

The Nice Things about Light-Keeping

Sid Smith of Cape Sable Lighthouse, Nova Scotia



Cape Sable Light Station (seen from east south east), with its graceful "classical" tower. 1956 photo courtesy of Sid and Betty Smith.

In 1993, Nova Scotia said goodbye to its last lighthouse keepers. It ended a long and venerable tradition, begun in 1734 when a light fed by sperm oil shone out over the French fortress of Louisbourg.

For more than two-and-a-half centuries families tended Nova Scotia's wind and sea-battered lighthouses, but the final three decades of staffed lighthouses were marked by radical changes. Automated equipment replaced the eyes, ears and toil of the lightkeeper and his family.

Until the mid-1960s, many aspects of the job had remained unchanged from the earliest days of lightkeeping, as families worked and lived for the service of mariners around the treacherous coastline of Nova Scotia.

One of those treacherous spots is Cape Sable, at the extreme Southwest tip of Nova Scotia. The cape is actually a low, sandy island, surrounded by dangerous ledges and reefs, which have claimed dozens of ships over the past three centuries.

Since 1861 a lighthouse has warned of the hazards of Cape Sable, and for a good portion of the 20th century, the Smith family kept the "Cape Light" light burning.

Sid's father Benjamin, his cousin, and a cousin-once removed were all keepers at Cape Sable. Sid followed the family tradition, becoming assistant to his father at age 21, in 1952. He remained on the island for another 27 years.

The following account of life on Cape Sable is in Sid's own words. Chris Mills recorded the interview on Nov 30, 2000 in Barrington, NS, at the home of Sid and his wife Betty June.

Dad went out there as assistant in 1929. He and my Mum. They had only been married just shortly before that and that would have been in the spring of '29. I was born in '31. My brother was born a year or so before me. A couple of years afterwards Dad became principal keeper, from then on until 1945. [In 1945 Benjamin Smith's nephew Albert became keeper-CM]

He gave up lightkeeping, moved to the mainland and he was only on the mainland for, what, I suppose three months and I remember him saying to my mother "You know I thought I needed a change, but I guess all I needed was a rest!"

At that time you didn't get vacations and during the war 'course he was frozen on the job, so to speak. And so I guess he felt "Boy, now that the war's over I need a change." But he didn't really need a change, it was just a rest.

It took until the spring of 1952 before he was able to get back on there as lightkeeper again. He stayed until he retired in 1970. And I stayed until '79, but by then automation had gotten to the point where it spoiled all the nice things about lightkeeping.

We lost the old diaphone and many other things and it got to be just a mow the lawn and paint type of existence. 'Course the more they automated, the bigger my garden got and the more cattle I had!

So it all started in 1929 with my Dad and it ended in 1979 with me. My cousin took over from me when I left there and stayed until '84. So, from '29 to '84 it was the Smiths, I'm afraid!

Early days

In those days there was only two light-keepers and of course you had quite a large light tower with kerosene vapour and a Fresnel lens. It all worked by clock-work so you were up the tower every four hours during darkness to rewind the light, or pump up the air pressure for the vapour light. The fog alarm was a type F diaphone. Of course somebody had to be awake at all times, so it was quite a job. You worked 12 hours a day and seven days a week.

You might not be working, but you were on duty and on watch, plus you had to take care of the buildings inside and out. The station was quite a big station. A lot of the stations directly after the war, they got a new home or a new fog alarm building, this type of thing, but Cape Sable still had the same old big engine room, or fog alarm building which was in two parts.

One part was where the old steam whistle gear used to be, plus the other end of it, which made for a big building. The old duplex house, well, it was taller than your extension ladder would reach, so every thing needed a lot of work on it even before we could get around to painting it. The work kept us busy all the time.

In 1961 they built another house. We had the third keeper, or second assistant. That did make a big difference. You could get away. We had our watches arranged every third week so you were through on watch at four in the afternoon and you weren't on watch

again 'till late the next morning, so this was something really terrific! You could either go to bed early, or if it was raining or snowing, well, you weren't responsible for being out winding lights or whatever.

