A Tale of Teenage Wickies

Two Rhode Island Men Remember Life at an Offshore Light Station

By Jeremy D'Entremont

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Conimicut Lighthouse as it looks today.
Photo by: Jeremy D'Entremont

When young Bob Onosko joined the Coast Guard in 1957 he requested duty aboard a 64-foot tugboat. To his surprise, he instead found himself stationed at Conimicut Lighthouse, offshore in the upper Narragansett Bay near the mouth of the Providence River. "For a seventeen year-old teenager," he says, "that seems now to have been a lot of responsibility. As I look back, lowering our 16-foot wooden boat from the deck to water was very tricky, and a little bit dangerous, particularly when you were alone."



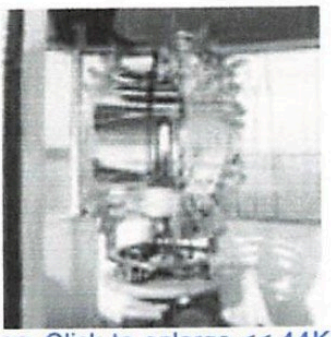
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The old fog bell at Conimicut Lighthouse, which ...
Photo by: Fred Mikkelsen

Sending teenagers to the isolated lighthouse was not so unusual at the time. The following year, 18-year-old Fred Mikkelsen, following a brief stint as a relief keeper at Warwick Light Station, was assigned to Conimicut Lighthouse. During the ride from Bristol a Coast Guard chief told him, "You'll be stepping back in time and then some!" Mikkelsen thought, "How bad can it be? The idea of being a lighthouse keeper was a thrill in itself for an 18-year-old like me."



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The bell room in the Conimicut Lighthouse, with ...
Photo by: Fred Mikkelsen

The early history of navigational aids in the vicinity underscores the danger of the exposed location. A granite tower at the Conimicut Shoal was first lighted in 1868, and the nearby Nayatt Point Lighthouse was discontinued. In 1874 a five-room house was built on the pier at the lighthouse. In March 1875, great chunks of ice moved down the Providence River and struck the pier, destroying the dwelling. Keeper Horace Arnold and his son were lucky to escape with their lives. In 1882 the old granite tower was torn down and a new cast-iron "sparkplug-style" lighthouse, with integral living quarters, was erected. It hadn't changed much by the 1950s.



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Conimicut Lighthouse's 35 mm IOV (incandescent ...
Photo by: Fred Mikkelsen

When Bob Onosko arrived in 1957, the officer in charge at Conimicut was Boatswain Mate First Class Bob Reedy, who had taken over when the civilian keeper, a Mr. Powell, had recently died at the station. Onosko remembers that Bob Reedy at first appeared to be a "very salty individual" and maybe a bit intimidating, but adds, "As it turned out he was quite easy to work for and we got along quite well, and he was an excellent teacher. He was very professional and took the assignment quite seriously, as well he should have."



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The galley inside the Conimicut Lighthouse circa ...
Photo by: Fred Mikkelsen

Fred Mikkelsen had a similar experience when he arrived the following year. "Climbing the ladder to the dock," he recalls, "I met Boatswain Mate First Class Joe Bakken." Bakken "lived on Camel cigarettes and instant coffee" and had many interesting tales to tell of his life at lighthouses and on board lightships. And Bakken "knew his stuff," says Mikkelsen, "when it came to the equipment we had to work with, and when he realized I respected his knowledge, he was a good teacher."



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The living quarters inside Conimicut Lighthouse. ...
Photo by: Fred Mikkelsen

Mikkelsen soon understood the comment by the Coast Guard chief about "stepping back in time." The lighthouse had no electricity, and the lighting apparatus was still an incandescent oil vapor (I.O.V.) lamp fueled by kerosene. The I.O.V. system was notoriously finicky. If everything wasn't cleaned and properly aligned, "you would be up all night trying to get the thing to run right."



>> Click to enlarge << 29Kb
Conimicut Lighthouse circa 1960.
Photo by: Fred Mikkelsen

There was no plumbing at the lighthouse except a cistern and a hand pump. "On occasions Bob Reedy would pour a gallon of bleach in the cistern as a precaution," says Onosko. "I still remember how bad the water tasted after that."



