

Thacher Island Association

P.O. BOX 73

ROCKPORT, MASS. 01966

Thacher Island Newsletter

November 1991

THE GREAT OCTOBER STORM

This is going to sound a little like a classic stand-up comedy routine....you know how it goes: "I have some good news, and I have some bad news..."

Well, we have some good news and some bad news concerning Thacher Island. The good news is that we reroofed the boathouse, the bad news is that the boathouse has been demolished. The good news is that we repaired the chimney and reroofed the whistlehouse, the bad news is that the entire east wall of the whistlehouse has been washed away. The good news is that we patched some shingles on the keeper's house which had been blown away in past storms, the bad news is that we have to do it again.

As this newsletter is being written it is a little too early to completely assess the damage to the island from the great October storm that began in the early morning hours of Monday the twenty-eighth and reached its peak intensity just at the time of high tide on Wednesday evening, with winds clocked on the island by our keepers gusting to eighty-four miles per hour, and which did not finally abate until Friday night. The high winds were accompanied by a four to five foot storm surge and thirty foot seas. As you all know the destruction up and down the coast has been extensive, with houses destroyed and roads washed away.

The most important damage to the island has been the loss of electric power due to the cable rupturing. This of course means no heat, light or telephone communication and the back-up generator in the whistlehouse is down due to the damage there (although the generator itself does not appear to be seriously affected as Mr. Dee was able to get it to turn over briefly on the Saturday after the storm) so the only source of temporary power is the generator in the south tower which is currently serving to keep the light burning with 250 gallons of fuel in reserve.

Some preliminary information coming from the Coast Guard is that they think the cable damage may be in Loblolly Cove where it enters the water, and that they will make its repair a high priority, although it may still be weeks or months before we have power restored. In the mean time, to be on the safe side, we have shut the island down and all keepers are ashore, although Armand and Betty Desharnais, John Bennett and others have been

A Night to Remember

Ann Hernandez and Alan Tomaska, a businesswoman and contractor from the Chicago area, began their lighthouse keeper's duties for the first time at Thacher Island at the beginning of October. They looked forward to a quiet month, with pretty, fall colors, some visitors and a few construction people on the Island.

On Tuesday they began to realize that the developing storm was out of the ordinary and began extensive videotaping of its mounting ferocity. By Wednesday afternoon they had documented the change in character that the sea undergoes in a really bad storm, the blowing spume and the muddy color from the surf scouring the bottom. They also documented the death of the boathouse as the first waves struck it and collapsed its walls, and the crests of waves completely obscuring Straitsmouth lighthouse, waves that were to tear off its entryway.

Finally there is a very dark picture, taken from the keeper's backyard, with huge looming white masses in the near distance, and over the shriek of wind noise you can hear Ann's voice saying "it is now almost dark....the power is gone....the telephone is gone....the boathouse is gone....the whistlehouse is gone.....Ned, John...you said we would have an adventure....."

Alan admitted later to a few minutes of panic. As the dark closed in he remembered saying to Ann "They are going to have to get us out of here!" Cool heads prevailed however as they made contingency plans for dealing with worst possibilities, and worked to re-establish radio contact with the shore.

Ann and Alan promise to get the Association a copy of their video tape so we can share it with all of you at a future meeting. Δ

making day trips out to the island for additional damage assessment and clean up.

Additional damage includes the demolition of the railroad trestle from the turntable to the whistlehouse, and serious damage to the walkway from the keeper's house to the whistlehouse, half of which is now lying on its side. The trail from the boathouse to the north tower has been largely washed away, and we have lost between ten and twenty feet of upland trail along the bluffs at the south end of the island, with large boulders and debris thrown all across what is left of the trails. These will have to be cleared before the trails can be mowed. Portions of the Wedmore Walk have been washed away - indeed, at the peak of the storm the water washed right across the island at the camping area adjacent to the old

foundations of the north tower's keeper's house.

