

Half Staff – Gene C. “Shorty” Lesch

October 16, 1999

Gene C. “Shorty” Lesch, 78, husband of June W. (Walker) Lesch of Bearskin Neck, Rockport, died on Saturday, Oct. 16, at the Addison Gilbert Hospital. He was born in Jamaica Plain on Aug. 19, 1921, to the late Hans C. and Catherine (McCormack) Lesch.

Mr. Lesch first came to Rockport at age 14, working for the late Orin Poole on his farm.

He joined the National Guard, 1st Platoon, A Company, 101st Infantry, Yankee Division, in 1939. In 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Sgt. Gene Lesch was assigned to Cape Ann in charge of setting up advanced command and lookout posts in Rockport and Gloucester.

After additional training in the United States, Sgt. Lesch was sent overseas. He was seriously wounded in action in France following D-Day. He was discharged from the U.S. Army in 1945 and received the Bronze Star, Purple Heart and Combat Infantry Badge.

Following World War II, Mr. Lesch returned to Rockport and apprenticed with Lewis Whitney as a metal craftsman at the Pewter Shop on Bearskin Neck.

Mr. Lesch and his wife June later opened their own shop on Bearskin Neck, “The Weathervane”, which they operated for 20 years. His hand-crafted pewter designs were sold to customers throughout the United States and overseas. He was an active member of the Bearskin Neck Association.

Mr. Lesch also lobstered off Rockport in his boat, Pot Luck. He ran the sailboat races for the Sandy Bay Yacht Club for many years. He and his boat were used in the “Harbormaster” series filmed in Rockport in the late 1950s starring Barry Sullivan and Paul Burke.

He became a member of the Rockport Forest Fire Department in the late '40s and served until 1960.

When the Rockport Sea Scouts were founded, he served as its skipper for 20 years.

He also served the town of Rockport as a member of the Rockport Housing Authority.

Mr. Lesch became harbormaster of Rockport and served for 21 years. In 1971, he received the Don Brown award for his participation in a rescue off Gull Island in Rockport. In 1976, he was made an honorary small boat coxswain by the U.S. Coast Guard. He was named Harbormaster of the Year in 1982 by the Mass. Lobstermen’s Association.

Following his retirement in 1985, he was presented with a life membership by the Sandy Bay Yacht Club.

He was also a charter member of the Edward Peterson Post No. 98, Rockport American Legion.

In his free time, he and his wife enjoyed traveling, especially to Puerto Rico and Florida. He also enjoyed working as a yacht salesman for Eastern Yacht Sales and was a crew member aboard the fishing vessel

Ocean Reporter.

Mr. Lesch is survived by his wife of 53 years, June; a sister, Thelma Crocker; a daughter Judith, wife of Stephen Davis, of Rockport; two sons, Roger, husband of Rosemary Lesch, of Rockport, and Scott, husband of Arlene Lesch, of Gloucester; five grandchildren, Thomas Lesch and Rachel Lesch, both of Gloucester, Jill Davis, Sven Davis and Story Reed, all of Rockport; and great-grandchildren, Ian Weller, Zachary Silverman and Jacob Silverman, all of Rockport.

A memorial service will be held in the Sandy Bay Yacht Club on T-Wharf, Rockport, on Sunday Oct. 31 at 11 a.m. Family members and friends are invited to attend. Contributions may be made in his memory to the Rockport Ambulance Department Gift Fund, c/o Rosemary Lesch, 39 School St., Rockport, MA 01966 or to the Rockport Harbor Department Gift Fund, 37 Broadway, Rockport, MA 01966.

Retired Rockport harbormaster Lesch was a big presence

By Michelle Morrissey, Gloucester Daily Times

If you had a problem, you went to see Shorty. If you wanted to see a friendly face, you saw Shorty.

That's what many boat captains, fishermen, lobstermen and nearly all other mariners who passed Cape Ann used to say about former Harbormaster Gene "Shorty" Lesch, according to his friend, Bill Lee.