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Conimicut Lighthouse as it looks today.
Photo by: Jeremy D'Entremont

In times of fog, the Gamewell Fog Bell Striker was put to work. The machine "had to be maintained, oiled and cleaned," says Mikkelsen. "It would run about two hours on ten minutes of winding." The bell would be struck automatically every ten seconds, but inside the tower the noise of the striking machine was louder than the bell. If the striker stopped, "the silence would wake me from a sound sleep," Mikkelsen recalls.



>> Click to enlarge << 72Kb

This seascape painting was done by Fred Mikkelsen ...

During Bob Onosko's year at the lighthouse, he was frequently alone and there were never more than two men on duty. During Mikkelsen's three years, the official complement of four men was never realized. "Most of the time we had a three-man crew," he says, "and worked six days on and three days off. Many times we ran with a two-man crew and once I was there alone for 37 days." When a relief keeper arrived at the end of Mikkelsen's longest solo stretch, he was presented with a cake Mikkelsen had baked to look like a toilet seat with the words, "Welcome Relief!"

Generators were proposed for electricity, but the conversion was delayed out of fear that the vibrations might cause a crack in the tower to worsen. "After a while Joe Bakken supplied a ten-inch black and white television and a car battery. We could squint at it for about 118 minutes before all would go dark," Mikkelsen remembers. One day the new group commander of Coast Guard Station Newport showed up at the lighthouse unannounced. Mikkelsen explained that the men could only watch TV for about two hours at night after the battery had been charged for four hours during the day. He told the commander, "You see, Sir, this light is the last kerosene light in the continental U.S. and we are proud of that." After seeing the cistern and hand pump, the commander said, "I'm going to make sure you get the things you need to make this place livable."

"He was true to his word," says Mikkelsen. "With his help we retiled the galley, put in new cabinets, hung curtains in the windows and did several other do-it-yourself projects." The crew was soon well stocked with batteries, magazine subscriptions and fishing gear.

One of Mikkelsen's most memorable experiences in his three years at the lighthouse was a 1960 hurricane. "We brought things inside and tied things down," he says, "even hauling one of our boats up onto the roof above the walk around, just in case the other boat and the pier were swept away. All this time, with the folly of youth, we joked about how we would easily survive if the light broke up or went over."

Mikkelsen remembers that the seas at the height of the storm surge blocked all sunlight through the galley windows on the first deck. When he went to the lantern to check the light, Mikkelsen became aware that the lighthouse was moving in the storm, with the greatest movement near the top. "It would bang you against the wall," he says, "and you had to hang on to the handrail of

the ladder." After the storm passed, says Mikkelsen, "you could smell the broken trees and leaves in the wind that came from the shore. The old girl had safely held out for one more time in her struggle with the sea."

Conimicut Lighthouse was fully electrified via cable from shore shortly after Fred Mikkelsen left. The light was automated and the keepers were removed in 1963. "There is something about seeing it with its windows boarded over and in a desolate lifeless state that makes me turn away," says Mikkelsen.

Bob Onosko and Fred Mikkelsen both still live in Rhode Island and they recently got together and reminisced about their lightkeeping days. There are many more memories, including rescues, getting stuck in ice floes in the bay, mysterious bloody footprints and even a purported ghost.

Onosko today is very involved in the restoration of another Rhode Island "sparkplug" lighthouse as an active member of the Friends of Plum Beach Light. About his teenage lightkeeping days Onosko says, "If I had to repeat the experience in today's world of computers, cell phones and TV, I imagine being without electricity or running water would be a bit more intimidating." But he adds, "Strangely, I did not dislike being there on most occasions. I've always enjoyed the water and liked to fish and clam. I consider the experience a significant and positive event in my life."

Today the City of Warwick is working to obtain ownership of the lighthouse, a development Fred Mikkelsen finds encouraging. "I'm gladdened to see them take an interest in its preservation and hope they can do what needs to be done to open it to the public," he says.