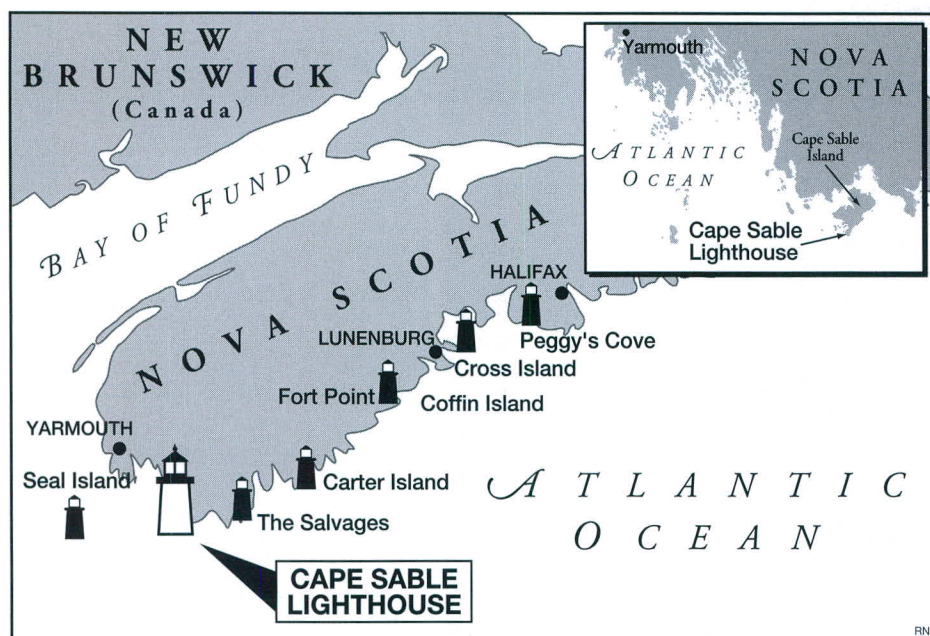
An average day in the 1950s was totally different than the 1970s. In the 1950s I came on watch at one o'clock in the morning, until seven. Dad usually wound the light shortly before he called me at one in the morning, so if the fog wasn't in or the fog alarm wasn't in operation, why, all you had to do was make sure the light was operating properly.

It was a kerosene vapour light and you couldn't trust the things! They gave a good light but they weren't really that reliable. You had to have proper air pressure, the rights drafts and all this sort of thing.



Sid Smith with one of Cape Sable's 55mm kerosene vapor burners. Chris Mills photo, November 2000.

You had kerosene under pressure coming into this vaporizing tube, and that came out of the top of the tube through a little pin-hole, as vapour. Some of that was brought back down through these little burners on the side, and they kept the tube hot so the next batch of kerosene coming along would also get hot and vaporize. The remainder of it went up by the cone and into the mantle. But if those pilot lights that kept the tube hot went out, why, then your kerosene came out as raw kerosene instead of vapour, and it burned. And what a mess! How many times



have I looked up there and said "Oh, should I go up there and put it out, or should I just set here and cry?"

My goodness, it was four and five days just getting all the soot, cobwebs and the whole bit cleaned up after the vapour light caught fire. If you could get there, if you happened to catch this thing before it had been doing this for very long, why, it might not be too bad. It might only be a day to clean it up.

But if it started acting up just after you'd checked on the thing and it had been 10 minutes in the process of burning raw kerosene, all the Fresnel lens, the iron work up overhead, the window frames, even the windows themselves would have about an eighth-of-an-inch of a black grease. And it was on everything – all the ironwork and all the glasswork and those prisms! It seemed to be that everything was on the inside somewhere you couldn't get at. It wasn't something you could take down and wash! You had to do it all, right where it was.

But it was an awful thing! That's one piece of automation I liked, when they took the kerosene vapour light out and put an electric bulb in the lens. That was in December 1960.

The Diaphone

"How many people get to operate anything that can make that much noise?"

