

## **Kenneth N. Black, “Mr. Lighthouse,” Is Lost**

### **In Memory Ken Black**

**June 29, 1923 - January 28, 2007**

With his family and close friends around him, the man known around the world as “Mr. Lighthouse,” and founder of the Maine Lighthouse Museum, CWO Kenneth Black, (USCG Retired) passed away peacefully at the Penobscot Bay Medical Center Hospital in Rockport, Maine, on Sunday, January 28 at the age of 82.

Black is largely credited as being one of the principle founders of the lighthouse preservation movement in the United States, and the first person to have a national newsletter about lighthouses, which always ended with his personal comments and the statement, “Be neighborly,” a philosophy that he was known to live by.

Born on June 29, 1923, Black was a Coast Guard veteran of World War II and he saw action at the invasion of Okinawa. After the war served throughout New England and the Great Lakes in various capacities including, being OIC at the Point Allerton, Massachusetts Life Boat Station; Commanding Officer of a lightship; Group Commander of the Quoddy Head Coast Guard Station in Lubec, Maine; Commander of the Coast Guard Cutter OJIBWA and he finished his over 32-year Coast Guard career as Commanding Officer of the Rockland, Maine, Coast Guard Station.

His interest in saving lighthouse artifacts began when he realized that many items were being discarded as automation changed the way lighthouses had been operating since the late 1700’s. He first created an exhibit at the base of Boston Lighthouse in the 1960’s, an exhibit that is still there to this day. As well as being the first Coast Guardsman to decorate a lighthouse at Christmastime, he started the First Marine Exhibit at the Rockland Coast Guard Station, which evolved into the largest collection of lighthouse lenses and equipment in America. By the time he had retired from the Coast Guard in 1973 he was the official curator of the First Coast Guard District.

When the collection at the Rockland Coast Guard base outgrew its quarters, it moved to the Shore Village Museum building on Limerock Street in Rockland, Maine and Black spent the next 30 years traveling all over New England searching out artifacts. While doing so, many people heard what he was doing and stepped forward to help and donated other artifacts. Some artifacts were easy to get to the museum, while others such as priceless Frensel lenses or fog bells and foghorns weighing thousands of pounds were more difficult.

Two years ago the gigantic collection, through the help of civic-minded community leaders, moved to its new headquarters on the Rockland waterfront in a recently renovated building where it was renamed the Maine Lighthouse Museum. Although Ken

slowed down a bit in recent months, he was still active in many community events and the ongoing development of the new Maine Lighthouse Museum. He was present just a few weeks ago for the press conference announcing the consolidation of the collection of the American Lighthouse Foundation's Museum of Lighthouse History. That merger will now create the largest lighthouse museum in the United States as well as being a Mecca for lighthouse buffs and an important Maine tourist attraction.

Black made famous the phrase that he coined, "Lighthouses are like people, they come in many different sizes, shapes and colors," which was also the title of his popular slide presentation that he proudly presented an estimated thousand times, while always promoting the importance of lighthouse preservation.

Although retired for many years, Ken spent many long hours every week in the last thirty-five years volunteering his services to the lighthouse community and other worthwhile causes such as the Salvation Army, Rotary, Shriners and the American Lighthouse Foundation. He received countless awards such as the Coast Guard 'Public Service Commendation,' the Harbour Lights 'Lifetime Achievement' award, the Lighthouse Digest, 'Beacon of Light' award, and the American Lighthouse Foundation's 'Keeper of the Light' Award, to name a few. Even a book about life after retirement included a full chapter about Ken Black.

When the United States Coast Guard wanted to honor him at the dedication last year of the CWO Kenneth Black Exhibition Hall at the Maine Lighthouse Museum, they couldn't find an award to honor him with because he had already been honored over the years with every award or honor the Coast Guard has to offer. But not to let that stop them, the Guard arranged for a special honor to be given to him by the Foundation for Coast Guard History for his saving of hundreds of artifacts that might otherwise have been lost forever. At that time he was also honored with special commendations from The Maine State Legislature, the Maine State Senate, the Governor of Maine, The City of Rockland, Lighthouse Digest Magazine, various Coast Guard units, the United States Congress and the one that he loved the best was the special personal recognition from the President of the United States, George W. Bush.

Black was also proud of the fact that his wife Dot serves as President of the Friends of Rockland Breakwater Lighthouse, a chapter of the American Lighthouse Foundation and he loved it when friends would call his wife, "Mrs. Lighthouse."

During retirement, Black and his wife lived happily in Union, Maine, away from the ocean. Black said, that other than the in-ground swimming pool in his backyard, he tried to stay away from the water as much as possible because he spent so many years on the water that he preferred the land life of the green rolling hills where he loved the wild birds that he kept well supplied with food. In later years he would only go on the water for fund raising cruises for lighthouse preservation or to visit a lighthouse.

Tim Harrison, president of the American Lighthouse Foundation, said that Black knew

more about the mechanics of vintage lighthouse equipment than anyone, anywhere. Fortunately, for the sake of future generations, Black recorded on film a number of tapes where he explained what each artifact in the collection was used for and why it was used.

Harrison went on to say, “Ken Black never did any of this for personal recognition or gain, he did it because it was the right thing to do. He felt it was vital to save lighthouse artifacts to help future generations learn why lighthouses and the people who kept them played such an important role in the development of our nation into being a world leader. He was proud of what he accomplished, yet he was very humble about it, in fact he used to be almost embarrassed when he was honored.”

But more importantly said Harrison, “We have all lost a man who served his nation well, served his community well, served his family well, and was a friend to so many people whose lives he touched in many different ways. He will be greatly missed, but we will never let his legacy be forgotten, a legacy that will live forever at the Maine Lighthouse Museum.”

Black leaves behind a wife Dorothy (Dot), stepson Joe and his wife Wanda, stepson Jim, and his wife Franny, and his grandsons Keegan, Travis and Christopher.

A wake will be held on Wednesday, January 31 from 2 PM to 4 PM and from 6 PM to 8 PM at the Burpee, Carpenter & Hutchins Funeral Home, 110 Limerock Street, in Rockland, Maine. The funeral home is directly next door to what was once the Shore Village Museum where Ken Black’s lighthouse collection was housed for 30 some years before it moved to the new Maine Lighthouse Museum on the city’s waterfront.

The funeral service will held at the Maine Lighthouse Museum in Rockland on Thursday, February 1 at 11 AM.

In lieu of flowers the family has asked that donations be made to the One Hundred Million Dollar Club of the Shriners or to the Maine Lighthouse Museum, P.O. Box F, Rockland, ME 04841.

Sympathy cards can be sent to, Dot Black, 174 Sennebec Rd., Union, ME 04862