George Sanford Morrison Has Lighthouses in His Blood

By Kathleen Finnegan Comments?



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George Sanford Morrison proudly displays a ...
Photo by: Timothy Harrison

George and Wendy Morrison were recently honored by the Friends of Little River Lighthouse with the gift of a hand painted wood plaque of Little River Lighthouse for their third year of caretaking duties and volunteer work at the lighthouse. The plaque was painted by Cutler, Maine artist Pam Britton who has done numerous paintings of the historic structure.



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A young George Sanford Morrison, with his sister, ...

Morrison is no stranger to lighthouses. He spent some of his younger years living at Maine's St. Croix River Lighthouse near Calais, Maine where his father George Sullivan Morrison was the Coast Guard lighthouse keeper from 1945 to 1949.



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St. Croix River Lighthouse on Dochet Island near ...

Morrison said life on Dochet Island, on the Maine and United States border where the lighthouse was located, was good for his family. His father, a Chief Boson's Mate, was appointed as the lighthouse keeper at the end of World War II. He doesn't exactly know how his father secured the position, but he was ordered to report their shortly after his return from World War II duty in the South Pacific.

"The island itself was a playground, a kid's dream," says Morrison. His memories are all good, playing in the fields, swimming at the small beach, jumping off the wharf into the frigid waters, and taking a boat to the mainland to school, which was sometimes exciting in itself, especially in the wintertime. "My father would row the boat (we didn't have an outboard engine then) and my mother would be in the bow of the boat pushing the ice floes out of the way. I wonder how many grade school kids get to school that way now days? Once we got to the shore, my sister, Linda, and I would catch the school bus to Calais."

If the weather was too bad for his father and mother to get him and his sister back to the island lighthouse, they would stay with the folks that owned Elliott's Store. It was also at the Elliot's Store that they obtained most of their provisions, especially items that his family could not grow on the island.

Fuel for the lighthouse was delivered by the lighthouse tender. "The crew of the tender would carry the coal up to the house and stack it in the cellar," said Morrison. The family also had chickens and a chicken shed behind the house. It was here that young Morrison got into big trouble when he threw rocks through the windows. Apparently his first punishment wasn't enough, because after his father replaced the windows, he did it again. The second time the punishment was a little more severe and he never threw rocks again.

Morrison said he doesn't have many memories of the interior of the keeper's house, but does of the tower. "As a kid, it was exciting to climb the tower as I would play and imagine all kinds of things, like defending the island from a pirate or an enemy attack from the lantern room."

Although Morrison's father went on to serve at Libby Island Lighthouse and as Officer in Charge of the Cross Island Life-Saving Surfboat Station, Morrison said

up until the day his father died, he always talked about the good memories of the family's life at St. Croix River Lighthouse.

All that talk of lighthouse life, surf boats, life saving stations, and Coast Guard vessels must have got into young Morrison's blood. He eventually followed in his father's footsteps and joined the Coast Guard. In the 1960s he had the honor to serve as a lighthouse keeper at Libby Island Lighthouse at the entrance to Machias Bay where his father had also once served as a lighthouse keeper.

Although he often talked about it, the younger Morrison also never returned to visit St. Croix River Lighthouse. In 1976 the lighthouse, then abandoned but with plans underfoot to turn it into a museum, was destroyed by a fire and lost forever to the pages of time.

When Morrison left the Coast Guard, he did a stint with local law enforcement and then from 1982 to 1994 he worked for the U.S. Customs Service and then retired to live in Canada where he has family roots.

In 2008, when Morrison learned that Little River Lighthouse, on an island off the coast of Cutler, Maine, was being restored and available for overnight stays, he immediately booked a night for himself and his wife. Morrison said he couldn't believe what he saw. "The restoration was amazing. Wendy and I immediately fell in love with the island and lighthouse." After going through the scrapbooks in the keeper's house that detailed the restoration story and history of the lighthouse, Morrison and his wife immediately wanted to volunteer to help with the ongoing care of the lighthouse.

For the past three years they have been part of a team of different caretakers who would spend a couple of weeks or more at a time on the island at a time to greet visitors, take care of overnight guests and handle a variety of chores, such as mowing the grass, painting, general maintenance and helping with Open House events. Morrison said, "I grew up around boats and had a great time piloting one of the station's small boats to ferry guests and visitors back and forth to the island."

On his first visit to Little River Lighthouse, he met Tim Harrison, chairman of Friends of Little River Lighthouse, a chapter of the American Lighthouse Foundation, who since 1999, initiated and led the efforts to restore the lighthouse that was once listed by Maine Preservation as one of Maine's Ten Most Endangered Historic Properties. Morrison and Harrison immediately struck up a friendship.

Morrison was so impressed with Harrison's and the other volunteer's efforts to restore the lighthouse that he wanted to honor their efforts and subsequently made a number of rare artifact donations for the museum exhibit in the keeper's house. Among the items that he donated, which he had inherited from his father and held great personal meaning to him, were a Seth Thomas brass clock that was once used at Maine's Cross Island Life Saving Station and a late 1800s US Life Saving Service brass telescope. Harrison said the artifacts are extremely rare and because of this, they are removed from the island when there are no caretakers on duty.

In talking about the history of the artifacts that Morrison donated, Harrison explained that the U.S. Life Saving Service was a sister organization of the old U.S. Lighthouse Service. In the 1915 the Life Saving Service, along with the Revenue Cutter Service, were merged to create the U.S. Coast Guard and in 1939 the Lighthouse Service was also merged into the Coast Guard.

Morrison said, "Lighthouses have played a major role in my life and I would like to make sure that my grandchildren and all future generations value the historical significance that life saving stations and lighthouses and the people who served at them had on the maritime history and growth of the United States."