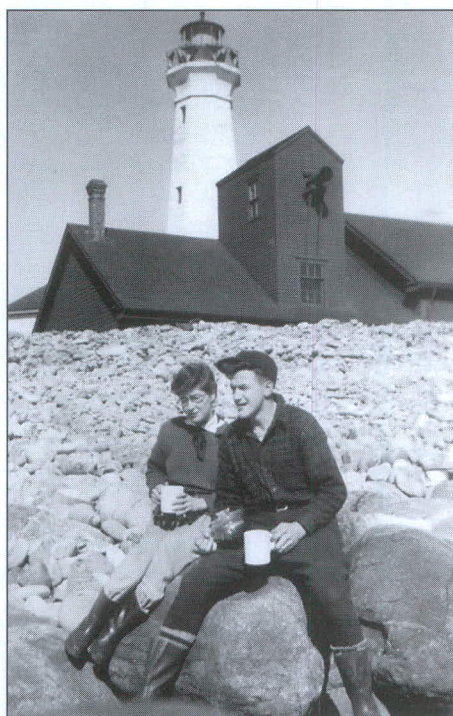
The end of the Cape Sable ledge, which was really the reason for the station being there in the first place, ran off to the sou'west of the light station about four miles. There was a big buoy right on the end of the ledge. So when you couldn't see the buoy or the light from the buoy we usually started the fog alarm engine.

The foghorn involved many things. You had two diesel engines and compressors, and there was a mechanical timing device to go with each engine. Each engine was a total unit by itself, just so you could switch back and forth when you needed repairs, or for long spells of thick weather.

Then up overhead in the fog alarm building you had your diaphone, which required lots of pipe and lots of compressed air. Out in the other room was these big air tanks to hold the compressed air.

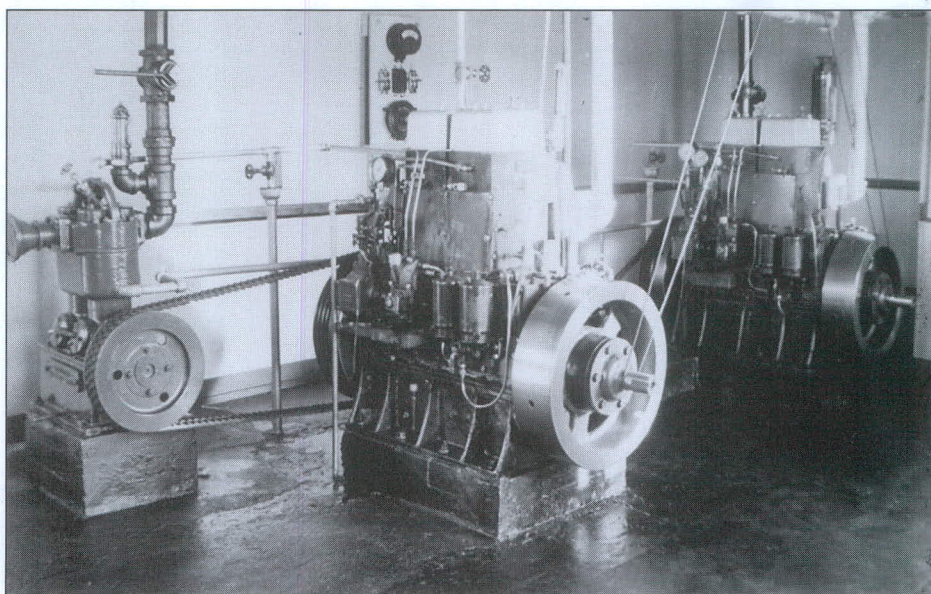
To go start the engine, okay, the fog has come in enough that you have to start the engine. The Vivian diesels we had in the 50s and 60s were started on compressed air, so you

also had your compressed air tanks. You'd start an engine and you kicked your air compressor into gear. When your air got up to 30 pounds, why, then you could operate your horn. It was one of those things you had to be around a lot to make sure your oil pressure was okay, and the water system was still pumping water.



Above – Sid and Betty Smith enjoying afternoon tea in 1955.

Below – Cape Sable's engine room 1957-58. Two 2-cylinder Vivian diesel engines and Ingersoll-Rand air compressors. Both photos courtesy of the Smiths.



Once you got everything operating, then you would time your engine. We always had a stop watch and you would set them so they were blowing the proper blast and maintaining the proper air pressure at all times.

