Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log - Vol. 2 #4 - 1986 Visit USLHS.ORG

Life On The Rocks

by Bill Beavis

If YOU have ever wanted to become a lighthouse keeper then it looks like you have left it too late. They're not recruiting any more. In ten years' time all lighthouses will be automatic, and it is planned, if onboard electronics continue as they are at present, to do away with lighthouses altogether by the beginning of the 21st Century.

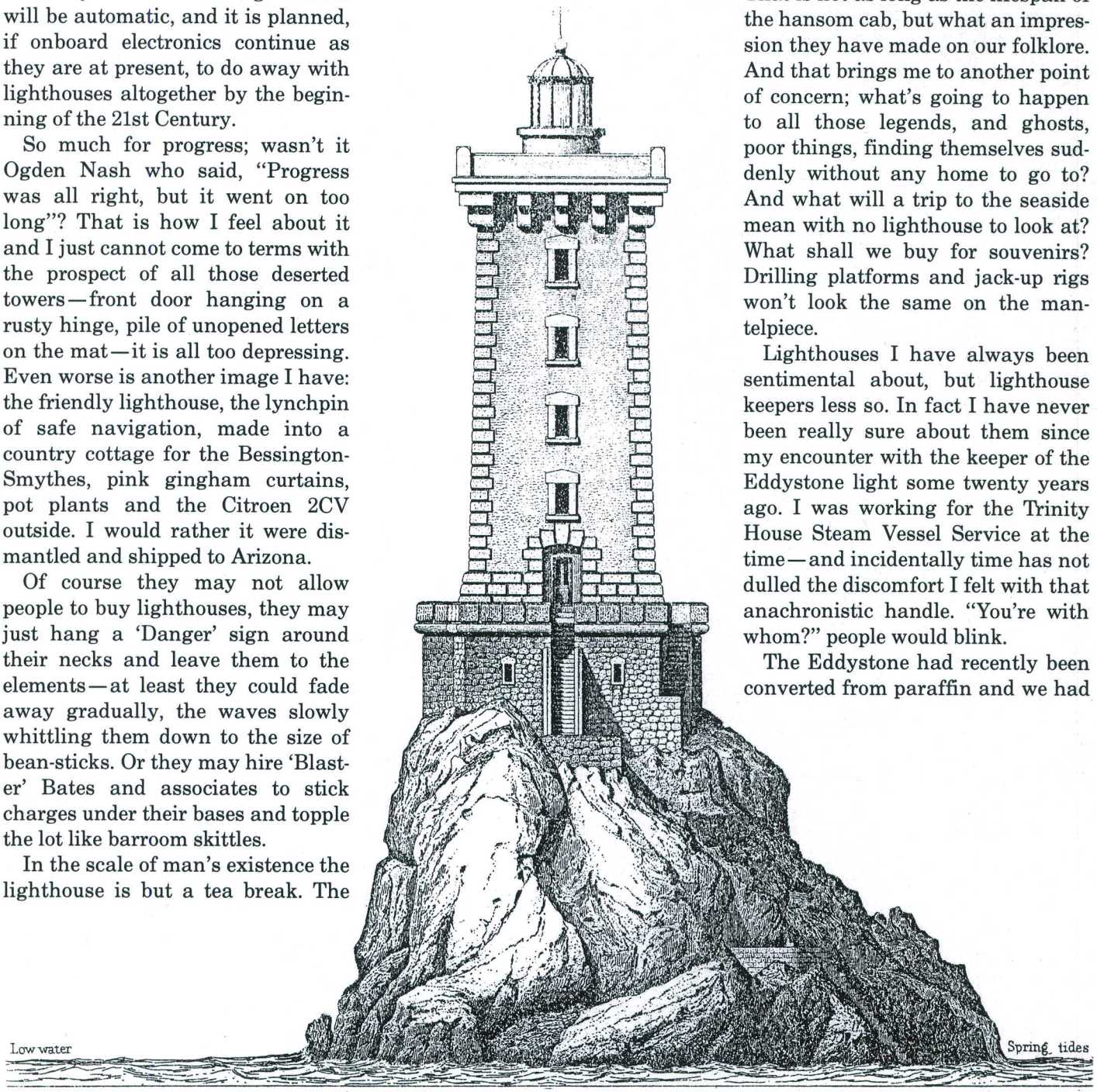
So much for progress; wasn't it Ogden Nash who said, "Progress was all right, but it went on too long"? That is how I feel about it and I just cannot come to terms with the prospect of all those deserted towers—front door hanging on a rusty hinge, pile of unopened letters on the mat—it is all too depressing. Even worse is another image I have: the friendly lighthouse, the lynchpin of safe navigation, made into a country cottage for the Bessington-Smythes, pink gingham curtains, pot plants and the Citroen 2CV outside. I would rather it were dismantled and shipped to Arizona.

