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TRURO TALES.

BY GRACE DESCHAMPS



"The Life Savers of Cape Cod," published in 1902 (reissued in soft cover in 1967 by Chatham Press) is a chronicle of history whose drama could scarcely be packed into the pages of that valuable record of the U.S. Life Saving Service on Cape Cod. It is doubtful if anyone except perhaps a Conrad could do justice to that "stiffening before the outward and inward terrors" that can turn ordinary men into heroes.

J.W. Dalton, who wrote the book about the men of the U.S. Life Saving Service, who manned the 12 stations dotting the Atlantic shore of the Cape from Wood End to Monomoy Point, made no try for overdramatization. He did a good job, nevertheless, of compiling vital statistics and he amazingly included photos of life saving crews—who look like other men, yet seem not to have been when they clambered into a surf boat and headed into suicidal seas to take off seamen from a foundering ship.

Thumbing through the book again - for one is drawn to these bare bones of a human document - and reading the names beneath the photographs of long dead surfmen, one is struck by the number of still living links here to the men who helped make the early U.S. Life Saving Service known the world over.

Its successor, the U.S. Coast

Guard, with modern equipment and miracles of communication, has continued that great tradition. What gives another dimension, however, to the saga of the old Life Saving Service is that between the Life Savers of Cape Cod and the might of the sea there was little except their surfboat, their own skill and courage and a physical stamina that could go the limit of human endurance.

For facing death in icy seas, for untold hardships on shore on his lonely patrol of miles in the darkness of night in freezing weather, a surfman in 1902 received \$65 a month for 10 months of the year, up from an original \$40 a month. For the other two months of the year, from June to August, he received a fee of \$3 for each call to duty. The captain of a life-saving crew received \$900 a year, up from an original \$200.

Each year the surfman underwent a rigid physical examination. If he failed to pass it he was dropped from the service and without compensation. It made no difference, the author of the book pointed out, how long he had been in it, "the hardships he had suffered, the perils he had faced or the great deeds of heroism he had performed."

If a man became disabled in the line of duty he was retained

on the payroll for the period of his disability, but not to exceed a year, although in special instances his pay was continued longer but not beyond two years. If a man lost his life in the service his family received his \$65 a month for a period of two years.

Despite the perils of the job and this absence of fringe benefits, the Life Saving Service could pick and choose the most able men along the coast, and this it did.

Skill Differed

Although all of them had grown up with the sea, the special skill of the surfman differed in one respect from that of the sailor. The surfman also had to be master of the skill required to launch a boat into crashing breakers and beach it again successfully. But fishermen were good at handling boats in a surf and shalermen expert in split-second maneuvering against dangerous odds and the Cape had no lack of either. There are people around who know these men of another day.

The widow of a long dead surfman at Peaked Hill Bars Station lives at 93 Commercial Street, Provincetown, Mrs. Nell Silvey is a bright and lively Truro native, her personality undiminished by her 89 years. Her husband, William E. Silvey, a No. 1 surfman, had spent 32 years in the Life Saving Service when he died in 1929 - "worn out," Mrs. Silvey believes, by his arduous occupation.

The back side of the Cape was not for nothing called a "graveyard of the Atlantic" and the Life Saving Stations, a few miles apart, looked out on

dangerous waters. The hazard at Peaked Hill Bars, however, was "one of the most dangerous of all." Offshore are shifting outer and inner bars that awaited the hapless sailing ship driven shoreward in a Northeaster. The ship could be lifted over the outer bar only to strike with fearful impact on the inner one some 600 yards from shore. Often it was impossible to effect a rescue by breeches buoy and the only hope of reaching the stricken ship was by surfboat - in a boiling sea that could capsize it, swamp it or splinter it against the hull of the foundering vessel if the oarsmen, watching the face of their skipper manning his 21-foot steering oar from the stern sheets, missed their cue for an instant.

Vessel Ashore

The words "vessel ashore at Peaked Hill" could send a chill through the Outer Cape community and Mrs. Silvey admits to many an anxious hour. The remarkable record of the Peaked Hill Station, however, was replete with sparsely written entries of rescues that miraculously brought the crews of stricken vessels safely to shore.

Another Provincetown resident, Real-Admiral Clarence M. Bowley, USN., retired, is the son of the late Capt. George P. Bowley, a keeper of the Head of Pamet Station in Truro. Captain Bowley, for 10 years previously a surfman at the Highland Station, was at the Pamet Station only a little more than a year when he was made a superintendent in the Life Saving Service, with charge of a district extending from Portland, Me., to Block Island,

R.I. His son, a graduate of Annapolis, retired years ago after a total of 34 years in the Navy.

Grandly beautiful, the waters off the Atlantic side of Truro were nevertheless an evil trap to sailing ships struggling to round the Cape in a storm. Over the years the log of the Head of Pamet Station recorded "many fearful disasters" on the submerged bars that extend several hundred yards seaward. One of these was the wreck of the British ship Jason in a December, 1893, storm that split the iron-hulled ship in tow and swept 26 men to their death. Only one man survived. Three ships foundered here in a single storm. Of the total of 34 men on board the three, however 22 were saved.

Patrolling the ocean shore of Truro was hazardous, too, in a storm, when mighty tides sent a lone Surfman scrambling for his life up the steep side of a cliff or dune. In a driving blizzard a man could be blinded by frostbite that prevented him from opening his eyes - or he could fracture a hip, as happened at the Highland Station, when the edge of a cliff gave 'way beneath Henry Baldwin and he fell nearly 50 feet to the shore below. An "all hands" search found him the next day crawling pitifully along the beach. A surfman making his way along the narrow width between sea and the bottom of a cliff, could be caught by a rushing sea and dragged into an undertow from which he escaped by only the merest luck. This had happened, too.

Number One

Ephraim S. Dyer, No. 1 surfman at the Pamet Station and in

1902 said to have been the oldest man in point of service on Cape Cod if not in the United States, was a great-uncle of Truro attorney John R. Dyer, Jr. He was the brother of Joh B. Dyer, a Truro correspondent for the Advocate many years ago. Pamet surfman John DeGroot, a striking figure, was the father of Mrs. Anne Kane, wife of Truro "Town Father" Tom Kane. Holland-born John DeGroot stowed away at 14 on a ship outward bound from his native land.

Curator Arthur Bickers of the Provincetown Historical Museum is the son of the late Capt. George H. Bickers, keeper of the old Wood End Life Saving Station. A whaler before he joined the Life Saving Service, Captain Bickers was a home in precarious situations and he earned an enviable reputation for successful rescues.

Atkins, Paine, Hatch, Small, Francis Corey, Kelley, Lucas, Rich....local names studded the roster of bygone surfmen and to many an Outer Cape family the book about the Life Savers of Cape Cod could be a family album.

The sea was close here and in one way or another it touched the lives of nearly everyone. It is unlikely that anyone looked upon relatives or friends in the Life Saving Stations as heroes but in the story of lives routinely risked and sometimes lost to save other lives, that's the way those bygone villagers somehow come out. In fact it's the way the government now thinks of those \$65-a-month men.