Ida Zoradia Lewis (1842-1911) was seeking neither fame nor fortune when she grabbed the oars and took to the choppy waters off the coast of Newport, Rhode Island. Her goal was to rescue two drowning soldiers. Though her father, Captain Hosea Lewis, was the lighthouse keeper of record, he had become too infirm to conduct his daily duties let alone perform a dangerous rescue in a snowstorm. With the help of her little brother this 103-pound young woman succeeded in saving the men. Ida had made her first rescue at the age of fifteen, but it wasn't until this save--her fifth daring rescue--that the world discovered the remarkable Ida Lewis. When published reports and newspapers ran stories of the rescue, her life changed. That summer alone, 9,000 visitors came to meet the heroine, including President Ulysses S. Grant, Susan B. Anthony and other luminaries. Lenore Skomal has meticulously researched and uncovered original source material, and recounts the stories of other courageous women who tended the precious Fresnel lens and saved countless lives through their steadfast work, but most of all, this is the story of a simple woman who became a hero for just doing her job.

My Personal Review:
This lovely book, a story of a brave woman and the sea, is so well-written. It is obvious that it was a labor of love for its author. In less than 150 pages, Lenore Skomal manages to convey the spirit of Ida Lewis and the times in which she lived. Despite the scarcity of primary sources such as journals, personal letters, or any other correspondence, the book is well-documented by the author. She has painstakingly put together this book, complete with some wonderful vintage photos. Ida Lewis was born in Newport, Rhode Island in 1842. Her father, Captain Hosea Lewis, was a coastal pilot who in 1853 became the first keeper of Lime Rock Lighthouse.
on a tiny island in Newport Harbor. After years of back-and-forth travel, a house was finally built on Lime Rock for Lewis and his family, but they had lived in the house for just a few months when a stroke disabled him. Ida, 16, already having assumed a heavy burden of household duties, now began to take care of the light—she filled the lamp with oil at sundown and again at midnight, trimmed the wick, polished the carbon off the reflectors, and put out the light at dawn. Ida and her mother tended the Lime Rock Light from 1857 until 1872, when her father died. Her mother was appointed lighthouse keeper and remained in this position until she died in 1879, even though Ida continued to do the work. In 1879, Ida was officially appointed to the keeper's job with a salary of $750 a year and she remained in this job until her death. During her 39 years on Lime Rock, Ida saved 18 lives, although some reports say this number may have been 25. In 1858 Ida performed the first of her many rescues and saved the lives of four young men whose boat had capsized. Ida's fame spread quickly after a daring 1869 rescue in a snowstorm, and articles appeared in the New York Tribune, Harper's Weekly, Leslie's magazine, and other major newspapers. On Independence Day in 1869, Ida was honored by the town, but this shy, retiring woman was distressed by all the attention. She was briefly married to Captain William Wilson in 1870, but they separated after two years. Although never awarded the Carnegie Medal, as was rumored, Andrew Carnegie did give her a pension in her later years. On the night she died in 1911, the bells on all the ships anchored in Newport Harbor tolled in her memory and flags were flown at half-staff throughout Newport.

In 1924 the Rhode Island legislature officially changed the name of Lime Rock to Ida Lewis Rock with the lighthouse named after her—the only such honor ever paid to a keeper. In 1995, a new class of Coast Guard buoy tenders was named for Ida Lewis. The buildings at Lime Rock were sold in 1928 for $7,200 and became the Ida Lewis Yacht Club. The Yacht Club remains in operation today, with many additions surrounding the original buildings. A causeway now connects the rock to the mainland. A well-done effort about an interesting but little-known part of our coastal history.

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