Coney Island Memories

By Celestine Boisvert O'Connor

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This photo, taken in 1953 at the Coney Island ...

Cecile Boisvert Chenette and Celestine (Sally) Boisvert O'Connor are daughters of Adrien J. Boisvert, U.S. Coast Guard keeper at New York's Coney Island Lighthouse from 1944 to 1960. Sally and Cecile have graciously shared their memories of growing up at a unique light station.



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Adrien Boisvert with Jeanntte, Irene, and Cecile ...

Cecile's Memories The Coney Island Lighthouse was home for me until I was 16 years old, when my father retired from the Coast Guard in 1960. My parents were lighthouse keepers. Yes, I say both were keepers because my mother was there working every day and night to make sure everything was done correctly. My parents had seven children — four girls and three boys. I was the middle child.



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Adrien Boisvert, 1926, at the Crown Point ...

We had many advantages as we grew up on this shore light. We all attended Our Lady of Solace Catholic Grammar School. It took two buses and 15 minutes to get there. We all attended high school either at Bay Ridge All Girls School or Erasmus High in Brooklyn. On weekends my sister Sally or our friends would go to the many museums in New York City and we were given extra credits in our art class for these visits.



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During the summer in Coney Island, once a week ...

It was also so convenient because we had all the stores close by. The lighthouse is in a gated community called Sea Gate, and our street was Beach 46th Street. Our neighbors were very close by, so as we grew up we could make money by babysitting and by cleaning the old houses that opened up in summer for the influx of New York City people who left their hot apartments for some sun and fresh air. We had friends and sometimes family from out of town come visit us. So Coney Island Lighthouse, or Norton's Point Lighthouse as it is also known, was in the middle of a busy small community near one of the world's great cities, New York.



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Adrien and Alice Boisvert's 30th wedding ...

When summer came it was great living right on the beach. In the summer we lived in our bathing suits. In the morning we would go up to the beach with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and stay all day. What an idyllic way to grow up!



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The kids at play in the front yard at the Coney ...

Our older sister Jeanette would take us to the beach and take care of us very well all day. On one occasion my brother George, who was about nine years old at the time, went into the water. It was very rough and as he was getting out a large wave knocked him down and he went under and tumbled around a bit. At the same time a woman was walking on the edge of the surf with her small daughter on her shoulders. She was also swept into the ocean by that large wave. As George was

recovering his footing in knee-deep water, the small girl was being sucked into the water and tossed around. The undertow was dragging her out. She suddenly hit against George's legs, and he was able to grab onto her before she got out any further into the deep water. The child's eyes were full of sand and she couldn't see. She held onto George so tight that when her mother came to take her from George she wouldn't let go. Finally she did go to her mother and was okay. The next day the woman found out it was one of the "lighthouse kids" that saved her daughter, and she came and thanked George.



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Keeper Boisvert's wife Alice on the front porch ...

My older brother Andy Jr. was born to my parents when they were keepers on Fire Island Lighthouse on Long Island. Andy was 1 1/2 years old in 1938 when the big hurricane hit the island. My father went around the island and warned people to evacuate, but some people wouldn't leave. My parents' good friends were Adele and Alice Trottier, who were sisters. Adele kept telling Alice that their cottage would be all right because they had heavy appliances like a big refrigerator that would hold the structure in place. The women lit a candle to the Blessed Mother Mary and prayed. As the water level rose, Adele started to worry. She thought at this time my father would come back for them. This was not to be, as they were warned that it was impossible. My parents watched from the lighthouse as the island was completely covered with water — all except the lighthouse.



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Adrien J. Boisvert when he was 30 years old.

My mother kept watching the expression on my father's face to see if there was any fear. There never was any fear showing. Father just kept checking the cellar in the house. He told Mom if the cellar filled up with water the foundation would crumble. His concern was for his wife and young son Andy Jr., plus the other family on the station — a keeper with his wife and two daughters. They didn't have to abandon the station if everything held in place.



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Cecile at age 6, playing on the supports of the ...

