Memories of Coast Guard Days at the Gurnet

By Jeremy D'Entremont

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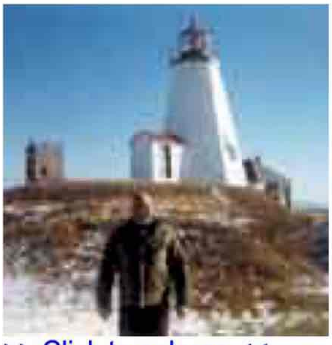
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This photo shows Paul Christian's uncle Bill ...

Paul Christian is a Civil Designer Technician living in Portland, Oregon, but a large piece of his heart is across the continent on a long sandy peninsula in Massachusetts known as the Gurnet. As a boy in the 1960s, Christian spent summers there with his family, close to the Plymouth Light Station. "My son was in Boy Scouts," says Christian. "He went to summer camps every summer and went on to become an Eagle Scout. He asked me once why I never did Scouts. I told him the Gurnet was my summer camp growing up, and I would not trade it in for anything else." Christian's parents eventually moved to the Gurnet year-round, leaving there just a few years ago due to health reasons and a desire to live in a less isolated location — especially in winter.



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Paul's father Bud Christian was very involved in ...

Plymouth Lighthouse, known locally as the Gurnet Light, is the oldest standing wooden lighthouse in the U.S. (1843). It is notable for many other reasons as well. The station had the first woman lighthouse keeper in the nation (Hannah Thomas), and the earlier lighthouse building (a dwelling with two lights on the roof) was struck by a British cannonball during the Revolution. A nearby 1878 lifesaving station was discontinued in the 1950s and is now privately owned.



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BM1 Al Ross in front of Plymouth (Gurnet) ...
Photo by: Paul Christian

Frank Allen Davis was the civilian keeper when the Coast Guard took over operation of the lighthouse in 1939, and he joined the Coast Guard and stayed until 1946. A succession of Coast Guard officers and crews lived at the Gurnet until 1986, when the light was automated. The old dwelling was destroyed and a new ranch house was built to house the Coast Guard crew in 1963.

The Gurnet families - especially the kids - often socialized with the Coast Guardsmen stationed at the lighthouse. "Our house abutted the Coast Guard property," Christian recalls. "When we were kids, most of us would go to the station at night and watch TV. One of the station guys even started baseball games between the Gurnet kids and Saquish (a nearby beach) kids."



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Coast Guardsmen Bob Murphy (left) and Bob ...



>> Click to enlarge <<
Ed Vogel (left), Bob Murphy (middle) and Bob ...

Paul's father, Bud Christian, remembers that during the Kennedy Administration there was an emphasis on physical fitness. The Officer in Charge at the light station wanted to get his crew in shape, so every morning he would get them up early and they would all jog around the Gurnet's dirt roads.



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This photo shows Ed Vogel (left) and Bob Palachek ...

The Coast Guard's mascot at the station was a dog named Smokey. There was once a "meal exchange" involving Smokey between Paul's mother and the Coast Guard personnel. "My mom had made a steak supper for my Uncle Bill, who was a lobsterman," he recalls. "As my mom was going over to his house across the dirt road, Smokey jumped up and knocked the plate out of her hand. The steak fell to the ground and as quick as he could Smokey grabbed the steak and ran off. My mom was a little upset, along with my uncle who did not get his steak. When the Coast Guard guys at the station found out they came down and apologized, and they gave my mom a can of dog food, as a joke - 'Since Smokey ate your supper, you can have Smokey's supper.'"



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This photo shows most of the kids who lived on ...

Part of what made the Coast Guard so important to the Gurnet and Saquish residents is that they provided the only link to the "outside world," says Christian. "During the time that I was growing up on the Gurnet in the '60s and the early '70s, the Coast Guard had the only telephone to the mainland. People from the Gurnet and Saquish would come up to the station and ask if they could use the phone. The alternative was to drive on the beach to Duxbury [4 1/2 miles] to the nearest phone. At one time there were telephone lines from the mainland all the way out to the Gurnet, hooked up to the old Coast Guard Station and then to the present Coast Guard station, but in the Blizzard of 1978, the ocean waves knocked down most of the telephone poles along Duxbury Beach to the Gurnet. Also, the Coast Guard had the only 'full time' electric power. Some people would go to the station to do their laundry."



>> Click to enlarge <<
Plymouth (Gurnet) Light today.
Photo by: Jeremy D'Entremont

Paul Christian later joined the Coast Guard himself. He says he had the opportunity to be stationed at the Gurnet, but turned it down because it was "too close to home." He last visited the Gurnet in the fall of 2001 for the funeral of his mother, and he visited again the following summer. "It brought back many memories. I had the opportunity to see old friends I hadn't seen in 20 years. In some ways it has not changed since I left in 1978," he says. "On the other hand, the lot across the street was just a grass field, with lots of

ticks. Now it has poison ivy about ten feet tall." Another big change is that the lighthouse was moved 140 feet back from the edge of the eroding bluff in 1998. "The field we used for baseball," says Christian, "is where the lighthouse is now."



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One of the Coast Guard crewmembers at the Gurnet, ...

Today the lighthouse is cared for by a nonprofit group, Project Gurnet and Bug Lights. They also look after Duxbury Pier Lighthouse, known locally as "Bug" Light.



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Smokey, the Coast Guard's mascot at the Gurnet, ...

Christian is now working on a scale model of the lighthouse, based on blueprints of the real thing. If he can't move back to the Gurnet, at least he can have a symbol of it at his home in Oregon. "I do miss not being down there," he says. "Had a lot of good memories."



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This photo shows neighboring property at the ...

This story appeared in the March 2003 edition of Lighthouse Digest Magazine. The print edition contains more stories than our internet edition, and each story generally contains more photographs - often many more - in the print edition. For subscription information about the print edition, click here.

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