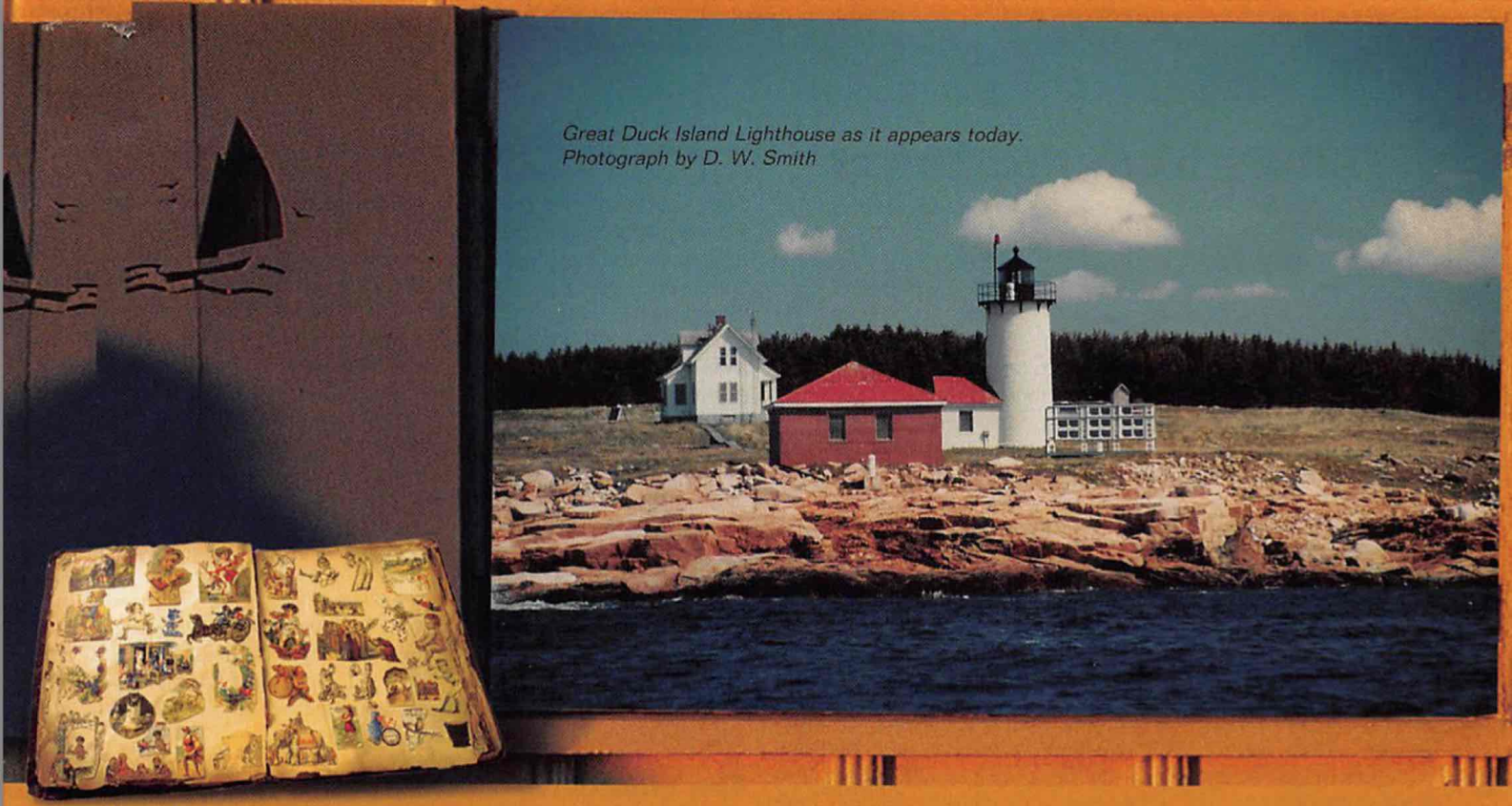
The second summer he worked on a towboat. His job was to fire the engine. He lived on the boat, which ran from Sandy Point to Bangor and also from Bath, Maine to Augusta, Maine. He made thirty-five dollars a month.

"Our family was a close family. We had to do things together. My father played the organ and my sisters used to sing. We used to sing in the evening then we would play checkers, dominos, and different games. We didn't have television. We had an old phonograph with a large, loud speaker that you would wind up and play round records on.

