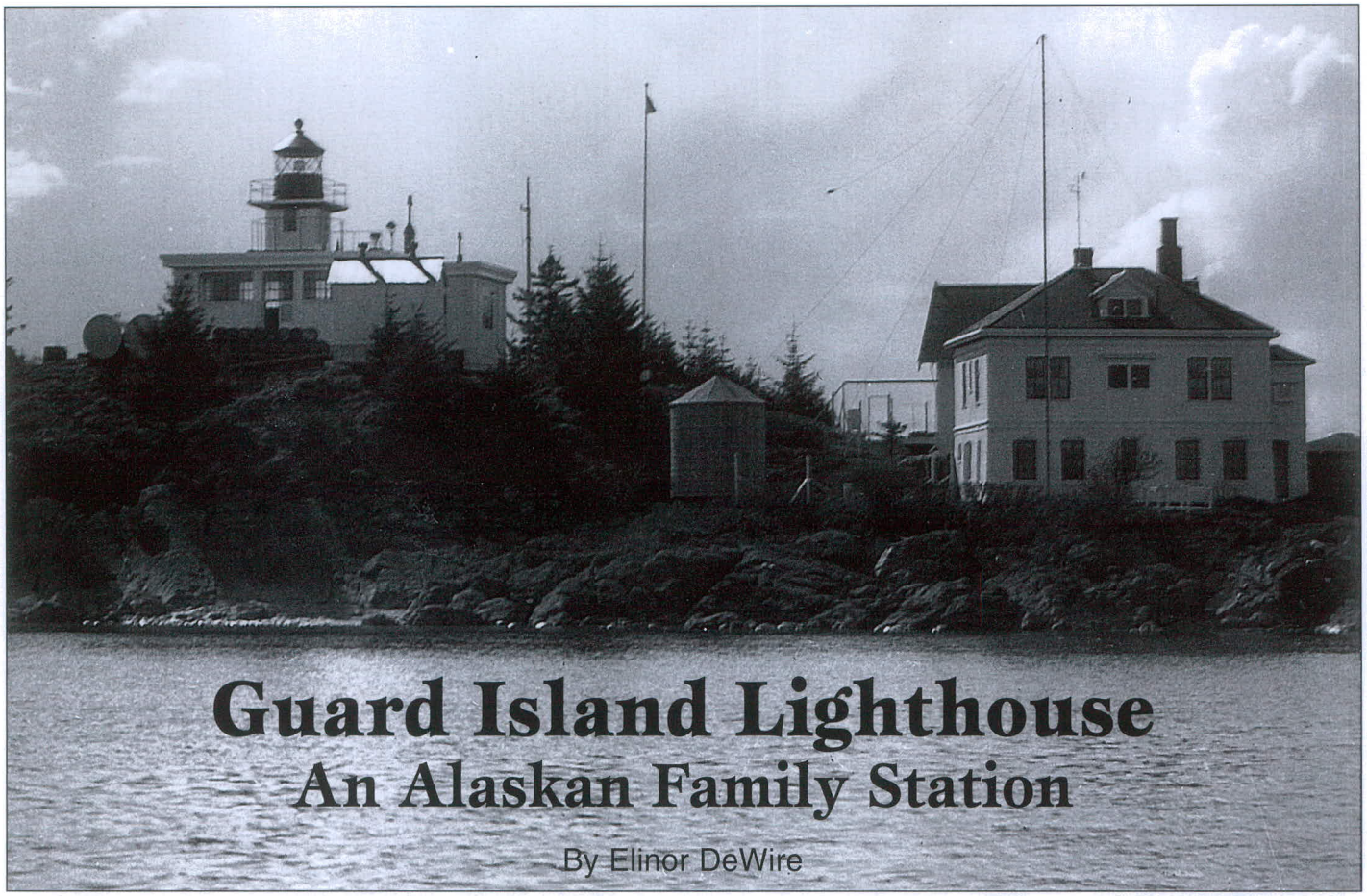
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# Guard Island Lighthouse
## An Alaskan Family Station

By Elinor DeWire

**The original Guard Island Lighthouse was a truncated pyramidal square tower constructed of wood. It was situated on the highest part of the island overlooking the entrance to the Tongass Narrows and exhibited a lens-lantern. The two-story dwelling was built for two families. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard Archives.**

In early July 1897, gold was discovered in Rabbit Creek near Dawson City in the Yukon. A few weeks later, several grubstake miners arrived in Seattle and San Francisco, showing off their bags of gold. One nugget was said to be the size of a walnut! The Klondike Gold Rush began, sending a shockwave of excitement around the world. The "Panic of 1893" and the subsequent "Panic of 1896" had sent the United States plummeting into the throes of a recession, with serious bank failures, high unemployment, and businesses out of money. Suddenly, everyone realized riches awaited in the far-flung territory in the American north called Alaska!

