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Memories of Little River Light Station

By David P. Bartholomay

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Little River Light Station from the water's edge, ...
Photo by: David P. Bartholomay

Life as a light keeper had changed considerably by the time I arrived at Little River in 1970. Gone were the farm animal barn, and other items that once existed on the island. However, I did share many things with my predecessors.



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The Little River Lighthouse showing the walkway ...
Photo by: David P. Bartholomay

I too had served on a buoy tender (USCG Cowslip) out of South Portland servicing the lights along the Maine coast. In addition to 'working buoys' the Cowslip provided fuel oil and water to the many manned lights. I often went ashore to assist the keepers with the fuel and water hoses that had to be run from the ship to the light station.



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The keeper's house, taken from where the barn ...
Photo by: David P. Bartholomay

While stationed at Boothbay Harbor Search and Rescue Station I often did relief keeping at the Burnt Island and Cuckolds Lights. I also called Libby Island my home before moving onto Little River. Little River was a resort compared to life on Libby Island though I loved them both. It goes to prove it is possible to love two very different 'women' with very different temperaments. In fact, a good part of my heart remains along that coast and particularly with "my lights." Two weeks on station and one week ashore was great duty.



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A view from where the barn once stood shows the ...
Photo by: David P. Bartholomay

Life at Little River did not have the hardships that others had experienced. It was like living on your own private island and the only responsibility was to maintain the buildings, keep the light burning, and turn on the fog signal when necessary. The other keepers and I worked diligently to maintain the station to the best of our abilities and resources.



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The old fogbell before it was brought to Cutler ...
Photo by: David P. Bartholomay

The farm animals were long gone, but we had a station beagle (Freckles) and an assortment of wildlife for our amusement. The island raccoons offered many challenges for us. We had no choice but to burn our trash at the time. The only 'hardship' was the lack of clean fresh water to drink and bathe. Each month a water sample was sent to the state for testing and each month we were told not to drink the water without first boiling it. At one point, we did not have any fresh water to worry about because there was none. The officer in charge, who will remain unnamed, had us empty the cistern and paint it because he had received word that we might have a station inspection by the Group Commander. Not a good idea to empty your water supplies at the beginning of summer! He did attempt to get the USCG Cowslip to provide us with water, but was promptly turned down. They were not about to travel to Little River from South Portland to provide the station with a couple of hundred of gallons of water. So, we carried our drinking water from town and 'bathed' in salt water for a period until the rains returned.



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David P. Bartholomay, July of 1970 in front of ...

Life on the island was rarely boring or without its humorous moments. One good thing about being away from headquarters was no one really bothered to visit us, except for an occasional tourist. Winter and early spring offered as hours to read and work on 'home projects' while maintaining the interior of the house and light tower. Many afternoons were spent building wooden lobster traps for the coming spring and summer. It was a great opportunity for someone from Connecticut to experience.



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Felicia T. Bartholomay, David's wife, in July ...

Again the tourists offered us as much entertainment as we did them. One early morning, while running to answer the telephone in just my underwear, I had forgotten that the beautiful island often attracted unexpected tourists regardless of the time of day. Upon answering the telephone, I turned to look out the window and discovered two women looking in the window of the office. I am not certain who was more surprised, the women, the person on the other end of telephone, the other keeper, or me as I let out a yell of surprise. Thankfully, I had not been showering (lack of fresh water) when the telephone rang!

The accessibility to the town of Cutler permitted us to interact with the town's people, which we gladly did in many ways. The lobstermen depended upon us to maintain the light and we depended upon their friendship. We never missed a church supper when they were held. Where else could we get a home cooked meal for almost nothing and get to bring many extras back with us to the light? The only thing better than the food was the hospitality of the people.

The town of Cutler also had a baseball team that one of the other keepers played on. While he played, I was often called upon to officiate as an umpire. We went to great lengths to be certain the other team did not know that one of the players and I was stationed together for fear of raising some concern about my objectivity.

The accessibility offered my family the opportunity to visit me on my light. My parents came for a visit and stayed in town at the wonderful Bed and Breakfast. My wife had the opportunity to spend a weekend on the light itself. It did not take long for each of them to fall in love with the island, too. It was impossible to visit the island and not fall in love.

Going into town for the mail and supplies was also an adventure at times. When the swells were sweeping into harbor the other keeper and I would take our pod and 'surf' into town. That heavy old boat with the 9.5-hp motor could provide quite a ride. Returning to the light offered its own thrill. We would flip a coin to determine who would huddle in the bow while the other manned the motor. The 'loser' would man the motor and take the brunt of the water crashing over the bow. Regardless of the howling wind and water it was always possible to hear the laughter of the lucky man tucked away in the bow.

It was not all fun and games. Trying to scrape and paint the exterior of the house was a challenge while located in a place known for the fog. There were days when we painted that were not ideal, but we had no control over the weather and learned to work around it. In addition, toting supplies from the boathouse to the house was often a challenge. The three-quarters of a mile seemed like miles at times. The walks never dried out completely and many of the roofing shingles missing caused some humorous moments. Even at 130 lbs. I could crush a dozen eggs when I landed on them! More than one 'can' was damaged during a free fall.

When I think about the time and effort devoted to maintaining the station it saddens me. It is with sadness that Libby Island is without the keeper's house and other structures, as well as the current condition of Little River. However, it is with great hope 'my' light will be restored to its previous condition for others to see and fall in love. I hope someday to get the chance to revisit my light and think about a wonderful period in my life.

Truly, it is a shame that wonderful experiences are often wasted on youth. Little did I realize the history of the light station or that the days of manned lights would soon end. It is shameful that a country such as ours cannot afford to keep history alive for future generations. Other national treasures are preserved, why not light stations?