Oh, I just loved that old diaphone! I guess I p'rhaps learned that from my Dad because I know he loved that old diaphone. They operated on two operating valves, a large one and a small one. The horns that had the "grunt" on them had the long blast, with the "grunt" on the end. The "grunt" was because once the operating valve had shut off, the other one still had enough air trapped in between the two valves to keep the one valve open. That's where you got the "grunt" from. So if you had more pipe between your small operating valve and your diaphone, you'd get a longer grunt on the other end.

'Course dad knew all these things. He'd been operating diaphones all his lightkeeping days. I know he was getting everything out of that poor old diaphone that it had to give! I always used to tell everybody how that rockweed down behind the engine room would all stand right on end when that thing would blow.

"Oh no, it doesn't, does it really?"

I remember during the war there was a sword fishing boat from Lockeport and she was shelled and sunk by a German submarine. They were sword fishing on Georges Bank. I know it was ideal conditions because I remember the weather — it was just calm and thick fog, in August, 1942.

The crew got off the sword fishing boat, and they rowed in to Cape Sable. I remember

Percy Richardson was the captain, from Lockeport. He said "We heard this fog horn blowin', and I figured it up and it had to be about 42 miles off." They were on the northern peak of Georges Bank. He figured that it was 110 miles off that they were shelled, and they were two and a half days rowing in.

There were 11 of them. One fellow I remember had his muscle on his arm blown off and one fellow had a piece of shrapnel went right through his wrist. And one old guy I remember had his ribs all scraped up where I guess shrapnel tore along his ribs.

He also said they put a rope from dory to dory during the night so they wouldn't stray from each other. They knew which horn it was, so they just kept rowing 'till they got there, but just before they got there that Sunday afternoon, why, the fog cleared up!

engines back in the 30s and 40s, everything was belts and pulleys. Your engines ran overhead shafts with all these big wooden pulleys, and then you ran water pumps off of that shaft. Everything ran offa that shaft, so it made for a lot of belts a flappin' around!

The ones that went to the air compressors went right direct from the engine to the air compressors and they were big wide leather belts. I've seen Dad and my Uncle Alfie crawl through them while the engines are running but I wouldn't crawl through them! 'Course we were only kids. We weren't allowed to, but I've seen them go through. I imagine if they were both living today they could say you know that wasn't being very smart!

I gotta tell you a little story. My Uncle Alfie, he just loved going gunning. The wind was to the sou'west one day, so he was just out

was, was blood and feathers! You wouldn't believe what a mess! So that's what happened when you tried to get in between the belts!

I always enjoyed the engine room for some reason and once we got generators in it, why, it was just that much nicer. You had fog alarm engines and generators going. We had an office out there where you could set back and put your feet up on the desk. Right out the big window in front of the office you could watch the engines workin' and you could read and the whole bit. The engine room was a nice place for me.

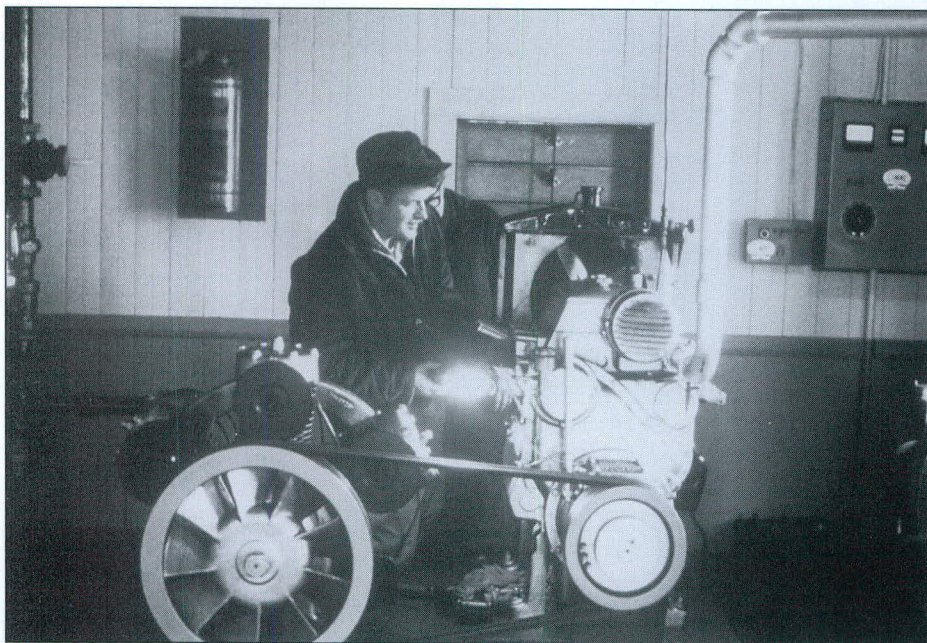
Those were the days!

