Life in a Lighthouse -
An Interview with Marie Heckemeyer

by Katherine House

Editor's note: Marie Heckemeyer's father, Laureat Leclerc, was the last civilian lightkeeper at the Tarrytown Lighthouse (New York). He served in the U.S. Lighthouse Service and the Coast Guard from 1929 to 1970 and was stationed at Romer Shoal; Great Captain Island off Greenwich, Conn.; North Dampaign Light in Long Island Sound; New Haven, Conn.; Tarrytown; and Old Saybrook, Conn. Heckemeyer attended the NJLHS October meeting in North Tarrytown and recalled what it was like growing up in a lighthouse. After the meeting, she talked to NJLHS member Katherine House.

When the Leclerc family arrived at the Tarrytown Lighthouse in 1942, they wanted to leave. At the time, the caisson light stood offshore in the Hudson River, although it is accessible by footbridge today. There was no place for 12-year-old Marie and her two younger brothers to run around and play. The riveters making fighter planes in the
Chevrolet plant on shore kept them awake all night. And, because of the war, the family was forbidden to have visitors at the lighthouse, making life lonely at times.

When they had lived at North Dumpling Lighthouse in Long Island Sound, the Leclercs fished frequently. But at Tarrytown, Leclerc thought pollution from the auto-
motive plant made it foolhardy to fish in the Hudson, Hecke-
meyer says. Instead, her father did the grocery shopping al-
most daily after he rowed Marie and brother Joe to shore to
attend church and school at St. Teresa's. Of course, the family
gradually adjusted to life on “a pile of rocks,” as Hecke-
meyer calls it, and she has many memories—happy and sad—of her
life at Tarrytown from 1942 to 1947.

The lighthouse, built in 1883, did not have a refrigerator,
electricity or indoor plumbing until after World War II. There
was a coal burning stove on the first floor and a coal burning
furnace in the basement. Water was pumped into the kitchen
from a cistern that collected rainwater. The family used an
outhouse overhanging the river in warm months and a cham-
ber pot in the winter. When an indoor bathroom was added
after the war, the family still preferred the outhouse, says
Heckemeyer, because the bathroom required pumping
muddy, smelly water from the river.

The first floor of their round home—18 feet in diam-
eter—was a combination kitchen and living area, with built-in
shelves for storage. On the second floor was Heckemeyer’s
bedroom, shared with a toddler brother. Her parent’s bedroom
was on the third floor. The fourth floor was brother Joe’s bed-
room and a workshop. On the fifth level was the oil room
with access to the gallery and fog bell. The lantern room,
above the oil room, could be reached by ladder.

When it was cold enough, the family stored some foods
in a paint shed outside the front door. Mrs. Leclerc always
had plenty of canned vegetables, canned milk and ingredients
for homemade bread on hand in case bad weather prevented
food shopping for several days. In fact, Heckemeyer says she
and her brother were sometimes out of school for up to two
weeks when weather conditions changed.

Occasionally, in the winter, the family could walk across
the ice to town. Their father was always cautious, however.
They put their 16-foot skiff on top of a sled and pushed the
contraption in front of them. If the ice broke, they could climb
into the boat and make it to shore safely. Heckemeyer didn’t
enjoy making the trip from shore to the lighthouse when it
was rough. On such occasions, she was always welcome to
spend the night with friends in town. Brother Joe had an op-
posite view. “The rougher it was, the better he liked it,” says
Heckemeyer.

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There was no telephone at the lighthouse, only a ship-to-
shore phone used for giving weather forecasts to boaters. “My
brother and I used to fight about whose turn it was,” says
Heckemeyer. The forecasts were given at 8 in the morning and
in the evening around suppertime. The lighthouse’s call letters
were “Nan-Nan King George,” according to Heckemeyer.
During blackouts, it was very dark out on the river, she says.

The children spent plenty of time doing schoolwork. Her
mother taught Heckemeyer at home until she was about nine
because there were no nearby schools at her father’s previous
posts. Then she went to public school before arriving in North
Tarrytown. The nuns at St. Teresa’s doled out plenty of home-
work, says Heckemeyer, making it particularly tough when
she and her brother missed school because of the bad weather.

