Reprinted from the U.S. Lighthouse Society's The Keeper's Log – Spring 1990 <www.USLHS.org>

Ted Pedersen An Alaskan Lighthouse Keeper

As told to PAC Ed Moreth, USCG



Keeper Ted Pedersen at Cape St. Elias, his first light station. Circa 1928.

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For me, life at Alaskan lighthouses wasn't lonely and I regret having ever left the service.

I think the Cape Sarichef station was the best. I spent five years there. It was located on the northwest tip of Unimak Island, some 71 miles from the port of Dutch Harbor. I also served two one-year tours at the Capt St. Elias station which is on a small island some 60 miles south of Cordova.

But Sarichef was the country I knew best because I was born out there; it was part of me. I was really at home there.

I was born February 24, 1905 in what was then the village of Unalaska. My mother, half Aleut and half Russian, died when I was one year old, leaving my six-year-old sister and me in the Jesse Lee Home for Children. My father was a well-known and wealthy fur trader and whaler who spent most of his time at sea. He did frequently stop by Unalaska to see us during his Arctic deployments.

In 1916 he took me out of the orphanage and to sea as a cabin boy aboard the whaler *Herman*. I distinctly remember seeing the Cape Sarichef light station when we transited the Unimak Pass, it appealed to me and it looked peaceful.

In 1927 I applied to the Seventeenth Lighthouse District [Alaska] for a position at a lighthouse. I was told that there were no vacancies but they did need a deckhand aboard the District tender *Cedar*, which supplied the light stations of Alaska and worked other aids to navigation.

I joined the *Cedar* as an able-bodied seaman, but I put in my application for a light station and I listed Unimak Island as my first choice. During my first six week trip aboard the *Cedar*, the third assistant keeper at the Cape St. Elias Light Station lost his mind and this provided an opening for me. While I was glad to be at a light station I did feel confined at Cape St. Elias, which I always called Big Baldy. At low tide you could walk around, but when the tide was in you had to climb along the edge of the bluff.

Within a year the Cape Sarichef station's second assistant was relieved from duty after the keeper reported him insane and this gave me a chance to be transferred to that station. I reported to Cape Sarichef in July 1929 and learned that the [relieved] assistant had been serving his last year at the station when he received a letter stating that his wife was stepping out on him. Four years later I relieved the keeper, 63-year-old "ol' Ed Moore," a former Buffalo hunter who had been keeper there for 20 years.

There were three of us assigned to the station and we lived in one of the three small houses near the lighthouse. We each had our own room which was sparsely furnished. The station had been designed to house three families. There was even a barn for a milk cow, but we kept the surfboat there. We each had an eight hour watch. We had to make sure the light kept lit, and that was in the days of kerosene, not electricity. The light was turned on 20 minutes before sunset and when visibility was poor. We



The Cape Sarichef light station circa 1930. This station is almost a duplicate of the original Scotch Cap station on the other end of Unimak Island, even the terrain is very similar. This photo and opposite page by Ted Pedersen courtesy of the Coast Guard.

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also turned on the fog signal when the fog rolled in and during heavy snow storms. The lights lens revolved on wheels powered by a weight driven clockworks. Because our lamp was an IOV [incandescent oil vapor lamp] we used a small alcohol torch to light the mantle. We'd have to go up every hour and check on that and see if the light was all right. We also had to pump up the air [of the IOV] and hoist up the weight. I rigged one of the station's dresser mirrors outside of the watchroom window so the watch stander could check the light without leaving his post.

When we were on watch, we had to keep the engine running too. Every week we had to go through the chores and shine some brass. Whoever had the day watch had to scrub out the engine room and empty the ash and cook one meal for the entire crew.

A light station crew member had to be a jack of all trades: cook, gardener, engineer, plumber, barber and sometimes a doctor. We had a cook book and a medical book but we had no medicine, unless you brought it with you. In time of emergency we depended on the Coast guard which usually had a cutter in Dutch Harbor some eight hours away.

Once a crewman slipped and dislocated his shoulder; another crewmember and I tried to put it back in place but we could not get it back, so he just put his arm between his legs, made a jerk, and put it back in the socket.

I earned $120 a month and $20 a month was taken from each of us for our annual grub supply until the food was paid for which took about four months. At our station the primary meat supply was Caribou that I hunted. I usually got six caribou a year and canned the meat.

It was peaceful at Sarichef. You were part of the elements and lived from day to day. I was a free human being.

It was so changeable from one day to another. In the spring we had fog and it was quiet; in the winter, we had turbulence and snowstorms and heavy weather. Sometimes you couldn't stand, the wind was so bad.

I could see remains of shipwrecks along the beaches and I called the Bering Sea my front yard; the view out back was of the smoking volcanos which the Russians called "The roof of Hell." Once an earthquake jolted the station so badly the lighthouse door jammed and the clock's pendulum stopped.



Ed Moore, Cape Sarichef's keeper, gives Ted a haircut in 1930 after Ted returned from a year's paid vacation, a benefit given to keepers who served three consecutive years of isolated lighthouse duty. Ted Pedersen photo.

