



## MAINE'S LOBSTER ISLAND

# Monhegan

By WILLIAM P. E. GRAVES,  
National Geographic Staff

*Photographs by Kosti Ruohomaa, Black Star*

**S**TRANGELY but logically, the quietest night of the year on Monhegan Island is New Year's Eve. No lights blaze, no music blares, no toasts ring out in the snugly shingled homes of this rocky outpost 10½ miles off the coast of Maine. Let the rest of the world stay up past midnight; Monhegan goes to bed early.

To the query "Why?" the 60 permanent residents answer with a single word: "Lobsters!" Monhegan makes its living trapping the armored delicacies of the deep. New Year's Day means Starting Day, the opening of the lobstering season. No one can afford to celebrate, for the fleet leaves at dawn.

Under a 50-year-old State law proposed by the islanders themselves, lobsters may be taken in Monhegan waters only between January 1 and June 25.

"We give 'em the other half a year to grow," a veteran lobsterman explains. "You don't see farmers killing all their chicks. You might say lobsters are our chicks."

Protected by conservation, lobsters grow as fat and prime as their forebears, which were taken in Monhegan waters three and a half centuries ago by such explorers as Champlain and Capt. John Smith.

In summer artists and vacationers throng Monhegan's tranquil coves and spruce-blanketed heights. These photographs show the island's other face: a lonely offshore community all but marooned by wintry seas.

Monhegan's hardy fishermen spend their leisure hours over cigars and cards in a fishing shack. Painted lobster pot buoys, strung from the ceiling like chandeliers, symbolize the islanders' debt to the sea.



Lobster pots ride a wheelbarrow on their way to the fishing boat. Monhegan islanders build traps of oak laths and spruce and sink them on offshore ledges. Lobsters, attracted by bait, enter through doors whose funnel-shaped nets prevent exit.

Andrew Winter, a seaman turned artist, helps his neighbors haul gear.

Top-heavy cargo of pots screens a lobsterman in his dory. Men in boots and waterproof overalls prepare a skiff. Bait tubs hold redfish, pollack, and herring.

Rock ballast sinks the pots, which become dry and buoyant during storage ashore. Once submerged, they absorb water, requiring only a built-in concrete slab to keep them on the bottom.





Anchored fleet takes on traps beneath the snow-powdered slopes of Mariana Island, Monhegan's neighbor. Mainland lobstermen, who trap the year round, scrupulously avoid Monhegan's protected zone, a two-mile strip encircling the island.

These men transfer dory-loads of traps to the lobster boats on Starting Day.

288







Oil hats and slickers protect Douglas Odom (right) and his brother Harry on a winter run to haul their traps.

Most islanders work in pairs, one man to pilot the boat, the other to tend the pots. Foul weather keeps few crews ashore.

Fishermen dread "the vapor," a shrouding mist produced by the meeting of cold air and warm water.

Pounding home, a lobster boat kicks up spray off Nigh Duck Rock, one of many uninhabited islets surrounding Monhegan.

Sail mounted aft, called a jigger, steadies the boat against wind and sea when the crew cuts power to haul pots.





Heeling to an Atlantic swell, a heavily loaded boat slices the waves. Superb seamen, the trap tenders put out in all but the dirtiest weather, braving winds as high as 45 miles an hour. Their oak-and-cedar craft, built to order in mainland yards, carry depth finders to detect shoals and radiotelephones for ship-to-ship talks. This boat carries pots stacked beside the furled jigger.



Hungry gulls mount an aerial patrol on a lobsterman preparing bait. Monhegan islanders tend as many as 250 pots a man, endlessly inspecting, baiting, hauling, repairing. In good seasons top fishermen, known as "highliners," harvest as much as 15,000 pounds of lobsters apiece.

Gulls, the crews' friends and tormentors, accompany every boat. Chary at season's start, they soon become accomplished thieves. "The rascals come so close they'll knock your glasses off," one fisherman remarked.



291







Lord of Monhegan, a four-pound lobster shows claws that can easily break a man's finger. Measuring the catch (left), the fisherman uses a brass gauge to determine length of the heavy cradle shell. Law forbids the taking of "shorts" and "jumbos." Plugging claws with a wooden peg (below) prevents lobsters from maiming one another on way to market.



Sizzling steaks, the lobsterman's delicacy, brighten a day in the fishhouse. Shacks, built at water's edge, provide workshops, men's clubs, bunkhouses, cardrooms, and forums. Wives keep clear. Eaton Davis, broiling this feast on a gasoline stove, turns the steaks with branding irons used to mark pots and buoys.





