

TINKHAM TALES IV

*Based on the Journals
of Lighthouse Engineer
Ralph Tinkham*

Edited by Wayne Wheeler

Our Society has the good fortune to have acquired a historically valuable donation of the papers of Ralph R. Tinkham, Lighthouse Engineer. Presented by his granddaughter, Marjorie Scooros, the memoirs chronicle a fascinating career that led him far and wide as he moved up the ladder of positions within the U. S. Lighthouse Service to become Chief Engineer and, eventually held the position of Captain, Chief Engineer of the U. S. Coast Guard.

Ralph Tinkham graduated from the College of Engineering, University of Michigan in 1905. He joined the Russel Wheel and Foundry Company in 1906 as a design engineer, from which he was "loaned" to the Lighthouse Service to oversee the design and initial construction of the proposed Rock of Ages Lighthouse. Working for the firm's structural steel division, but from the Lighthouse Service 11th District offices in Detroit's Customs House, he worked on the Rock of Ages project until he resigned the firm in 1908. He then began employment with the Lighthouse Service as the Superintendent of Construction for the 11th Lighthouse District (Lakes St. Clair, Huron and Superior).

For the next 38 years Tinkham was involved with numerous lighthouse projects across North America, from the Great Lakes to Alaska—even to Panama. After his retirement in 1946, he wrote a massive tome about his experiences, laced with anecdotes.

Over several issues of *The Keeper's Log*, we will publish some of his more interesting memories as part of a series called "The Tinkham Tales." We now present installment number four.



Ralph Tinkham in the late 1920s at his desk when he was Superintendent of the 19th Lighthouse District (Hawaii, Midway, Guam and American Samoa). Note the photo of President Hoover at left. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, Split Rock Lighthouse.

Isolation in Alaska

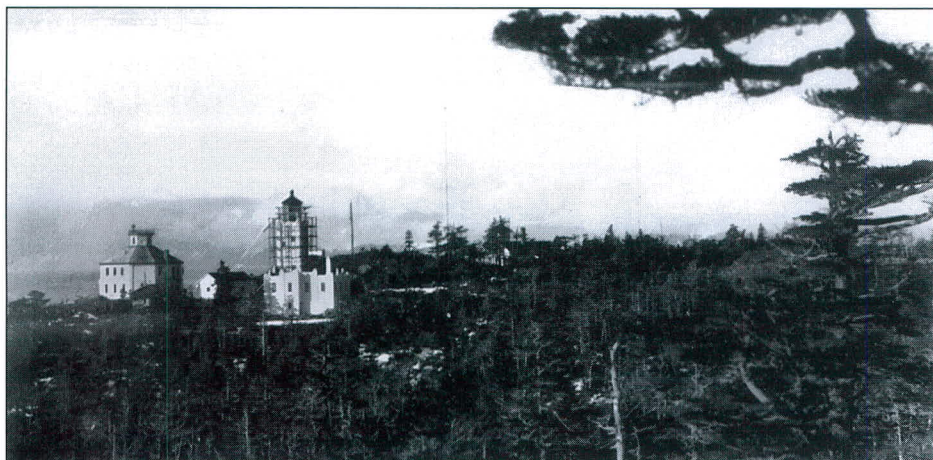
On one occasion while waiting in Cordova for a ship, advantage was taken of the few days interlude to make a maintenance inspection of the Cape Hinchinbrook Light Station. This station is located at the entrance to Prince William Sound, thirty miles south and east of Cordova. A fishing boat and crew was hired for transportation to the cape and return. Leaving Cordova at midnight the boat arrived at the station about five in the morning and anchored. A safe landing was made with a dinghy through light surf to a narrow beach below a high cliff on which the station was situated. A series of stairways led to the top where a derrick was anchored. The derrick was used to hoist supplies from the beach which were landed from the lighthouse tender *Cedar* at the time of its annual supply trip, now due in about two weeks. From there a concrete walk lead to the station.

