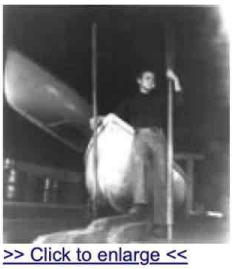
St. Louis Car Salesman Recalls Old Times at Maine Lighthouse

Bill Andrews Spent Three Years in 1950s at Mount Desert Rock Light

By Jim Merkel Comments?



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Born and raised in the Midwest, Bill Andrews had no intention of spending most of his military service time at a lighthouse more than 20 miles south of Mount Desert Island in Maine.



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Nonetheless, the 62-year-old St. Louis, MO car salesman today speaks fondly of the three years he spend in the 1950s at the Coast Guard light station at the tiny rock-covered island called Mount Desert Rock.



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"I used to just love to go up and just sit on the inside of the light," Andrews said. "You could watch the gulls. God, you could see forever. . . . Some days, it was almost spiritual. It was so serene. It was so calm."

The St. Louis native went into the Coast Guard in 1954 and stayed until 1958. Besides his three years on Mount Desert Rock, he also spent time at two other nearby light stations on the Maine Coast, Bear Island and Bass Harbor Head.

"A wickie, that's what they called us," Andrews said, referring to the wicks lighthouse keepers had to light in the days before electric lights.

As much as anything, youthful cockiness led Andrews to Mount Desert Rock..

"I wanted to go into the Marine Corps, and the recruiter wasn't real nice, so I walked down the hall, and the guy hollered, "Do you want to go in the Coast Guard, and I said, 'Yeah.' That's how I went in. I was 17," he said. "I was kind of a wise guy."

He wasn't pleased when he learned where he would spend his service time.

"First it ticked me off, because I was 17 years old. Man, you don't put a 17-year-old kid where there's no action," he said.

Soon, though, this teenager, who looked like a brash James Dean in an old picture taken on Mount Desert Rock, began to appreciate the beauty of the place. "You're the first one to see the sun come up in the morning, and the ocean is so calming anyway," he said. "And that rowing. That really put you in shape. That was probably the best exercise there was."

Andrews followed the tradition of Mount Desert Rock lightkeepers who began protecting passing ships early in the 19th century.

The station was established in 1830, with a wooden tower attached to a stone dwelling. In 1847, a granite block tower designed by noted architect/engineer Alexander Parris went up in its place. That tower was raised 10 feet in 1857, to accommodate a 3rd Order Fresnel lens installed the next year.

The 58-foot tall tower that resulted from that raising is the same one that Andrews saw when he served at Mount Desert Rock. "The base was something like six or seven foot thick," he said, recalling that edifice. "Supposedly a few guys got hurt out there and they buried them right in the light," Albert said. "That might be an old wives' tale."

The old granite tower is the same one that whale researchers see today. Although the Coast Guard keeps and maintains a Vega VRB-25 solar-powered optic on Mount Desert Rock, the island itself is owned by the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine. Allied Whale, the marine mammal research group at College of the Atlantic, uses the island as a base to study fin and humpback whales that come close by.

Albert can attest there were and are plenty of whales that come close to Mount Desert Rock. At certain times of the year, it was possible to row out and get close to whales. "You didn't want to get too close, because they'd bump you," Albert said. "Whales all over the place. Seals used to lay on the island. It was really an experience."

The privilege of seeing whales up close was a treat in a schedule that theoretically called for Coast Guardsmen to be on the island for 44 days and off 22 days. In fact, the weather meant people were on the island for much longer periods.

"Usually, you ended up spending anywhere from 60 to 80 days on at a crack," he said. "You had to row off the island in a boat. That's the only way you could get on or off." If the seas were rough, nobody could get on or off.

"You had to watch the waves. You had to watch how the sea rolled," he said. "A couple times, we got dunked. That was nothing unusual. It was pretty cold."

Each of the four Coast Guardsmen on the Rock was on duty eight hours and off 24. "When you were on duty, you had to watch the light, you had to listen to the radio beacon. You couldn't really do a whole lot of stuff away from this one room that we stayed in. You had to check the generators. It was pretty constant," he said. "You actually made rounds."

The light itself was powered by electricity. It also had a radio beacon, which sent out a Morris code signal at regular intervals. Navigators on ships used the signal to set their course, or determine their location by triangulation if they were in contact with two others. Power for the light, compressed-air foghorn, and the dwelling came from two diesel generators that recharged and ran a bank of batteries.

The Fresnel lens at the station especially amazed Andrews. "It was huge," he said. "Actually, the bulb wasn't all that big."

When they were off duty, those on the island might find themselves doing chores like painting, or watching TV programs broadcast from nearby cities. Often, they were without the conveniences that people had on shore.

"The first year, we cooked on a wood stove. That was a trick. Then they finally came in with natural gas, made it a lot easier," he said. But there was difficulty even with this method, because Coast Guardsmen had to put the gas tanks into the same small boat they used to and row themselves ashore.

"You had to order your groceries to last you at least a month at a crack, because there's no way of saying, "Yeah, it's going to be a good day, and we need to go grocery shopping."

Shopping itself was done over a phone connected to the shore. "We used to call each other back and forth," he said. "I used to call home. You had to go through an operator. It wasn't like today. You rang it," he said. "It was kind of behind times, back up in Maine at that time."

And it was isolated.

"The only land you could see from the rock -- that's what they called it -- was Mount Desert," Andrews said. What they actually saw on Mount Desert Island was the 1,530-foot-high Cadillac Mountain, the highest point on the Atlantic seaboard north of Brazil.

Although they were far from the center of things, the men on the island did have some contact with others.

"There was one lobsterman that came out there. His name was Ollie Trask. Captain Ollie," Andrews said. "I almost went in business with him. That was his lobster area. That's where he did his fishing."

Summertime was a time for party boats to come out near the island. Occasionally, there were regattas, and the Guardsmen would call in and say where the boats were.

One stop for Andrews when he did get to shore was Bar Harbor, on Mount Desert Island. It wasn't the bustling resort it is today. "There was nothing there," he said. There was one tavern on the dock. Since many of the Guardsmen weren't 21, they hung out at a drug store.

"Up in Maine, they were real strict. The fishermen were a little bit different," he said. In the summertime, fishermen would come out and hang beer out over the side of their boats. "Then we would row within 20, 30 feet of their boat. Then I would slip off the side and I would steal the beer. 'Course, they knew I was stealing it. That way, they weren't contributing," Andrews said. "It wasn't their fault that I took the beer."

The free beer was the way the fishermen said thanks for a valuable public service.

"If a bad storm was coming, we would pull as many lobster traps as we possibly could by hand," he said. "We would pull as many as we could up and store 'em in the boathouse. . . Although Andrews suspects the government didn't appreciate it, he said, "What they didn't know didn't hurt anybody."

Besides, Andrews said, "It made (for) good relationship with the fishermen, because you never know when you're going to need 'em."

The biggest excitement Andrews had at the light station occurred as the military dropped bombs at night that exploded several miles up, setting off bright flashes

Like a flash does with a camera, it provided the light for aerial mapping photography.

Unfortunately, one bomb didn't go off until it struck the ground, right on the island. "The bomb hit the tip of the island and blew out all of the glass out of the house." The boathouse was filled with metal from the exploding bomb.

Luckily, it didn't affect the light itself, probably because it was high. "It scared us to death," he said. "If you'd have been in the boat house, you'd have been dead. . . . They bombed us."

The Air Force had a normal government reaction to this episode fit for a segment in the old movie "No Time for Sergeants."

"They came out on this island. . . . all this pomp and circumstance. It was cool, really cool," he said.

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