The Webber Journal

That’s not funny, Junior!

By **Geoff Currier** - *Mar 23, 2016*



Bernie Webber's journal recounts the two years he spent in Gay Head beginning in 1947.Photo Courtesy of the USCG

In 1947, before Bernie Webber made the heroic rescue portrayed in the movie "The Finest Hours," he was assistant keeper of the Gay Head Light, and in a memoir written many years

later, he recounts those early years.

In our second installment, Bernie talked about getting to know his neighbors and some of their curious habits, and in this episode he learns that being a keeper of the light is not the cushy job some might imagine, and finds a novel way of staying warm on cold winter nights.

Installment 3:

"*I admit after the midnight hour on those black and moonless nights, with just a drizzle of rain in the air, I was a little scared to make the walk from the lifeboat station up to the lighthouse. It was eerie; the glow from the beam of the lighthouse rotated high overhead, causing ominous shadows. There were occasions on such a night when I would arrive at the light and upon opening the door at the base of the tower and stepping inside, I would be frightened half to death. In front of me from the darkness came a shadowy figure with face lit up. I would be petrified until I realized it was "Junior" having some fun with me by holding a flashlight under his chin — only then would my heart stop pounding.*"

The day after my arrival, I walked over to the lighthouse to meet Frank Grieder and let him know I was his new assistant. I found the opening to the path that led over to the lighthouse; it was rocky in places, full of thickets and scrub brush.

Over the next two years I would make this trip at least a couple of thousand times. During the summer months on nice days, a stop or two along the way to pick raspberries or blackberries was a treat. But in a thick-o-fog at midnight, or on a cold winter's night in knee-deep snow, with winds howling at 40 to 50 mph, it was a much different story.

I met Frank, and right away from the look on his face, I could tell he wasn't all that happy to see me. After all, I was a Coast Guardsman, and just a kid in his eyes. Elsie, Frank's wife, broke the tension by inviting me into their house for coffee. Around the kitchen table we sat, drank coffee, and talked, and things were immediately better between us. Frank and Elsie were good people; I think they soon realized I was there to be a help to them.

They were a team. Frank was somewhat disabled; he told me it was from a gassing during WW I. Elsie often helped him with some of the more strenuous work. To the best of my knowledge they had two sons, Bill and "Junior." Bill didn't live at the light at the time; I don't

recall having met him. Today he resides on the island of Nantucket. “Junior” suffered from epilepsy and often had seizures; he was a grown man, large for his age, and very strong.

There were times I would be present to witness the seizures and be of some help to Frank and Elsie with the handling of Junior; it brought us all closer together, and I began to almost think of myself as part of the family.

The Grieders lived a rather reclusive life. With no electricity at the lighthouse, they depended on oil lamps. With no running water, they collected rainwater. Their trips to town were made only when absolutely necessary. They did have a garden and a few chickens.

Frank took me under his wing and taught me the ways of a lighthouse keeper. Contrary to what one might think, there was a lot of hard work involved in the maintenance, care, and operation of a lighthouse. He was methodical and very conscientious about the way things were to be done. He also was aware of the great trust and responsibility placed in his hands to keep the “light burning” for all at sea who depended on him. He was determined that I follow his lead.

Lamp oil (kerosene) was used as fuel for the light. Every drop would be strained at least twice through a chamois cloth into five-gallon brass cans, to make sure it was as clean and free of sediment as possible. Cleanliness was most important to assure the fuel flowed freely under pressure through the fuel lines, vaporizer, and burner to the mantel.

At times, straining the oil wasn’t enough to filter out the most minute particles. The light would then sputter, dim, and if not caught in time, flicker out. A tool with a cross wire called a pricker sometimes would unclog the vaporizer aperture and keep the light going, but one would have to be present in time to catch the situation.

Equipment and maintenance supplies were limited. Every little expense was questioned by Coast Guard authorities. WW II was by now officially over; however, money for operating expenses was tight, and we were required to “make do” with what we had.

When on duty I would assure myself that the light was operating properly before I would walk back over to the lifeboat station. Once there I would sit in the kitchen on watch, looking out the window up at the light. Many a time I’d have just sat down with a cup of

coffee when I'd see the light flickering, and I'd have to jump up and run all the way back over to the light tower, hoping to get there in time to prevent it from going out.

On many a winter's night, and during inclement weather of any kind, I would climb up and sit inside the giant French Fresnel lens. As the light hissed and burned brightly, it emitted a warmth, so I would sit and go round and round for hours just to be there in case the light started to fail, so I could tend it and keep it lit. This was far better than slogging back and forth making the trip between the lighthouse and the lifeboat station several times during my watch.

In any event, I'd have to tend the light every hour to pump up pressure and wind up the weight clock that drove the lens, rotating it in timed revolutions to show the proper sequence of characteristics.

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Geoff Currier