BORDEN FLAT'S LAST KEEPER

It was early spring of 1963 when I first stepped across the threshold of Borden flats light. I had just been transferred from the Rose Island light down river in Rhode Island. There we were quartered in a house. We all had our own bedroom, a full kitchen, a great basement workshop (where I built a small sailboat), and an island to roam and explore. I immediately realized Borden Flats had been misnamed, it should have been called BOREDOM LIGHT. Even that name, I would soon come to realize, was an understatement.

The Coast Guard knew she was scheduled to be automated soon and we would be the last crew to man her, and therefore had done little to modernize or maintain the old girl. I was aware my stay would only be a few months, yet in the end it would seem like years. In the seventy-five years since she was commissioned in 1881, there had been less than a dozen head keepers. Some light keepers of yesteryear spent their entire careers on the same light. I envisioned the grit of those fellows as I closed the door behind me.

Borden Flats, as you can see, is within sight of the hustle and bustle of Fall River. One can easily observe it all from the light, yet it felt very remote. For a comparison, Alcatraz comes to mind. Sparse to say the least, the kitchen consisted of a basic cupboard, a simple sink, a table with a couple of chairs and an ancient kerosene-fired cook stove. It had a metal can on the back that had to be removed and filled once a day. It was also the only source of heat for the entire lighthouse. Filling that jug was second nature to me as we had the same system when I was a kid in rural New Hampshire.

One floor up was the living area, it had a couple of chairs and a black and white TV, the same TV we were watching the day the nuclear submarine "Thresher" went down with all hands, in April of 1963. The next floor was the bunk room where there were a couple of metal bunks, or racks as they were called, and a "bureau", known as a chest of drawers to today's folks. Above that was a small utility space which was topped off by the light room some 48' above the river. The fog bell was mechanical and had to be hand cranked (like the weights on a grandfathers clock), which would run the bell for a few hours when needed.

Besides watching TV and keeping the place clean, there was little to do. Mealtime was the highlight of the day. We had a charge account at a small market near the town dock. Every day we would lower our small boat with the davits, and motor in for a grub run. I remember we ate a lot of liver and onions, a cheap meal back then, and drank a ton of coffee. All drinking water had to be boiled on that old cook stove. It came from the rain roof, made its way down the gutters, and was stored in the cistern in the base of the foundation. Guess where all the sea gulls would roost! You guessed it, on the rain roof. Now you know why we boiled the water! Yes it was pretty crude living, but at least we had electricity. Prior to 1957 there was none,

even the beacon was kerosene.

There were three of us on the light, two on and one off all the time. The shift was 6 days on and 3 days on liberty for each of us. As a second class engineman I was second in command. Because there was a back up generator, the light required someone with my rank to maintain it. They enclosed a small section of the porch to keep it out of the weather. The kerosene barrel was also kept in this small space. All, including the room, are long gone.

Mid summer of 1963 we received word from CG Castle Hill, the Life Boat Station that serviced us. We were to have all the furniture and personal belongings on the apron the next morning as they were shutting her down. A civilian on shore would remotely operate the fog device. We didn't have to be asked twice, the next morning at daybreak everything was piled high on the outer caisson. We were waiting for their 40 footer to take us off, when Castle Hill called us. They wanted to postpone the pick up for a few days. Wanting none of that, I told them everything was already exposed to the weather and we needed to go today. They relented and picked us up a couple of hours later.

I was the last one to step off Borden Flats and as we left, I watched behind our wake, as she disappeared in the early morning mist. If I had any inclination of making the Coast Guard a career, Borden Flats cured all that. Within a month I was discharged.

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