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I Remember Race Point, MA

By Shirley Morong





Above — Race Point Light Station in 1890. From left — fog signal building, head keeper's dwelling, storage building, garage, storage building, tower and duplex dwelling. Note children in foreground. Photo by Henry Rosenthal, courtesy of Cape Cod Photography.

Lighthouse Memories

My husband enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard in January, 1935. During his 23 years of service, he was stationed first on mainland lifeboat stations, later on a weather ship [ed. ocean station vessel], a buoy boat and the Hens and Chickens lightship.

My children and I followed him whenever possible which meant he could be home sometimes, but sea duty meant long separations.

The Lighthouse Service consolidated with the Coast Guard on July 7, 1939, when civilian lighthouse keepers could either retire or become members of the Coast Guard [ed. they could also remain as civilian keepers until they retired].

Wanting to be close to his family, Clif applied for duty at a light station. He was the son of a lighthouse keeper whose family had a long association with the Lighthouse Service. However, before he could be assigned to a light station he had to receive training at off-shore stations. When he completed training he was transferred to the Cape Race Light Station at the tip of Cape Cod, MA.

We were very excited, realizing that at last we and our three children would all be together. He received his orders on the first of September and we were living at Popham Beach, Maine. We hired a U-Haul truck and packed our furniture and household items and headed for Cape Cod, leaving the children with relatives in Bath.

It was a long ride from Popham Beach to Cape Cod, but we were eagerly looking forward to reaching our new home, unloading the belongings and resting for the night. However, much to our dismay, when we reached the Coast Guard station at Race Point, we were informed that the furniture would have to be left there [ed. search and rescue), as the light station was down a couple of miles of sand dunes over which our vehicle couldn't travel. We had to have the U-haul returned by noon the next day, so we unloaded all our possessions with the help of the Coast Guard crew. We stored them in the station garage with the promise that they would be taken by some means to the light station at the end of the dunes.

We spent the night in a motel in Provincetown and returned to Bath and Popham the next day to retrieve the children, our dog and other stuff we had left behind. We reached the Race Point Coast Guard station just as the station crew was loading our furnishings onto what looked like a hay wagon. It was pulled by a tractor over

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the sand dunes to the light station and we were transported by a jeep, leaving our car at the station.

It was foggy so we were greeted by loud blasts from the fog horn. Our new home was a far cry from what we had expected. It consisted of one half of a duplex, the other side being occupied by another Coast Guard family. There was no electricity and the walls of the two rooms downstairs and three upstairs were in poor condition. During the recent war, members of the military had been quartered there and had generators for electrical power. However, when they left, the generators and wiring were removed, leaving holes and damaged plaster. Our previous experience of living at a light station in Maine hadn't prepared us for this.

Water was obtained from a pump connected to a cistern in the basement. The small outside toilet was perched on the side of a sand dune behind the house. A refrigerator was operated by a kerosene powered lamp and often when we took a bottle of milk from it, ice would be over the top of the container requiring it to be thawed out before using it. We left our electric refrigerator at the Coast Guard station to be sold, but had brought our electric washing machine to the light station. The officer in charge of the light station, who lived with his wife and cats in a single dwelling nearby, said he could hook up an engine he had to the washing machine. When we tried it out, it worked very well.

Life at Race Point was far different than any place we had experienced before. The Coast Guard furnished the station with a jeep that had wide tires. We needed transportation to the boys' school in Provincetown and for errands. Our daughter had not reached school age.

A few weeks after our arrival, the family in the other side of our duplex left the service. We were able to move into their side, which was in much better condition and had a nice full bath. Salt water was piped into the house for flushing the toilet and for bathing. The water from the cistern was used for cooking, drinking and washing clothes and dishes.

For amusement we walked the beach during the day and read at night. Watches were divided by the three crew members. The [oil] vapor lamp [ed. i.o.v. lamp] in the tower required almost as much attention as the kerosene lamps in a lot of Maine lighthouses. The fog horn was operated by machinery and was located in a separate building, a short distance from the tower.

We found the remains of quite a few shipwrecks when walking the beach and one day the boys came running to the house very excited. They had found a human leg in the sand! Clif wrapped it in paper and took it to the Coast Guard station. It was believed to have come from a shipwreck victim farther down the coast.

The following January we received word that there were two vacancies at light stations in Maine; one at Portland Head and the other at Cape Elizabeth. Clif immediately wrote requesting a transfer to one of the stations, reasoning that our children would not be able to attend school through the winter.

A few weeks later a transfer came through to the Cape Elizabeth station. We were ecstatic and immediately began packing. It took all day for the jeep and trailer to take the furnishings across the dunes. The District office advised us to leave our household effects at the Coast Guard station and a commercial truck would transport the furnishings to our new station. We got there before the furniture did, but that's another story.

It was good to be back in Maine and live in a house with electricity and a bathroom. It almost seemed as though destiny meant us to be at the Cape Elizabeth station, for the house we were to live in was the same one in which Clif was born when his father was a civilian keeper there. Two more houses and a light tower were on the hill above the small village and Coast Guard small boat station. The village had a few year-round dwellings as well as some summer cottages and the fog signal building.

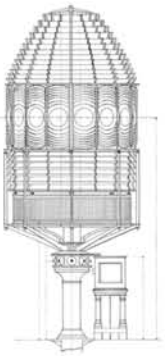
A school bus transported the children to a nearby school each day. There were stores in the area and Portland was fairly close.

We did have some nice memories from the Race Point station. Our fellow shipmates became close friends and the fishermen and store keepers of Provincetown respected the Coast Guard. They gave us special attention at a time when rationing was still in effect from the war. We enjoyed trips exploring the Cape when we could leave the station and the ocean was always a delight to me, but as I said before, it was good to be back in Maine.



The eastern tower and dwelling of the Cape Elizabeth (twin lights) Light Station in 1975. USLHS photo.

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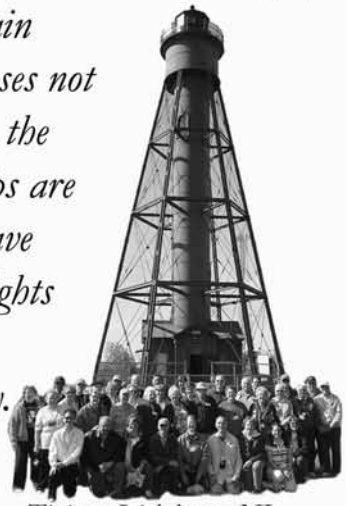
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