

Sea Coast Mission artist passes away

BAR HARBOR — Ruth Lepper Gardner, a renowned artist from Southport who served as the artist-in-residence at the Maine Sea Coast Mission during the 1940s, passed away last month, at Cove's Edge in Damariscotta.

Ms. Gardner spent many hours aboard the Sea Coast Mission's boat Sunbeam III, visiting Maine islands and capturing island life through hundreds of pen-and-ink drawings. Her drawings were used for Mission publications, including annual reports and Christmas bulletins.

In 1940, Ms. Gardner illustrated the book, "Anchor to Windward" written by Edwin Valentine Mitchell. The work shares the story of the Maine Sea Coast Mission.

In 2009, Ms. Gardner celebrated her 104th birthday aboard the Sunbeam V in Boothbay Harbor where staff from the Mission had a chance to thank her for her contributions. Ms. Gardner enjoyed looking at her drawings. There were depictions of Matinicus Island, Burnt Island Light, lobster boats, docks, wharfs, and many other illustrations of long-ago coastal Maine life. Her drawings are now preserved in the Mission's archives.

Martha DeTurrís, daughter of Rev. Neal D. Bousfield, the Maine Sea Coast Mission's superintendent from 1938 to 1972, recalls a time in 1939 when she was 5 years old aboard Sunbeam III. "My deepest memory of Ruth Lepper Gardner came the day Sunbeam III was launched in Damariscotta. It was winter, the water was rough, and the Sunbeam III was not in ballast. She rolled so badly all on board held their breaths as she leaned nearly on her side as she went way to port, then way to starboard, over and over and over. Miss Lepper and I were in my dad's cabin. I was put on my dad's bunk and securely tucked in. Miss

Lepper, who was a bit short in stature, perhaps about 5 feet, 3 inches, tried to keep the door of the cabin closed so that water would not come in. She had a bit of a struggle to keep her back securely pressed to the bunk, while one leg at a time was firmly braced against the closed cabin door.

"She was a most determined lady to do as she thought was needed. She never said a word about how tired one leg and then the other became as she had to stretch a bit to reach the door. We

made it to North Haven intact and I remained dry, thanks to Miss Lepper."

On May 15, 2004, Ms. Lepper Gardner received the Distinguished Achievement Award for her life's work from the University of Southern Maine, recognizing more than 60 years of drawing the Maine coast.

"The Maine Sea Coast Mission is very appreciative of Ruth's drawings that help preserve the Mission's history," spokeswoman Sarah Clemens said.



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SEA COAST MISSION

Gary DeLong, former Maine Sea Coast Mission executive director, with Ruth Lepper Gardner, in Boothbay Harbor on the Sunbeam V. He is admiring the detail on a sketch she drew for the Maine Sea Coast Mission.