The heyday of lightkeeping to me would have been in the 1960s. You had three men. You had your own generated power for electricity. It seemed to be you had enough time that you could enjoy the island. It wasn't just work all the time or be on watch all the time. You did have some time off in between watches that you didn't have to sleep, so you could go enjoy the island.

When I went back to Cape Sable with my Dad I knew just what lightkeeping was about, I'd grew up there and so I never complained about the salary, I didn't complain about the living conditions, I knew just what I was getting in for and I volunteered for this job, so I did everything that had to be done.

I remember the 30s and how cold the old house was, and I can remember Dad and Mum hanging up blankets around the walls in that old house, especially when it really got [to be] severe winter weather. 'Course we thought that was great, my brother and I! Man, go sleep down by the stove tonight, drag the mattress down and Dad luggin' coal to keep the fire going!

Man! The old house was an awful old thing really when you stop and think of it. It was only built in 1910, but it was built up on that high foundation, right broadside to the wind, easterly or westerly. You would get an easterly storm, and it would blow and then it would die out after the storm. Or perhaps the wind wouldn't go around, just start breezin' up from the west'ard and after a while you'd hear this awful crunch. The house had gone that three inches or so up on the peak, gone to the eastward because of the west wind and all the doors that normally would open, now wouldn't open, and all that ones that wouldn't open, would fly open! But once you got so you were the husband or the wife, the one respon-



Sid Smith with the standby Lister FR-3 air compressor. This was placed in use after hydro was brought to the station via underground cable in 1968. Smith family photo.

The engine room

"Once we got generators in it, it was just that much nicer!"

It was always warm out there in the engine room. It was noisy of course but you had a lot of stuff thrashing around and you know, just to keep it going all the time, why, yeah I enjoyed the old engine room and all the mechanisms that went with it. When I was a kid they used to have the old big dynamo and you had your rheostats so you could dim your lights down and charge your batteries.

Of course with the old Fairbanks Morse

by the engine room, and these sea ducks were comin' down from the nor'west and going right by the point. Uncle Alfie had this old single-barrel shotgun. I know the thing killed more on the back end than it did on the front because he was always skinned up around the nose from shootin' that old shotgun!

But I remember this day really well – this would have been back in the late 30s I suppose, or early 40s — he shot this sea duck and the thing just scaled and went right in through the engine room window. It went right in under those belts and went around on the flywheels and well, us kids run in there to see what happened to that duck! All there

sible, why, then [you got used to it], no, I think I'd rather have an insulated house with gyproc on the walls instead of old sheathing that's opened up over the years.

But I truly enjoyed it. I really did. It's the only light station I ever worked on and lived on but I got to know it. I knew every little thing about the island. Okay, I liked duck shooting. I knew where to be when the wind was a certain way with the tide coming or the tide ebbin' off. All these things seemed to make a difference. 'Course to go gunnin', especially black duckin', why, I didn't have very good luck at that until I got so I could think like a black duck and then, Ahhh!, things started to improve a little!

I know some things made it more enjoyable than just to go do this thing and not like it. Especially after I was married and my wife was chasing me up the light – she would help wind the light. In that old big tower . . . it had great echoes when you were going up through it. You could stop on this floor, second floor and you could sing and it would echo! Once I was married, why, lightkeeping became really a nice thing to be doing and it was because of Betty June really.