Snow Blurs Monhegan's Spruces, Houses, Trucks, and Lobster Pots. A Solitary Villager,



Wrapped Against the Blinding Storm, Trudges Down the Island's Icy Main Road



**Monhegan Island**, a community of 60 permanent residents and 300 summer visitors, faces the coast of Maine across ten and a half miles of water. Too small to incorporate as a town, the island operates as a plantation, a civil unit with minimum government.

Once an American landfall for European sailing ships, Monhegan earned the nickname "sentinel of New England." Ocean-going vessels bound for certain ports in Maine still call to pick up pilots.

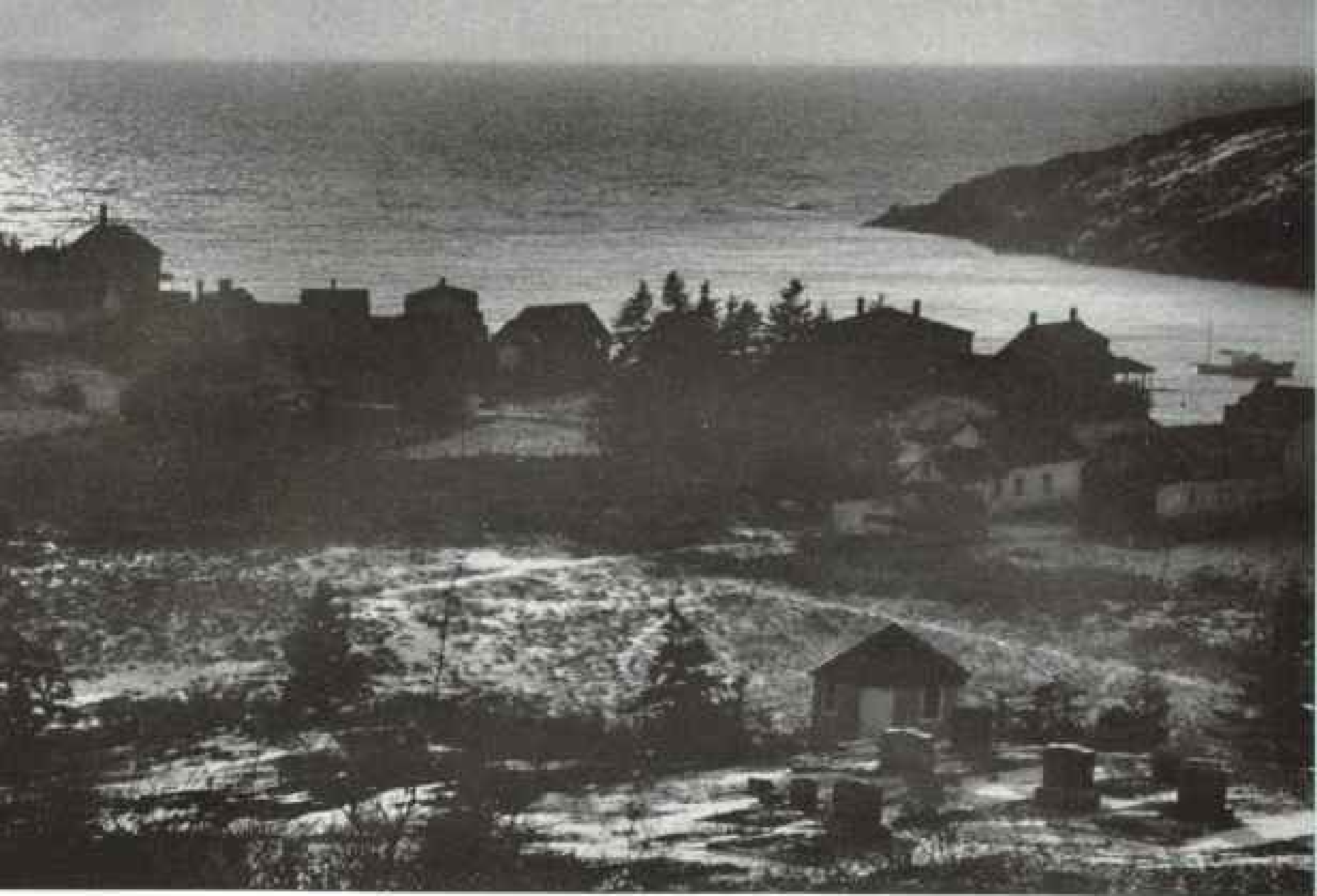
This view from Monhegan Light looks across the channel to Manana Island.

**Sewing circle**, the housewives' answer to the men's fishing shack, meets once a week in winter. Members fashion quilts, mittens, socks, potholders, and embroidered goods to support the island's only church. These women work by kerosene lamps. A few villagers have their own power plants.