Lesch, 78, who patrolled Rockport's waters for more than 20 years, died Saturday.

"There's no marine traveler who hasn't met Shorty or knows of Shorty," Lee said.

Lesch, whom some credited as responsible for developing Rockport's waterfront, was Rockport's harbormaster from 1964 to 1985.

Lesch, a decorated World War II veteran, also served with the Rockport Forest Fire Department from the late 1940s until 1960.

In addition to working as the town's harbormaster, Lesch and his wife also operated The Weathervane pewter shop for 20 years, up until the early '80s. The couple lived on Bearskin Neck for more than 50 years.

"He loved Rockport as much as any native and maybe more than some," said Roger Martin, local historian and author.

Martin first met up with Shorty and June Lesch in 1953.

"I was away for 11 years," Martin said. "He and June took me under their wings when I was at loose ends."

Martin said he and Lesch served as deputy forest fire wardens, and fought many fires together.

For his extended family, Lesch's hard work in Rockport's waters are what they will remember most.

“He is the reason I’m doing what I’m doing today,” said Rosemary Lesch, his daughter-in-law and Rockport’s co-harbormaster.

Rosemary said she worked as a patrol boat operator with Shorty in the early ’70s, and then became assistant harbormaster in the ’80s.

“I’m very proud of what my father did,” said Roger Lesch, who is now a patrolman with the Rockport Police Department. “He did a lot of things for different people.”

Lesch recounted the story of a 3 a.m. rescue many years ago, where he, his brother and father all went out to rescue a boat that had hit the breakwater. The rescue was successful.

“We joked that the whole clan was going to be involved with rescues like that one,” he said.

Shorty Lesch worked on Lee’s boat, The Ocean Reporter, and Lee called the harbormaster “extremely overcautious.”

“He was safety minded, with real on-the-job training,” Lee said. “If it was rough weather or clam weather, he had that sixth sense of where he was and what he was doing. It was pure salt in his blood, as far as the commercial fishermen are concerned.”

“There are hundreds of stories about Shorty,” Rosemary said. “Different rescues we’ve worked on that seemed impossible at the time, but we got through them.”

One rescue she remembered was when the boat Salad Days went up on the outer breakwater, and its passengers had to be rescued. Although the boat sank within minutes, everyone on board was saved.

She said in an era when women were not always considered tough enough to work public safety jobs, Lesch went against the common misconception.

“He gave me the opportunity to prove differently, in a time when men weren’t always open to females working a job like this one,” she said.

Martin said he remembers the friendly, jovial side of Shorty Lesch.

Not only did Martin enjoy the Lesch’s food and hospitality, but also their television in the early years of their friendship.

“They were one of the few people I knew who had television. I was fascinated by this new medium,” Martin said. So fascinated, in fact, that often the Leschs would head upstairs to bed before their guest left for the evening.

“That was the kind of relationship we had. They’d get up and say ‘shut off the television and lock the door on your way out,’” Martin said. “You don’t find those kind of people in everyday life.”

Lesch weathered both controversy and praise during his tenure as Rockport’s harbormaster. In 1980, Lesch was the subject of controversy over the assignment of harbor floats and was charged with misusing his authority.

But not only did selectmen exonerate Lesch, they issued a letter commending the job he was doing.

In 1984, two Pigeon Cove lobstermen sued Lesch, saying he selectively enforced marine regulations against them. That suit was settled out of court in 1987.

He retired in 1985.

“People didn’t always like what he did,” Rosemary said. “But he always did what he thought was best for the town of Rockport.”

She said Lesch shared with her his knowledge about the water, search and rescue, management skills, and the chance to become one of the first female harbormasters.

A memorial service for Lesch will be held on Sunday, Oct. 31, at 11 a.m., at the Sandy Bay Yacht Club.

Rosemary Lesch said the ceremony will be less a somber religious ceremony, and more of a chance for people to come and share their stories about knowing Shorty Lesch with friends and family members.

“There are hundreds of thousands of stories out there,” Rosemary said.