Bill Grieder's Lighthouse Boyhood

by Jeremy D'Entremont

Bill and Ruth Grieder are popular residents of the Madaket section of Nantucket, Massachusetts. I visited them at their home in a tranquil setting overlooking Hither Creek to hear about Bill's life at three lighthouse stations in the 1930s and '40s. Ruth, a native of Nantucket, has an interesting story of her own, with deep roots on the island and an uncle who served in the Lifesaving Service. Ruth and Bill met while Bill's father was lighthouse keeper at Nantucket's Great Point.

Back in the 1920s, Bill's father Frank A. Grieder lived in Camden, Maine with his wife Elsie and two sons. Elsie was originally from England, where she served as a Sergeant Cook in the Royal Air Force during World War I. Frank worked in a granite quarry. In 1930 everything changed for the Grieder family when Frank got a job with the U.S. Lighthouse Service. Bill was in the first grade at the time.

The rest of this article is in Bill Grieder's own words.

Duxbury Pier Light (Bug Light), Massachusetts, 1930-1934

It was at the height of the Depression. All of a sudden he got this job and we moved down from Maine in a Model A with all the furniture and everything. We were going into the Lighthouse Service. We lived in Rocky Nook -- there was a summer colony.

This was during rum running. In the wintertime the places were all closed up, but you'd hear music in some of the houses at night. There was a lot of stuff being moved around. Nobody made any noise about it; we just kept quiet. But that was quite a well known place for that.

My Dad used to have to row out to the lighthouse. This was before they had outboards. It was in the middle of March, and he was going out. And the Plymouth Yacht Club -- I think it was their boat that was out there with two fellows on it. They asked if he wanted a tow, and he said sure. They came alongside and hit him [accidentally] in the bow and knocked him over. He saw the gunwale of the dory and grabbed it and hauled himself in. So they towed him out to the lighthouse. But he was practically a sheet of ice when they got there. And then he had to get up into the tower on the ladder.

The weather was never the same. You'd go out and a couple of hours later the weather changes and the tide changes.

The thing that I used to get a big kick out of was when it came in foggy. We had a huge brass bell up on the tower, and it worked like clockwork. You'd wind it up, and it had a big hammer. You'd wind and wind and all of a sudden it'd go "whammo!" and the whole tower would shake. You'd lie there at night and wonder "How am I going to sleep?" And next thing you know you'd gotten used to it. And when the fog cleared and they shut the bell off, you woke up. You couldn't stand it -- "Why is it so quiet?"

At low tide you could walk around there and pick up lobsters and sea clams. Of course if you were out on the flats you always kept your eye on the tide because it came up quite quickly.

We used to bring people in there when it was blowing hard and they were a little leery of the weather. They'd tie up on the rail or the steps of the ladder. It could get quite stormy there in Plymouth Harbor.

It was nice for my mother because she was on shore. We might get to see my father two times a month. And then he had a chance to transfer to Great Point.

Great Point Light, Nantucket, Massachusetts, 1934-1937

[The original Great Point Lighthouse was destroyed by a storm in 1984. It has been replaced by a concrete replica. The site of the old lighthouse is now under water.]

We came to Great Point. My mother came by steamer. My Dad and I came down on the lighthouse tender. All the furniture was brought to Great Point -- they brought all the furniture and landed it on the beach. And then it had to be taken up to the lighthouse.

By the same token, all the coal and oil had to come in. The oil was put in a storage building just a short way from the lighthouse. The coal was brought up to the house. It was that really big, heavy coal. I used to have to go down in the cellar and stack it up against the back side so we could get our winter supply of coal in.

A lot of things about Great Point were a little different from the norm. We had a cistern down in the cellar and we used to collect rain water. There were gutters and they used to come down on the drainpipes and into the basement. They had these -- like funnels, with a narrow end on it -- so when it rained you pulled them out of the cistern pipes so you'd wash the roof off for 15 or 20 minutes or a half hour, because a lot of bird stuff got on it. Once it washed off you took these funnel-shaped things and turned them so the water would fill up the cistern.