On the positive side, both lighthouse towers appear undamaged, and the keeper's houses are intact, although the water came within eight feet of the houses. Importantly, the boat landing ramp seems to be intact, with only a few planks loosened, and in fact a large boulder, several cubic yards in size, that was a nuisance for boat landings alongside the ramp is now nowhere to be seen. The electric winch is intact although it did receive a salt water bath, so its future operating ability remains in some doubt at this time. (Currently we are attaching a line to the tractor to haul up the Thacher Island boat.) The oil house was not damaged and the cistern roof is intact. The tractors, tools and equipment are all basically intact, and Alan Tomaska hauled the keeper's boat and motor high above harms way. The fog horn in the whistlehouse is still there, although now pointing at the sky.

It is still too early for us to give you a complete damage report, or to tell you what our specific plans are concerning repairs and rebuilding. We will keep you informed, and plan on sending out another newsletter fairly soon to keep you up to date. No matter what we do however, you can be sure of one thing - we will need your support now more than ever. We hope you will all give consideration to the enclosed fund raising program arranged by Bill Hahn, and any other donations of money or services will be greatly appreciated. Δ

THE KEEPER'S LOG

- *Armand and Betty Desharnais finished up their normal winter's stay at the beginning of April.*
- *Dan and Pat Wetherbee had their initial stay as keeper's during the month of April.*
- *George and Dottie Carroll returned for another term of summer duty in May, with Dottie once again turning a profit for the Association from her gift shop.*
- *Dexter and Jane Mead from Newbury, Massachusetts spent the last two weeks of September on the Island.*
- *Ann Hernandez and Alan Tomaska from Chicago had a rather interesting October.*

The Keeper Search Committee has also had three more couples visiting and taking training for potential future duty on the Island.

The Dog House

The Thacher Island dog, "Cookie", is enjoying shore leave at the home of George and Barbara Fisher after more than six years of island duty.

Cookie has a particularly good time barking at George and Barbara's livingroom ceiling fan, which she regards as a Coast Guard Helicopter.



SOME GOOD NEWS FOR A CHANGE

There have been some positive developments unaffected by the stormy weather. One of the most important concerns the Thacher Island boat. As some of you may know, the Coast Guard was threatening to shut down our island boat operations after receiving an anonymous complaint that we were in violation of Coast Guard regulations. After some discussion and negotiation, the Town has agreed to bring the boat operation into conformance with regulations over a two year period, and the Coast Guard is allowing continuing operations.

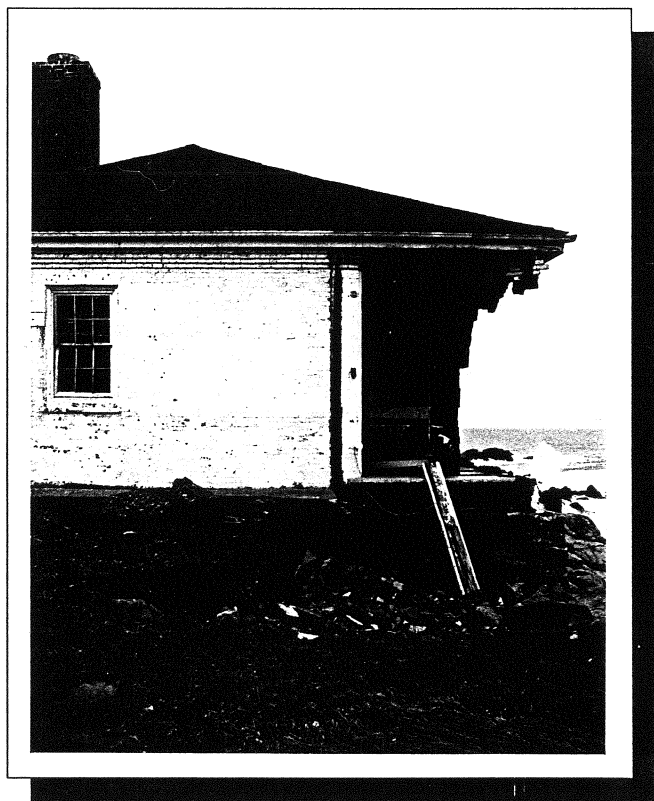
Some modifications have been made to the boat, primarily to the fuel filler caps, to bring the boat into conformance, and it has passed an informal Coast Guard inspection.