About 100,000 in all sold their earthly belongings, including homes and farms, and boarded ships for the great Pacific Northwest. Droves of prospectors and speculators called "Stampeders" soon arrived in Seattle, then a relatively small town and the staging point for the long voyage north. Their immediate destination was the tiny community of Skagway, a miniscule dot on the map until the gold rush began. To reach it, they traveled the "liquid highway" through the notoriously dangerous Inside Passage, dodging myriad rocks and islets and fighting determined currents and tides. From Skagway, it was a long and grueling walk up the Yukon River Valley to the gold fields.

The gold-seekers, and the opportunists who followed them, didn't seem to care that no lighthouses had yet been built along the Inside Passage. The need for wealth superseded the dangers. It didn't take the government long, however, to realize the need for better navigational aids. In 1898 alone, some 300 wrecks occurred on the route north, despite the snail's pace of "three knots and a fervent prayer" with which most ships moved through the labyrinth of islands and rocks that lay south of Alaska proper and along the British Columbia Coast.

The U.S. Lighthouse Establishment in Washington, D.C. had considered building lighthouses in Alaska in 1869, shortly after the vast territory was purchased from Russia. Congress had ordered a survey of the Alaskan Coast—no small effort in itself!—and U.S. Coastal Survey scientist George Davidson took on the onerous task, eventually recommending six lighthouse sites and numerous locations for buoys and day marks. But Davison's report was shelved. At the time, the nation was sunk in Civil War debt and reconstruction, and Alaska had exacted a high enough purchase price at $7.2 million to discourage further expenditures. Rumor had it the land was worthless—"Seward's Folly." Politicians felt the nation had more urgent concerns.

Attitudes changed when gold was discovered in the Yukon. Alaska had a mere 59 buoys and 12 day beacons, plus a crude post light on the remains of Baranov's Castle in Sitka, when the stampede to the gold fields began. Davidson's report was hastily revisited and sites were selected for two sentinels—Five Finger Island at the northern extreme of Frederick Sound and Sentinel Island at the north end of the Lynn Canal. In all, eleven sites were chosen and a new Lighthouse District was planned. Money was allocated for the construction of a lighthouse tender to service the region.

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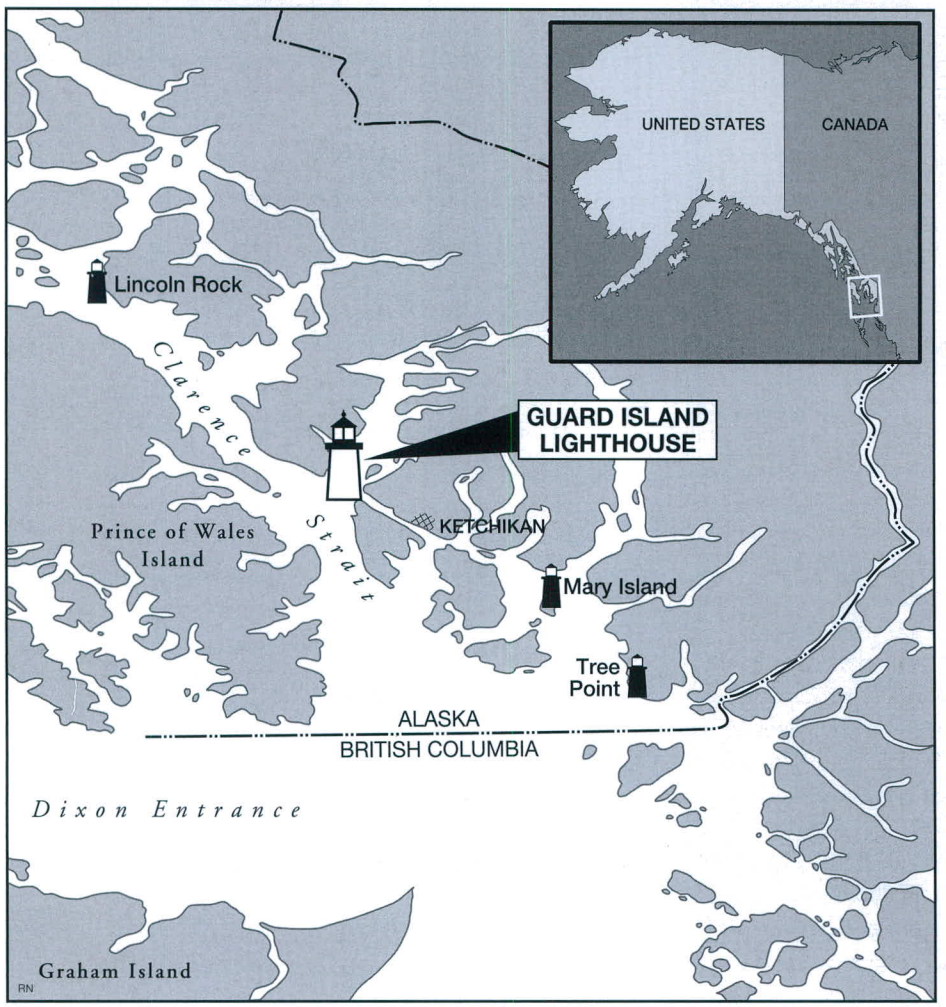