Meanwhile, Alice and Adele had to escape through a window. Alice grabbed a tree as she held her sister. Adele didn't know how to swim. After a long while Alice finally and regrettably had to let Adele go. Adele drowned. She was later found on the beach with only her hand showing out of the sand. Their small cottage was still partially intact with the candle still lit. Alice lived a long life, always remembering her dear sister.



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Alice Boisvert, Adrien's wife, checks the weather ...

Years later my brother talked to our parents about "the storm." Andy Jr. said he remembered a mattress floating by the station with a body on it. My parents said it amazed them that Andy Jr. — who was only 1 1/2 years old at the time — would remember seeing that. My parents never talked about it after they witnessed it. They just wanted to forget it. My brother Andy is now a senior citizen, and in all his life he never went swimming in the ocean because of what he witnessed as a child.



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A perfect score for Red Cross donations is ...

One of our jobs on the Coney Island station was to climb the stairs to the lighthouse each night before sunset. At the top of the lighthouse was a large brass crank handle attached to a cable that held a round weighted barrel. Every night we took turns cranking up the weight. During the night the weight would slowly descend and turn the lens, sending out a beacon of red flashing light. My parents gave me five cents for the job.

We would save our money and at Christmas time we would have enough to buy presents for the family. Another job was helping our neighbors. We lived in an all-Jewish community. Some of the people were Orthodox Jews. Because of certain religious customs or beliefs (on the Sabbath) they could not touch money or anything electric, or the stove. So on Saturday mornings we would go to their houses and turn off the lights and turn off the stove and they would have five cents in a dish waiting for us that they had put there on Friday. So we were happy that we had spending money, and they could abide by their religion.

Every day the American flag was raised on the flag pole. My father did this in the morning because he was up first. At sunset us kids would lower the flag, fold it and put it away. One day I was taking down the flag and instead of folding it, I was playing with it. I was draping it over my shoulders and running around like it was a cape. Seeing me do this, my very gentle father walked over to me and carefully took the cape (flag) from me, folded it, kissed it, and put it away without

saying anything to me. This made me very ashamed of my actions with the American flag.

My parents taught us many things by example. By doing this he showed me not only to have respect for the flag, but for what it means to be an American. And he showed me how much he loved this country. My parents were naturalized citizens. They were born in Canada and spoke French to us before we went to school. My father wore his lighthouse uniform and later his Coast Guard uniform with great pride. When he went to church on Sunday he looked so handsome and polished that I would be bursting with pride that he was my father.

The collision of the Andrea Doria and the Stockholm was a big event for us as kids. I was 12 years old at the time. We first heard about the collision on television. Soon the phone started to ring — people and reporters wanted to know more. I don't think my parents had any more information then anyone else, so we kept watching TV for any news reports and pictures. Finally there it was — a live picture of the great Andrea Doria. She was huge, laying on her side before she made a death roll into the ocean never to be seen again.

My father said if we watched we could see the Stockholm pass in front of the lighthouse. I can remember waiting for what seemed to be forever. There she was, gliding by effortlessly with the front fifth of the ship crunched up as if it were a piece of aluminum foil. "How could she float with the front all like that?" we wondered. She made it to port okay. I think she had lost five lives.

I don't remember if it was dawn or if it was sunset, but one of the most beautiful sights was when the ship Ile de France, carrying survivors from the Andrea Doria back to New York, glided by our house. It was not light but still not dark. The graceful ship went past us with the side lights on. ILE DE FRANCE it said in bright letters. We could hear the music softly playing across the still shimmering water, and we could see the survivors on the deck. These people were so lucky to be saved, unlike the 46 who lost their lives. The music from the ship, the beautiful lights and the cool summer breeze made it a night to remember.