Did I think I would last that long [27 years]? Well, I don't suppose I would have if I hadn't gotten married. Betty June just loved it out there, and all aspects of lightkeeping. Of course she grew up at Bon Portage light. I know that most lightkeepers that really hang it down and are successful, or were successful in this area, it seems to me, it was because they had a wife that liked it too. I suppose if I hadn't married Betty June, it could have been a different story. I feel it might have been a different story. But to marry her and for her to enjoy it and take part in it, you know it just made the whole thing truly worthwhile.

Working with Father

"Aren't I your little boy?"

It had its advantages, but it also had its disadvantages. The advantages would be that I could talk him into things I know that nobody else could talk him into!

"Well come on Dad, aren't I your little boy?," and play that game on him some. Especially when I was courting my wife! Dad would say "Well okay, your mother's coming on the island tomorrow and I know between she and myself we can keep things goin', so if you want to go to the mainland for overnight or so, why, go ahead!"

That wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been my Dad, and also if he hadn't thought that Betty June was p'rhaps the nicest little person he'd ever met! I know I wouldn't have gotten away with those kind of things with any other keeper.

But I think the downside of that would be okay now, I'm his boy and he hasn't gotten over it yet. I mean, he didn't say "You should do this for me!", but you knew that he felt that you should not just show respect [for him] as your employer, but [for him] as your Dad as well.

I suppose that had its downside at times, but I think the advantages outweighed the disadvantages, really. In fact I know they did!



Sid and Betty Smith in 1955. Smith family photo.

Weather and wrecks

I think the hardest I ever saw it blow . . . I had a wind gauge and it would go to a hundred and ten miles an hour. Anyway, it broke that night. I remember coming from the engine room and I got [as] far as that old light tower and of course the wind was sou'west and I was kinda stuck right on the side of the building. I just stood right there and let it hold me there until, "Okay, I think it's dropped off enough I can make a run for the back steps!" I made it, but boy it was just all you could do to just crawl along. It was really blowing!

That was the night that there was salt spray beading around the windows at the top of the tower, which was 100 foot up. So there was an awful lot of spray going over the place that night, that's for sure. That was I think the hardest I ever saw it blow. I know the "Ground Hog Storm," as everybody refers to [it] around here, in 1975, that was bad but it wasn't that bad. The highest tides we had were just before we left there in 1978-1979, and both of them in the wintertime. Real full tides, with water on the barn floor.

There were no shipwrecks as such. In 1957 there was the *Maid of LaHave*. She caught fire . . . she was [a] flat-bottom landing craft type thing left over from the war days. They come ashore up there on the sand beach. She was there about eight or ten days before they got her off. That was in February of '57.



Keeper Benjamin Smith and his son, assistant Keeper Sid, taking a break after working on the diesel engines. 1956 Smith family photo.

That was a hands-on type thing, because the captain and crew stayed down to the house and then the Mounties came from Halifax and stayed out there because some people had stolen some stuff off of her. So we were right in on the ground floor on all the cops and robbers deals!

In 1969 in August, the *Rhythme* come ashore in a thick fog. I don't know what that was all about, but she was up on Black Point. She run right into the bank up there pretty well. She was there quite a number of days before they got her off.

Just after I left, the *El Paso Columbia* grounded off outside. I was on the Coast Guard [lifeboat] then in Clark's Harbour. Reg Smith was at Cape Sable at that time. The tug that was towing the *El Paso Columbia* was the *Joshua T*. They called the Coast Guard that they'd lost their tow. It was blowing about 80 knots there at the Coast Guard station then. It was really blowing!

They said no, they weren't expecting any help, they were just notifying what had taken place. So I passed it on to Yarmouth Marine Radio. I think there was five men aboard the bulk natural gas carrier. I think she was 65 thousand ton or something like that.

When it come daylight, what a monstrous ship! Good heavens, you could see it anywhere! It didn't matter where you were. It was several days before they got her towed off.

I was listening to them on the radio and they got those five men off. That thing was over 65 foot on the sides of her. They anchored her, but she was just towing the anchor right along because it was blowing a hundred miles an hour, they said aboard that tug. And they got these guys off the ship. I'd like to know how they done that. All the good seamen aren't just from this end of this province, that's for sure, 'cause those fellows, they did alright.

