

Keepers of the DeTour Reef Light

Note: At the Tenth Anniversary Gala, at the invitation of the DeTour Reef Light Preservation Society and Dr. Charles Feltner, DRLPS Historian, invited past USCG members to come and talk about their experiences while assigned to the DeTour Reef Light. The following is the information they shared.

One mile offshore sitting on an underwater reef in the St. Mary's River the 83 foot high DeTour Reef Light serves as a guide for the boat traffic traveling between Lakes Huron and Superior. Since 1931 freighters have relied on the Light to avoid that reef and make the turn into the River. Inside the DeTour Reef Light members of the U.S. Coast Guard worked to keep that Light shining until it was automated in 1974.

Originally, there were three men assigned to the Light. However, during World War II, a fourth man was added into the rotation to keep three men on the Light at all times. The mouth of St. Mary's River is a strategic location for boats going to and from the Soo Locks and the US Navy believed the beefed-up security was necessary. The four man rotation was maintained through 1972.

More than 100 men served on the DeTour Reef Light from 1931 until it was fully automated in 1974. Charlie Jones was Officer in Charge for 22 years and retired with 40 years of service as a civilian. Jack Short served on the Light over 10 years. It was considered a remote assignment by the Coast Guard and the young recruits learned to deal with loneliness and isolation.

Because of the remoteness of the DeTour Reef Light, few men volunteered to serve on the DeTour Reef Light. For Marvin Kurkierewicz (who served two tours on the Light, 1963 and 1969-70) and John Gretka (1961), the assignment kept them close to home.

During John's assignment he took six days of leave to get married and move his bride into a trailer on the shore. While on rotation at the Light, he could look across the water and see his house.

Steve Lovett volunteered for another reason. As a young man, Steve served on the Light from 1958-1959 as an EN3 (Engineman 3rd Class) with the Coast Guard. Steve shared with DRLPS Historian Chuck Feltner: "I thought it was great that I got so much time off. Besides one week off every month I got an additional 30 days of leave because of the remoteness of the assignment. I was able to do a lot of traveling and have a lot of fun."

The men that served on the Light had an isolated assignment and ate, slept, worked and played on the Light. Some of those assigned to the Light viewed the assignment as punishment, but the overall agreement among the men was that, with a good attitude, you could make best of it.

Assigned to the Light

The men's schedule was described by Marvin Kurkierewicz. "There were four of us assigned to the Light during the season. We had three weeks out (at the Light) and one week off (on shore). The season ran from early April to when the shipping season ended in late December. Every day we had four hours of watch duty and four hours of general assigned duties."

Watch

The Officer in Charge (OIC) served on the day watch from 8AM to 4PM and the seamen covered the evening watch. Watch included monitoring the two radios, AM and FM, listening for minor infractions on the water, starting up the fog horn when visibility was low, and turning on the light in the evening. As long as they kept their eyes and ears open, reading, watching TV, or playing cards helped pass the time on watch.

In 1958 Steve Lovett was on the 12-4 AM watch and reading a murder mystery, when he heard the front door open and close. Thinking it was probably the wind, he went back to his reading. When he heard heavy steps coming up the stairs to the living quarters; it was time to investigate and at the top of the stairs stood a very tired canoeist. He had been following Father Marquette's route and was camping on Espanora Island. A bear came into his camp and chased him. To get away from the bear he had paddled four miles toward the only light he could see, the DeTour Reef Light. After that scare, Steve didn't read murder mysteries at night for a long time

Duties

The four hour work assignments entailed lots of scraping and painting inside and out. According to the men, it was a never ending job. The engineers assigned to the Light spent their duty hours in the basement keeping the machinery running including the stand-by generator and the compressor. Cleaning the lens was the responsibility of the Officer in Charge.

Their daily uniform dress was dungarees and T-shirts. They only wore the US Coast Guard uniform once a year when the Northern inspectors out of Cleveland showed up. Some inspectors were more thorough than others. One Captain is remembered for checking the waist band of the men's underwear and the neck piece of the t-shirt for any signs of dirt or wear.

When they were not on watch or on duty, they were on the Light, sleeping, eating, and relaxing.

Sleeping

Sleeping in shifts was the norm since someone was always on watch and with group quarters the men had to deal with a lot of snoring.

Eric Olsen laughed, "One of the fellows I was assigned with was a real snorer, and if you got to sleep before he did you had a chance. If you were awake when he came in, you were in trouble. We would keep a stack of tin pie plates in the bedroom just to toss at him. Then we'd try to get to sleep before he started up again. If that didn't work we'd have to fling another tin pie plate."

Meals

Charlie Jones was a civilian light keeper who had originally hired into the US Lighthouse Service in 1922. He came to the Light in 1940 and did all the cooking until he retired in 1962. When one of the new guys cooked dinner as a favor to Charlie who was ashore, he was in a lot of trouble with Charlie. The meals were Charlie's responsibility! Although Charlie took his cooking seriously, as a cook, Charlie had the reputation of making "heavy" biscuits and pancakes that even the sea gulls wouldn't touch.

After Charlie retired, the men took turns with the meals. John DeCenzo (1962-63) was a fabulous Italian cook and still observed the Catholic tradition of meatless Friday. His Friday night pasta-fazole brought people all the way from the Soo just to eat that soup.

Comforts

Originally a diesel powered generator provided the Keepers with power. Shore power was brought out to Light in May 1957 by stringing cable over the rocks on the DeTour shore, into the water and out to the Light. The phone worked about half of the time and the power cable was taken out by the ice multiple times during the manning of the Light.