Of course they may not allow people to buy lighthouses, they may just hang a 'Danger' sign around their necks and leave them to the elements—at least they could fade away gradually, the waves slowly whittling them down to the size of bean-sticks. Or they may hire 'Blaster' Bates and associates to stick charges under their bases and topple the lot like barroom skittles.

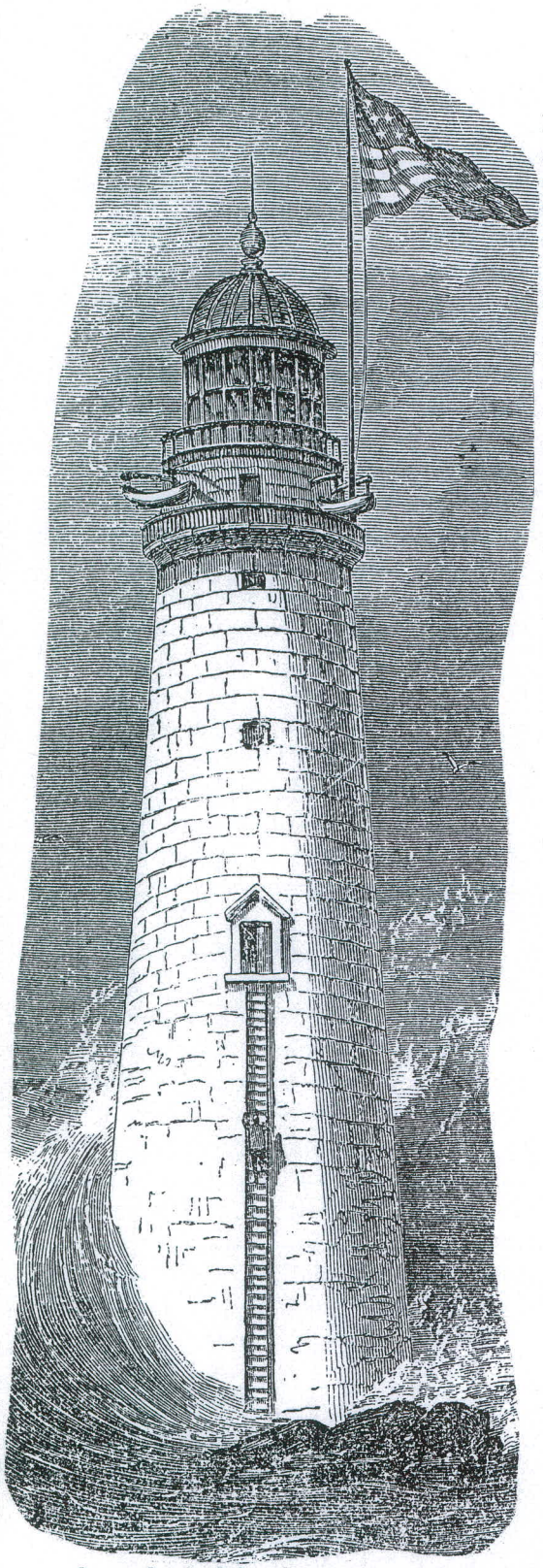
In the scale of man's existence the lighthouse is but a tea break. The ancients had them, it is true, but not the salt-cellar type, not the ones we are familiar with; these have only been around for about 130 years. That is not as long as the lifespan of the hansom cab, but what an impression they have made on our folklore. And that brings me to another point of concern; what's going to happen to all those legends, and ghosts, poor things, finding themselves suddenly without any home to go to? And what will a trip to the seaside mean with no lighthouse to look at? What shall we buy for souvenirs? Drilling platforms and jack-up rigs won't look the same on the mantelpiece.

Lighthouses I have always been sentimental about, but lighthouse keepers less so. In fact I have never been really sure about them since my encounter with the keeper of the Eddystone light some twenty years ago. I was working for the Trinity House Steam Vessel Service at the time—and incidentally time has not dulled the discomfort I felt with that anachronistic handle. "You're with whom?" people would blink.