"One time long in the winter, my brother and I were playing in the kitchen. We had the lights out and were playing hide and seek. Then, we heard a funny noise. Well, it sounded like something rubbing together. We went and looked out the window and saw these white forms on the government property near a wooden fence.

"I tell you, we struck to the other room quick. We told our father that something white was coming through the gate and it was making an awful noise. Of course, he got up and went out there. About the time he got to the door, these ghosts rapped at the door. It was two fishermen. They had come out from Manset, Maine. Their boat had broken down between Duck Island and Mt. Desert Rock. They had rowed in from there. Of course, the spray was flying and so was the vapor. They were nothing but a solid bed of ice.

"They wanted to know if they could come in. We took them in



Great Duck Island Lighthouse as it appears today.
Photograph by D. W. Smith

and got their clothes off them. The noise we had heard was them walking with frozen oil skins. I think they stayed two days. When the vapor cleared up, someone came out from Manset looking for them.

"At one other time, a ship crashed on Little Duck Island and broke up. My father got a little piece of what was left of the wheel. He carved a pair of little wooden spyglasses. I still have them around here somewhere.

"I was told the story that before we moved there, a ship came ashore on Big Duck Island on the east side. Two bodies were found and were buried in the winter in the swamp, which isn't quite in the center of the island. At times when the surf comes in there, it will split the island in two. You see, it turns into marshland. These men were buried there. In the spring their bones came up and they didn't have any identifications of who they were."

Christmas was a special time for the Reed family on the island. "We had a nice Christmas tree. These were the days when people used to make their own decorations. We would string popcorn and put it on the tree. For gifts we would get candy, apples and a few presents; not the same things that kids expect today. We would get one or two gifts and be satisfied. We got useful things, mainly clothes.

"The first Christmas we were on the island, my brother and I got jack knives and the second keeper gave us small play boats. These were our choice gifts. We didn't get gifts from each other. We had no way to make money or get ashore."

After discussing family life, Dalton talked about how with a large family it required special planning to live on the island.

"My father used to buy flour in the fall. Twelve to fourteen barrels of flour would last us the winter. They were all brought out at one time by boat and the government would furnish so much. We also brought crackers and different types of cereals. We used a lot of molasses. We didn't eat much meat but we did have plenty of nice fresh fish and lobster.

"Everything came in barrels. We would keep most of this food in the basement. Food was very cheap then.

"My mother was the doctor, seamstress, cook and cleaner. We had an old washtub and she used a washboard. If one of us was sick, she would use her old fashioned remedies.

"My older brother had Scarlet Fever and my mother brought him out of it. I don't ever remember seeing a doctor at our house."

"My father would lobster, fish and repair all the shoes for the family."

During the summer months, the Reed family sometimes had company. "People would come out a lot. They would go for a sail, visit the lighthouse, and see the gulls. There are thousands of gulls on the island along with many other birds.

"Many of the tourists would pick up the tiny gulls. The ladies would have nice summer dresses on and they would play with the birds. Then something would happen!"

"You know, it was a funny thing about those gulls. They would never come in past the white fence that marked off government property. Once in a while they would land on the well house. They only bothered the tourists when the tourists bothered them.

"There were sheep on the island too. They put them on the island to graze and feed. In spring, they would come out to shear them.

"During the winter months, many of the sheep would die. They would cast or get down on their knees and not be able to get back up again. Then, the eagles would destroy them. I remember helping to pull up a good many."

After living on Duck Island for ten years, Dalton's father decided to accept a smaller light. However, he became sick and the family moved back to West Tremont, Maine.

When asked if he had been back to Duck Island Dalton said, "No, I haven't been out there. I have heard they have changed it all around. They have got the Coast Guard out there now but I think they are going to do away with them. They are going to computerize the lighthouse so they won't need people.

"The lighthouse was a real nice place to live."

QUICK FACTS:

Although the story refers to the island as Duck Island its real name is Great Duck Island Lighthouse.
Established: 1890
Present tower is the original structure.
Automated: 1986
Now owned by the College of the Atlantic
Light: flashing red signal every five seconds
Foghorn: One blast every 15 seconds
Nearest town: Frenchboro, Maine