COAL

By Myron L. Corbett

Comments?



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Myron Corbett as a young boy at Little River ...

Myron L. Corbett is the son of Willie Corbett, an early 1900's Maine lighthouse keeper.



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Myron Corbett, the author of this story, as a ...



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Libby Island Light Station Maine was indeed a ...

In the terms and talk of today we are more than aware of imbalances in certain areas of the fuel, or energy crisis, situation.



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This winter scene at Maine's Libby Island shows ...

Speaking strictly from the standpoint of an observer at times, and as a wholly concerned participant at others, there was a whole lot of energy spent in putting the coal landed at certain light stations where it would do the most good.



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It took plenty of moves before the lighthouse buoy boats and tenders arrived at the island, rock, or ledge station to land supplies, and a different set of circumstances prevailed at each one.

Tennants Harbor Lighthouse on Southern Island ...



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The Corbett family at Little River Lighthouse, ...

Concerning ourselves with Tennants Harbor Lighthouse on Southern Island and Little River Lighthouse in Cutler, a couple of rather small islands with some differing terrain, let's take it from the point where the supply ship anchored or kept forging slowly against the current to remain in good touch with their work launches.



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Willie Corbett from a 1906 photo in his early ...

These launches, manned by a crew of tough muscled foc'sle hands under the direction of a boson or mate, were loaded with coal in very heavy burlap bags and nosed into the vicinity of the boat slip, weather and other conditions permitting, from whence those 200 pounds plus sacks were placed squarely upon the back and shoulders of one of the hands who would scramble, slip and slide up the beach with it.

A couple of men doing the placing upon one individual's back and shoulders placed it upon him evenly, and as soon as he was on his way another took his place, knee deep or more in swirling surf, and hip boots pulled all the way up.

At some point, with both Southern Island and Little River the same in this respect, the bags were dumped out onto the ground close to the boathouse. As the bags were dumped they were carried back to the launch, with the empties representing ten bags to the ton, and with each station receiving from 8 to 9 tons.

After the last launch load had been dumped it was a relieved and back weary lot of coal besmirched sailors that sought the little privacy of their quarters and washed up for the next chow.

At the island a somewhat mixed emotion overtook the keeper, or keepers, as there would be plenty of energy spent in moving this black mass almost the entire length of the island as there was no need whatsoever for it at the boathouse.

There was no doubt they knew exactly how many steps, yards, or paces it is from one end of either island to the other end.

Perhaps the mixed emotions with which the keeper and his family received this allotment of coal had their basis in and around scrounging driftwood for the kitchen range. This might have meant even making short forays to the nearby mainland after usable lumber as well as driftwood.

At any rate, a godly supply of free for the taking, minus labor and saw, dulling firewood was handy when the previous landing of coal had been used too avidly and threatened not to last until the next lot.

The fog signals depending upon a coal supply saw appreciably more of it landed, but such was not the ease at either of the islands in this story. Machinery striking bells were their signal requiring no fuel. Weights raised into the top of the conical towers descended and set in motion a timed-release clock.

However happy the keeper may have been to once more be lavish with coal, or to enjoy its long lasting warmth, it was up to him to get it across the island.

I recall one year at Southern Island when this was done by engaging a local teamster to drive his horse and cart across the nearly exposed at low water bar from Elmore Island.

Coming over on one low tide and going back on the next saw sufficient time, with two shoveling, to get it all across with the steed and cart able to get nearly a full bath on the way back. At other times the wheelbarrow and coal scoop got a real good workout and, in time, the desired end could be achieved with the slower method.

Sometimes outside labor might be engaged to wheel coal, but most often, at cutler with full of vim and vinegar youngsters able to give a good account of themselves it went something like this; “If you boys want to go hunting this afternoon or play ball, or go fishing; I want to see six loads of coal wheeled by each of you three.” This sort of proposition was figured to be most fair and the extent of load was geared to the capacity of each.

Little River Island is something like an inverted “U” in that there is a hump right in the middle of the island and no way to negotiate it except over the top and a planked wheeling trestle up the north side from the boathouse was maintained. Every bone wearying step of the way across this humpbacked bit of detached terra firma found one’s mind filled with the desire for an easier way out. A horse perhaps? That’s right, my kingdom for a horse!

There had been a four footed helper on the scene when my grandfather, Roscoe Johnson, was on Libby Island Lighthouse where two dwellings and the fog horn took coal in large doses, often ferried out to the island by a schooner scow able to strand herself right on the beach and discharge.

According to family channels, the four footed helper in this case, a jackass, wasn’t altogether amenable to doing as he was directed. As a matter of fact one day, upon being harnessed into the coal cart and given the go ahead signal, he totally misunderstood and backed up instead, straddled the well with the cart, but dropped his hind legs through the curbing and was hung up.

More stories of Myron Corbett’s memories of growing up at Maine lighthouses will appear in future issues of Lighthouse Digest. We thank his son, Gordon Corbett for donating his father’s stories and photos of lighthouse life off the rugged coast of Maine.