The original half sized cast iron bath tub with feet was made for a midget according to Jerry Livingston. The sink in the head (bathroom) was very small too, but, Jerry laughed, "it had to be or the sink would overhang the tub!"

Entertainment

The men on the Light had to make their own entertainment. Many of them became avid readers and there were many books available. They were able to fish. They did battle with the sea gulls and, at one point, sprayed red paint on the gulls that came too close.

Watching television was an option for them also. They had fair reception paired with a bit of static, but with dedication it was possible to watch some of their favorite comedians like Bob Hope and Jackie Gleason. It seemed to them that every time a joke came to its punch line, the fog horn went off. If the next punch line was 5 minutes later, they could count on the foghorn to blast over it.

When the foghorn was going off, that was also the time for coffee cup races. They would fill coffee cups to different levels and put them on the mess (kitchen) table. Because the fog horn housing is just below the mess, the vibrations were substantial and the coffee cups would actually move and race.

On a weekend when Charlie Jones, Keeper and Officer in Charge (OIC), was on rotation off the Light and one of the young "Coasties", who was quite a ladies man returned from his trip to shore for the mail with three young ladies on the boat. The party was just getting started when they were greeted by the Commander's boat arriving for a surprise inspection. The inspection, of course, included all areas of the Light, and they knew the commander would not appreciate the young ladies' visit. One of the young men had the bright idea to hide them in the attic at the base of the tower. That attic was quite small and filled with dust and spider webs, but the girls were convinced to climb inside the small, dark, windowless, stuffy attic and to quietly wait out the inspection. Their presence was not discovered and, when the Commander left, they climbed out of the confined area, covered in spider webs, dusty, and ready to go home.

More Entertainment

"You know that idle hands are the devil's work shop", observed Jerry Livingston. When cases of wooden safety matches and a bunch of old fuses were discovered in a storage room, they thought "We can make bombs!" They all had sharp knives so they scraped the red stuff off the matches and eventually had a pile of sticks and a pile of the red stuff. Did you know that '00 shot fits into 3/8 inch pipe? They started packing the wire into the pipe, packed the red stuff in, dropped down the shot, packed it with a piece of rag, added a spark plug, and ignited it. The bomb could go thru three or four 1-inch boards! Jerry continues, "At least we were smart enough to hide behind the furnace."

Who Are These Ladies?

The DeTour Reef Light Preservation Society (DRLPS) has been researching former Keepers that served on the DeTour Reef Lighthouse. In the process they have come across some interesting photographs that depict life on an offshore lighthouse. Particularly interesting is the fact that ladies in the DeTour-Drummond area socialized with the young servicemen on the Lighthouse. Pictured are three of the young women having dinner with Steve Lovett and Gene Anderson in 1958. This was a serious infraction of the rules but head keeper Charlie Jones was on shore leave and was unaware of these visitors. These young ladies also prepared dinner in the galley (kitchen) for the Coasties as shown in pictures. A third lady went up and inspected the Fresnel lens in the lighthouse tower. By the smile on her face, it would appear she was having a good time.

The young ladies are probably in their seventies or eighties now and the DRLPS would enjoy hearing about their time on the Light. Anyone who knows the names of these ladies is asked to contact Chuck Feltner, DRLPS Historian by email at Historian@DRLPS.com.



Weather

Weather, including the waves and fog, had a great impact on travel to and from the Light.

In bad weather it was always an adventure to travel to and from the Light. Bringing an electrician to the Light in 20 foot seas, the 25' launch was lost when it hit the crane's boom. The launch was burned the following spring in a bonfire.

One of the men traveling to shore in a 16 foot fiberglass skiff got locked in the ice. He climbed out of the skiff and onto the ice. Luckily he was able to walk across the ice to shore. Some weeks later the skiff showed up at 40 Mile Point in Lake Huron with his glasses still in the boat.

Other memories include waves coming over the deck that is 20 feet above the water, blowing the window out and being weathered in and running short of supplies.

But one of the saddest memories was shared by Bob Soldenski. On opening day in the spring of 1971, Seaman, Donald Ashley, Jr., didn't make it back out to the Light. It is believed his boat hit ice, flipped over and he drowned. Ashley had dropped Patrick Holmes and Marvin Kurkierewicz at the lighthouse. Navigating a 16 foot Coast Guard outboard tender, he was on his way back to pick up supplies and Samuel Rouse when he hit ice and capsized. The men on the lighthouse heard him yelling for help but they had no boat to rescue him. Holmes radioed for help and the ferry, Drummond Islander, was two miles away and responded immediately. The men on the ferry found the over-turned boat but no sign of him. It was very cold that day and Ashley had so many layers of clothes on that his life jacket but could not be hooked closed. His body was never found.

Foghorn stories

Foghorns can be very deceptive on the water. They can be heard, but it's difficult to know what direction the sound is coming from. Two of the Light's crewmen knew this and they were coming back from a trip to shore in zero visibility with no compass. One of the guys thought that if they watched the wake, it would show them the direction they were traveling. As long as the wake was straight they were heading to the Light. They ended up on the rocks at Frying Pan Island - so much for navigating using the wake.

When the foghorn was active, the crews had about one minute to fall asleep before the next signal, and they joked that they learned to talk with a seven second pause.

Winter shutdown

In the early years, the Light was emptied of all provisions during the winter shutdown. After a pilot crashed and was stranded on Spectacle Reef Light with no food or shelter, Charlie Jones left it unlocked over winter and stored a little food in the pantry. If anyone else became stranded by the ice, he wanted a refuge for them. Eventually the Coast Guard required

The Light Didn't Fail

Eric Olsen proudly summed up his time on the Light. "It's the good you do. Hundreds of people depended on the Light. The Light didn't fail.