There were also household chores to do. Heckemeyer has
not-so-fond memories of polishing brass and more brass as
well as the lighthouse lens. In fact, when she got married, she
told her husband she didn’t want any brass in their house. She
decided that she had polished enough brass— for life. Accord-
ing to Heckemeyer, her brother Joe may have polished more
brass than she did. At school, “my brother was a little devil,”
she recalls. The nuns would send home notes about his behav-
ior, and Dad’s punishment “was worse than what the nuns
would have given him,” according to Heckemeyer. “It was
‘Ok—you have to polish more brass.’”

Joe Leclerc helped his father paint the lighthouse. Hecke-
meyer assisted in the dusting and cleaning and doing the laun-
dry in a hand-cranked washing machine that resembled a bar-
rel on four legs. When the lighthouse inspectors arrived, they
would take out white hankies and run them along the win-
dowills and the tops of door jambs to make sure the place was shipshape. "I remember they were friendly and all, but they were business," she says.

For entertainment, Heckemeyer enjoyed reading and doing embroidery. If she and Joe were well-behaved all week, they could listen to one radio program on Saturday nights on a battery-operated radio. She chose "Hit Parade." Joe favored "Inner Sanctum," then had nightmares. On Saturday evenings in the summer, she remembers hearing the music and laughter from the dayliners that used to sail up and down the Hudson.

One of her favorite memories as a lighthouse keeper's daughter comes from when the family lived on North Dumpling. Her father had rescued a member of the Du Pont family, and the family later visited to show their appreciation. Four adults, a little girl and their chauffeur arrived in a Chris Craft speed boat. "We were some kind of impressed," says Heckemeyer. The chauffeur carried in all kinds of food, cigars, balloons and buckets of fresh cut flowers to thank Laureat Leclerc for his work.

While at Tarrytown, Marie Heckemeyer met her husband, who ran a patrol around the fleet of Liberty ships moored nearby. "He would see me and blow the whistle and I'd wave," she says. "Mother would say 'Oh no. I thought my daughter was safe on a pile of rocks.'" One day, Heckemeyer was out in the skiff when her future husband asked her to have an ice cream soda. At her mother's instructions, Marie's brother Joe tagged along on her dates. They were both fascinated by her boyfriend's car since the Leclerc family had never owned an automobile.

Heckemeyer left the Tarrytown Lighthouse in 1947 to get married, the same year her mother died of cancer and her youngest brother drowned at the lighthouse. Her father remarried and stayed at Tarrytown until 1956 when he was transferred to Old Saybrook. The Tarrytown Lighthouse was decommissioned in 1965, made obsolete by the Tappan Zee Bridge completed 10 years earlier.

"I think a lot of people thought it was a glamorous life, but it really wasn't," says Heckemeyer, although she fondly recalls how the isolation kept the family close. "We were a family unit," she says. "We were close knit. We had no other choice--living on a pile of rocks surrounded by water. Everything we did was together."

President's Corner

by Tom Laverty, NJLHS President

Marie Heckemeyer, the daughter of the last civilian lighthouse keeper at Tarrytown, gave a brief presentation at our Tarrytown meeting. Marie was thrilled to speak to our group and gave a delightful account of life at the lighthouse. What impressed her the most about our organization was the number of people, about eighty-five, who attended the meeting. She was even more surprised to learn that the New Jersey Lighthouse Society has more than 500 members. Marie has not been the only person to express surprise at the size of our membership. I get that reaction from many people when discussing Society business. I am not surprised. A week does not go by when the mailbox in Brick is not stuffed with new membership applications.

Why all this attention to lighthouses? I am not sure there is any one answer that completely explains the reason, and I am not going to take space in The Beam trying to give an answer. Suffice it to say that lighthouses have become a popular part of our cultural heritage. There are now several retail shops in the United States that specialize in selling lighthouse memorabilia. In the last ten years there has been a proliferation of books written about lighthouses. The list of projects involving renovation, restoration or the saving of a lighthouse has also grown over the last several years.