The beginning of the end

It's really strange – this is one thing I noticed when automation started coming in to effect. All the things that had to be strictly adhered to, such as the characteristics of your light and horn, you had to make sure that they were operating at those characteristics. You had to make sure they were operating when the visibility was down to a certain degree. Then, once automation came into effect, if something didn't operate properly when it was being operated by a videograph or a fog detector, why, no that's alright!

When you had to do it yourself, it was so vital that it was done properly. You knew that if the visibility was down to so many miles you had to have that fog alarm in operation. You knew when the sun went down the light was to be lit, and it had to be lit and revolving until the sun came up over the horizon the

next morning.

You knew these things and I guess it got be just part of your life. Yes, you knew it was important because you would talk with fishermen and they would tell you how nice it was to hear the fog alarm when they were comin' in from offshore in thick weather, or to see the light, at night time.

I know lots of times in the winter, the windows would ice up or snow up in the lantern and OK, you'd say "Who is more important right now?" for me to go out on deck in all this wind on the top of the light to clean this window? Or is there somebody out there that needs it more than I do? Usually you just went out and did these things.

All those year I was quite pleased to think that Dad and myself, we stuck to the rules. I don't think we ever missed foggy weather and not have the horn going, or nighttime and not have the light lit. But after a while it got so it didn't really matter. "Oh well no, there's gonna be times when this automatic equipment doesn't detect this or that, but don't worry about it".

[In the 1970s] the Coast Guard wanted to get rid of the old Fresnel lens because it was floating in a mercury bath. That was at the time when the big mercury scare was on. As a country we seem to go through these scares! I don't suppose there was very many places that had more mercury on them than light stations, at that time. They were always gonna come and take it out and I said, "Well, leave it until I'm gone."

"No, no we can't do that!"

Then they'd be back in the helicopter some day with the superintendent of lights or the engineer. "Gotta get rid of that mechanism!"

One day I said "What are you going to do with this mercury?"

"Well we'll dispose of it."

And I said "Come on, you don't just up and dispose of mercury. It's one of those things that if you push it down here, it's gonna come up somewhere else."

"Oh well, we'll do the proper thing."

I said "Okay. Can you do any better than this? Have it on an isolated island, in a concrete tower in a cast iron vat, with two watchmen 24 hours a day watching over it?"

"Well when you put it that way, no I don't suppose we can."

I said, "Well leave it right there. It's serving a purpose and when I'm gone you can do



The Smith family in 1974, sitting in the wreck of a work boat lost from a tug working to free the ship *Rhythme*, which ran aground at Black Point, Cape Sable in 1969. Smith family photo.

whatever you want, but as long as I'm here I want that mechanism there on top of the light."

And I got away with this! Or I don't know if I got away with it, or they didn't get around to it while I was there, but he never mentioned it anymore! [The Coast Guard finally replaced the lens with a DCB 36 aeronautical beacon in the early 1980s-CM] Here was this thing floating on mercury, so you didn't have to grease bearings, there was never any possibility of a breakdown. This thing was floating. But they said "You can't have that", 'cause a mercury scare is on right now! But anyway, I'm glad it stayed there as long as I was.

A good life

I suppose I might have done a few things differently, but very few. If I was to do it over I know some of the mistakes I perhaps made I would change now because I know the mistakes I made. No, I don't think I would change very much. I truly enjoyed it. This was your life and you knew what was expected of you. I got to know the second assistant, and so we all knew each other and knew our likes and dislikes. We knew when to say okay, stay away from that guy, he doesn't want company today or, this is the time to go see him, I think he's in a good mood.

I was on there about a month ago [October 2000]. Usually I don't go down around where the station was at all, but anyway I cut right across there. I got figuring out, okay, now that rock there that would tell me where the barn was. If the barn was there, okay, the well would have been out here, and this is where the temperature screen for the department was. And here's where the corner of the house would be. I fooled around there for 15-20 minutes and I think I pretty well laid out right where the buildings used to be even though they've been long gone.

