

FIFTY YEARS ON LIME ROCK LIGHT

Ida Lewis, Famous Life Saver
and Only Woman Keeper of
Lighthouse in Service of
United States, Reaches Golden
Anniversary.

DOWN in Newport harbor, on a little island of rock that barely reaches to the surface of the water, Miss Ida Lewis will celebrate tomorrow the 50th anniversary of her arrival at her little island home by throwing open the doors of Lime Rock Light to the many friends she has made during her eventful career.

Miss Lewis, who celebrated her 68th birthday last March, is a native of New-

port and is one of the most distinguished daughters of that city. During the first 15 years of her life, which were spent in the city, she had no further knowledge of the sea than might be gained by any girl of her years from occasional excursions to the shore or brief sails on the waters of the bay. Soon after she arrived at the light, of which her father was the official keeper, she gained considerable renown by the daring manner in which she braved the dangers of the deep to rescue four young men from a watery grave, and since that time she has taken such a prominent part in saving human lives from the sea that she has been known throughout the world as the Grace Darling of America.

Indeed, there have been prominent citizens on this side of the Atlantic, who express the opinion that the deeds of the Newport woman rank ahead of those of the English heroine, and as a ground for the statement urge that while the heroine of Lime Rock Light has saved the lives of 18 individuals, the English woman saved but five. The rescues made by Miss Lewis, however, have been made in the waters of the harbor, while Grace Darling braved the terrors of the water of the open sea.



Ida Lewis

Miss Lewis was the daughter of Hosea Lewis of Newport, who was appointed official keeper of Lime Rock Light when she was 15 years of age. When Mr. Lewis received the appointment from the Government he took his family, consisting of three girls, two boys and an invalid wife, with him to reside on the little barren island near the southern entrance of the harbor.

Ida was the oldest of the children and soon after arriving at Lime Rock Light learned to row, becoming so proficient in handling the oars that she was able to take her smaller brothers and sisters to and from the mainland, where they attended school.

During the summer of 1859 four young men, sons of prominent Newporters, were sailing a small catboat in the harbor just after darkness one evening. One of the number climbed to the top of the mainmast and started to rock the boat until finally the craft capsized and threw its occupants into the water. The cries of the men struggling in the water were heard by Miss Lewis and she hastily rowed to the locality, where, after much difficulty, she succeeded in saving all.

When she was 17 years of age her father became crippled with rheumatism; she took charge of the light and did all of the work. Her father remained official keeper of the light for 25 years, but for 17 years of that time was a helpless paralytic, and his daughter was appointed the official keeper by an act of Congress 28 years ago, the only woman in charge of a lighthouse in the service of the United States.

She has held the position since that time and at present lives there with her brother. She makes daily visits to the city in a rowboat, landing at the little wharf at the foot of the grounds of the summer home of Mrs. John Nicholas Brown, to purchase supplies in the city on week days, or to attend divine service in the Thames Street Methodist Church, where she is a regular attendant, on Sunday.

During a blizzard on a winter's day, 1868, two troopers from Fort Adams were being rowed to the fort by a boatman from Newport. The boat was capsized and the boatman, as well as the troopers, benumbed from the cold and seas, were nearly drowned.

Miss Lewis, hearing their cries, went out in her dory, and, catching hold of the hair of the two soldiers, managed to get them into her boat and to the lighthouse, where she worked over their half-drowned bodies for an hour before they fully recovered consciousness. The boatman was drowned.

In recognition of this brave deed, the men at Fort Adams presented to Miss Lewis a purse, the presentation being made by Maj. Gen. Hunt, who was then commanding the garrison.

As a token of esteem and admiration the citizens of Newport presented to Miss Lewis a fine rowboat, the purchase price being raised by popular subscriptions, in which Gen. Grant participated.

The day the presentation occurred, a big parade was held, the boat placed on wheels, and with Miss Lewis sitting on one of its thwarts, it was hauled through the principal streets of the city by 30 prominent citizens. The procession ended in front of the old City Hall, where a reception was tendered her and she was presented with a resolution of thanks from State and city.

Medals and trophies are seen on all sides in her parlor and these thousands have viewed and admired. They include a silver medal from the New York Life Saving Association for the rescuing of two men in the harbor, during a bad storm in March of 1869. There is a hand-painted flag picturing the rescue made by Ida Lewis in the year 1869, the gift of the late Col. Jim Fisk of New

York, who established the Fall River Line.