Just the list of lighthouse projects in New Jersey will give you an idea of how popular lighthouses are. At Navesink Twin Lights, new exhibits are being installed that tell the history of the lighthouse and its role in navigating New York harbor. The Generator House that once supplied electricity to the magnificent nine foot diameter lens is being renovated and will soon be open to the public. At Absecon, the Inlet Public/Private Association is raising funds to renovate Absecon Lighthouse and possibly reconstruct the keeper's house. Cape May and Barnegat have both undergone extensive renovations in the last several years. East Point has received a federal grant to have a 'historic structures report' done to guide the Maurice River Historical Society's renovation of that lighthouse. In Tuckerton, the Seaport organization has tentative plans to reconstruct the Tucker Island Lighthouse to use as a visitor center and exhibits building. Conover Beacon, part of the Chapel Hill/South Channel Range Light located in Leonardo, is attracting some attention from a couple of Middletown Township organizations interested in trying to preserve the structure. At Sandy Hook, the National Park Service and United States Coast Guard have been discussing the possible transfer of the Sandy Hook light to the NPS.
Many of the organizations involved with these projects have approached the New Jersey Lighthouse Society for assistance. With a growing and active membership we hope to be poised to assist these lighthouse groups in any way possible. I hope the membership keeps up the good work of recruiting new members and getting the message out to the general public. These are critical times for lighthouses. We have to act now to insure their survival well into the next century.

Please make plans to attend our next meeting on December 2. Yvonne Miller, who has done a fantastic job organizing our meetings, has planned an outstanding program. Our guest speaker will be Michael Henry, who has had more experience restoring New Jersey lighthouses than anyone I know. Sometimes think he has worked on more lighthouses than most of us have climbed. He will give you insights into how one goes about restoring an historic lighthouse. You will also hear about the plans for renovations to the Absecon Lighthouse.

Finally, the December meeting is our annual election meeting. The health of the organization depends on having quality individuals to manage the Society’s activities. We have several new faces running for office. If we are to provide assistance to lighthouse groups all over New Jersey and want to continue to impress other “lighthouse” people, we need to keep an active membership. Hope to see you December 2.

Oh, by the way, the Chapel Hill Lighthouse was recently put up for sale for $400,000. Any takers?

Society Receives Tax Exempt Status

The Internal Revenue Service has responded favorably to our request to be a 501(c)3 organization under Federal Tax Laws. The ruling was made June 21, 1995 and will allow the New Jersey Lighthouse Society to be recognized as a non-profit educational organization. President Laverty thanks all the individuals who worked diligently to produce the documentation for the application and thanks Rosemary Dixon for putting together the initial application and tracking it through the IRS.

The New Jersey Lighthouse Society also filed with the State of New Jersey to receive a tax number for exemption from sales tax for goods and services purchased by the Society.

NJLHS member on Discovery Channel

NJLHS and MAC member Katherine Von Ahnen, known by Cape May Elementary School students as the “Lighthouse Lady,” will appear on the Discovery Channel on December 13, 1995, at 10:30 a.m. in a program highlighting the Cape May Lighthouse and the two children’s books she has written about it.

The first, Mary Elizabeth and the Cape May Lighthouse, is the story of her mother’s childhood adventures as a ten-year-old living at the lighthouse. The second is The Lighthouse and The Three Little Pigs, a coloring-activity-story book for grades K-3. She is currently writing lighthouse articles for Highlights Magazine.

In September, Katherine flew to Green Bay, Wisconsin, to present hour-long lighthouse programs at four schools in that area. Two schools in Virginia and one in Millville, New Jersey are also scheduled for programs in November.

Of the filming about her life with the lighthouse and her two books, Katherine says: “It was easy to say how I feel about the lighthouse and it was a wonderful opportunity to give credit to the Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts, who came along like Prince Charming to save it, while inspiring me to write the two books that will always be the joy of my life.”

World War II Memories

Last issue The Beam asked our readers to share their memories or experiences from World War II regarding lighthouses or lightships. We received a couple of responses, and as promised, we’re sharing the results.

Member Ed Berryman was getting a free ride to Europe aboard a troopship early in World War II. Its destination (unknown to them) was a port in Scotland.

