



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Lighthouse Memories

SEAMOND PONSART ROBERTS

In 1943 when Octave and Emma Cornell Ponsart moved into the Cuttyhunk lighthouse, they brought with them their three-year-old daughter Seamond. The family left the island in 1947 when the lighthouse and keeper's house were torn down and replaced with the present skeleton steel tower. Seamond's family then moved to the Vineyard where she attended the Tisbury School in Vineyard Haven. From 1977-1991 she pursued a career in the Coast Guard where she attained Yeoman class. During those years she was one of their then only seventeen court reporters. She is married to David Roberts and they have a daughter Gloria. Two summers ago Seamond revisited the island with her daughter Gloria and agreed to an oral interview at the CHS. The following excerpts are from Seamond's recollections of what was truly a remarkable and now almost forgotten way of life.

Ethel Twichell, Editor

The basics of everyday living

We had a flock of chickens and they supplied chicken meat and of course our eggs. We got fish out of the ocean and we had tons of quahogs and shellfish. Dad had a lobster car where he'd store the lobsters after Uncle Tom Cornell would toot and bring them in. We grew corn and potatoes and even some asparagus. Also green beans and tomatoes. So we had a vegetable garden and put up what we could.

In wintertime when the pond was frozen and it was too much trouble to break through, Dad would pick up the groceries up town, get 2 large boxes, and, leaving the non-perishable things like the cans and cereals with Aunt Kate Loveridge, would walk

back to the West End with the rest of the groceries on his back. I'd be walking with him and we'd walk the road so that took a while. He was very happy when it snowed, because then he could use my sled. We'd tie both boxes on the sled and make one trip.

The house, being a government building, was very spartan. Downstairs there was a large livingroom where the Coast Guard provided the bunks for the lightship guys. We had 6 or 7 bunks in there. And there was a sofa in there that had been there since who knows when because I don't think we brought it when we came over from Dumpling Rock. First of all we didn't have much



Seamond Roberts with her parents Octave and Emma Cornell Ponsart in 1946-1947. Octave Ponsart was the last keeper of the Cuttyhunk lighthouse.

after the 1938 hurricane. Next, you're not encouraged to bring a lot, because if by mistake they had transferred you a long distance, the government didn't want to pay a lot to move you. So you were told to bring the minimum. This generally consisted of your clothing, your bedding, your utensils for the kitchen, your washtub for washing clothes. So when a lighthouse keeper moved out, he always, always left all the government stuff.

We had a bookcase in the dining room so that became our little living room. And, of course, we had the kitchen and in the kitchen we had the big black cookstove that had a reservoir in the back for hot water. It was a coal stove and I always remember – it was great – how it provided tons of heat. But the thing was, you would have to clean it up really well and when the inspectors came over, the inspectors also kind of inspected what the housewives did. So everything had to be just so or else the keeper could flunk the inspections if the house wasn't just so.

World War II

We were there during the war and we had company with the army, with the radar site there. In fact, when the radar site came to the island and the bunkers and the ones on Homer's Neck, the rest of the island, the West End past the cemetery, was put off limits to the regular islanders which was awful. Of course, half of them didn't obey it. But certainly summer people did. They didn't say, "Achtung – mines," or anything like that, but the warning was quite strict. And so we had our own end of the island, not because we said "No Trespassing," but because the Army did.

Some of the lighthouses were blacked out, but we didn't black out for three good reasons. One, it wouldn't help the mariners at all; two, we were out on the end of the chain of islands and the Navy needed us more than they were afraid of the Germans and not having it. Now Gay Head was dimmed down a little bit. And three, we triangulated on Gay Head from our lighthouse to their lighthouse. You have to remember that we



The lighthouse in the 1940s. The impressive amount of laundry was all done by hand at that time.

were up high also and, yes, you could see Gay Head and the two lightships (the Vineyard and Nantucket lightships) out there. This made like a four-way point of reference. The only reason Gay Head was dimmed down was because it has a visibility of maybe 25, 30 miles and they didn't want to help the Germans that much. The lightships were lit dimly, but they were lighted – for the local mariners particularly. Sow and Pigs is such a hazard and Hens and Chickens isn't much better.

But did we have blackout curtains? Yes, we did. And Dad used to laugh. He'd say, "What's the point? The light is burning." We would get a phone call from the Coast Guard saying "We're having a blackout. Pull down the shades." We'd do it, but it really was pointless.

Lighthouse duties – the Fresnel light

Dad had to take water and alcohol and wipe the glass off every day. People would say, "Gosh, that's a lot of work, what's a little bit of dust?" Well, when you diffuse the light over the miles – I can't remember the range – maybe 5 miles or something like that – a little spot makes a big difference. The other "don't touch" was, "Don't touch the brass." That didn't have anything to do with the lighthouse except that we had to polish every square inch, every millimeter of brass all the time with Brasso. We had to polish the little oil cans and the kerosene cans and the dust pan. The brass dust pan had to be polished! And we had air vents in there which you had to have because of the kerosene lamps. They were brass and had to be polished.