I used to have to clean the cistern every year -- get down inside it, scrub it down. Occasionally you'd find some bones -- some mice fell in. Of course you didn't advertise that to too many people.

The [District] Superintendent of the Lighthouse Service used to come to the lighthouses on his tour of inspection. And he used to ask for a glass of "God's water" -- that's what he called it. And if he'd known what was in it, I don't know if he would've wanted it.

Of course, when he came down for his inspection, the lighthouse people knew he was coming, probably before he did, because he'd be at the other stations and word would get around. We had a telephone, but you had to go through the Coast Guard station to get an outside line.

They [keepers] spent a lot of time on maintenance work. There were very few lighthouses that I ever saw that weren't kept up. They took pride in their lighthouses. You wanted to get a high rating.

If you wanted a new paintbrush, a new saucer, a new fork -- anything pertaining to the lighthouse -- "Show me the old one, I'll give you a new one." They ran a tight ship. They just didn't have that kind of money.

There were times during northeasters -- gales -- we'd have ducks flying into the windows and they'd break the plate glass, and that had to be replaced. The light blinded them and they just ran into it.

While we were there the Nantucket Lightship was struck by the *Olympic.* Later the radio operator from the lightship [John F. Perry of Provincetown] came out to Great Point as an assistant keeper. He told me what happened on the lightship. He said he went outside and lit a cigarette, and he looked up and saw the

Olympic heading right for them. The lightship was split in two. The part he was on stayed afloat, the other part sank.

There was a big pond there at Great Point. That's where I learned to go fishing and sailing and all kinds of stuff. I used to do a lot of hunting. I did a lot of things out there. I had a golf course up in the sand dunes -- I used tomato cans. I did a lot of beachcombing. I'd swim with sand sharks, eels, all that kind of stuff. And there was a huge nesting area for terns. Thousands and thousands of terns.

The Coast Guard was doing patrols down on the beach. Most of the time they'd do their walk and punch the clock, but during the winter they'd stop in for coffee. Imagine walking six miles of beach in a howling northeaster in the wintertime! They used to do it, and I'll tell you, it was a rough trip.

We had a truck -- a Ford truck -- and the Coast Guard had a truck. And that's about the only vehicles that were around. We had big balloon tires, called sand tires. You could go to Wauwinet in the track you left a week before, and it was still there except where the tide came in and washed it out. You could just get in the ruts, pull the throttle out, take your hands off the wheel, and she'd track right to Wauwinet.

The Flying Santa [Bill Wincapaw or Edward Rowe Snow] dropped presents at Great Point at Christmas. I didn't know what it was at first. I thought somebody was dropping bombs.

There might have been three cars out there in the summer. That was it. After I got out of the service I got out there -- I hadn't been there in a long time -- and I counted 75 jeeps in one weekend. I said "This place has changed!"

My mum was down here at the Island Home. When she heard Great Point had blown over [in 1984], she was wondering what they were going to do about it. Well, we found out that Senator Kennedy got funds to replace it. My mum was looking forward to that. Every time I went down to the Island Home she'd say, "When is the tower going to be done?" I'd say, "Well, they're still working on it." The weather had a lot to do with this, too.

So I used to take her out to Altar Rock with a telescope and set it up so you could see the lighthouse and actually see the guys working on it. I'd get her out of the truck to look at it.

So they finished it. They had a feed down at the school, and the dedication -- the ceremonies -- were at the lighthouse. We went out with the Coast Guard on the *Bittersweet*. Some people went out by car, some went out by sailboat, and they had the dedication.

When we got back to Nantucket and he [Senator Kennedy] was getting ready to leave -- we were up on the bridge and my mum said, "I wonder if he's coming up here?" So my daughter was down there and she got Senator Kennedy, and he climbed the ladder to see my mum. That made her day. And they gave her the key to the lighthouse. She should get some recognition. She was a great gal. She had a hard life.