“While we were still offshore we passed a British Lightship and then another not much later. In each case the little ships were bobbing up and down in the waves and their crews were crowding the rail and waving enthusiastically to us.

“As we approached each vessel they gave us several blasts on their fog sirens. These guys were obviously delighted to see another shipload of Yanks coming. What a welcome! I had a lot of respect for those crews, stationed right out there in u-boat alley like sitting ducks. I still remember the names of those ves-
Lightship Mast Responses
by Kim Ruth

I heard from a number of members regarding the lightship mast on Route 130 in Yardville. Many thanks to Bill Gately, Louis Bender, and Rich Hellenbrecht for enlightening me.

The consensus is that the mast came from Lightship LV53/WAL 501. The lightship was built in 1892 by the J. W. Wheelan Co. of West Bay City, Michigan at a cost of $53,325. LV53 was 119 feet long and weighed 310 tons. She had three sister ships, LV51, LV52, and LV54. LV53 was iron hulled and had two masts with daymarks. The vessel was steam propelled when constructed but in 1906 the propulsion plant was changed to a Murray-Tregurtha kerosene engine. In 1946 she underwent an extensive overhaul at Curtis Bay, Maryland. Her kerosene engines were removed and replaced with a Superior diesel engine.

In 1914, the two masts were replaced by a large diameter lantern mast amidships. It is this replacement mast that is now on Route 130 in a restaurant parking lot.

Mast from Lightship LV53/WAL501
Photo by K. Ruth

LV53 was stationed from 1892-1896 on Frying Pan Shoals, North Carolina. From 1986 to 1996 she was on the Martin’s Industry Station, South Carolina; from 1906 to 1923 she served as a RELIEF vessel in the South Carolina area; from 1923-1933 she was on the Charleston, South Carolina station; In 1933 she...
was again assigned as a RELIEF vessel in the South Carolina area; from 1934-1951 she was on the Stonehorse Shoal station, in Massachusetts. During the war years 1939-1945, she remained on the Stonehorse station, but was given no armament.

LV 53 was decommissioned on June 15, 1951, in Boston and was toed to Cape May, N.J., for final disposition. The vessel was sold on September 15, 1951, for scrap. It is thought that the vessel was dismantled at the North American Salvage Yard in Fieldsboro, N.J.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's the mast was the advertisement for a custard stand that stood on the present site and was called "The Beacon." The custard stand was eventually torn down and Giovi's restaurant was built on the site and continues to operate.

NJLHS - North Tarrytown Meeting
by Yvonne Miller

The society held its Fall Meeting at St. Teresa of Avila's Church Hall in North Tarrytown with 84 members attending. Many members participated in the T-shirt/Sweatshirt Contest. Winners of the three categories were:

Best Commercial: Pat Hospedor
Best Handcrafted: Joy and Ray Vanaman
Best Children's: Justin Penna & Shandon Mandan

The highlight of the meeting was our special guest, Marie Heckemeyer, daughter of the last civilian lighthouse keeper at the North Tarrytown Lighthouse. Marie spoke of experiences growing up in lighthouses on Long Island Sound as well as North Tarrytown. She shared some of her happy and sad memories with us as she answered questions from the audience.

Sue Moga, Assistant Naturalist for Westchester County Parks and Recreation Commission gave us a brief outline of what to expect at Kingsland Park and the lighthouse and we left to meet Chris Letz and Andra Sramek, Lighthouse Tour Guides. Chris and Andra greeted us at the entrance to the park and some of the members walked along the Hudson River while the rest of the group went directly to the lighthouse. Chris took us back in time to when the riverbanks were less inhabited and to winters where one could walk across the ice. We moved along to the lighthouse where we found it much easier access than Marie had experienced living there with her family. Inside the lighthouse, we found Marie sitting at the kitchen table reliving even more memories about her family's life at the North Tarrytown station. Many pictures were taken, and many questions asked before we reluctantly took leave of the lighthouse and our gracious hosts.

Thank you Sue, Andra, Chris and Marie!

Missing a lens filter?
Joan Walton found a 55mm camera filter at the North Tarrytown Light - If it's yours call Kim Ruth at (609) 386-4296 to claim it.