Dad wore his khaki working uniforms and he wore his navy blue dress uniform a lot. A winter cap was the blue cover and the summer cap was the white cover. You know, he didn't have to wear it, but he did. Dad loved the lighthouse service and I think when he got appointed, it was probably his happiest day. As for the work of the keeper out there, being a one man station, he did it all. He whitewashed the tower, he painted the house, he painted the barn and whitewashed the little oil house we had out there.

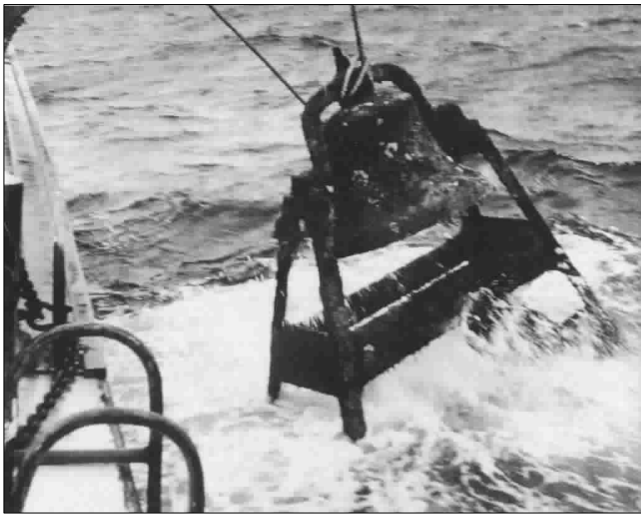
The Vineyard Lightship men

They would come ashore and they would trek up to the front of the island to catch the Coast Guard boat to go to New Bedford for – I think they had two weeks off. It was something like that because lightship duty was considered to be and actually was very hazardous duty. And monotonous duty. In a way, if you could stand it being in the Coast Guard, it was very good duty because you got all this time off. It's called compensatory leave. It was called compensatory because they had to suffer out there – the monotony and waves and wind and the peril. They had a crew of twelve aboard all the time and that included the skipper. Then they would rotate five out for two weeks. When they were storm bound, they'd get to the front of the island and if they couldn't get off, then they'd traipse back and they'd stay with us. Or after a leave they'd get ashore and the weather'd get so bad quickly, they'd stay with us. Or they'd send a new guy in from Boston and he'd wait with us to go out. Unless it was the cook. If it was the cook, he went out there I don't care if there was ice or anything, they got him out there. I think they would have rowed him out there through pure hell.

The Lightship goes down

When the lightship went down, I lost my uncles. It wasn't just that they brought me candy and cookies. In a way they were my touch with the outside world. We were all isolated from the rest of the world because of the war. [This part was added to the interview later.] When the 1944 hurricane hit with all its incredible fury, I was in the tower with Daddy doing errands for him all night as he could not leave the tower for a second as the light kept going out. And we watched for the lights of the Vineyard Lightship. I had a little stool to stand on to watch for the lights of my uncles' ship. There came a time around 2 a.m. or so when the hurricane hit like never before and the tower was shaking so much that Dad and I were both holding on to the center pole of the light stand and we both thought the tower was going to fall. It probably lasted for 5 or 6 minutes. At first Dad wanted me to go downstairs, but it was shaking too much for

me to try. When this blow was over, we had a very, very short “eye” of the hurricane happen maybe only 5-10 minutes and when I looked out there were no lightship lights. The tower was totally wet, but there was a visible horizon and there plainly was NO ship out there. It had gone down and Daddy and I were both crying. My father said – and I remember this so well – “Down to the bottom. The iron men in the iron ship.” and “Go tell your mother.” I did and Mom came running up the tower and we three knew they were gone and we stayed up there crying, all three of us.



The bell from the Vineyard Lightship was the only article salvaged from the wreck. Photo by Brad Luther.

The Lightship Memorial

When they did the lightship memorial (in 1999) Harold Flagg (a crew member who had been on rotation at the time) read off the names of the shipmates and they sounded the bell which had been brought up from the sunken vessel. And the first time they sounded the bell, it went through me like electricity because the day after the storm, when it was daylight, we saw that the lightship was visibly gone. But the second thing was, the bell on the ship used to ring dum, dum, dum, dum, dum. We all looked around and there was all this wreckage and all this horrible stuff. We all looked at each other and we were all listening for the bell. I hadn't heard that bell in all these years. They hit that bell and they had Harold read off the names of

his shipmates. When it was over, he said “How'd I do?” and I said, “Oh, Harold, you did well. They all heard you. Your friends, your shipmates heard you.” It was the funeral they never had. And they didn't because some of the bodies are still there. Even though they dove to it, it's sealed and it's off limits.

They were very much a part of us, stayed with us, lived with us like the right arm of our family. And then at night they'd read with us, bounce me on their knees and sing to me. They were part of our social life. That's the way it is at sea. I think there's nothing sadder than to be walking through a cemetery and you'll see “Lost at Sea.” I know it's a horrible way to go, but we follow the sea and you always know there's a chance you won't come back.

I am grateful to Seamond Roberts for taking part in this interview and for permitting the editing I have done for the sake of space and clarity. ERT



Seamond Ponsart Roberts at the memorial service for the men of the Vineyard Lightship in 1999. The memorial for all the men lost on area lightships is located near the waterfront on JFK Boulevard in New Bedford.