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LIFE ON BOON & NUBBLE LIGHTHOUSES

By

Robert Miller

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Life on Boon and Nubble Lighthouses

(Warren Day was interviewed by Bob Miller in January and September of 2003)

Bob Miller
91 Pleasant Ave
Kittery, Maine 03904

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When I was very young, I thought living in a lighthouse would be a very cool thing to do. Looking back on it now, I'm not sure what it was about living in a lighthouse that intrigued me. Perhaps it was a sense of adventure -- the remoteness, boats, and the storms. Especially the storms, which as a child I thought were very exciting. These days I'm not so sure -- all that time in relative isolation, not being able to leave when you want to... Then again, for a period of time the isolation might be a relief, something to take a person completely out of the rat race. But, what did I know? I had never met anyone who had anything to do with a lighthouse, never mind, live in one.

One January day, when I ducked into the post office to mail a letter and escape a snow storm, I over heard someone mention that he had lived in a lighthouse. Aha! Here's my chance, I thought. I introduced myself to Warren Day and asked whether he would be willing to talk about the time he spent living in a lighthouse. He agreed.

Warren's route to living in a lighthouse was not the most direct, and it certainly had its share of sorrow. When Warren was five his father died in a train accident in Epping, New Hampshire.

After that much of Warren's time was spent in the company of his grandfather Warren Alley. Mr. Ally was a fisherman with only a third grade education, but he joined the Light House Service and was stationed at Whaleback Lighthouse at the mouth of the Piscataqua River. Warren visited his grandfather on weekends. When he stayed overnight, he slept on a bunk underneath the stairs. Warren loved being at the lighthouse.

In 1939 the Light House Service was incorporated into the U. S. Coast Guard. The requirements for lighthouse keepers became more uniform and rigorous. Most of the old lighthouse keepers were grandfathered in under the new arrangements, but they were now under the command and management of the Coast Guard.

In 1941, Warren's grandfather, Mr. Alley, was transferred to Boon Island Light** as the lighthouse chief. Boon Island was designated as a family assignment, and Warren's grandfather wanted to go there so that is wife could be with him. That meant that in the summers, Warren could live on Boon Island with his grandfather and grandmother.

Boon Island isn't much of an island, it is less than one acre in size and at its highest point it is no more than 14 feet above sea level. It is small place to be. Warren said that his grandmother loved being out there. They had a dog too, to keep them company.

Warren had one major task to do when he was on Boon Island, that was to run up all 168 stairs to the light and cover it up in the morning, then make the same run in the evening to uncover it. The lens was covered up during daylight hours. When he wasn't doing that Warren helped to land the

boats of fishermen and Lobster men. Warren's grandfather and grandmother also did a little bit of lobstering and fishing of their own. They salted their own cod. There wasn't a whole lot to do on Boon Island, but Warren enjoyed himself. He played cards with his grandmother, read books, listened to the radio, and went fishing. It was a contemplative life...or so it would seem.

This was in the early 1940's, the war was on. Boon Light was right in the middle of the shipping lanes. There were twenty Coast Guardsmen stationed on Boon Light and all of them were armed with M1 rifles. Warren recalls that one night they heard an engine out on the water. They called an alarm and they did their best to spot whatever it was that was making the noise. They were convinced the engine noise they heard was from an enemy submarine. Air support arrived from Portsmouth, but they never saw anything.

There were several buildings on Boon Island, all made with granite blocks. There was one four room building for the light house keeper and his family. Warren had his own bedroom there. "In the morning, when it was cold, that granite wall would sweat..." big drops of water slipped down the granite. There was another house, a sort of barracks for the armed Coast Guardsmen stationed at Boon Island. The generator and the diesel motor that powered it were in a small building. The generator charged the batteries that supplied all their electricity. Of course there was the light house tower itself, and, last but not least, an outhouse.

The drinking water on Boon Island came from cisterns. Food had to be brought out to Boon Light on a launch. Landing a launch on Boon Island was no easy matter, there was only one way on the island and that was to steer the boat to the rail that guided small craft up and on to the

land. According to Warren, if you didn't hit it just right, you ran into real trouble. The boat would tip take on water or wash up on the rocks.

Storms were a real threat. The island is so small, that waves wash over it in a heavy storm, so "things got pretty rough". Warren says that there was a line from the house to the tower. In stormy weather he had to put on a life jacket and hang on to the line as he went from the house to the tower and back, or risk being washed away. No one was ever washed away while Warren lived there. Of course, in really bad weather when the waves mercilessly pounded across the little spot of land, things got very scary and no one went outside. There was no reason to do anything but wait for the storm to be over. The beacon was turned on well in advance of the worse part of a storm. As for the outhouse, during a storm, you used a bucket and emptied it later.

Boon Light is 137 feet high. From the top, "It was a beautiful view," said Warren recalling looking out at the distant mountains on the coastal side and at the seemingly endless ocean on the ocean side.

