West Chop Lighthouse's lead legacy

Lighthouse keeper's daughter saw lead paint brushed on, chipped off for years.

By **Rich Saltzberg** - June 17, 2019



The house where Seamond Roberts, daughter of lighthouse keeper Octave Ponsart, lived with her father and mother, Emma Ponsart, from 1946 to 1957, a period when lead paint was said to be regularly applied to and chipped away from all lighthouse structures on West Chop. — Rich Saltzberg

The U.S. Coast Guard continues to sit on hundreds of documents pertaining to lead at its lighthouse facility on West Chop, citing an ongoing investigation as the reason to deny repeated Freedom of Information Act requests and an appeal by The Times.

As The Times reported earlier in June, Valerie Parent, a Coast Guard mother who discovered two of her children suffered elevated blood lead levels while living in one of the houses at the lighthouse facility, learned from the Coast Guard that the facility was contaminated with lead. In a statement, Parent said she and her family remain "hopeful that the Coast Guard will do the right thing and provide us with some sort of assistance and closure moving forward."

A former resident of West Chop Lighthouse with firsthand experience of the lead paint regimen used in the upkeep there is sympathetic to Parent's plight. In a telephone interview from her home in Pineville, La., Seamond Roberts, the daughter of one of the last keepers of West Chop Lighthouse, and author of a book on lighthouse living, told The Times she saw lead paint applied and chipped away from structures there from 1946 to 1957, the years her family lived there. "I was there from age 6 through 17," she said.

Roberts described her father, Octave Ponsart, the civilian lighthouse keeper at West Chop, as one of the last keepers in the region.

"The very last one was Joe Hindley, our friend over at Nobska," she said.

She and her parents came to the Vineyard from Cuttyhunk Light. Her father was transferred when the Coast Guard was poised to demolish the lighthouse, she said. It was razed in 1947.

To move Seamond, her father, and her mother Emma over to the Vineyard, the Coast Guard transported them right from a beach on Cuttyhunk to a beach at West Chop using a Higgins boat, a type of Navy landing craft used for beach landings in World War II.

"It was quite an event. They moved us by landing craft right up [Vineyard] Sound," she said.

Their furniture and all their belongings were packed in the vessel, she recalled.

"We landed on the beach. I was a little kid and I thought it was like [General] MacArthur landing in the Philippines. We kind of waded through the water to get ashore. It was a grand day."

Sam Fuller, the assistant keeper, was ensconced in the keepers house, but offered it to her dad.

"Dad said, 'No, I'm not going to going to move you out. You know, a house is a house,'" she said.

So they moved into the adjacent house. Facing the lighthouse from Main Street, it was the righthand house, presently 917 Main St.

"The thing was the wind there was really damaging to both the tower and the houses," she said. "So they had to be repainted quite often, and I believe the houses were repainted at like two-year intervals, maybe three at max. And the tower was whitewashed, so that wasn't so bad, but that top part, you know the iron railings, that got chipped off real frequently."

Unlike the brick tower, the iron railings were painted black, and remain black today.

"Beneath the black paint, which of course was also lead-based, was red lead, because that's the basis for paint metal on metal, or it was back then," she said. "And they would either chip it or blowtorch it off. It was all over the place."

Roberts said she played in the paint chips created by her father and Fuller's elbow grease with chipping irons and other tools.

Lead is a neurotoxic heavy metal. Red lead, or lead tetroxide, is a reddish pigment used in corrosion-resistant priming paints, among other applications. Red lead was also a product name for a National Lead Co.'s Dutch Boy Paint brand. The use of lead in residential paints was banned in the United States in 1978. Rules and restrictions on lead paint have continued to grow since then, at times driven by litigation.

In its 2014 Coatings and Color Manual, the Coast Guard states, "Heavy metals such as lead, chromates or organic tin compounds present in vessel primer, antifouling paints and primer coatings can accumulate in the body from ingestion and/or inhalation. Chronic exposures can produce disabling illness and possible death."

The Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution requires gloves be worn simply to handle things made of lead.

Not long after coming to West Chop, Roberts' father asked Fuller how to deal with leftover paint.

"He said, 'Well, you can put it in the oil house and hope for the best.' It'll probably freeze through the winter and that's no good, so he said just dump it on the edge of the garden down there where nothing grows. That's where everybody's dumped it for years. So that's why nothing grew."

The engine room, where the engines that produced steam for the foghorn were housed, was also painted with lead paint, Roberts said.