During the summer in Coney Island, once a week there would be fireworks on the boardwalk. We didn't go there because we had better seats — up in the lighthouse. Mother would make a large bag of popcorn. We would go up the lighthouse stairs to the outside balcony on the top and sit there with our legs dangling over the railing and have the best time watching the fireworks. It was so great — we had an unobstructed view! I remember those nights so well. There we were on top of the world, fireworks bursting all around, the moon shimmering on the ocean and a warm summer breeze with the smell of the ocean! Looking back, it was so much fun. When you grow up with that, at the time you don't know how lucky you are until later in life when you have your own children.

Sally's Memories

Sometimes you don't know what you've got until it's gone. I felt this way when I was 15 years old and moved away from the ocean.

On July 8, 1960 — my Dad's 60th birthday — we began a new life in rural upstate New York. Dad retired from 34 years of service as a lighthouse keeper. After my initial culture shock resulting from the move from New York City to the suburbs, I found that I liked the slower pace of life, but I never stopped missing the ocean.

I missed seeing the ocean out my front door. As children, my six brothers and sisters and I would play on the large boulders that lined the ocean at Norton Point. It was thrilling to see the heavy surf that always came with storms. Coney Island Lighthouse Station sits on the very southwest corner of Brooklyn. We would often watch the approach of rain as it crossed the three and one-half mile channel that separated us from Staten Island.

Compared to other children living in New York City, we had a massive front lawn to play on. Dad always had a large vegetable garden and every time I see blue hydrangeas, I think of the bushes in front of the cottage.

The art of building light stations was perfected during the 1800s. When the lighthouse and cottage were built in the 1890s, they were built to last. The slant of the cottage roof, the way the tops of the second story windows slant toward the sea and the heavy brick walls were designed to prevent damage from the fierce storms. The cement used to build the thick foundation was so strong that it took my father an entire day to chisel a small hole for the installation of a new furnace during the 1950s.

In order to maintain the property, my father Adrien J. Boisvert had to be a Jack of all trades. He had to paint the tower, house and surrounding fence. He was able to do all of the electrical and most of the plumbing work himself. Dad was also a bricklayer, stonemason and an excellent carpenter.

During the forties and fifties, the cobblestone streets and old trolley tracks in New York were being replaced. The old materials along with old building materials were being dumped along the shoreline around the city. Dad would retrieve some of this material to build structures around the station. One can still see the low brick and cobblestone wall near the ocean that he built in the 1950s.

My mother Alice M. Boisvert worked just as hard as Dad. It was her responsibility to keep the house spotlessly clean — a tough job with seven children under foot. At any time Coast Guard inspectors would show up at the door to give a white glove test to the house and tower. Mom also answered the phone and maintained the station when Dad was out of town or sick.

One of the duties my parents had was to watch out for fog so that they could turn on the fog bell. They were often awakened at night with the sound of distant ships' horns. I remember Dad putting a ladder up on the bell tower during a power outage in order to manually sound the bell with a hammer. He and my brother Adrien Jr. (Andy) would take turns doing this until the fog was gone. Eventually the bell was removed due to shorefront erosion and the fact that modern ships have new ways of establishing their location.

Some of my fondest memories involve going to the beach in the summer. Since the Army Corps of Engineers placed large boulders in front of the station to prevent erosion, we had to walk four blocks to the nearest beach. Every ship that entered New York Harbor had to pass right in front of us. We would watch for the really big ships like the Queen Mary. Within 15 minutes, the wakes of these giant ships would reach shore in the form of big waves. We would try to body surf as many as possible. It was great fun.

This past March, I went on an Elderhostel learning vacation. One of the study topics was lighthouses. The man that gave this talk, Ralph E. Eshelman, is on the board of the National Lighthouse Museum located on Staten Island. Ralph told us that the Fresnel lens from Coney Island Light is on display at the museum. I hope to see it one day. Since I have never seen the lighthouse from the ocean, I plan on taking a cruise that will pass in front of the station.

Living at Coney Island Light has given my brothers and sisters and I a unique opportunity to know the joys of coastal living.

This story appeared in the October 2001 edition of Lighthouse Digest Magazine. The print edition contains more stories than our internet edition, and each story generally contains more photographs - often many more - in the print edition. For subscription information about the print edition, click here.