**Above – 1915 view from the rear of the station (left to right) the back of the dwelling, oilhouse and tool shed, boathouse, and lighthouse are visible. Note the little fog bell mounted below the tower's lantern.**
**Below – A 1917 view from the water. Photos courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard Archives.**



In 1900, the Lighthouse Service requested $500,000 for more sentinels but Congress gave only $100,000. It was pittance, considering the obstacles that lay ahead to build lighthouses so far from civilization. It meant wooden structures where masonry was the better choice, and few creature comforts for the lightkeepers and their families. With a shoestring budget, architects and engineers went to work. By the end of 1904 eleven lighthouses were completed, most in such remote areas only men were permitted to live at them. Only three would allow families.

One of the family stations—the one closest to civilization—was Guard Island Lighthouse in Clarence Strait at the northern entrance to Tongass Narrows, the portal to Ketchikan. The quaint 10.5 acre island—actually two islands attached by a tenuous strand of beach at low tide—was picturesque, covered in trees and rocks tumbling steeply down to the water. Only about a half-acre was habitable, with room only for a few buildings and a boat landing. The plural *Guard Islands* soon became, simply, Guard Island.




The station officially was commissioned September 15, 1904. A 34-foot tall, square, truncated wooden tower similar to the style of many British Columbia lighthouses became the centerpiece of the island, perched on Guard Island's highest point and sporting a small Fresnel lens-lantern with a red sector to cover an especially treacherous shoal area. A fogbell mounted to the tower clanged every twenty seconds, run by an automatic striker. Also part of the station was a two-story clapboard house, a boat house, and an oil house for kerosene storage.

Staffing Guard Island Lighthouse was less of a problem than the more remote stations, where only men could serve; still, there were serious challenges. For all its grandeur, the Alaskan wilderness exacted a high emotional and physical price from its pioneer families. Lightkeepers willingly came to the lighthouse, perhaps seeing the chance for adventure and desperately in need of employment. Some were cut out for the sequestered duty, with its rainy weather, interminable murk, and long dark winters. Others were not.

A popular story about Guard Island's earliest families has all the drama of an afternoon soap opera. They bickered constantly and lodged complaints against each other with the Lighthouse Establishment. Tensions mounted when the assistant keeper, who had been sent on a trip by the head keeper to fetch supplies, returned and discovered his wife and the head keeper romantically involved. A fight broke out; fists flew, and curse words cut the air. The assistant promptly left the station, with his distraught wife in tow, and sailed for Seattle. The day after their arrival in the city, she was found murdered in a hotel room.

