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Island Lighthouse Problem

'Copter for Santa?

WOOD ISLAND LIGHT, Me. (AP)—Santa Claus may have to switch to a lifeboat tonight to visit the home of Rickie Winchester, 4, and his sister Robyn, 9 months.

Their world is a tiny island a mile off the rocky coast.

Their daddy is keeper of a 600,000 candlepower beacon that could guide Santa Claus tonight. However, it usually guides mariners heading either "Down East" or "up" to Boston.

David Winchester, 27, starter duty as keeper of the tall lighthouse last October.

His wife Pat, 23, a striking blonde, met her young Coast Guardsman when she was singing in U.S.O. shows.

Pat was surprised to see tears in the eyes of the previous keeper's wife who vacated the house last October.

Now she knows she will probably be in tears too, when her husband's tour of duty ends next September.

"We love this island, every day is different, we live in a world of our own," says Pat.

Dave grins. "This is the best job I ever had in seven years in the Coast Guard. You wake up in the morning and you are already at work. No commuting. No traffic.

Wood Island is a half-mile long but only a few hundred yards wide. At this season of the year only a few lobster boats from Biddeford Pool pass nearby. In the Summer the sails of yachts dot the horizon coasting downwind toward Cape Elizabeth and Portland.

The family has "shore leave" two days every month. A man comes out from the Fletcher's Neck Coast Guard Station to watch the light in their absence.

"We look forward to going ashore but after two days we are all anxious to get back to our island" says Dave. "Last time it was stormy and we had to spend a third day ashore. That was almost too much."



"THIS BEATS COMMUTING. When you wake up in the morning you're already at work," says David Winchester, 27, who is spending first Christmas as keeper of lighthouse at Wood Island, Me. His wife Pat and children, Robyn, 9 months, and Richard, 4, watch as he unloads Christmas tree. (AP)

"We live it up every Wednesday, that's the day the lifeboat brings the mail" says Pat.

"The children get restless ashore. I visit my folks in Portland. The children always seem to be bothered by the noise of automobiles. Everybody sleps better out here where you can hear the surf."

Pat has to buy food for a month every time she goes ashore. "Sometimes I forgot something and have to 'make do' for weeks," she says.

Dave takes pride in polishing the lens and reflector high in the old stone lighthouse and in keeping the station in spic and span order. He comes from Jonesport, a Down East village where nearly every able bodied man is a lobster fisherman. Dave's father James, a veteran of 28 years in the Coast Guard, is a chief at the training station in New London, Ct.

"Friends ask me if I'm bored out here," says Pat. "Why I'm not in the least. We have a busy life, even a busy social life. Sometimes we dance if there is good music on TV. I even put a dress on every Sunday. It's slacks the rest of the week, though."

Rickie follows his father's footsteps, up the winding stone steps of the tower or down the boardwalk to their "Peapod," a boat used to leave the island.

Blue-eyed Robyn is on the verge of walking, without even bothering to crowl. She has her own orange life jacket with her name on it for trips ashore.

Rickie doesn't put much stock in Donder and Blitzen and the rest of the reindeer. He has watched his dad paint the flat stones that form an arrow on the helicopter pad near their house.

Daddy has told him that someday a big Coast Guard helicopter might land there during a rescue operation.

Rickie thinks Santa Claus may use a helicopter.

"My mommie told me so," he says.

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