Gay Head Light, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, 1937-1948

When we left Great Point in '37, we were told the boat was going to pick us up. So all the furniture went down to the beach, and we sat there all day, all that night. We finally got a telegram that it had been delayed for a couple of weeks.

So all the furniture had to go back up to the house and we had to wait for the lighthouse tender.

When we went to Gay Head we had a tarred road right to the front door. That really thrilled my Mum, to think she didn't have to go out in the sand.

They had a caretaker out at No Man's Land [an island near Gay Head] and he got a bug. He signaled that he needed some assistance, so the Coast Guard went over. And he had to go to the hospital. They had a cow there, and the cow had to be milked twice a day. So the Coast Guard went over morning and night to milk the cow. I used to go with them the days when I wasn't in school. They used to call them the dairy maids. That didn't go over too well.

One night at Gay Head we had a northeaster. I heard a plane going around. I ran out of the house -- I could hear the plane flying and I could see the lights. It went around three or four times. It was a miserable night. The plane crashed that night at Lobsterville, just a mile down from the lighthouse. They came in to make a landing -- they had their gear down. It hit a sand bar or something and it killed two pilots. I knew something was wrong. Evidently they were using that light to try to get a position.

A freighter came ashore halfway between the Devil's Bridge and the Gay Head Cliffs. And the Navy used it for bombing practice. They used smoke bombs. It was quite something.

There was always some work for me. I used to polish brass. I learned to light the lighthouse, and I taught my mother to do it. There were times when my Dad was sick -- my Mum would go up to light the light or I would go up. Of course we had an assistant keeper, but if you couldn't call on him you did it yourself.

I went up to help whitewash or paint the tower, and mow the lawn of course. Lug the kerosene up in the tower. Polish the lens. Gay Head had 1,008 prisms. It had to be cleaned and dusted all the time. We had a dust cover over that. In the wintertime we used to put glycerin on the outside of the [lantern] glass, so if you got rain it wouldn't ice up.

They used to use alcohol for the torches under the vaporizer for the lamp. They first used pure alcohol, and they had a run on alcohol. And it wasn't all going into the tower. The light wasn't the only thing that was lit. So they switched to denatured alcohol. They had a sign on it -- "Poison."

Another job I used to do was to take people up in the tower. My Mum used to do it too. We didn't have to do it but it was kind of a courtesy. Mostly anybody who stopped in we'd take up.

One question they used to ask quite often -- "Do you light the light on a foggy night?" I'd say, "Now you think what you just asked me. Suppose the fog clears up and the light is out." And they'd say they hadn't thought about that. That light is on every night. You could see it for 19 miles.

We had a generator supposedly coming to electrify Gay Head. The Coast Guard were right next door to us. They had modern conveniences -- plumbing, electricity, the works. We had outside privies, a pump. The commander of the Coast Guard was trying to get us these generators. Well, the 1938 hurricane came and the generators had to go to the Coast Guard to replace generators they had lost or something. There went our generators. The commander came down and he said, "Well, I'm still trying to get them for you." But he finally told us it's no use.

My Mum said, "What do you think if I write to President Truman?" And he said, "Well, give it a try." So she wrote him saying, "In the '40s it's deplorable to have a station like this with no modern conveniences." He wrote back and he assured us that Gay Head would be electrified in the very near future. It was electrified, but my Dad had been retired when it was electrified.

Gay Head was a big, beautiful lighthouse. Well, that's history.

A final note: In an article in the Nantucket newspaper called *Yesterday's Island*, Mary Miles said about Bill and Ruth Grieder, "Perhaps what is most noteworthy about their stories of life on Nantucket is that they show true Yankee grit, resilience, humor, and plain old-fashioned decency." I couldn't agree more, and I thank them for their generosity in sharing their stories.