Most families adjusted well. George West and his wife Alma seemed perfectly suited to the cloistered life at Guard Island. They served in the 1920s shortly after the station was rebuilt. Alma West and Mrs. Waltenberg, the assistant keeper's wife, were excellent housekeepers, gardeners, and cooks. The station's annual rainfall of 176 inches, plus its long summer days, contributed to the garden's success. Cabbages rivaled beach balls in size; carrots and beets and potatoes were canned in great profusion. Meals were the highlight of every day and much fanfare was made setting the table and serving. On one occasion, the couples cleverly photographed themselves

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**The original square wooden tower commissioned in 1904. The station was rebuilt in the 1920s and the wooden tower was replaced by a concrete structure. Note the curtains in the lantern. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard Archives.**

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**Another view of the original tower with the keepers and families on the gallery. Note the fog bell. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard Archives.**

at a formal dinner, possibly Thanksgiving or Christmas, gathered around the table in their best clothes and uniforms.

By 1924 a new single level, 78-foot tower of reinforced concrete had replaced the crumbling wooden sentinel. The new lighthouse was equipped with a diaphone foghorn and a fixed 300mm lens that produced a white group flashing signal every six seconds. A second dwelling was built so each family would have their own house.

Marine traffic of many types passed the lighthouse—passenger steamers, fishing boats, ferries, Native canoes, pleasure boats. The keepers dutifully recorded every passing vessel. One day during Prohibition, the station logbook received a grave entry. The lightkeepers had caught sight of a boat adrift off the station and immediately went to its aid. No one answered their calls as they approached the derelict vessel. They cautiously boarded her and found no one on deck. Inside the cabin they made a gruesome discovery—the bodies of two murdered men. The incident was blamed on bootleggers who frequented Ketchikan with their contraband cargoes and gambled away their dirty money.

Arthur Shaffer brought his new bride, Olive, to Guard Island in 1937. A Montana native and a cowboy at heart, Shaffer had moved to Alaska to work as a fisherman but soon discovered he was prone to terrible bouts of seasickness and had to quit the job. He tried various jobs for several years. While visiting the Juneau post office one day he saw a sign soliciting lightkeepers for Alaskan lighthouses. The job seemed appealing and so he signed on with the Coast Guard. He was sent to Guard Island Light where he found life on a small island lonely, since his pregnant wife was advised to stay ashore with the family until the baby's arrival.

Mrs. Shaffer gave birth to two daughters during the couple's assignment, Kathryn in 1942 and Donna in 1945. After Kathyrn's birth, the couple was reunited on Guard Island for a few years. Life was good. They had each other, and Art Shaffer had not gone off to war like so many of his friends. With the second pregnancy, Olive Shaffer was sent to Ketchikan shortly before her due date and baby Donna was born in a hospital there, since the possibility of getting a doctor out to Guard Island in time for the birth was too risky.

In a 2004 interview, Donna Shaffer Shinney noted that her parents recalled there being at least seven Coast Guardsmen on Guard Island during World War II to help with the lighthouse work and stand coast watches. Like other coastal lights, the beacon was extinguished except for special use. Reports were sent to Juneau every four hours by radio. Tensions ran high, due to concerns about the Japanese invasions of Kiska and Attu in the Aleutian Islands in June 1942. No problems arose, however, but the Shaffers were glad to leave Guard Island Light in 1946. They were transferred to the less remote New Dungeness Light Station on a sand spit off Sequim, Washington.

A year later, Otto and Dorothy Gibbs arrived in Alaska to briefly serve at Mary Island Lighthouse while one of its regular keepers took a leave of absence. They had two small children at the time, Dennis and Suzette, and the family dog. At Mary Island, the couple cut their teeth on Alaskan lightkeeping, learning to deal with the constant din of the foghorn, the miserable rain and dampness, and the wolves that came near the station. The tower's 88 steps were traversed several times every day.

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The Gibbs' moved to Guard Island in December 1947. Life was a little better there—fewer steps to climb, civilization closer, no wolves, and a bigger crew—though the rain, fog, and the perpetual honk of the foghorn continued. Two year old Suzette would cover her head with a blanket when the horn blared and say, "shut mouth, foghorn."

Dorothy Gibbs filled her time with housekeeping and caring for her family. On days the rain ceased, she hung laundry on the line, fastening it securely so the island's stout wind wouldn't carry it away. Otto Gibbs built a teeter-totter for the children from an empty wire spindle and old wooden boxes. The couple worried constantly about the kids, fearing they might wander down to the water, fall in, and drown. Dorothy kept a sharp eye on them, and much of their playtime was spent indoors. In winter, the island was sometimes blanketed in snow, which was a treat for the family, especially near Christmas.