Roberts deemed the dumping and the scraping and painting cycle to be longstanding practices.

"So there has to be tons of lead-based paint there, and I don't think they'll ever be able to get it all out, or the majority of it, because that went on for years," she said. "You have to think from the time they put in that new tower, in what was it, 1891, from that time they were using lead-based paint. That's what they had. So this is a tragedy, really."

Roberts learned last summer from a past resident of West Chop Lighthouse, one whose family has long since rotated off the Vineyard, that two of the Parents' children tested elevated for lead, and that both Chief Robert Parent and his family and station commander Senior Chief Justin Longval and his family had moved from the premises due to lead contamination.

"It scared me so much; I'm 79 years old now, I went and had a lead level done at the VA, and they were amazed I had any lead in me. It wasn't dangerous, but it's there, and I wasn't surprised at all. I played in the paint chips."

Asked if VA healthcare providers considered her lead levels might be from a later exposure, Roberts said no. "They think it was from childhood exposure."

Her dad was in charge of four of the five the lighthouses on the Vineyard; however, he only did the painting on West Chop.

"Now on East Chop and on Cape Pogue and over to Edgartown, they had the civilian employees at [Station] Woods Hole come over and do them, because obviously my father and Sam couldn't do all this stuff," Roberts said. "But they used the same materials, you know …

And I'm sure with [East Chop and Edgartown] being iron towers, that they had to go the red lead route … And so they've got to have heavy lead concentrations too. Because heck, to get it done, you had to chip it off. "

Father's final task

"Up on top of the engine room roof we had the whistle [foghorn], which looked like a great big giant train whistle," she said. "When it would snow, the hole in the whistle would get clogged up." When it did, she described the a deep sound it normally made muffled to a weak bleat.

"When that happened, either Sam or Dad would have to go down and take a ladder, climb up on top of the whistle house, and unstick the whistle," she said.

When this happened in the winter of 1956, the consequences were serious. "So Dad was up there … And it was a cold, cold winter night with a blizzard going on, and it was about nine o'clock and I was getting ready for bed, and Mom said, You know, Dad's been down there a long time. And I said maybe he's making log entries, because that's where we kept our logs was in the engine room. Well, she wakes me up at 11 pm. She says, Come on, we've got to look for Dad, something's wrong. Well, we found him in a snowdrift, where he'd had a heart attack. We drug him in the house, barely. She called the town doctor, which at the time was Dr. [Ralph] Mitchell."

Roberts said Dr. Mitchell told her mother the road wasn't plowed and he didn't think he could reach them. Roberts said her family was often alone on West Chop in the winter, and the town often didn't plow the road. Nevertheless, Dr. Mitchell said he would try to get there, she said.

"So what did Dr. Mitchell do? He walked the beach. My dear old doctor, and he got here at maybe 4 in the morning."

Dr. Mitchell was able to preserve her father's life, but that marked the end of his lighthouse keeper's career.

"The next day they [flew] him up to Brighton Marine Hospital and, man, he'd almost died on us," she said. "He had a massive heart attack, and he had to retire and he hated it, he hated it, he hated it. Because his idea of dying the way he should was climbing the tower stairs, not being in retirement. So when we left in '57, they [the buildings at West Chop] definitely were still being painted with lead-based paint, inside and outside."

Roberts went on to enlist in the Coast Guard. "I joined when I was much too old to join," she said. "I got an age waiver. And I went through boot camp at age 37½. When you're that old going through boot camp, the half counts."

Roberts said she became a yeoman, and one of 17 military court reporters at the time. Her work was largely comprised of preparing materials for courts-martial. She retired in 1991, she said. She went on to write "Everyday Heroes: The True Story of a Lighthouse Family," a book that chronicles her family's time at both Cuttyhunk Light on Gosnold and at West Chop Lighthouse. The book rests on a shelf behind the desk of Martha's Vineyard Museum research librarian Bow Van Riper. Van Riper spoke highly of Roberts, and said the museum has incorporated some of her history into the museum's Fresnel exhibit. Oral history curator Linsey Lee has recorded some of Roberts' stories, as well, Van Riper said.

"It's all wrong," Roberts said. "I don't think, honestly, the Coast Guard will fix it. I don't think they'll fix the lead. I don't think they'll fix the family, and God, that's so wrong. And I love the Coast Guard."

She apologized for her father's role in the matter: "I'm so sorry that my father and Sam and all the other keepers contributed to it out of ignorance, but that's what it was."