Wood Island duty a far cry from life in Omaha



By ROBERT F. MELVILLE

We rode out to Wood Island Light in a peapod the other morning, with Coast Guard Petty Officer Michael W. McQuade at the helm, Journal Tribune photographer John Ewing amidships and myself in the bow.

"Peapod" is the nautical nickname for the type of double-ended craft, fashioned in peapod shape, which McQuade and his family use to get to and from their island home, where for the past two years they have been keepers of the Wood Island Light.

McQuade, born 28 years ago in the middle of Nebraska, picked us up in the open 14-foot wooden lapstrake peapod, with "U.S. Coast Guard" emblazoned on both bows, at the dock at Biddeford Pool and we made the half-mile trip to Wood Island in an easy 15 minutes.

McQuade eased the peapod onto a set of wooden rails on the shore (protected) side of the island. The rails serve as his driveway on an island that has no beaches and nothing but a rocky shoreline. Ewing and I picked our way across the slimy cross ties to the boathouse and waited while McQuade winched the craft the 50 yards up the railway inside the boat house.

Waiting for us by the boathouse, frantically waving his tail, was Kelly. Kelly's a friendly, medium-sized brown mutt who came with the island. "He's been here through four keepers and we love him," McQuade told us. "He's a good watchdog. If someone lands on the island, he'll go down and bark at them and alert us that someone's around."

We later discovered that one good reason why Kelly comes with the island is that he is afraid to get in a boat.

We walked the six-tenths of a mile from the boathouse across to the ocean side of the island and the lighthouse and lighthouse keeper's house on a wooden, elevated boardwalk. Dense bushes, thickets and low-lying trees, sculpted groundward by the winds were close by on both sides.

The place was screaming with gulls. It is one of their prime nesting sites along the Maine coast. And a young gull, only a few days old, brown with black spots, all liquidy looking, staggered along a foot from the walkway.

The low and dense foliage is a perfect cover for the hundreds of nesting gulls, terns, ibises, egrets and herons with whom the McQuade family shares Wood Island.

The island is 34 acres and the Maine Audubon Society owns 25 of them. Their members make periodic trips to the island, ususally by canoe, to observe the nesting birds' habits.

We were greeted after our short walk through the jungle-like cover the house (red roof and white clapboards over the two-story, six-room regulation Coast Guard house) by McQuade's wife, the former Patsy Andresen, who went to school with her husband back in Omaha.

Patsy's main job these days is raising three-month old Damian, their first child, who was born at the Webber Hospital, Biddeford. (The McQuades stayed at Oddy's lodging house at Biddeford Pool just before the birth and a relief keeper kept a lookout for all the ships at sea.)

The lighthouse at Wood Island is connected to the dwelling house by a ground-level passageway through which McQuade goes to care for the light and the horn and to keep a weather eye on all the buoys.

Wood Island Light, built in 1808 and rebuilt in 1856, stands two miles off the mouth of the Saco River, where it leads mariners into the river or to the anchorage at Winter Harbor or serves as a beacon to sea tucked in between Goat Island at Kennebunkport and the lighthouse at Cape Elizabeth, 10 miles to the north.

Its keepers grew up far from the sea and are proud of it. McQuade wears a Nebraska t-shirt. They have "OMAHA" on the Maine license plates on their car which they keep at Oddy's dock ready for the occasional trips to the supermarket.

McQuade spent 4½ in the Navy before transferring to the Coast Guard. "This is better," he says, "Patsy and I see a lot more of each other and have come to know each other a lot better. We like the life out here even though we have no neighbors and few visitors."

"I transferred to the Coast Guard because here you have a feeling of doing something, of accomplishing something in your job. In the Navy, it was a defensive force and you were always just waiting for something to happen."

At Wood Island, McQuade's first job is to turn the lighthouse on in the evening, 15 minutes before sunset, and off in the morning, 15 minutes after sunrise.

The light, a pair of 1,000 watt lamps at the top of the 40-foot tower, flashes twice in every six seconds: A tenth of a second flash, 1.4 seconds off, a tenth of a second flash and 4.4 seconds off. Its rotating beacon is visible for 24 miles, given optimum conditions.

It turns on with an ordinary switch, similar to the one that turns on a front porch light.

McQuade also turns on the lighthouse fog light whenever visibility drops to below 2½ miles (and that's been a lot lately) or when he can't see Stratton Island off toward Scarborough.

The low-noise fog signals' message to mariners is: A two second blast, two seconds off, a two second blast and 24 seconds of silence in every half-minute.

McQuade's other duties include checking on all the buoys near the lighthouse, some 20 of them to make sure they are still on station, have not dragged their moorings or broken loose. "It has happened nine times since we've been out here.

"What do I do then. I call up Group Portland (there is both telephone and electric service by cable from Biddeford Pool) and report the missing buoy. Then a buoy tender or a smaller vessel comes out from there, or Portsmouth, or Boston and within a day or so."

McQuade takes fixes on them with a dumb compass from the top of the lighthouse tower.

In addition, there is always a lot of maintenance work on the machinery, on the generator, at the house (McQuade's rank in the Coast Guard is machinery technician second class, although it's a shame it isn't lighthouse keeper.)

And there is always ground work to be done, mowing and trimming. Recently, he finished digging a huge hole for an individual sewage treatment plant that was airlfited by helicopter to the island.

The McQuades like their private life on the island. They do a lot of reading and play cards a lot (rummy and casino) and watch television only sparingly. They are also working on a needlepoint design of the lighthouse. They have few visitors (sometimes some relatives and friends come and stay for a day or so). But most of the time they have the island to themselves, with the raucous birds

But they don't know how much longer they will be out there. McQuade is tentatively scheduled to be reassigned this fall. And at any rate, lighthouse keepers are limited to three-year stints.

On top of that the Coast Guard has announced, then cancelled, and then announced for a second time, plans to automate the light. "But there is a lot of interest in keeping it manned," McQuade said, "because it is so easy to get to and because the fishermen rely on having someone out here to keep an extra eye on them."

Wood Island is one of 19 manned lights left on the Maine coast.

The McQuades (now it's just Michael) make two or three trips ashore in the summer for supplies and the mail, and only one in the winter when the wind pipes up out of the northwest and there is usually a choppy sea running.

When we were there, the McQuades went outside and posed on the walkway to the flagpole for their picture, complete to their own dog, a Lhasa Apso named,, Torrey. Patsy told us Torrey means tower-dweller.

As we left to go back to shore, we noticed the tide had turned, the wind had shifted more into the west and there was a slight sea running.

Patsy, as any housewife might, called to her husband to be careful as he skippered us back to shore in the peapod.

Robert Melville is editor of the Editorial Page



The McQuades at Wood Island Light

(Photo by John Ewing)