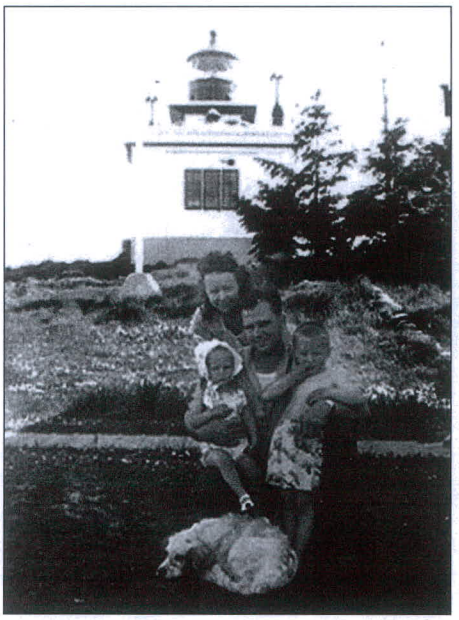
Entertainment for the Gibbs' was the radio, and one of their favorite programs was "Truth or Consequences." It was a game show hosted by Ralph Edwards. Contestants were given an off-the-wall trivia question and if they failed to answer in the allotted time, there were consequences, usually of an absurd nature. Dorothy Gibbs was listening to the show one day when one of the program guests, William Livingston, failed to answer correctly and was tasked with delivering a bucket of ice to a remote lighthouse. The sentinel selected was Guard Island Light! A short time later, Livingston flew to Ketchikan and, accompanied by a Coast Guard officer, came to the lighthouse with a bucket of ice. Many publicity photos were taken, and then the Gibbs' all went to Ketchikan to appear on the radio show to talk about their experience.

During their visit to the city little Dennis Gibbs, age five, got lost and wandered about Ketchikan until he ended up in a barber shop. The police were called in to find his family. When asked his parents' names, he replied: "Mommy and Daddy." Otto and Dorothy Gibbs were eventually located and the boy was reunited with them, very happy to be back with his family but a bit sad to leave the police station, since the police chief had given him a large chocolate bar.

A year after the Gibbs family departed from Guard Island in February 1949, Dan Moore arrived. His wife, Alline, stayed in Vancouver, Washington with family. She was pregnant and, as regulations dictated, she could not travel to



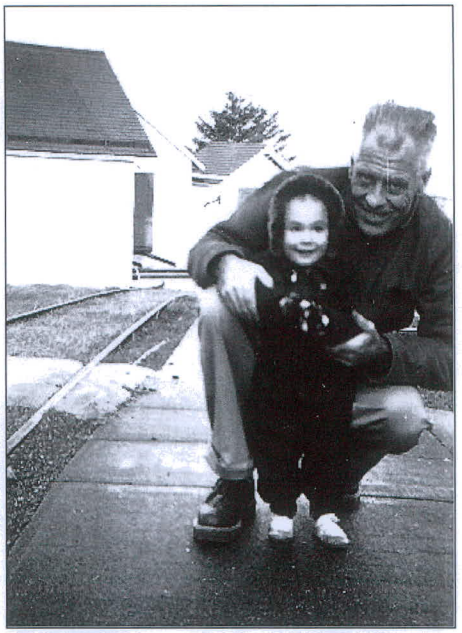
**Above – The famous Guard Island "Truth or Consequences" visitor (center) posed with Coast Guard keeper Otto Gibbs (right) and an officer from the district in the late 1940s. The cross-legged kid is Dennis Gibbs, now a teacher living in California.**
**Below – A family portrait of Otto, Dorothy, Dennis, and Suzette Gibbs, plus the family dog, captures the bucolic beauty of Guard Island in the summer. Both photos courtesy of Juliette Gibbs.**



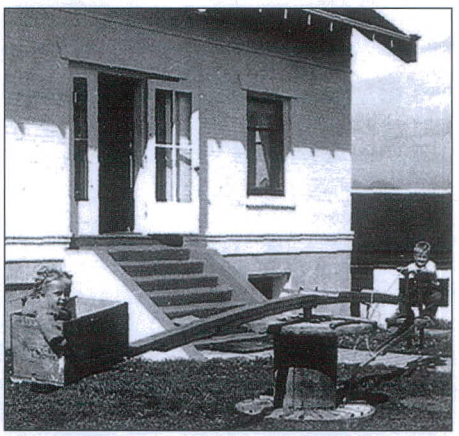
Guard Island until after the baby was born. On August 9, 1951, three days after her birth, the news of baby Christine Moore's arrival reached her father by telegram:

*BABY GIRL 7 LB 12 OZ PM MONDAY*
*MOTHER AND BABY DOING FINE*

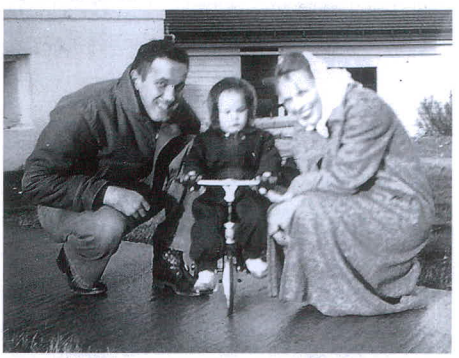
In a letter back to his wife, Moore said that the telegram was three days late due to it being sent care of the Ketchikan Postmaster. Guard Island's officer-in-charge, a man named Jackson, happened to go ashore and brought back the mail with the good news. It was another six months, however, until the family was reunited.



**Chief Jackson, the officer-in-charge in the early 1950s, was fond of Dan and Alline Moore's baby, Christine. He taught her to walk on the sidewalks. Photo courtesy of Chris Waugh.**



**The Gibbs kids had their own amusement on Guard Island in the 1940s—a homemade teeter-totter their father built from a wire spindle and wooden boxes. Photo courtesy of Juliette Gibbs.**



**As a family station, Guard Island was well appointed with comforts and amenities. Little Christine Moore, clad in a warm snowsuit, had a tricycle and plenty of sidewalks and plank boards on which to ride it. Here, she posed with her parents, Dan and Alline Moore in 1953. Photo courtesy of Chris Waugh.**

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In the meantime Moore found plenty to do, since he was the station engineer. The lighthouse and other buildings ran on electricity provided by two diesel generators. One ran all night and was turned off during the day; the other served as a backup. Power was stored in batteries. Diesel-powered compressors ran the fog signal. There was never a lack of chores, with so much scraping and painting needed and machinery to tinker with. And if nothing needed to be repaired, Moore found other tasks to occupy his time. One day, perhaps a bit restless, he organized all the tools in the shop by painting their outlines on the wall so that they could be hung in their proper place.



**A bored Coast Guard lightkeeper amused himself by fitting a defunct two-cylinder diesel engine with a pipe to make it look like a cannon. Two of these faux guns guarded Guard Island in the 1940s and 1950s. Photo courtesy of Chris Waugh.**

In January 1952, Moore was given leave to fetch his family from Washington. He met them in Vancouver and then traveled by car to Seattle where they boarded the passenger steamer SS *Denali* with two 75-pound trunks of belongings and the aptly-named family dog, Salty. The cruise to Ketchikan took two days, and then another boat shuttled them ten more miles out to Guard Island. A few hundred feet off the island, a smaller motorized boat met the transfer vessel to take the Moores, their dog, and the trunks ashore. It motored to the boat landing and was positioned on a cradle, then was winched up the boat ramp on a rail car. The old rail track that once brought supplies to the station was still visible, but obsolete. By this time, a concrete sidewalk zigzagged over the station.

On the boat trip from Seattle, Alline Moore had brought along a newfangled invention—disposable diapers—since there was no place to launder cloth diapers on the ship. Once ashore at her new home, the conveniences were put away and cloth diapers were unpacked. Washing diapers became a regular



**U.S. Lighthouse Establishment keepers snapped a picture of themselves at a formal dinner in the late 1920s. Keeper West is at left. Notice Assistant Keeper Waltenberg looks slightly blurry, probably from racing into the picture after setting the shutter delay. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard.**

chore for her and she discovered that laundry days were unpredictable. There might be sunshine and a light breeze to dry clothes outside, but most days it was rainy, windy, and sometimes even snowy. Laundered diapers and other clothing had to dry on a line stretched across the kitchen.

