

THE CAPE CODDER • NOVEMBER 18, 2005

Cape Experience

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It was 20 years ago this week that the Provincetown Monument was lit up with more than 4,000 lights, highlighting the already-proud Cape-tip landmark for a six-week stretch during the holiday season.

"The whole town embraced this, from the kids to the elderly and everybody in between," marvels Provincetown Chamber of Commerce executive Candy Collins-Boden of that first night when the lights went on. "The first night that this was going to be lit, they were holding their breath, going, 'We can't believe this ... we can't believe this!' ... and when it came on, you could hear this 'AAAAAAHHHH!!!' all over town. The boats in the harbor were blowing their horns ... the cars in the parking lots were blowing their horns ..."

The fever pitch expectations will be alive again Wednesday at 6 p.m., as the Monument Lighting celebrates its 20th anniversary, along with the feat of a community coming together to showcase this towering spectacle that can be seen from all over the Cape and even as far away as Boston. Members of both



Let there be light

away as Boston. Members of the Provincetown Chamber and the Monument Museum have all had a hand in organizing this festive event that has left this center of diversity and gala activities positively ga-ga over two decades. These two organizations have been doing all the work, although they will be taking bids for electricians to do the work beginning in 2006.

John Kaschak was working with the chamber for the first event, and he still raves about the wide range of personalities that turned out to make this a reality.

"We had Portuguese fishermen working with hip-hop lesbians, and becoming good friends!" Kaschak marvels. "It was really great – that was the heartwarming thing for me – seeing all the people working together."

Kaschak recalls that, in 1985, Nantucket was advertising for its annual Christmas Walk, and a small group of Provincetown locals figured they had to come up with a way to draw people to the lands-end part of the Cape. Kaschak's house is located in the monument's shadow, and he enlisted the help of neighbors Artie Martinez, the electrician for the project, and Manny Martin. "Without even seeing it, we said we were going to do it," Kaschak recalls.

The first lighting was set up by the core group of Collins-Boden, Kaschak, Martin, Martinez, and T. Gandolfo. Martinez and a crew from Quahog Electric have been doing the electrical work ever since, but Martinez says this will be his last hurrah. His 8-year-old son, Jonathan, will be throwing the switch next Wednesday.

Provincetown celebrates 20 years of Pilgrim Monument illumination Wednesday

The first few years proved to be trying times for the crew of volunteers, even though donations began to pour in after the Provincetown Monument's Board of Directors OK'd the project. One of the first hurdles to clear was to figure out how many lights and how much cable would be needed, and Kaschak came up with a pretty simple equation. "The Christmas tree is as tall as it

is wide, and believe it or not, the height of this monument (252 feet) is twice as tall as the perimeter of this grass from one side to the other," he said, pointing to the grounds surrounding the tower. "It was incredible how lucky we were."

Extending the season and brightening up Provincetown as winter approached were the goals of the group. The lit monument may indeed look like a Christmas tree, but the Thanksgiving theme plays more of a role in the celebration, says longtime crew member Mick Rudd. After all, the Pilgrims first settled in Provincetown, established and signed the Mayflower Compact here, and saw the first birth and death in the new world, before moving on across the bay to Plymouth.

"It's important to remember that it not be confused with Christmas lights," Rudd asserts. "We light the monument to commemorate the first landing of the Pilgrims here and to commemorate Thanksgiving, in a sense, but it is not holiday lighting. It is not associated with any religious holiday, per se."

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The Pilgrim Monument, adorned with lights, glows under the full moon in Provincetown.

Photo by Jeffory Morris



Experience THE LIGHTING OF THE PILGRIM MONUMENT

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It's related to the mission of the monument itself – the *Pilgrim Monument*.”

Adventure was a key factor in the early years. Newspaper photographs from 1987 show Kaschak hanging on to the edge of the metal cages atop the tower, with the wind making the experience all the more hazardous. “That was pretty hairy,” Collins-Boden recalls. The wind speeds pick up as altitude increases, and that made for a rather humorous moment one November when Rudd and a group of volunteers were pulling the strands of lights up and down from the ground by way of a pulley system they had devised, when tourists were coming out on to the observatory area.

