Ken Rouleau's Year at Halfway Rock
By Jeremy D'Entremont

Since 1871, Maine's Halfway Rock Lighthouse has stood on a windswept, barren rocky ledge in Maine's Casco Bay, ten miles east of Portland Head. Ken Rouleau of Derry, New Hampshire was barely out of his teens when he arrived at the Rock in 1960. For a young Coast Guardsman, the isolated station wasn't ideal duty. "We didn't have any fun – I didn't anyway," he says. "There was not much social life. You took care of yourself."

Rouleau was originally from West Lebanon in southern Maine. After joining the Coast Guard he spent about a year and a half aboard a cutter doing patrols in the North Atlantic. Storms were frequent and rough seas were a constant. "There weren't many days you could stand up, never mind walk around," he recalls.

He asked for a transfer and was sent to the Coast Guard station at Fletcher's Neck in Biddeford Pool, Maine, where he spent a few months. Then came a year at Halfway Rock. There were four men assigned to the station at the time, with two on the Rock at all times. Each man spent 21 straight days at the lighthouse, followed by 21 days off.

The days were split into 12-hour shifts for the two men on the station, so the crewmembers didn't see that much of each other. But some of the men made an impression on Rouleau. He remembers James Murray from Manchester, New Hampshire. And he definitely remembers John Cluff, a native of the southern Maine coast. This may have something to do with the fact that Cluff was a great cook – he made "the most delicious sausage you've ever tasted." His other specialties included asparagus on toast and peach pies.

The Coast Guard sent a large boat to pick the men up or bring them to the station, but it was necessary to transfer to a small peapod boat to land at Halfway Rock. It took great skill to land the boat on the ramp in heavy seas. Rouleau recalls one time when Cluff was returning with the station's television, which had just been repaired on the mainland. The boat flipped over as he tried to land, and Rouleau remembers his own sinking feeling as he watched and thought, "No TV for another three weeks!" Launching the

peapod was just as hazardous, as the men would ride it down the steep ramp. “It flipped more than once,” says Rouleau.

Rouleau says the tower at Halfway Rock was “immaculate” when he was there. He and the other Coast Guard crew painted the other buildings during his stay. The dwelling had been built not long before he arrived, but it hardly provided the latest in modern conveniences. Rouleau recalls a pipe sticking out of the ceiling in the cellar for showers, and a chemical toilet. Generators provided electricity -- one would be “screaming constantly.” The dwelling Rouleau lived in has since been destroyed by storms.

The Coast Guard crew kept the third order Fresnel lens and all the brass in the tower spotlessly clean. Every 30 minutes, they checked the clocks associated with the mechanisms that turned the lens. There were three of these clockwork mechanisms that each had to be wound once a day. The fog signal also had to be operated as needed. “The foghorn would drive you completely bonkers when it would be foggy for seven or eight days at a time,” says Rouleau.

Despite limited resources, the men at Halfway Rock found ways to pass the long hours. They did lots of reading – *Readers Digest* was popular. Rouleau fished in the area, catching mostly pollock. One time he found a seagull with an injured wing, and it became the closest thing to a pet the men had at Halfway Rock. Rouleau fed pollock to the bird and nursed it back to health until it took off.

Coast Guard crews remained at Halfway Rock until its automation in 1975. Subsequent keepers found their own ways to keep busy. Stephen Krikorian, one of the last keepers, showed a reporter from the *Portland Press Herald* a basketball he had picked up on the shore. "There are 2,448 pimples on this. I counted 'em. It took a day." The men kept a chart in the house with the heading "House Fly Killings." Coast Guardsman Ronald Handfield held the record of 257 fly killings in two months.

After his stint at the Rock, Ken Rouleau spent 30 days as a relief keeper at Squirrel Point Light on the Kennebec River in Arrowsic, Maine. The man he relieved was Clarence Skolfield, Maine’s last civilian keeper. Picturesque Squirrel Point was like a well-earned vacation after Halfway Rock.

In 2000, Halfway Rock Lighthouse was leased by the Coast Guard to the American Lighthouse Foundation. The tower now stands alone, its automated light and fog signal keeping vigil on the Casco Bay.

Ken Rouleau laughs at talk of the romance of lighthouse keeping. "Anything is beautiful if you don't have to do it," he says. Still, nostalgia creeps in as he remembers his days at Halfway Rock. "I'd do it again. At my age now I'd love to be out there."

PHOTO CAPTIONS

1 Halfway Rock Lighthouse, circa 1960. Courtesy of Ken Rouleau.

2 A tender approaches Halfway Rock Light Station. Courtesy of Ken Rouleau.

3 The old fog bell tower was still standing at Halfway Rock in the early 1960s. Courtesy of Ken Rouleau.

4 Young Ken Rouleau at Halfway Rock, circa 1960. These photos were taken by Ken's two brothers during a visit to the light station. Courtesy of Ken Rouleau.

5 Halfway Rock Lighthouse, circa 1960. Courtesy of Ken Rouleau.

6 Ken Rouleau at Halfway Rock, circa 1960. This was before a helicopter landing pad was installed. Courtesy of Ken Rouleau.

7 Halfway Rock Light today. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.

8 Ken Rouleau in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in October 2002. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.