Photo Contest Update!
by Carl Nelson

Our Third Annual Lighthouse Photo Contest is about to begin! Are you ready?

The contest will be held at our March 23rd Meeting at Sea Girt. The closing date for submissions will be Saturday, March 9th. If you are ready you can bring your entries to the December meeting.

This year we are setting up two drop-off points for your convenience. Call the following to make arrangements for delivery:

- Tom Laverty at Twin Lights. Telephone (908) 872-1814.
- Carl Nelson, 50 South Main Street, Unit #2, Medford, NJ 08055. Telephone (609) 953-8368.

Quite frankly, the best and easiest way to submit your photos is to mail them to me at the above address. This worked out very well last year. Be sure to wrap them well with extra cardboard for reinforcement.

Remember that we have added another category this year - "Close-ups of Lighthouses," that is, any part of a lighthouse that you find interesting or descriptive; such as windows, stairways, railings, doors, mechanical parts, etc.

Our judge and speaker will be Ed Hansbury, whom I have known through my camera club experience. Ed has competed in and judged photo competitions for many years. He has lots of photo experience, and I am sure you will enjoy his presentation and critique.

Mounting and Matting Workshop

We plan to have another workshop on mounting and matting. This year it will be held at Twin Lights on Sunday, January 7th from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m.

The workshop last year was well received, and I look forward to another. A sign-up sheet will be available at the December meeting, or call me at (609) 953-8368. If extreme weather prevails, we will hold it the following Sun., Jan. 14th.
The Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen’s Museum is planning to construct the Tuckerton Seaport Village.

The Village is a cooperative effort of museum members, volunteers, corporate sponsors, state and local government and other interested organizations. Plans call for the construction of a replica of the Tucker’s Island Lighthouse (Little Egg Harbor Lighthouse), which will house the Tuckerton Seaport Interpretive Center and include displays of baymen’s tools, decoys, clamming equipment, eel pots, shrimp nets, snapper poles, bird calls and boat and sailmaking equipment. Pictorial histories of boats, ships, decoy makers, ships’ captains and baymen will be displayed along with vintage sneakboxes, garveys, charterboats and sloops.

9th District Legislators, Senator Leonard T. Connors, Jr., Assemblemen Jeff Moran and Christopher Connors have introduced Bills S-1166/A-1188 which provide for the creation of special license plates featuring the Tucker Island Lighthouse. If you are interested in the special license plates, send your name and address and phone to Baymen’s Museum, P.O. Box 52, Tuckerton, NJ 08087. They will advise you if the bills authorizing the plates are approved.

The Baymen’s Museum, in conjunction with the Community National Bank of New Jersey, has created a special Tuckerton Seaport Visa Card which features the Tucker Island Lighthouse on the card. First year membership fee is waived; there is currently a 13.92% A.P.R. and 25 day grace period. In addition, once a year, 1% of your average outstanding balance will be donated to the Barnegat Bay Decoy and Baymen’s Museum, in support of the Tuckerton Seaport Project. Call (609) 869-7900 for further details.

The I.P.P.A. (Inlet Public/Private Association), went before the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority on October 10 to request approximately $518,000 for the reconstruction of the Absecon Lighthouse Keeper’s House, and $450,000 for interior lighthouse restoration.

One usually thinks of toy trains under the Christmas tree, but member Ed Berryman has combined trains and lighthouses. He’s created “Forja Head Lightstation.” The lighthouse is the Old Spice bottle that was produced a few years ago, and Ed drilled a hole through the 1/4” thick glass in the base in order to install the light and wire. The lighthouse now flashes the letter “K” (his grandson’s initial) in Morse code.

Kim Ruth has a couple of HO scale lighthouses, both European in style, one is made by Kibri, number 8254. I’ve long since lost the information on the other. They have been electrified using miniature Christmas tree light flasher bulbs and 9 volt batteries. After a minute of or so of warm up time, the lighthouses actually flash rather realistically. Both lighthouses were purchased from hobby stores specializing in model trains.