In 1881, Miss Lewis was presented with a gold medal by an act of Congress for rescuing from drowning at least 13 people, particularly two soldiers, who had broken through the ice near Lime Rock Light on the afternoon of Feb. 4, 1837, and for this same rescue Miss Lewis was presented with a silver medal from the Massachusetts Humane Society. The troopers stationed at Fort Adams remembered her for the rescue of their comrades on this occasion not only with a purse but a handsome silver tea pot.

Of the 18 people Ida Lewis has saved five were troopers from Fort Adams.

Lime Rock Light was visited in 1869 by Gen. Grant with Vice President Colfax. Prominent men, including Gen. Sherman, Admiral Dewey and hundreds of prominent summer residents of the city-by-the-sea have visited the light to view the trophies.

During the Chicago Exposition a row boat in which many of the rescues were made by the brave Rhode Island woman was exhibited, with a collection of photographs of the medals which have been awarded to her.

Miss Lewis shrinks from telling her experiences and her story of her brave deeds consists of a terse statement, "Oh, a couple of men fell overboard and I happened to see them in time to pull them out."

In her early life she was considered to be physically weak, but the life at

the lighthouse agreed with her and she has attended to the duties of a keeper in such a thorough manner that Lime Rock Light is regarded by the Lighthouse Board as being one of the best managed and maintained on the coast.

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Only 36 'Wickies' Remain

As Lighthouse Keepers

WASHINGTON — To the roster of vanishing Americans should be added the sentinels of lighthouses.

There aren't many "wickies" left—the rugged, solitary men who kept the lights burning for mariners in fair weather and foul, every night of the year. These men were their brothers' keepers in every sense, for the job of helping seafarers gave neither fame nor fortune but required the utmost dedication.

The Coast Guard, which has jurisdiction over all lighthouses and other aids to navigation, says only 36 civilian lighthouse keepers remain in service. On retiring they will be replaced by Coast Guardsmen.

Rapid Automation

The day is rapidly approaching when even the scattered crews of Coast Guardsmen will quit the lighthouses for the last time, leaving their operation to automatic controls. Conversion of a lighthouse at Baltimore, Maryland, to atomic power in May, 1964, underscores the rapid automation of lighthouses.

Standing along the Nation's coasts and lakeshores are some 42,250 navigational aids. Among the aids, which include buoys, fog signals, radio beacons, day

beacons, and loran stations, are 10,858 light stations of various kinds. These are fully automatic, except for 287 manned lighthouses. There were more than 400 manned stations less than a decade ago.

Tending lighthouses has never been an easy job, even in the gadget-filled 20th century. It was drudgery in colonial times.

Forerunner of all American lighthouse keepers was George Worthylake. He tended the future nation's first "Light House & Lanthorn," built at Boston in 1716 and paid for by charging ships a penny a ton.

In winter, Worthylake was doubtless hard pressed to keep "ye oyle from congealing" in the dozen or so lamps. He was paid only 50 pounds a year, but was liable to a 100-pound fine should he neglect his work. Both Worthylake and his successor were drowned in the line of duty.

The first keeper of another historic lighthouse, Portland Head, Maine, got no pay at all. He was provided with a home for his family, and allowed to farm and fish on the property.

A lightkeeper at Ocracoke, North Carolina, thought to turn the lighthouse into a part-time tavern to help support himself, but the Government quickly stipulated "that no goods should be stored, no tavern kept, no spirits retailed" on the premises.

"All Is Well"

Though he worked for the thriftiest of all government agencies, the old Lighthouse Service, a first-rate keeper had to be a combination mechanic, bookkeeper, handyman, cook, electrician (in the 20th century), and one-man rescue service. One of the few women lightkeepers, Ida Lewis, of Rhode Island's Lime Rock Lighthouse, saved 23 persons from drowning.

In time, electricity and electronics replaced candles, sperm oil, and kerosene. But there was no way to alleviate the burden of weather.

During flooding on the Mississippi, the keeper of a Louisiana lighthouse managed to send word: "I am yet on the job, but the water has run me out of my house. . . ." He added bravely, "All is well."

Not all danger came from storms. In 1957, the crew of a Chesapeake Bay lighthouse had to take to a cutter in darkness when three Navy attack bombers mistook their station for a practice target and riddled it with rockets.