KINDLY LIGHTS

By: Sarah Gleason

After many unfortunate publishing delays, this excellent chronicle of lighthouse administration, viewed through the beacons of Southern New England, is finally in print. Sarah Gleason, a tireless devotee of lighthouse preservation, says Kindly Lights grew out of her work on "The Light Must Be Kept Burning," a traveling exhibit on Rhode Island lighthouses that is now permanently installed at Beavertail Lighthouse.

Intrigued by the story of David Melville's successful gas lighting experiments at Beavertail and the subsequent failure of the government to adopt his superior inventions, Gleason became interested in the mismanagement and scandal that has so often colored lighthouse history in this country.


The title is not meant to mislead. There are two sides to every story, and this book ably reveals the double entendre of lighthouse history. The tales of the keepers and their mission, and of the sailors who needed them, are there; but so are the powers of bureaucracy. Gleason presents one of the best interpretations of the history of lighthouse administration to date.

Chapter one sets the stage for developments and problems in lighthouse administration. We get a taste of sea hazards and the tough Yankee know-how that spawned our nation's lighthouse system, but also the "self-reliance and resistance to change" that stifled it from time to time. The book moves quickly into Colonial America and a lucid description of the fledgling lighthouse service and its early illuminants.

The heart of Kindly Lights is the struggle to establish a sound administration. Much of the information offered is from primary sources cited for the first time — refreshing amid the many recycled materials we've seen lately. Among the more fascinating disclosures is the dichotomous character of Winslow Lewis, whose work was both a boon and a bane to the development of an American system.

Final pages are devoted to the reminiscences of 20th century keepers and their families, along with a "Catalogue of Lighthouses" in Southern New England. Though the catalogue section presents little new material — all lighthouse books seem to require these light lists — conversations with the keepers are excellent. Their comments are carefully chosen to support the book's dual theme.

Kindly Lights is hardcover, 7 1/4" x 8 1/2", a light list and bibliographic endnotes comprising a third of its 175 pages. No index is included, and all photos are black & white, though many are from historical archives. Available through the Keeper's Library for $19.95 plus S & H.

In the last issue of the Log we reported that the Sand Point lighthouse in Wisconsin was now open to visitors as a museum and published a photo of the structure. Actually, it's the Escanaba, MI, Sand Point lighthouse that is open to visitors; the photo and location were in error.

The Delta County Historical Society stopped the Coast Guard from razing the lighthouse in 1985 and obtained a lease for the property. The lighthouse had been missing its lantern room for a number of years. The Historical Society located a duplicate lantern room and a Fresnel lens similar to that which used to grace the tower on nearby Poverty Island. The lantern and lens were installed and the siding stripped from the walls to reflect the appearance of the lighthouse right after a fire in 1886. The society has really been very creative in interpreting the dwelling. In the kitchen eggs appear to be cooking on the stove, the keeper's daughter is taking a bath in a large tub next to the stove and laundry is hanging in the corner. There are other period rooms to view, as well as an exhibit room of maritime artifacts relating to the area. And as with most lighthouses, the highlight is climbing the tower and enjoying the view of the surrounding countryside.

The lighthouse is located on the waterfront in Escanaba where Ludington St. curves into Jenkins Drive. The museum is open Memorial Day through Labor Day, from 1 to 9 p.m. daily. Admission is $1 for adults and 50 cents for children. For information or special tours you may call (906) 786-3763.