Surprisingly there was no evidence of a keeper when the landing was effected. It was not until the lighthouse was reached, followed by banging on the entrance door, that the principal keeper appeared, rubbing sleep from his eyes. After introductions, the keeper explained that after extinguishing the navigation light a half hour after sunrise he had gone to bed. Neither of the two assistant keepers were up yet. Technically this was a violation of Service requirements, for there should have been a keeper on watch at all times. The keeper seemed a bit surly, but at

the moment this was attributed to his having been routed out at this early hour, and possibly to having been caught by an inspecting officer with no one on watch. It soon developed that there were other reasons.

The keeper was asked first as to getting breakfast before proceeding with inspection of the station. This suggestion was met with a grumbling reply that there was nothing on the station to eat, that their supplies were exhausted and they were waiting for the tender, due to arrive soon. Skeptical of this announcement it was requested that he open up the pantry. This station was self-contained, all facilities in one large building: individual bedrooms, toilet and lounge on the second floor, and on the ground floor a combination galley and dining room, storerooms, fog signal machinery room and repair shop. The navigation light [lens] was exhibited in a lantern surmounting a short tower rising from the top of the building, reached by a spiral staircase from the second floor. The pantry adjacent to the galley, actually was a large store room lined with shelves from floor to ceiling on all walls, a counter shelf on one side under which were bins for flour, potatoes and other root vegetables. There were overhead meat hooks on racks for hanging smoked hams, sides of bacon, and such fresh meat as the keepers might bring in from hunting.

On entering the pantry it was immediately evident that the keeper was not far



The Cape Hinchinbrook Light Station was established in 1910. The original wooden lighthouse, sans lantern room, can be seen at left. The replacement, at right with the scaffolding, was constructed in 1934. The lantern room from the original lighthouse was used on the new, reinforced concrete structure. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

wrong in his statement. It was like the predicament of Mother Hubbard, for here the shelves were bare indeed, the meat hooks all empty. Looking into the bins there was a mere scraping at the bottom of the flour bin, nothing in the others. The inspection revealed a liberal supply of coffee, a few cans of evaporated milk, some salt and sugar and on one top shelf, eighteen feet long, was completely filled with cartons of Aunt Jemimah's pancake flour. That was about the extent of it; they were living chiefly on venison and gull eggs. Asked why all the pancake flour, none of them cared for it. Pancakes and coffee made our breakfast that morning.

As the inspection progressed, following breakfast, close questioning elicited from the keeper details of a weird situation existing here. The three men had not spoken a word to each other during the past six months. Rare cases had been encountered previously, on the Great Lakes as well as in this Territory, where two men alone together on a station simply got talked out and tired of looking at each other, or where three men were isolated, two would gang up on the third, with resulting complaints and recriminations, but this case was unique.

