Rose Island Boyhood Recalled in New Booklet
By Jeremy D'Entremont

Charlotte Johnson of the Rose Island Lighthouse Foundation in Newport, Rhode Island says that people have often asked her when she planned to write the book on Rose Island. "THE book?" she'd respond, adding, "No one could possibly write a comprehensive book on Rose Island because there is SO much to tell." But rather than surrender in the face of such a daunting task, Johnson and the Foundation have taken a different approach. They have decided to tell the story of Rose Island "subject-by-subject, story-by-story and chapter-by chapter."

Thus was born the first edition of the *Rose Island Beacon,* released in December 2001. The title of the premiere issue is "Boyhood Life at Rose Island," by Wanton Chase. Chase is the 92-year-old grandson of Charles S. Curtis, who was keeper from 1887 to 1918. Wanton Chase is the oldest person with first-hand experience of early 20th century life at Rose Island. With the help of his friend Natalie Nicholson, he has written down the stories he's been telling Rose Island Lighthouse Foundation members for years. "To me it was just living," says Chase matter-of-factly, adding, "I think the lighthouse is beautiful. There's no question about it."

Rose Island Lighthouse is one of New England's happiest restoration stories. The lighthouse was established in 1870, but lost its importance as a navigational aid with the construction of the Newport Bridge in 1969. In 1985 the Rose Island Lighthouse Foundation took over the lighthouse property. Since then they have lovingly restored the building inside and out. The lighthouse has been restored to the 1912-1915 period, with a coal stove in the kitchen and a player piano in the living room. In 1992 the lighthouse was opened to the public, and it's since been relighted as an aid to navigation. You can also stay overnight for a taste of Lighthouse Service life.

Among those who advised in the restoration process was Wanton Chase. In the *Rose Island Beacon,* Chase says he was "a very sickly baby" and was sent to live with his grandparents on Rose Island. His parents thought the sea air would help his breathing difficulties. As it turns out, Chase had been born with only one lung, a fact he didn't

learn until a couple of years ago when he had to have x-rays during a bout with pneumonia.

Some of the details of Rose Island life recalled by Chase in the booklet concern his grandmother's cooking prowess. He remembers that his favorite pudding was made from white seaweed. "It was sort of round and about the size of a softball," he remembers. Chase was always on the lookout for the right kind of seaweed during his beachcombing expeditions. He even includes a recipe for "Sea Moss Pudding" in the booklet.

Keeper Curtis' many duties on Rose Island are described. "My grandfather was fastidious in everything. He whitewashed everything that didn't move," Chase remembers. Besides his lighthouse work, the keeper was busy all day with his chickens and a large garden.

For the most part, Chase's island boyhood is recalled with great fondness: "… I can remember with great pleasure that I used to get up in the morning, eat breakfast and, usually barefoot and in cut-off pants, would head for the shore to see what had floated in… I used to find lots of clothing and my grandmother would wash anything that fit me." There were dangers, though. It wasn't easy to get to a doctor, for one thing. "I will never forget running and falling on a rock that had barnacles on it," he says. "My bare chest became a bloody mess from landing on the barnacles."

Chase says his greatest pleasure was rowing out from the island in a skiff, something that was against the rules. "My grandfather frowned on that," he says. "I usually went out when he was taking his nap or not around to see me go out."

Chase lived on the island until he started school in Newport at the age of seven. "What a sad night I had before the day I left for school!" he writes. "I remember standing at the screen door facing Newport city lights and crying." When his grandmother asked what was wrong, Wanton answered, "I don't want to leave here and live in Newport!"

Happily, Chase did get to spend some summers at Rose Island after he started school. He went on to become a machinist, toolmaker and planner for the Navy's torpedo station at Newport's Goat Island and in Middletown. He lived in Newport for 66 years but now lives in a retirement

community in Middletown. The one-time "sickly baby" says, "Old age isn't for sissies. I was active all my life."

The new booklet closes with a poem by a friend of Wanton Chase, the Reverend John H. Evans, retired rector of Holy Cross Church in Middletown. The poem begins:

A little lad enjoyed an island playground,
Encircled by a busy restless sea.
Without a toy or other tots around him,
He nonetheless was happy as can be.

The Number 1, first edition issue of the Rose Island Beacon is priced at $5.00. Call the Rose Island Lighthouse office to order (401-847-4242), or pick up your copy in Newport at Armory Antiques, 365 Thames Street, or at Newport Hardware, either on Broadway or Bellevue Avenue in Newport.

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