Sentinels Of The Sea

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

During his travels to Cape Cod described in his book "Cape Cod," Henry David Thoreau does not visit Chatham but he does refer to it briefly, saying, "What they did for shade here in warm weather we did not know, though we read that 'fogs are more frequent in Chatham than in any other part of the country; and they serve in summer, instead of trees, to shelter the houses against the heat of the sun.'" It is to some extent because of the prevalence of fog here and in Nantucket Sound to the south that lightships were established in 1852 to guide the large number of sailing ships while voyaging between Nova Scotia and New York City. At their peak eight of them served to warn about sand bars, or rips, and to guide ships safely through Nantucket Sound during the frequent fog banks.

The earliest lightships were sailing vessels, with their lights originally powered by candles, to be replaced as the technology became available by kerosene, acetylene, and finally electricity. They were kept in position by huge mushroom anchors weighing as much as 7,000 pounds, but in spite of them, storms, ice, and strong currents could push the ships off station, or they could break free of the anchor chains. Pollock Rip Lightship broke free of its anchor so many times that it became known as the "Happy Wanderer." In 1902, 50,000 vessels passed by Pollock Rip Lightship, but after the widening of the Cape Cod Canal in 1928 so many ships used that route that by 1952 only 6,060 passed by, and by 1968 that number had dropped to 120. Ships traveling westward from European ports would first pick up the Nantucket Lightship, then Pollock Rip, and on to Ambrose Lightship at the entrance to New York Harbor.

Lightships were manned by crews of 10 who had two months on duty, followed by one month off. The greatest danger that these men faced was being hit by passing vessels, some being hit more than 20 times, making it dangerous for other vessels to moor near lightships. But even the daily routine aboard a lightship was difficult, for unlike a vessel underway, the moored ship is at the mercy of the wind and the waves, especially in winter when the frigid, even violent, winds blow through the rigging and toss the vessel as if it were a mere chip of wood, so that the bow often is submerged as the waves wash from bow to stern. The freezing spray coats the hull and the rigging with ice, leaving the masts like giant icicles and coating the decks so that they are treacherous to navigate.

Because fog enshrouded Nantucket Sound so often, the lightships served the essential service of guiding and warning passing vessels. To do so they were equipped with foghorns that constantly emitted a piercing blast every few seconds, along with the tolling of the bell that sounded at two-minute intervals. Since fog is so prevalent the crew becomes used to the sounds of the fog horn and the tolling bell to the point where when the fog lifts the silence actually disturbs their sleep. The crew of a lightship followed a set routine. The members of the watch on duty at sunrise lower the lights and extinguish them so that they can take them below to clean them in preparation for sunset when they are hoisted for the night. The crew is divided into the captain's watch and the mate's watch, each consisting of five men. Twice between spring and winter each watch goes ashore for two months, so that each crew member is aboard the lightship eight months of the year, probably unable to stand being on duty any longer.

Because of the hazards of duty on the Pollock Rip Lightship were so extreme, only the most experienced and hardy sailors could endure it. Those most able to do so usually were men who had served aboard whaling ships, as they were accustomed to months and even years at sea with little or no respite. Perhaps it is because of such hardships that in the early days the ships often were manned by federal prisoners.

Recompense for serving under such conditions, although higher than that of the average sailor, was nevertheless meager, with a captain receiving $1,000 a year, a mate $700, and a crew member $600. While these salaries are relatively small, the crew did enjoy a sort of room and board and, moreover, had little opportunity

for extravagant spending.

The Pollock Rip Light ship was one of the last to remain on duty, as all of them were gradually replaced by large navigational buoys, which resembled Texas towers. In its later years, life aboard the ship was greatly improved from the isolation and hardships of earlier times. By the second half of the 20th century, the men who crewed them enjoyed the best of foods, a library, radio communication with family members, and ultimately even color television sets. When it was decommissioned in 1969, the Nantucket Light Ship was the last to remain because the 192 feet of water under her was too deep to accommodate a navigational buoy.

With the advent of radar and sonar ships could determine their location without the help of light houses and light ships so that all of them were decommissioned, with the single exception of the Chatham Light, which continues to send its powerful beam out into the Atlantic Ocean.