

# BEALS HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



Vol. XV, No. 1 (Winter 2015)

## FIRST QUARTERLY PROGRAM

Beals Historical Society is pleased to announce its first quarterly program for 2015 will be presented by Bill Plaskon, of Jonesport, on the most interesting topic of astronomy. Bill has had a life-long interest in astronomy. He's lectured at schools, science centers, astronomy clubs and Sunrise Senior College and for the past several years, manages membership and data for the Jonesport Historical Society.

Bill explains that since the early 1800's when astronomers began studying our closest star, the sun has been going through a regular 11-year cycle of

minimum and maximum solar activity. The next maximum was supposed to occur in 2011, but it fell way behind schedule. Why should this concern us here on earth? Besides being responsible for aurora borealis displays, solar activity can cause electrical blackouts, damage to satellites, and possibly affect climate change.

Please join us at the Beals Elementary School gym on January 23rd at 6:30PM. Also, BHS would like to extend a special invitation to all students. The program is free to the general public and light refreshments will be served.

## MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL TIME

BHS membership renewal time begins with the New Year! For 2014, membership Chairperson, Eva Faulkingham, reports a total membership of 179 members. This includes 64 life, 5 new, and 110 renewals, which is a 25% increase over

2013! If you wish to renew your 2015 membership, please find and complete the membership application within this newsletter. We hope you have a safe, happy, and healthy New Year! Thank you for your continued support!

## RESCUE AT SOUTHWEST HEAD

*By Timothy Harrison*

One of the most frequently asked questions by visitors to lighthouses is: "Were there any shipwrecks or heroic rescues by this lighthouse?" Those questions might be answered at lighthouses that have caretaker volunteers, but at many other lighthouses those questions would only be heard by the spirits of the lighthouse keepers who have passed on. While each and every lighthouse has its own distinct history, few have an incident that can compare

with one of the most daring rescues in North Atlantic lighthouse history that took place during the bitter cold early morning hours of February 26, 1963 at Southwest Head Lighthouse on the southern end of Canada's Grand Manan Island.

The call came over the island switchboard at 12:36 am when the operator alerted a dozen locals on the island of 2500 inhabitants that lighthouse keeper Ottawa Benson had

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## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

**January 23, 2015**

**@ 6:30PM**

Bill Plaskon speaks on astrology

**March 20, 2015**

**@ 6:30PM**

John McMurray, Kinetic Sculpture

**May 2, 2015**

Talent/Variety Show

**May 25th, 2015**

Memorial Day Program

**June 19, 2015**

TBD

**September 5th or 19th, 2015**

TBD

**October 16th, 2015**

Gospel Concert

*Please mark your calendars  
as we greatly appreciate  
seeing your happy faces!*



issued a call for help.

Ottawa Benson had become the head keeper at Southwest Head in 1955, exactly seventy five years after his great grandfather Walter McLaughlin had become its first keeper in 1880. Benson had previously been stationed for ten years at Machias Seal Island Lighthouse, an island that is claimed by both the United States and Canada, and he was used to having the unexpected happen.

But things were a lot different here at Southwest Head where life was relatively calm, as was evident from a letter that Benson wrote in 1958 to the lighthouse column called "Life at the Light Station" that was published from the 1940s thru the 1960s by the Maine Coast Fisherman, which

later became the National Fisherman. He wrote, "We are still at our post, the fog has not failed to keep us busy; also to interrupt with spring painting. Nevertheless, we are making good headway; and expect to shine with the SUN when she decides to come out. Allison Benson is the assistant keeper here; we both have a car, so we meet the school bus, contract the mail, do our shopping, and feel like we are in circulation. The best of the surf and scream of the seagull is our daily music with the fog horn for bass. This is a home where the deer love to roam and play, chew your garden at night, and pretend they don't see it all day. A pretty

spot for those who are lovers of nature." Perhaps the most exciting thing to have happened in modern times was in 1959 when the old light tower was demolished and a new tower was built, something that probably kept the families of Ottawa Benson and his assistant keeper quite busy during the

said, "Me and my brother's been blown ashore. I got up the bank, but he's still down there." Benson was stunned; he had never known anyone to have ever even attempted to climb the nearly vertical 200-foot cliff. Somehow, probably totally on adrenaline, Billy Jones had done it under the most adverse



*The 1959 Southwest Head Lighthouse as it appeared in 1970.  
Notice the fog horn protruding from the tower.  
(Canadian Coast Guard archives photo courtesy Kelly Anne Loughery.)*

transition. But then life went back to its normal routine.

However, their quiet tranquil life was interrupted in the middle of the night during a snow and sleet storm on February 26, 1963 when Ottawa Benson and his wife Hildred were awakened by thumping at their door.

What they saw when they opened the door was the nearly frozen and battered body of 42-year-old Billy Jones who hailed from Haycock Harbor, Maine. Naturally, at the time they had no idea who this man was and where he had come from. The man, crouched on his hands and knees, covered in snow and barely able to speak, looked up and

of conditions of blowing snow and sleet and 50-mph wind gusts that dropped the wind chill to almost unbearable conditions. It had taken Jones three hours to climb up the cliff and reach the keeper's house. In good conditions this would have been an immense undertaking, but in this weather, it was nothing short of a miracle.