At first the Moores were worried about how soundly their baby daughter would sleep with the foghorn blaring so much of the time. It was mounted on the lighthouse but pointed toward the Moore's bedroom. When the fog rolled in, which was often, it blasted for five seconds once every thirty seconds. Amazingly, the baby slept soundly. In later years, Chris Moore Waugh quipped: "The adults learned to talk in twenty-five second intervals, and automatically suspend their conversations for five seconds in time with the noise…"

Now a motivational speaker living in Newport, Oregon, Waugh, detailed her family's life at the light station in *Misty Memories of Guard*



**Laundry day at Guard Island seldom allowed for drying wash on the clothesline, except in summer. Olive Schaffer secured her laundry with sturdy pins to hold fast in the stout wind. A wooden platform made walking along the clothesline easier and doubled as a deck for the family. Note Mrs. Schaffer's stylish 1950s saddle shoes. Photo courtesy of Donna Shinney.**

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**Arrival of the Coast Guard tender at Guard Island was a welcome sight in the early 1960s when only men were permitted to serve there. The tender brought fuel and supplies. This one came with a work crew whose task was to begin demolishing buildings to prepare the station for a changeover to automation. Photo courtesy of Pat Newman.**



**In the early 1960s, after the station had undergone several makeovers, some of the buildings were burned, including one of the dwellings. Eventually, the Coast Guard would remove all of the structures except the lighthouse and completely automate the station. Photo courtesy of Pat Newman.**

*Island*. The Moore's house had three levels. In the basement was a commissary stocked with food, boxes and cans of nonperishables lined up on long shelves, and meats, ice cream, and frozen fruits and vegetables in the chest freezer. Also in the basement was a play area with a ping pong table and bookshelves full of old novels, magazines, and how-to tomes. Reading was still a mainstay of lighthouse life in the 1950s.

Also in the basement was an oil furnace that kept the house warm and a bleach chlorinator to sterilize drinking water. Oil was delivered by the tender via a long hose which snaked across the waves and fed into to the oil tank. Water was caught on the roof during rains and snows and stored in two concrete cisterns.

The main floor of the Moore's house had a large kitchen, dining room, and both a family room and living room. The top floor had two bedrooms, a bath, and another small rec room with no windows, which Dan Moore used to develop film taken with his old movie camera.

Alline Moore's duties included cooking one meal a day for the entire crew—dinner. The men were responsible for their own breakfasts and lunches. An inexperienced cook, Alline scoured old magazines for recipes and wrote to family members for meal ideas. She even asked the young crewmen on station to write to their mothers for good recipes. She kept lists of necessities, which were ordered from Ketchikan grocery and drug stores via radio. It was important that food, medicine, and other supplies never run low, for the weather could prevent a ship from landing for weeks on end, especially in the winter months. The Coast Guard station in Juneau also took orders for bulk food and supplies and shipped them down to Ketchikan.

When not cooking, Alline Moore filled her time with caring for little Christine and the house. The baby had all the necessities too—a playpen, high chair, crib, and a tricycle when she was old enough to ride. Her mother coped with the isolation of Guard Island, and the fact that she was the only woman on the station, by writing letters, lots of them. Every Wednesday she sat down and penned long missives to family and friends, describing everything that happened on Guard Island. It was her connection to the mainland but also a form of therapy. On Thursday, the mail boat came, hopefully with answers to her letters.

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**Otto Gibbs' sense of humor was a pleasant diversion for his family and comrades. His welcome sign detailed the inhabitants of Guard Island in the late 1940s. Photo courtesy of Juliette Gibbs.**

time in his office in the bottom of the second dwelling doing paperwork. He was responsible for the smooth operation of the light station and was strict, but he also enjoyed some fun on occasion. He taught the station dog, Lady, how to climb a ladder. He also helped baby Christine learn to walk on the station's maze of sidewalks.

Another important role for Guard Island Light was to serve as a training station for Alaskan keepers. Coasties who were headed to more remote lighthouses like Cape St. Elias, Scotch Cap, or Cape Sarichef went to Guard Island first and learned the ropes under the tutelage of its seasoned keepers. There were usually two or three young seamen in training at the station most of the time. The trainees



**A view from the top of the lighthouse in the early 1960s shows the newer dwelling and its cistern (lower left). The entrance to Tongass Narrows appears in the background. Photo courtesy of Pat Newman.**

In addition to the Moores, there were several other young crewmen and the officer-in-charge, Chief Jackson. He was a bachelor who loved the station, worked hard, and grew very fond of little Christine. Moore and the young seamen stood watches, radioed weather reports to the Coast Guard station in Juneau, and made sure the radio beacon signal was accurate. Jackson spent most of his were nicknamed "school guys." They spent two to three weeks at Guard Island before moving on to their assignments in Northern Alaska and the Aleutian Islands.

