Life at the Light Station

Being A Collection of News Items Written by Lighthouse Keepers

Dobbins Gets Award

By Eleanor Newman

Captain Harry B. Dobbins, one of the last of the civilian lighthouse keepers, received the coveted Albert Gallatin Award recently in ceremonies at the Southwest Harbor Coast Guard Depot. Chief Boatswain Earl B. Drinkwater, commanding officer of the base, made the presentation, even though Capt. Dobbins had never been inducted into the Coast Guard service. The award was presented in recognition of almost thirty years of outstanding achievement in the lighthouse service. Capt. Dobbins retired the end of April, leaving his post as keeper of the Bear Island light station. He is now living in his boyhood home in Jonesport.

Capt. Dobbins has nothing against the Coast Guard. In fact, he's highly in favor of it. But he was too old to be inducted into military service when the lighthouse service, formerly under the Department of the Treasury, was taken over by the Coast Guard in 1939. He stayed on at his position, along with 293 other civilian keepers. Of this number, only about twenty remain at their posts today.



Captain Harry Dobbins receives the Albert Gallatin award from Chief Boatswain Earl Drinkwater, Captain of the Southwest Harbor Coast Guard Base. R. G. Whittemore of Boston, Chief of Civilian Personnel, First Coast Guard District, came up for the ceremony. —Staff Photo

Captain at Twenty

Capt. Dobbins has served at Great Point lighthouse on Nantucket, at Cutty Hunk, at Newburyport light station on Plum Island, all these off the Massachusetts shore; at Nash Island off Jonesport and finally at Bear Island outside Northeast Harbor, Maine. He first went to sea as a lad of fourteen. In the years that followed he advanced to the position of mate on five- and six-masted schooners, and at the age of twenty became captain of a four-masted schooner, one of the youngest captains of his day. He earned an unlimited master's license in both sail and steam prior to his entrance into the lighthouse service.

Rescues at Cutty Hunk

One stormy day a vessel in which three men were fishing about fifty yards off shore overturned. One man managed to get ashore near the lighthouse, clinging to a life belt, to call for help. Capt. Dobbins could see the others clinging to the bow of the boat. Not a particularly good swimmer, he tied a line around his waist, giving the other end of the line to his 11-year-old son, James, before attempting to swim out on his rescue mission. Because of heavy surf, it took him a good half hour to reach the men. One was only partly conscious when he arrived. Capt Dobbins grasped him firmly, holding the man's head above water as the boy on shore began pulling in the line to bring them ashore. When the waves carried them up on the rocks, Dobbins was pinned under the heavy body of the unconscious man he had rescued. With considerable difficulty he got free and pulled the man further up on the shore to begin artificial respiration. The other man who was clinging to the overturned boat was rescued by a swordfisherman's boat which managed to anchor near enough so they could throw him a line and haul him aboard.

At the same station Capt. Dobbins and his older son, Frank, went to the aid of the three-masted schooner Waltham, that had run aground on Point Rip in a severe storm. Nearby, Coast Guardsmen tried unsuccessfully three times to launch their skiff in the heavy seas. Somehow the captain and his son managed to launch their dory and get aboard the foundering schooner. The Waltham was short-handed, but with the aid of the two, they managed to anchor her temporarily to keep her from breaking up and to float her off as the tide flooded.

Wife Keeper Too

Capt. Dobbins speaks very highly of the way his wife, like so many other lighthouse wives, has worked right along with him. She has been at many times more of a keeper than he, he says, as she almost never left the station, while he had to go ashore frequently for supplies. In their days at Nantucket, the loneliest station they tended, she actually didn't leave the station for two years and ten months, never visiting Nantucket itself until after their duty was over. Congress recognized the share wives play in the lighthouse service two years ago when they granted pensions to widows of lighthouse keepers. Capt. and Mrs. Dobbins' two sons have followed the family tradition in going to sea. Frank served in the Coast Guard, becoming boatswain's mate first class. James was quartermaster of buoy tenders in the lighthouse service. Both men are now in the lobster business in Jonesport.

Still Likes Islands

Now that he is retired, Capt. Dobbins still wants to spend some more time on an island. He is planning to build himself a camp on Head Harbor Island off Jonesport and do a little lobstering.

town, and she was telling me that she and her husband were stationed here 12 years ago. They were the last civilian keepers at the station before the war. She says she really misses the place. We've been out here since Jan. 22, and already we know half of the people from town. They seem to be so friendly and really make you feel welcome. We like the place very much and hope to stay on for awhile. At least until the baby is old enough for school. By the way he just had his first birthday. So I guess we'll be here for quite a while yet.

"Well, I guess this is all for now