The Eddystone had recently been converted from paraffin and we had



Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log - Vol. 2 #4 - 1986 Visit USLHS.ORG



brought fuel for the new generator. I cannot remember precisely why I needed to contact the principal keeper but I suppose it was to get him to sign for it. I do remember, though, it was one of those exceptionally still days, foggy in fact, when you could actually jump from the boat to the lighthouse; normally the chit went up in a bucket.

Someone directed me to the principal keeper, who was up on the gantry seeing to the fog signal. Most people will have climbed up inside a lighthouse at some time in their lives and likewise this was not my first introduction to those dungeon-like spiralling stairs. However, there is a startling difference between the shore stations which most of us get to visit and a rock station such as the Eddystone. And the difference comes about halfway up when you come to a door marked *Bedroom.* (On shore stations the keeper sleeps in a cottage.) I don't know why a lighthouse keeper's bedroom should be so intriguing and to this day I still don't know why I opened the door. But open it I did, and ever since it has been impossible for me to regard lighthouse keepers with the same equanimity—*they sleep in crescent-shaped beds!*

Without a word of a lie it is true! The bunks are built around the sides of the lighthouse, and as the walls are curved so are the bunks. To me it was as if all the dark secrets of all the strange men who have haunted towers had suddenly been unlocked ...the hermits...the Hunchback of Notre Dame...Howard Hughes. Their torture was never-ending. Their days in round prisons, their nights in round beds! No wonder they went mad—no wonder the keeper had shut the door. How could anyone sleep in that? Not outstretched, that was for sure. I checked; the only way was with the knees drawn up to the chin and your back against the wall. And your back had to be against the wall. If you tried it the other way, or turned over in the night, you were likely to kick out a keystone and the whole lighthouse might come tumbling down.

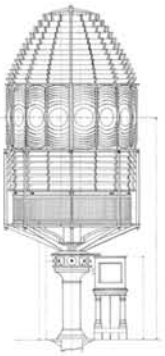
I closed the door quietly and continued up the stairs. I still needed to get my invoice signed. But what would I say? What do you say to a man whose nighttime habits you have suddenly uncovered? Would it show, the fact that he spent half his life curled up in a crescent-shaped bed? Would he list to the left or right?

At first glimpse he didn't look too good. I could see him out on the gantry with his arms raised high like a saviour addressing the crowd. Actually he was fixing the next fog detonator to a semaphore arm, but I didn't know this and when the explosion came I thought he must have shot himself.

When my ears stopped ringing I called him. "Hello there," I said quietly. But he didn't hear. I called again, louder. He still didn't hear, and that's when I noticed he had a plug of cotton wool in each ear. I had a problem, a very tricky problem. Supposing he hadn't seen our boat arrive, he would hardly be expecting any visitors up here. So how do you approach a man (he had now moved to the rail) who is leaning over a rail 200 feet in the air with bungs in his ears and who thinks the nearest human being is in Plymouth? Should I just go and stand alongside him? No, better not. I had done that once to a foc'sle head lookout at 2 o'clock in the morning, just sort of sidled up alongside him, only time in my life I heard a man scream. But in the event I didn't need to make a move because in that moment he turned and saw me. Well, I say me but as I was standing on the other side of the catadioptic lens what he actually saw was a couple of hundred of me and each of them horribly distorted. I waited for the shock to register, but no, the man was perfectly calm, insanely calm, I felt. Here we were, the strangest meeting since Stanley bumped into Livingstone and the man was offering his hand and asking if I had a pen to sign the chit. As I say, that was twenty years ago but the memory has never receded. I'm sad about the lighthouses, very sad, but I don't think you should grieve too much about not becoming a lighthouse keeper. Frankly I don't think the job would suit.

Reprinted with kind permission of Bill Beavis and the British magazine Motor Boat and Yachting.

Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

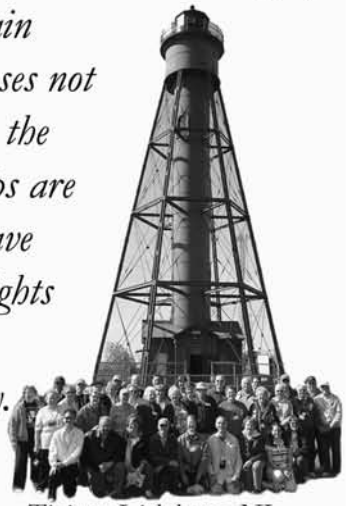
Help Support Our Important Mission!

Education



The Keeper's Log *magazine is the only one of it's kind and has been published quarterly since 1984. Receive this award-winning publication as a benefit of membership.*

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ

To learn more visit

www.uslhs.org

or

call Headquarters at

415-362-7255