Seventeen men assembled at the lighthouse in response to Benson's call for help. They soon found the spot where Billy Jones had come up. Peering down with flash lights into the darkness of night with its blowing snow, they hollered for Billy's brother, 36-year-old

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Floyd Jones. But no response was heard as the breakers smashed onto the rocks below.

The consensus of most of the men was that any type of nighttime rescue was much too dangerous and that they should wait until daylight. Then a man named Vernon P. Bagley, regarded by some locals as a character of types, who was always poking fun of one thing or another, stepped forward and said that it would be too late if they waited until morning. Bagley, 46, a former fisherman who had taken a safer job ashore as a game warden, was used to working in the elements. So he convinced the men to tie a rope around him, and with a flashlight and extra mittens tucked into his jacket pocket, he slowly began inching his way down the dangerous cliff as the men tightly held the rope. About twelve feet down, slabs of stone slid out from under his feet and the wind pushed jagged rocks into him. He panicked and hollered to be pulled back up.

As the men again debated about what to do, Bagley suddenly changed his mind and demanded to be lowered again and the rescue started all over. On his descent, Bagley nearly lost his life on several occasions, from a combination of falling rocks, a line that got tangled on the roots of fallen trees, and hypothermia was setting in. When he finally reached Floyd Jones, he found that the semi-conscious man was nearly frozen from the waist down and couldn't use his legs. So Bagley wrapped the injured man's arms around him, and tied the rope as tight as he could, and signaled to be pulled up. At first they dangled in space until they reached an area where, with Bagley's one arm holding Jones and his other arm grabbing and pulling at rocks and his feet pushing up on each tiny

rocky outcropping, up they went. The rope was straining and the men above struggled with pulling the weight of the two men to the top. Bagley recalled later that the rope was pulling so tightly around his waist that he thought he was going to be sliced in half. Finally, with only twenty-five feet to go, he was too



Lighthouse keeper Ottawa Benson is shown here lighting the lamp in the tower at Southwest Head Lighthouse before it was to be discontinued the next day and replaced by the new lighthouse tower. Ottawa Benson passed away at the age of 75 on December 13, 1982. He had spent nearly 30 years of his life as a lighthouse keeper. (Photo taken by Elmer Wilcox, Lighthouse Digest archives.)

exhausted to continue and wedged Jones into a crevice and Bagley was pulled to the top. Ninety minutes had gone by.

Then assistant lighthouse keeper Sid Guptill was lowered for the final phase of the rescue, which, after some difficulty, was accomplished. As Floyd Jones was pulled to the top of the embankment, the men, with great joy and excitement, soon realized that Jones was still alive and covered him in coats in preparation for transport to the hospital. In the meantime the exhausted Bagley, who had dropped to the ground in exhaustion when he had originally reached the top, got back up and staggered back over to the edge and looked down in disbelief at what he had just been through and

accomplished. With his legs unable to hold himself up, two of the other men helped him to the car for the trip to the hospital.

The next day at the hospital Billy Jones could not recall how he had made the climb, except to say that he believed that the strong wind blowing at his back must have kept him from falling back down the cliff as he climbed up. His brother Floyd could only recall when Bagley had first reached him and shook him awake. He said that Bagley's hand felt like a hot iron on his cold body.

One year later 300 people gathered at the high school gym on Grand Manan for a ceremony where Vern Bagley was awarded the Carnegie Silver Medal for Heroism and Sid Guptill was awarded the Carnegie Bronze Medal for Heroism. The March, 1968 edition of Readers Digest gave an in-depth detailed account of the rescue in a story titled Up the Cliff, and a song, Southern Head Rescue, was written about the event.

With the exception of Machias Seal Island Lighthouse, because there are no longer any lighthouse keepers stationed at lighthouses, the rescue of those in distress at lighthouses may never again have the same glorious outcome.





# BEALS HERITAGE CENTER

## BEALS HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Please check one:  Renewal  New      Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Name(s) as you wish it to appear on membership card and member roll on website:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
*(Please type or print clearly)*

Your mailing address:

Street or Post Office Box: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

### TYPE OF MEMBERSHIP

*(Please review all types and check the one that applies)*

- |  |                        |  |                 |
|--|------------------------|--|-----------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Annual | \$10 Annually          | <input type="checkbox"/> Senior/65 Annual        | \$5 annually    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual/Life   | \$200 one-time payment | <input type="checkbox"/> Senior couple/65 Annual | \$7.50 annually |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Couple Annual     | \$15 Annually          | <input type="checkbox"/> Student                 | \$5 annually    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Couple/Life       | \$300 one-time payment |  |                 |

Over and above dues, I wish to donate \_\_\_\_\_

for \_\_\_\_\_ operating expenses, \_\_\_\_\_ building fund, or \_\_\_\_\_ endowment fund.

Receipt and membership card will be sent to you.

**Instructions:** Please print, complete and mail this application, together with tax-deductible check or money order payable to Beals Historical Society to:

*Membership Chairperson,  
 Beals Historical Society,  
 P.O. Box 280, Beals, ME 04611*

*Annual memberships are for the calendar year and expire December 31st.*