Warren was only on Boon in the summers and when school was out. For all its remoteness, Warren loved the simplicity of life on that little swatch of land. There was more activity at Boon Light than you might imagine. There were always fishermen stopping by and Warren helped them with one thing or another. But Warren's time on Boon ended when his grandfather became lighthouse keeper at Nubble light*** in 1943.

There was a dramatic change in Warren's life at this point. During the school year, Warren had been working as a pin setter in a bowling alley. He was hit in the head with a bowling ball. His injury was severe enough for him to require a long recuperation period. He spent all his recuperation time on Nubble Light with his grandparents. He lived there continuously for one and a half years.

They had a three goats, a dog, and two cats on the Nubble. Warren says that in addition to giving milk the goats were good lawn mowers. Nubble Light is so close to shore that there was a power line out to it, so there was no need for anything other than a backup generator and kerosene lanterns in case of emergency. They got their water from two cisterns on the island. There was the main house, the light itself, and a smaller building that contained all the supplies.

The small one or two person suspended cable car that a visitor can see at the Nubble now connecting the island to the mainland, wasn't there in the 40's. They got back and forth from the light house to the mainland in a 12 foot flat bottom skiff, which was easy to handle and when you came ashore you could pull it up to high water mark while you went off and did your shopping or what ever you had to do.

"We did have a sixteen foot boat made in Old Town, Maine. It was powered by a twenty-two horse power outboard motor. When I could find the time I would go out and enjoy the wonderful coast of Maine and go into York Harbor and just enjoy my life and the things around me."

Warren and his grandfather had approximately 24 lobster traps around the Nubble and these gave Warren some money. He sold the lobsters at a small lobster pound on Long Sands beach in York for 35 cents a pound. "I also use the skiff to fish for bait for the traps and fish for our table use. As you can see the little skiff served us very well."

A typical day on Nubble was idyllic. Warren continued doing the same job he'd done when lived on Boon Island in the summers. He would cover the light before sunrise and uncover it at sunset. Sometimes he helped to build lobster traps or talk to the fishermen who came by. Warren's favorite thing was to fish or pull traps. He used alewife as bate to fish for mackerel, pollack, and flounder. At other times Warren would just sit at the end of the rocks and day dream.

His grandfather made fishing nets and occasionally gave a tour of the lighthouse to people who came by to visit and Warren accompanied them. The USO sent out cartons of books including the Saturday Evening Post for them to read. And there was always his grandmother's clam chowder to take the chill out of him. Sometimes on the weekends Warren's brother, stepfather, and other relatives visited.

I asked Warren what happened when he did something wrong. He said he didn't dare to get into trouble, his grandfather didn't hit but he could give a terrible tongue lashing. So Warren avoided that possibility.

There was a change in the per diem provided to lighthouse keepers while Warren was on the Nubble. From that time on Warren says his grandfather had to buy his own food. The

government did issue work clothes. But somehow Warren managed to run barefoot along the rocks.

Warren's grandfather would, of course, be on the island almost all the time, and, of course, so was his grandmother. Warren said that she would stay at Nubble light for months at a time and never leave. If there were something that required Warren's grandfather to leave the Nubble, he would have to find someone to replace him for the time he was a way. When they did leave the island his grandfather had a 1936 Studebaker for transportation, which he housed at a nearby restaurant. They were never off the Nubble for long.

Every now and then there was an emergency out on the water. Warren remembers one time when some kids took a small boat out to do some fishing at the end of the day. The water was rough and got rougher. The kids were going further and further out to sea. The boats on the Nubble were "good for lobster traps and getting back and forth from the mainland, but not for rescue in bad weather." Fortunately, with the help of the Coast Guard the boys were brought back safely.

Another time, late in the evening, they heard some noise out on the water. They weren't sure what it was, but the water was rough and it could be some people were in trouble so Warren and his grandfather went out in the 12 foot boat to see what it was. They had all they could do to row it out in the rough water. They finally caught sight of a schooner. "They were out there drinking and dragging anchor. We had to call in the Coast Guard." Everybody seemed to get involved in that rescue, including the fire department.

Warren loved his life out on the lighthouses, especially the time he spent on the Nubble. The life there and the time he spent with his grandfather and grandmother "could never have been more wonderful....It was an anchor for me."

Notes

* Whaleback Light Station -- the present tower was erected in 1872. According to Warren, Arnold White was in charge of Whaleback Light in the late 1930's.

** Boon Island Light station -- Located six miles off York, Maine, on an island about 400 square yards in size. The existing granite structure was erected in 1855, it is 137 feet tall and is the tallest lighthouse tower in Maine. Most of the buildings that were on the island were destroyed by storms. The station was automated in 1979.

*** Cape Neddick Light Station -- Constructed in 1875 (frame house construction typical of 1870's) the tower is cast iron. The station was automated in 1987.

The above information comes from "The Lighthouses of Maine" Text by Wayne C. Wheeler, president, U. S. Lighthouse Society. Edited by Tim Harrison of Lighthouse Digest Magazine, Wells, Maine.

For more information on Boon Light see: www.lighthousefoundation.org