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"Bear: The Black Dog at the Boston Lighthouse"

by

David Vitale, Assistant Keeper, 1968

I have many stories about my time on the Boston light but unfortunately most are not totally appropriate or very interesting to most readers. As you know, many characters found their way to the light, usually after the sunset. Edward Rowe Snow came out a few times with a boatload of people on a lobster boat cruise. At Christmas, we received gifts from the Flying Santa, Mr. Snow; I wished I'd save the books, comic books, and the 20 year-old Pall Mall he gave us.

Although I have not read very much about the light, I did notice a story online about a dog after my time out there. When I arrived on the island, there was a dog there named "Bear," a black Newfoundlander; it was rumored she was given to the Light by Mr. Snow and was sixteen years-old in 1968.

Bear managed to find something to eat every day out of the bay water. Her fur was constantly stuck together with salt, had a very sea-like odor, and seldom was allowed in the main house. She never let anyone on or off the island without considerable commotion, and was the first on any boat leaving. At sixteen, she would perch on the bow of a boat, leaning over the bow almost touching each roll and wave of water – a delicate dance that was extraordinary. She would not move from that spot on the bow until we arrived at our destination. She always bounded off the bow onto the landing area – whether a dock, a group of rocks, or a beach; and stood there until the boat was secured. I thought it was the end of her the first time she jumped off at Graves light with me; landing on Graves, especially when it was blowing and waves were rolling over the island, was serious seamanship. Her response didn't vary; she always landed first, and was very excited to greet us as if she had been there long before our arrival.

Bear would venture off the island at low tide; she would go across the spit between our island and Great Brewster. She always beat the incoming tide back across the spit. At that time, Boston used to burn trash on a barge on the west side of Great Brewster. There was always plenty of junk floating around on the tides. I would often find her next to the boathouse chewing at something after her adventures, but was never too sure exactly what it was.

I did see her have tasty snacks of fish or crab on a daily basis. Each of the light staff contributed to feeding Bear, and there was always store-bought food to eat; she ate very well. I would estimate she weighed in at around 100 pounds.

Bear was very independent and appeared to have a routine where she did her thing without any encouragement from anyone. She went for a daily swim during the time I was there. She would swim on the northeast side of the island on the rocky beach area in front of the water cistern building. When Bear was dry, she was not real attractive; matted salty coat, bloodshot eyes, and sort of a drooling mouth. But when she was in the water, she was glorious; her coat flared alongside her as she powered her away around in the water. She had a very similar water appearance as a black and grey harbor seal. On occasion, there were seals that sunned themselves on a small outcropping next to Shag Rocks. I thought at times Bear was cross between dog and seal.

Bear's life became complete when a new dog was introduced to the island. The new dog was a mixed Doberman, and was only on the island for short time. Bear got along great with the visiting dog, much too well. As I remember now, it may have been the first warm night of the spring – the northeast winds were coming around and beginning to prevail from the southwest. The night became alive when Bear began to howl and bark like something was very wrong. We found Bear next to the boathouse moving and twisting like she was try to get something off her backside. What we found was Bear giving birth. She was taken down in the cellar of the main house and she finished delivering six multi-colored puppies of various size and coats. The seventh and last puppy did not survive birth.

On the next day, Bear was very ill. I called Point Allenton and they sent out the 44-footer; it was too rough to use our Whaler. Once at the Point Allenton Station, we put her in the Power Wagon and drove to Hingham to a veterinarian's office. He recommended that she be put down due to her age and physical condition after the birth of the litter.

Bear was taken back to the island; the crew of the 44-footer and staff on duty at the Point were aware of the great loss for us on the island, as well as showing her the recognition and respect she had earned over the years on the Light.

I tried to bury her by using an old wood fish box that floated ashore that day; it was very well built and the right size for her. Unfortunately, it was too large to get it into the very rocky and boulder-filled soil next to the light house tower on the rise looking toward Bug Light on Great Brewster spit and Hull gut. After hours of digging, I began to worry that it couldn't be done alone, at least in that location. I decided to call Base Boston and ask for some help. Within a few hours, a small buoy tender with a crew (including a carpenter) arrived and made the box coffin, dug the hole, and with respectful formality, we were able to put Bear to rest in the only place she had lived.

The legacy of Bear lived on immediately in the cellar of the main house with 6 yelping puppies wanting to eat and be cuddled. Thank God for my future wife Kathy who advised us on what to do about feeding the puppies. She bought small doll-like baby bottles in Boston, and sent them to us along with different color ribbons to identify each puppy. It's difficult now to remember the details of the feeding and care of the puppies – but each puppy lived. Once word got out that there were island puppies from Bear up for adoption, we received numerous calls from around the South Shore and Hull, volunteering to take and raise Bear's puppies.

Five puppies were adopted and I kept the last female who looked somewhat like Bear. We named her Edwina, in honor of Edward Rowe Snow. She lived with my mother for over 10 years and had a litter of puppies on the North Shore.

The history and legacy lives on for Bear, Boston Light Black dog, and all other dogs that inhabited along with the keepers these magnificent coastal light houses.