Although I enjoyed the isolation we were always excited to have visitors. Once while hunting in September of 1934 I found two men wandering on the island; their schooner, the *Gladiator*, had grounded the night before, 18 miles from the station. They told me their skipper was too sick to walk and was left on board the vessel, which they felt was secure on the rocks. Eventually the Coast Guard cutter *Chelan*, from Dutch Harbor, arrived and launched a lifeboat to rescue the skipper. However, as the boat approached the *Gladiator* it was struck by freak waves and capsized. The 11 Coast Guard men managed to make it to the beach to save the captain, but they were wet, cold and stranded. They spent three days in a trapper's cabin surviving on rain water and the alcohol from the *Gladiator's* compasses.

After they reached Cape Sarichef I fed them mulligan stew made from fresh caribou meat, bread and coffee. They were with us for nine days until the weather subsided enough for the *Chelan* to get close enough to pick them up. It was good having them though, to have new fellows to talk to and to listen to their stories; it was company.

When the cutter got fairly close I rowed each person to the cutter in the station's 14 foot boat. It was too rough to take more than one, and it took me almost two hours to get all 14 on board

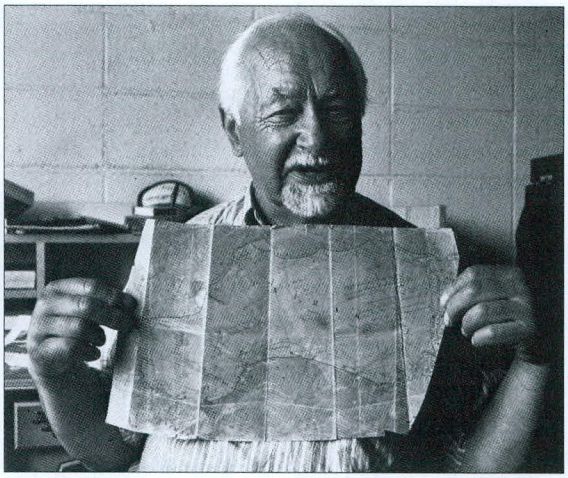


Ted snapped this self portrait as he stepped out of one of the trapper's cabins he stayed in during his trek around Unimak Island.

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It was illegal to shoot brown bears on Unimak Island unless the bear came within one quarter of a mile of the station. Ted shot two nuisance bears. In 1933 the District Inspector questioned Ted about shooting a bear from the kitchen window of the station.



Ted Pedersen displaying the route he took around Unimak Island during the Winter of 1934.

All photos by Ted Pedersen courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

the *Chelan*. On the last trip they loaded me up with ammunition and all kinds of goodies.

We generally received mail once a month. But during the winter months when the seas were too rough the mail was sent to Scotch Cap, on the other side of the island; we'd have to walk over to get it, if the weather wasn't too bad. One year we didn't get mail for five months. The only other regular visitor was the tender *Cedar* which delivered annual supplies, such as food, parts and coal, in July or August. Whenever the tender arrived we'd have some of the crew come in and that was a treat.

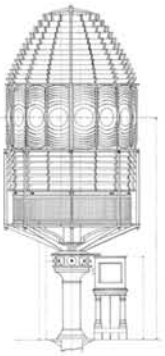
Our station was the only Alaskan station that shut down for the winter, between December 1 and March 1 as there was no traffic in the Bering Sea in the winter in those days. During that period I read, hunted and hiked. In January 1934 I set out on a 263 mile hike around the island to see a woman schoolteacher I heard was working at the False Pass Cannery.

The trip took 14 days and it was so cold that occasionally my beard froze solid. A year earlier a woman who was selling magazine subscriptions came ashore at the station. I was in a trance the entire time she was talking to me; I hadn't seen anything like her in almost three years. I must have sent out for six or eight magazines and never saw a one because I left.

In 1935 I took my second year's paid vacation and went to San Francisco. They gave us one year off for every three we served at an isolated station. I had planned to return to Alaska but my dad asked me to go to sea with him again. I really wanted to go back to Sarichef, but couldn't say no to my father. I didn't want to go back with him, but I gave in. Then in 1937 the Arctic trade petered out and I tried to get back in at Cape Sarichef, but there was no opening. They did have a second assistant position at Cape St. Elias and I took that. While I was there the skipper of the *Cedar* offered me a 3rd Mate position if I got my license so I left for California in 1938. By the time I received my mates license the Coast Guard had taken over the service and the Alaska District said they wouldn't hire any more civilians.

In 1940 I got an assistant position at the Point Sur station in California and in 1941 was transferred to the Oakland Harbor light and then in 1942, to the Roe Island lighthouse in Suisun Bay (CA) as keeper for one year. But Cape Sarichef was home to me, a place I wish I had never left. I had my room and board and I was living off nature. Out there I was part of the elements and I was an individual. I was at peace.

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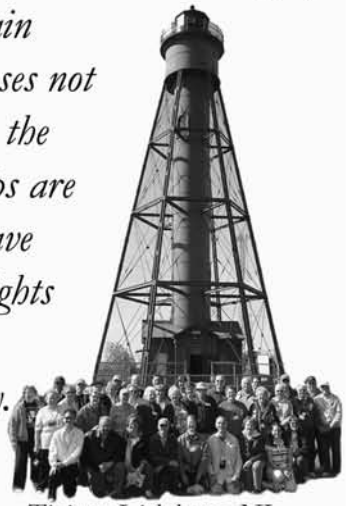
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