Yeah, it's kind of sad to me to see that they don't keep up their lighthouses after the light-keepers were taken off. I was up in that tower this past summer. I suppose somebody must go up there to the top of it once in a while, but all the paint is just hanging there. It's really sad to go in and I'd wished I hadn't gone up there because if somebody had said it was in a real mess I wouldn't have envisioned anything that bad.



The graceful lines of Cape Sable's 101-foot tall lighthouse. Note modern fog signal system mounted partway up right side of the tower. 1984 photo by Chris Mills.



Left to right – Morrill Richardson (former keeper of Bon Portage Light Station), Sid, Beverly, Betty June and Locke Smith, relief assistant keeper Lovitt Nickerson and his wife Pauline and Evelyn Richardson (author of *We Keep A Light*). 1971 Smith family photo.



Lightkeeper Benjamin Smith trying to train a young steer to pull the station wagon. The steer would fall over as soon as a strain came on its neck and horns, often taking keeper Smith with him! Photo courtesy Sid and Betty June Smith.

It would have been nice if they had kept one of the light stations as it was in the 60s with all the equipment, just to keep it, you know. When they got rid of the Pony Express, they didn't kill all the horses, so when lighthouses aren't necessary anymore, it doesn't mean that you should just let 'em fall down.

I think a lightkeeper has to be a person that can enjoy a stormy day as well as a fine one. I enjoyed the rough weather – I've gone for hikes up the beach or up the island just because it was stormy. I don't know, I'm like my brother, I guess. "I like the challenge", he was always saying. I loved all aspects of it, the fine days, the stormy days, the fog even!

I got two children that grew up there. You ask them and "Ooohhh, it was wonderful growing up there!"

I got a brother that still talks about it as if he was still living there. But he hasn't lived there since he was 15 years old.

I know my Dad loved it right up until he died. So, apparently if you take one of those places and you go there newly married – as he did and as I did – and stay all those years . . . well, it was home and it was a special way of life. A lot of it you didn't even realize when you were kids. Except when you drew pictures of houses they were tall!

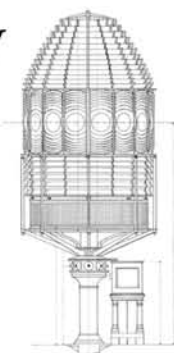
Apparently a lot of people are interested in lighthouses now that weren't that interested when I lived there, or I don't think they were. Some people never showed any interest in it, but once it's not there anymore, why, they take an interest in what we don't have anymore.

Yeah, I'm just pleased to think that I was part of it. Also pleased that I enjoyed it as much as I did because I truly did. I wouldn't have changed a thing.

This interview is part of series being conducted by Chris Mills as part of research for a book about Nova Scotia's lightkeeping families. The book will be written in the words of the lightkeepers and their families. Special thanks to Sid and Betty June Smith for their warm hospitality and for their willingness to share their memories, experiences and photographs of a way of life now gone.



Join the U.S. Lighthouse Society Today or Give the Gift of Membership!



Restoration & Preservation



Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse, MD

The U.S. Lighthouse Society has donated to many lighthouse preservation projects throughout the U.S. Most recently we were honored by being presented with the Preserve America Stewardship Award from The White House for our restoration work at Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse.

*To learn more visit
www.uslhs.org
or
call Headquarters at
415-362-7255*

Help Support Our Important Mission!

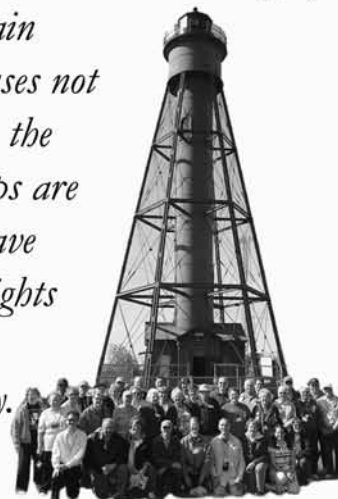
Education



The Keeper's Log magazine is the only one of its kind and has been published quarterly since 1984.

Receive this award-winning publication as a benefit of membership.

The Society organizes domestic and international lighthouse tours. Many of our excursions gain access to lighthouses not normally open to the public. These trips are a great way to have fun, see lots of lights and learn about lighthouse history.



Tinicum Lighthouse, NJ