



KELLY'S CORNER

by Jan Kelly

Breeches-Buoy Drill



Burying the
under sand
anchor.



The crotch
pole is raised



Maneuvering
the lyle gun
into position



US Coast
Guard
life-saving
surf boat

The National Park Service, The National Seashore locally, has many programs, walks and lectures for the edification of tourists and locals alike. They are listed in local papers and other seasonal publications. They are all enjoyable and interesting and are either free, or charge a moderate fee. After all the food and fun of a summer day, it's not too bad to put the gray matter to work. It's easy to learn, the information is presented well and the staff of the National Park Service is well-trained. Many are teachers by profession and most have a consuming interest in the material and subject matter they present. We locals know many of them personally, so we know just how good they are. Check the schedule, decide which program interests you and enjoy the sincere presentation while learning.

One of the most interesting, entertaining and interactive programs is the Breeches-Buoy Demonstration. This is a method used for saving crewmen one at a time from doomed ships. The method, developed by American ingenuity was practiced from 1902 to 1962. It was adopted by France and England necessitating bilingual instructions. The drill was practiced every Sunday by the Surfman and Keeper with friends and families visiting for the day, assisting in the cleanup of the drill. Tourists offer that assistance now at the weekly reenactment of the Breeches-Buoy Drill which is held every Thursday of the summer season at the Race Point Beach Lifesaving Station at 6pm. This is a historically correct demonstration which will take you to an era when the ingenuity of the human race was all important. From Peaked Hill Bars to Chatham there are more than 3,000 shipwrecks on record. The *Sparrowhawk* carrying early settlers was the first on record, 1626. The ship was bound for a Virginia settlement, but met with disaster in Orleans. It is recorded in Governor Bradford's diary. The ribs of the *Sparrowhawk* resurfaced in 1863 pinpointing the location of the wreck and affirming Bradford's diary. The British frigate *Somerset* is also of note. The *Somerset* was a British man-of-war which fired at Bunker Hill, Charlestown, patrolled and terrorized the coast and was a subject in the poem "Paul Revere's Ride". It was November 2-3rd, 1778 that the Peaked Hill Bars trapped the *Somerset* and held her as the seas pounded her to destruction as a northeast gale blew. 480 men perished without a hope. An impressive array of artillery was lost. The tide and waves finally heaved and pushed the ship onto the shore. The Captain and a small number of crewmen were saved. They were freed from a merciless sea and storm to be immediately imprisoned by the militia led by Colonel Doane of Wellfleet. They were marched to Boston. The shoals and bars swallowed up the derelict *Somerset*. A century later it's ribs were exposed again. In 1978, two centuries later, the ribs were exposed for a third time. Storms and shifting sands allowed us to view the remains of a 200 year old shipwreck.

The *Widdah* as it was spelled, was another terrible loss of life. That was 1718 in the area of Cahoon's Hollow and in October 1841, the town of Truro lost seven ships in one storm. Fifty seven men were lost from that small town and Truro became known as a town of widows and orphans. We live by an ocean graveyard, 25 miles out to sea with "ribbons of sand and shoals and ships are like minnows in a tidal pool." Drowning and hypothermia have claimed unac-

continued on page 23

continued from page 22

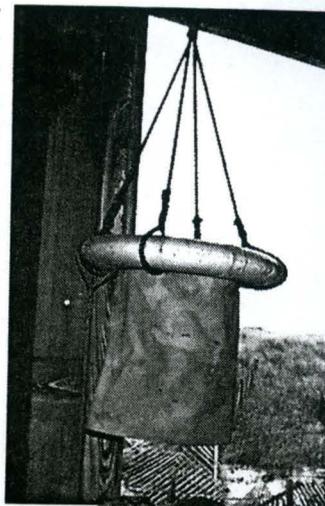
countable sailors through the centuries and while Native American and early settlers assisted and aided as they could, against the forces of nature isolated and independent individuals could do little, organization was needed.

Beginning in 1786, the Humane Society, a volunteer group based in Boston, build small shelters along the outer Cape to deal with the problem of shipwrecks and their survivors. A small stove, firewood, matches, dry clothing and some food were placed in each shelter. They were checked and replenished regularly but the Humane Society, being a volunteer organization, could not be asked to continue this daunting task. In 1871, Congress passed a bill to establish the U.S. Lifesaving Service and in 1872 the Department of the Treasury Fund had constructed and staffed nine stations from Monomoy to Race Point. Four more stations were added at a later date. The architecturally dramatic "Old Harbor" where the Breeches-Buoy Drill takes place was built in 1897-98 in the "Duluth" style, the original style of the Great Lakes stations. Originally at Chatham, the "Old Harbor" was moved by barge to Provincetown in the winter of 1977-78. If she had not been moved, the Blizzard of '78 would have claimed the lifesaving station as it had claimed many ships.