The exact nature of the license that will be required of boat operators has not yet been fully finalized, but a commitment has been made to see that our opera-

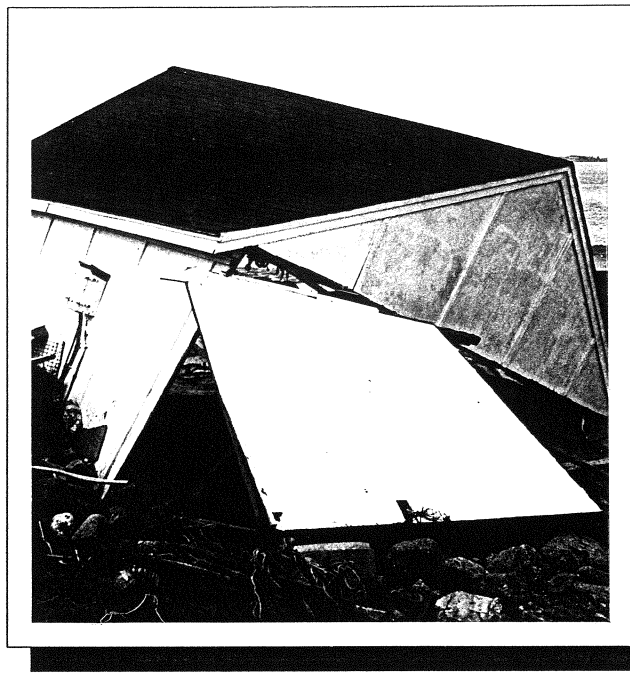
tors will become fully trained and qualified. (Some of them are already fully licensed of course.)

In September, the assistance of Seaside Glass and Mirror, Inc. was retained to remove all the old and weathered caulking at the north tower lantern and to reseal the glazing in an attempt to halt the leakage of water that was beginning to corrode some iron inside the lantern and wick room again. This work seemed to be doing the trick, at least before the great storm. This work was paid for by US Fish and Wildlife, who also unveiled plans for a new entry ramp and stair at the north tower that should make access easier and safer. They are planning to bid this work this fall, and begin the work immediately, weather permitting, although spring may be now more likely for a construction start.

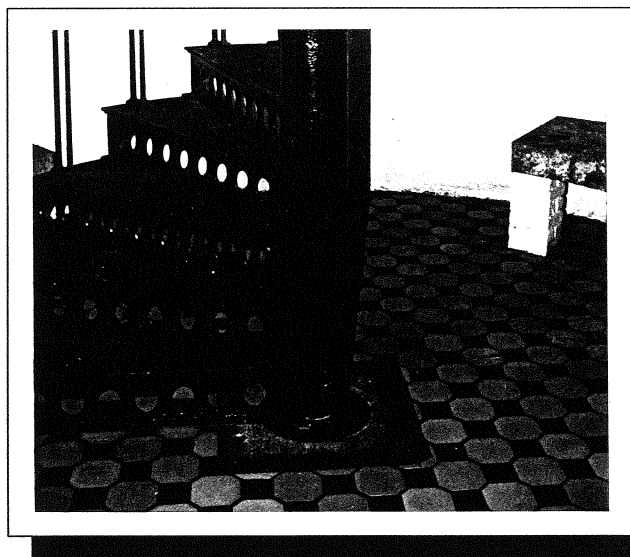
Finally, as part of a commitment to Fish and Wildlife, the tile work was installed at the base of the north tower, a tan octagonal tile and a square blue tile matching closely the original 1860's tile imported from England. The installation looks terrific, very nineteenth century, and well worth doing. Δ



Whistlehouse Damage



Boathouse Damage



North Tower Tilework

With the holidays soon to be upon us we would like to take this opportunity to wish everyone all the joys of the season.....along with a happy, healthy, productive and storm free 1992.

Sincerely yours,

George Fisher
President
Thacher Island Association



"Ned" Cameron
Chairman
Thacher Island Committee