You might remember our frequent contributors Ted & Jo Panayotoff. Still NJLHS members, they moved and have been busy running a bed & breakfast in Camden, Maine called The Elms. They have been promoting “Maine Fall Lighthouse Weekends,” which include lodging, some meals, and lighthouse tours. If you get up that way - stop in and say hello. For more information about The Elms or for reservations call (207) 236-6250 or (800) 755-ELMS.

Letter from the Editor
by Kim Ruth

It’s hard to get into the spirit of the coming holiday season when I’m still eating Halloween candy and I haven’t even thought about Thanksgiving turkey yet. This is the final issue of The Beam for the year and my last chance in print to say some of the things I’ve thought and felt this year.

I’ve made many new friends during the past year, and have had the chance to talk to and get to know many more members of NJLHS. We now number around 500 members and we’ve come a long way since our beginning, when we had about eighteen members and I knew each by name. It’s an easy task now to remember everyone’s name or face, let alone the particular areas of pharology that they are interested in. Where once I wondered if the society would develop into anything beside a small group of lighthouse lovers, now I can see that the society has developed a critical mass and continues with an energy from within.

I want to encourage you to share your knowledge and experiences with the rest of us. Our meetings and trips, and of course, The Beam, are perfect vehicles to do just that. I have tried to encourage your contributions to the newsletter. I have been encouraged by your many kind words. We are always looking for items for the newsletter. I have rarely seen a time when I have enough material to fill an issue or two ahead of the current one. Sometimes I have wondered if the next issue would have anything in it at all. It always seems to get done, but it’s only through your contributions that it continues.

Sermon ended, I want to warmly thank the many of you that have shared your stories and reported events for us this past year; George Feiter, Jack and Carol Slavin, Jurgen Tron-
icke, Jack Granger, Ruth Bales, Katherine House, Carol Di-
Napoli, Yvonne Miller, Ed Berryman and Flo Greco to men-
tion a few. Without you, The Beam wouldn't exist.

I know I speak for all of your officers and board members
and the staff of The Beam (my nit-picking, 'roof-reading bet-
ter half Sharon, stamp-lickers Mike, Kevin and Eamonn and
myself), when I wish all of our members a happy, safe and
joyous holiday season. I hope I'll get to know many more of
you in the coming year.

Program Signals
by Yvonne Miller

The December 2, 1995 meeting will be held
in the cafeteria of the Uptown School Complex,
Vermont & Madison Avenues, Atlantic City.
Hospitality will be served from 10:30 a.m. and the business
meeting will begin promptly at 11:00 a.m.

After elections, Felicia Grondin, President of the Inlet
Public/Private Association will give an overall update on the
Absecon Lighthouse restoration. Mr. Michael Henry of Wat-
son & Henry Associates is our guest speaker.

After Mr. Henry's presentation, members can visit the
lighthouse. The New Jersey Park Commission will let us
know approximately two weeks before the meeting whether
we will be able to climb the Absecon Lighthouse. Come pre-
pared to climb. But even if we cannot climb the stairs, we will
be able to go inside the lighthouse. Due to dust and falling
paint chips in the lighthouse, it is suggested that head cov-
erings be worn if you wish to go inside the lighthouse.

Directions to Uptown School Complex:
Take Route 30 East, the White Horse Pike, into Atlantic
City. Follow the signs for the Showboat Casino until you
come to Melrose Avenue. Turn left onto Melrose and con-
tinue to Vermont Avenue. The school will be on the left.
Parking is available in the front and rear of the building.

Spring Meeting:
Will be held at St. Uriel's Episcopal Church, Sea Girt, on
March 23, 1996 at 11:00 a.m. The judge of the photo contest,
Mr. Ed Hansbury, will critique the contest entries and give a
slide presentation. The Sea Girt Lighthouse will be open from
1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Summer Meeting:
Will be on June 22, 1996. Plans are being formulated for
a day at the Concord Point Lighthouse, Harve de Grace, Mary-
land. Further details will appear in the next issue of The Beam.

Fall and Winter Meetings (1996):
Presentation by President Tom Laverty and his staff.

December 7, 1996 - Tentative plans call for a meeting at the
details in next Beam.

Suggestions for future meetings, speakers, etc., are wel-
come and appreciated.