

Historic Coastal Beacon

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By JONAS CRANE

Today the Prospect Harbor Lighthouse, like many others along Maine's coast, is a deserted spot.

But two Prospect Harbor sisters and a merchant in the town remember when the lighthouse was a place of excitement and gaiety.

The sisters, Mrs. Merton Coombs and Mrs. Jesse Noonan are the daughters of Ambrose Wasgatt, keeper of the light for 34 years. Before moving to Prospect Harbor he was stationed on Egg Rock light for 10 years. Mrs. Coombs and Mrs. Noonan were born at Prospect Harbor and along with five brothers and sisters enjoyed a happy and exciting life as "lighthouse children."

"There was never a dull moment," the sisters recall. "Every day brought a new adventure."

Some of the adventures were scary. The two women remember one that happened when they were quite small. They were walking along the shore in search of shells when a man suddenly scrambled up over a ledge at the edge of the water. He was soaking wet and his face was covered with blood and bits of seaweed.

The terrified children raced home to tell their father about the man from the sea. When he heard their story he ran to the ledge and found that the injured man was a local duck hunter whose boat had been overturned by a bore tide. The man was a good swimmer and had emerged from the water safely but his face and hands were cut badly when he climbed out on the barnacle-covered ledge.

Walked To School

The Wasgatt children attended school at Prospect Harbor and did a lot of walking before their education was completed. The school was nearly a mile and a half from the lighthouse. There were no school buses in those days and the children walked every day. If the weather was good they trudged home to lunch and back to school, making a total of from five to six miles of walking daily.

Sometimes heavy storms and high tides turned the lighthouse point into an island and getting to school became high adventure. On such occasions the "lighthouse children" were loaded into the family surrey which swayed dangerously as their sure-footed horse picked his way over the flooded road.

Croquet was a popular game in those days and guests at the lighthouse spent many pleasant hours on the course that was air-conditioned by sea breezes. Every year an open house was held. It featured a boathouse supper. Long tables were set up in the spacious building. They were loaded with food for the visitors who had come to inspect the light and spend a pleasant day chatting and relaxing on the ledges.

Wasgatt was a Civil War veteran. Every year he invited the local chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic to spend a day at the light. Mrs. Noonan and Mrs. Coombs remember these visits as the highlight of the year. The G.A.R. always brought along a band and put on an impromptu concert on the ledges in front of the lighthouse. This was followed by speeches, hymn singing, and a big lobster and clam bake.

Watched For Subs

World War I brought exciting times to all the light keepers. German U-boats were known to be lurking offshore and lighthouse men were warned to be on the lookout for them. The Coast Guard stationed a "wigwag" man at the Prospect Harbor lighthouse. Radio and radar were unknown in those days and the "wigwag" men, who had special training in communication by signal flags, were essential to the Coast Guard communications system.

One cold February evening the lighthouse family observed a boat filled with men heading in from offshore. Their first thought was that the men were from a ship that had been attacked by a submarine. But when the men arrived at the lighthouse it was learned that they made up the crew of a Canadian schooner bound for Southwest Harbor with a load of ship timber. A seam had opened and they had been forced to abandon ship and row for shore. It was bitter cold and the men were nearly frozen from their voyage in the open boat.

The first lighthouse built in Prospect Harbor was made of stone. A town merchant, Byron Moore, remembers it as a place where he attended a gay Halloween party. The highlight came when everyone went into the dining room for a wild sea duck supper. He remembers that the dining room was a large, cheerful room.

Most of the old lighthouses have been replaced by more modern warning devices, but in their time they were important safeguards of sea traffic. The men who tended them were devoted to their work.

An example of this devotion to duty is remembered by Mrs. Noonan and Mrs. Coombs.

When the fog was thick their father always walked up and down the beach ringing a hand bell to warn sailors of the dangerous ledges.