“They came out and saw these guys bent over, doing this incredible task, and they said, ‘What are you doing?’” Rudd recalls. “I turned around and I said, ‘Well, in the winter, it gets really windy up here, and we sort of like to tie her down so it doesn’t blow over.’ They believed it – they were gone in about 30 seconds.”

The wind can also be a problem when stringing the lights, because a loose cable is “like a whip,” Collins-Boden explains. “Once one goes, it kills all the lights on the other one. If it hits it, it wipes the other lights out. Several times over the years, we had to let three, four, or five strands down and



Above: Eight of the many members of the Pilgrim Monument lighting crew assemble at the base of the Provincetown landmark. From left: Manny Martin, E.J. Martinez, Jonathan Martinez, John Kaschak, Bill Maher, Susan Avellar, Mick Rudd and Candy Collins-Boden.

Left: Jonathan Martinez, 8, will throw the switch on Wednesday’s lighting of the Pilgrim Monument.

Staff photos by Don Wilding



“We had Portuguese fishermen working with hip-hop lesbians, and becoming good friends! It was really great –

then do them again. If you have a free cable, it's breaking a lot of lights."

Looking like they were tying down the tower is indicative of how much work is involved here. Imagine the headaches involved with your own Christmas lights and then multiply it by an extraordinary number. "You have to put a new bulb in every single socket, and you have to make sure they all work," Collins-Boden explains. "We used to have little washers and bulbs, and we had to wrap each one in electrical tape – but now it's much better than that. They've got it down to a science."

Bill Maher explained how the procedure works – and how some unexpected help sometimes makes its way into the picture.

"We would drop a rope down with a barbell weight on the end of it so it wouldn't fly away, and then we would take the weight off, and hook the strand of lights, and when we pulled the lights up, someone would have to go down and bring the weight up," Maher says. "So I watched this young kid do it six or seven times, and I felt bad for him. I said, 'Listen, you take it easy – I'll go down and get the weight. So I started coming down all the steps, and as I'm coming down, I see a kid on every landing – I got the weight and took it back, and these kids had already set up a network, where they did a relay – one flight of steps at a time. I thought it was the kid at the top who was running up and down the whole time."

Next week's lighting is actually the 22nd lighting since 1985 – the monument was lit twice in 1995 (for the town's 375th anniversary) and again in 2001 (for 9/11). The monument was also lit in the 1950s, with fewer lights that also happened to be much larger.

The work has been hard, but the town has backed up the volunteer workers; restaurants have sent up sandwiches; and stores have provided all kinds of refreshments. Several volunteers have come and gone; many of the volunteers' kids grew up working on the monument; some crew members have passed away in recent years. Collins-Boden's father, Fred Collins, died this past year, as did Peter Santos.

"Whenever it's lit, I look at it and think of the people that have helped with it, and they're not here anymore," Collins-Boden says. "It's kind of cool – it's for them. They're the stars at the top."

So when Wednesday night rolls around, the memories will come back to everyone involved ... for Candy Collins-Boden ... Manny Martin ... Artie Martinez ... John Kaschak ... and so many others. All those days and nights ... all that work ... and then comes 6 p.m., when Jonathan Martinez throws the switch.

"That moment that the switch goes on, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, it's all worth it," Kaschak says. "That one second."



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– John Kaschak on the first lighting of the Monument in 1985



John Kaschak, left, and Manny Martin, two of the original lighting crew members in 1985, check the lights on the grounds of the Pilgrim Monument.

If you go ...

The 20th annual Lighting of the Pilgrim Monument in Provincetown takes place Wednesday, Nov. 23, from 5 to 7 p.m., with the lights turned on at exactly 6 p.m. The Provincetown Business Guild will provide refreshments, and entertainment will be provided by Zoe Lewis. The lights on the Pilgrim Monument are visible from all over town. There are several good vantage points for viewing the illumination, including the monument itself; Bas Relief Park on Bradford Street behind town hall; town hall lawn by the Veterans Memorial; along Commercial Street in front of town hall; and the area around MacMillan Pier including the parking lot at the base of the pier. For more information, call 508-487-1310 or visit www.pilgrim-monument.org.