A fleeting taste of the lighthouse life

By Jeremiah Murphy
Globe Staff

VINALHAVEN, Maine – Coast Guard Chief Charles Lawson, his wife and two young sons are spending their first and last Christmas in the Brown's Head Lighthouse on this island 13 miles off Rockland.

After the first snow fall about 10 days ago, Lawson and his sons, Stephen, 11, and John, 9, got into a tractor and drove into the deep pine woods that surround the lighthouse on three sides. They found a six-foot pine tree, cut it down and carried it back home where it was decorated in the holiday tradition. Two pine trees growing on the lighthouse grounds then were strung with Christmas lights.

Charles and Valerie Lawson and their sons live in the 151-year-old lighthouse that stands 30 feet above the Fox Island channel in a sparsely populated section of Vinalhaven. One can look across the mile-wide channel to North Haven Island. When the darkness closes in, the lighthouse beacon can be seen from miles away in Penobscot Bay.

There are 99 lighthouses along the New England coast from Eastport, Maine, to Block Island, R.I. Brown's Head is one of about 20 that remain so-called family lights. The others have been automated as a cost-cutting measure.

The Lawsons live 10 miles from Vinalhaven village, the center of the island's 1300 year-round population, composed mostly of lobstermen and their families and retired folk. The summer population triples at least.

Charles Lawson, 29, and Valerie Lawson, 28, will leave the island in February after spending 10 months here, because he has been promoted to chief petty officer, and the lighthouse post calls for a first class petty officer. They will leave with mixed feelings.

"When we first came here, I thought I would hate the loneliness and the confinement," Valerie Lawson said. "But I grew to love the lighthouse, partially because Chuck was home all the time after all those years when he was away so much. It was the first time we have had to raise the children together. We actually argue less while being together all the time here than we did when he was away part of the time. We are going to miss all that."

They both agree they will miss the quietness and the somehow reassuring sound of the fog horn and the beautiful scenery of the rock-studded Maine coast.

But there is another side of their island experience. Lawson said he and his wife "never had much luck making friends here. There is a feeling on the island among some – not all – of the people that you have to live here for three or four generations."

Sons harassed by children

He said their sons have run into harassment from island children and have been beaten up on occasion. He said now the boys "don't want to go to school. We won't miss that."

Charles, Valerie, Stephen and John Lawson savor their one Christmas season at Brown's Head Lighthouse, Vinalhaven, Maine.

Charles Lawson grew up in Beaufort, S.C., moved to Cape May, N.J., and was graduated from high school there. It was there that he met and married Valerie Eliott. He joined the Coast Guard right out of high school and served in Coast Guard ship and shore stations for almost 11 years until he got the call last January from Coast Guard headquarters in Washington asking him if he wanted to take over a lighthouse in Maine.

His first question, he said, was, "Where is Vinalhaven?" They live in a two-story, white frame house connected with the lighthouse. The house itself is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, a protection that prevented the Coast Guard from installing picture windows in the living room. The interior and exterior of the house gleam with cleanliness.

Lawson has taught his sons how to turn on the generator and the light and foghorn in case he were to become ill. Both boys have daily chores to do, including taking down the American flag each day at dusk and helping to keep the grounds trim and clean. They spent summer days and after school hours climbing around the rocks beneath the lighthouse and watching the scores of lobster boats that pass through the channel. Lawson and his wife use a bosun's shrill whistle to call their sons home from play.

Up at 6 to douse the light

A typical day at the lighthouse starts at 6 a.m. Lawson shuts off the light and gets to work on the painting and maintenence that goes on year-round. Valerie Lawson often drives the 10 miles into town to Bobby Candage's store on High street or Carver's grocery store on Main street. She said she was surprised by the relatively reasonable prices; she had anticipated high prices because all the food must be brought to the island by boat.

She has found that most of the islanders, the Ames, Dwyers, Carvers, Calderwoods and Caldwells and all the rest, to be pleasant and friendly. She said the school situation has been the biggest problem.

There are a dozen shops on Main street and one motel and one branch bank. The ferry runs back and forth to Rockland twice a day if the weather permits.

The family's next stop will be Milford Haven, Va., where Charles Lawson will lead a navigation-aids team beginning Feb. 1.

Lawson said his sons have been almost indifferent to living at an island lighthouse. But, he said, "Someday they will look back on the experience, and they will end up telling their own grandchildren all about those days."

Coast Guard Chief Charles Lawson says he'll miss the quiet, the sound of the fog horn, the scenery. PHOTOS BY MERRY FARNUM

BLOCKBUSTER
CLEARANCE
SAVE 25-50%!
COLOR TILE
HOME IMPROVEMENT SUPERMART
TILE
PAINT AND WALLPAPER

SAVE 25-50%!
Quarry Tile
• Decorator patterns!
• Imported ceramic floor tile
• Gigantic selection!
• Free instruction brochure to help you install easily!
Look for sale tags!
7 7/8" x 7 7/8"
8 1/4" x 8 1/4", 6" x 6"
REG. 79¢-1.59
SALE 39¢-1.19 EA.

SAVE 50%!
Ceramic Tile
• Italian fashion wall tile
• Your choice of white, almond or brown solid colors
• Matching decorator tile available
Terrace Floral
6" x 6"
REG. 60¢
SALE 30¢ EA.
Free use of our ceramic cutting tools!

CUT 50%!
Mosaic Tile
• Use on floors, walls and countertops
• Mounted on sheets
Look for sale tags!
Approx. sq. ft. sheets
REG. 2.39-4.19
Decorator Pieces
REG. 40¢-1.00
SALE 20¢-50¢ EA.
SALE 1.19-2.09 SH.

NOW SAVE 33%!
Economy Tile
• Glazed ceramic patterns
Pepper, Princeton
4 1/4" x 4 1/4"
REG. 18¢ & 25¢
SALE 12¢ & 17¢ EA.

CUT 33%!
Decorator Mosaic
• Mounted on easy-to-install sheets
MS-Series
46 sq. ft. sheets
REG. 1.59
SALE 1.05 SH.