With the establishment of the lifesaving service in 1872, perils at sea were dealt with in a more organized manner. They were paid, \$900 a year for the Keeper, \$65 a month for each of the Surfmen for 10 months. June and July were off months when they lived in town, but were on call in case a freak storm broke the summer calm. August 1st, the eight men reported for work. There were amenities - cots and a wood stove. They took turns as cook. They had four hour shifts as they patrolled the dunes edge. They walked five miles to the nearest emergency shelter, punched a clock or

exchanged tags to prove they gone the distance and were ever on the lookout for a disaster at sea. If they spotted a vessel in peril they shot a flare with the cry "ship ashore!" and then the work began.

Depending on location, wind velocity, distance, fetch of the waves, a decision had to be made. Surf boats or Breeches-Buoy? The keeper and four men would go out in the strong, relatively light, surf boats, 800-1,000 lbs. Five survivors could be transported each trip, the preferable method. But if the seas were too treacherous the beach apparatus of Breeches-Buoy was used. The prime objective was to save lives., The motto of these brave Surfmen was "you have to go out, but you don't have to come back". They were brave, but not foolhardy. A lyle gun - a 163 lb bronze cannon was loaded with 1 1/2 lbs of black powder and an 18 lb projectile was shot at the ship in trouble. The mast was aimed for; if the masts were down, the crew secured the pro-



Above: the Breeches Buoy
Below: The lyle gun

continued on page 24

7/27/00 Provincetown Magazine • Vol 23.16 23

continued from page 23

jectile and followed the instructions which were written on attached placards in French and English. The ship would set-up while the Surfmen prepared performing an often drilled maneuver in actuality. Five minutes was the allotted time. Lives had to be saved. What you will see will be less stressful and may be in sunlight. Storm conditions or nighttime is how it usually was, keep this in mind as you watch the drill and drama will be stronger.

The dramatization of Keeper and 8 Surfmen is theatre and history. The Keeper in cap and dark blue costume of the day introduces himself to the group. We were 140 strong and not crowded. Ramps and bleachers accom-



The Keeper

modate the group.

"Hezekiah Doane of Chatham, 56 years old, twenty two as keeper, thirteen as surfman, married with 2 sons and sixty five years old at retirement". The Keeper is the overall supervisor of the station, the drills and the rescues. The eight Surfmen (plus women these days) line up and introduce themselves: "Good evening sir! Surfman Pierce of Chatham" Family status, age and specific duties of the Breeches-Buoy Drill follow.

"Good evening sir! Edward Ellis of Brewster." All eight give their details. The Captain tells us that all these pieces of the jigsaw puzzle will fall into place. the only difference in this antique reenactment

is that one Surfman is posted on the high dune to warn ORV's of the drill. The Keeper barks orders, the Surfmen respond. The "anchor", two crossed attached boards is buried six feet in the sand, that is after the the Surfmen shovel the hole. The shot line box, the faking box of inert pegs is checked. "No knots!" Crucial to the procedure, the crotch pole is raised. Two Surfmen climb to represent sailors waiting for rescue. The life ring with short pants (breeches) attached is strung up with a lee line and a weather line. (Same system as a clothes line.) The hawser, cat's paw and block & tackle is set. Setting tension is all tested and set. The Keeper yells, "Ready!" and we in the audience and the Surfmen and the Keeper all cover our ears. The powder is lit in the lyle gun and BANG! What a blast. We didn't realize that such a small cannon could cause such a blast. The projectile hit the crotch pole. The Surfmen pulled the weather line out. The first survivor slipped into the life ring of short pant legs and down he came to us, rescued. The drill was repeated, the second man saved. The under sand anchor held, the lines were knot free. Everybody cheered. I don't think anyone realized how caught up they were in a piece of history. Originally American, this method of saving lives has been used all over the world. It was used at Race Point the last time in 1962 when a local fishing boat encountered trouble.

Those who wished were invited to help in the clean-up and most wanted to help. The life saving station was opened for others to browse, to the person we were impressed.

You can experience and enjoy this dramatization of beach apparatus drills each Thursday of the season at 6pm. The fee is \$3 for adults, \$1 for seniors, under 16 years of age are free. You will enjoy it, you will learn, you will be impressed and your money will go for the continuation of the teaching of local history.