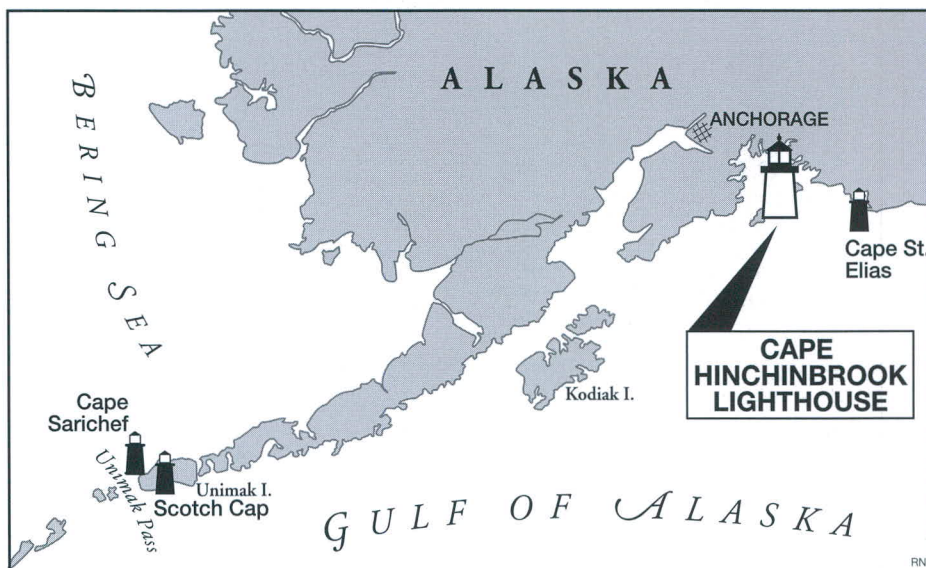
Six months prior to this inspection one of the assistant keepers had lost a ring. Failing to find it after a diligent search, his brooding eventually convinced him that the other assistant had stolen it. Accusation had started a row and the principal keeper had stepped in in an attempt at a reconciliation. As usual with would be peacemakers, both assistants turned on him, thereafter all three ceased to have anything to do with each other. In

fear of being reported and disciplined, none shirked his assigned duties and share of station work; each stood his watch and signed the watch book, with occasional lapses, perhaps, like this morning, for the keeper now exercised no authority over his assistants. They ceased speaking to each other, each cooked and ate his own meals alone, and each occupied himself off duty to suit himself. They hunted and fished alone, but shared their game without question. Fortunately, with the arrival of the supply tender *Cedar*, two weeks later, with the District Inspector aboard for his annual inspections, a relief keeper returning from leave was landed and the keeper due to go on leave was taken aboard the tender, which effectively ended the feud and all was serene once more.

During another visit to Cape Hinchinbrook an exciting incident occurred. I had

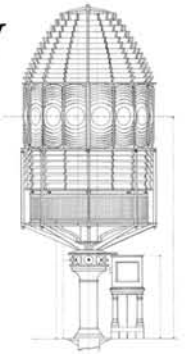
finished my inspection of the station and was watching, from the top of the cliff above the beach landing, the completion of the delivery of station supplies by the crew of the tender, when my attention was attracted to an approaching kayak some distance out at sea. It was the mailman. We had a contract with an Indian living at Cordova to deliver the mail from the post office at Cordova once a month. He did this in a kayak, a double-ended, canoe-shaped craft about twelve feet long, made of seal skins stretched over a light frame of wood, completely covering it except for a round opening in the center of the deck. The operator sat on the bottom of the kayak within this opening, a loose seal skin deck combing lashed tightly around his waist, thus making the kayak perfectly water proof, he himself clad in a water proof slicker and hood, wielding a double bladed paddle.

There was a high surf running that day, and the crew of the tender had had difficulty landing supplies, even with the ship's heavy cargo boat. So I watched the kayak, fascinated by the skill displayed by this Indian with his paddle. After negotiating a succession of breakers successfully, suddenly one of them capsized him. For a long moment the kayak surged forward with the wave, bottom up, the Indian of course submerged beneath, then, just as suddenly, the kayak turned right side up again, it's operator paddling furiously for the beach, which he reached without further mishap. He had righted himself by use of his paddle under water, a performance at which all those Indians are adept: they have to be to stay alive.





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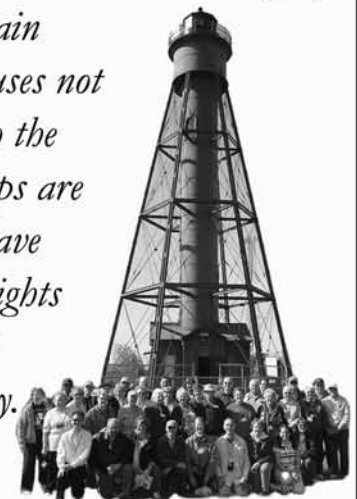
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