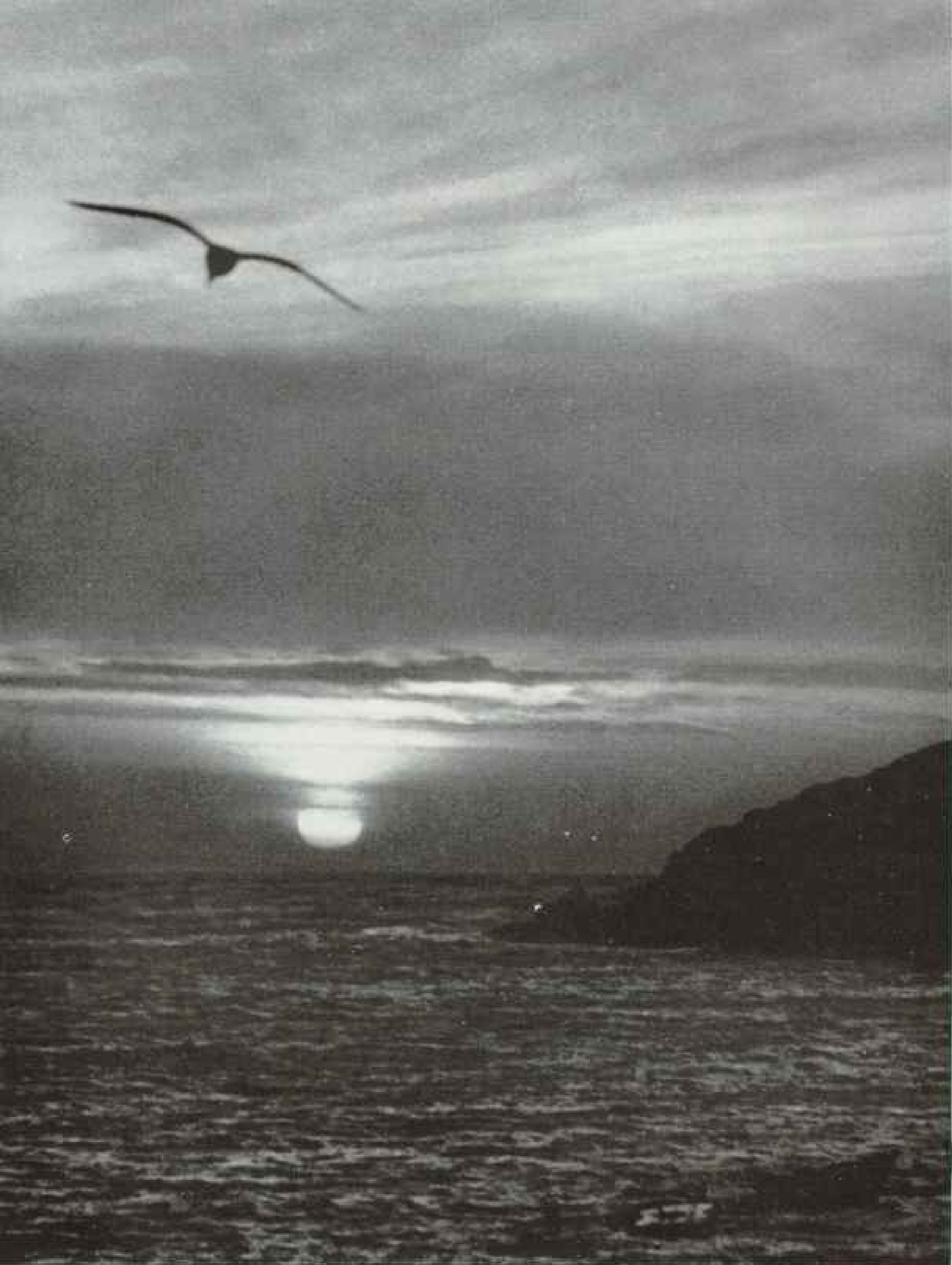
Gertrude Anderson (third from right), a missionary in Burma for 20 years, serves as Monhegan's nondenominational pastor. Marion Cundy (head bowed) held office as the plantation's third assessor. Christine Orne (smiling) is the wife of the truant officer.











*At Sunset a Lonely Gull Effortlessly Rides the Winter Wind off Monhegan Island*

Shipping lanes that once brought a constant stream of colonists past Monhegan's forbidding headlands now bypass the island. Winter gales isolate the outpost still further, often barring all but the mail boat for days at a time. But few islanders would desert their beloved "Rock" for the mainland.

298 "Find me a better island," one lobsterman remarked, "and the day you do I'll move."