The Moores spent twenty-two months on Guard Island. Alline Moore and her baby never left during that time and never saw another woman, though a fishing boat in distress reportedly had a woman on board who spent a very short time on the island. Alline did not meet her though. In a melancholy mood one day, Alline wrote a poem about the natural sounds on Guard Island that could only be heard when the intrusive foghorn was silent:

*Only when it's quiet can one hear the noise*
*And see nature.*

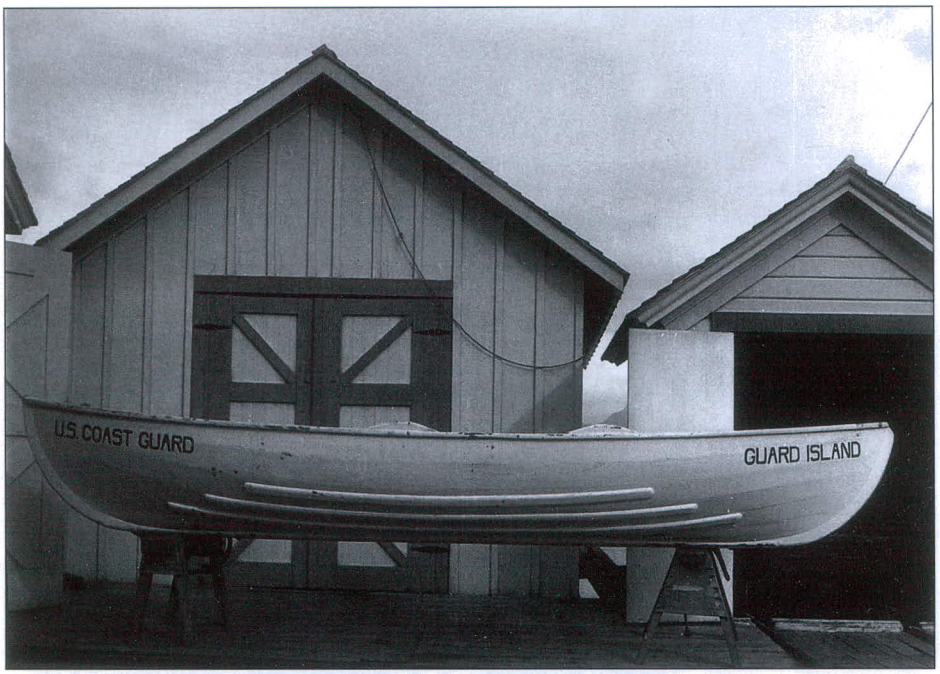
The Moores left Guard Island in 1953. Coast Guard crews came and went over the next decade. Pat Newman arrived about 1962. By this time, the Coast Guard had made Guard Island a stag station and there was talk about automating the light, since it was difficult to staff the place. Few men wanted to serve there. Newman was a greenhorn Coastie and had no say in his assignment. During his stay the number of keepers was reduced even more and one of the dwellings was burned down, since it was unneeded.

"Stag station" was considered a pun a few years later, for there were two deer living with the keepers in 1966—Wickie and Kato. Coast Guardsman Daniel Young allowed Wickie to sleep at the foot of his bed and eat from his dinner plate. Neither deer was housetrained, but the companionship of both was highly valued. One old-timer remarked that it was "as if they were children."

In April 1966, Kato disappeared and the crew was sure one of their dogs had chased the deer into the sea. Craving all the amusement they could find, the men staged a mock court martial but could not find enough evidence to convict Blackie the dog. Sadly, a short time later, Wickie suffered an accident and died. The men were inconsolable and expressed their sadness by radio the next day when they ordered some supplies from Ketchikan. A seaplane landed with the requested items, plus a new pet fawn. The men named her Angel, since she came from the sky.

Guard Island Light's tenure as a staffed station was nearing an end. On July 31, 1969 the Coast Guard ANT from Juneau completed automation and seal-up of the station with the installation of a DCB 24 aero-beacon with a range of 24 miles and an automatic sensor on the foghorn. The sixty-six year old station was set to run on its own. The entire crew was removed with little fanfare. Probably, no one was sad to leave. The departing officer-in-charge, William McKey, tersely wrote in the logbook: "Disestablished Guard Island Light at 14:45 this date."

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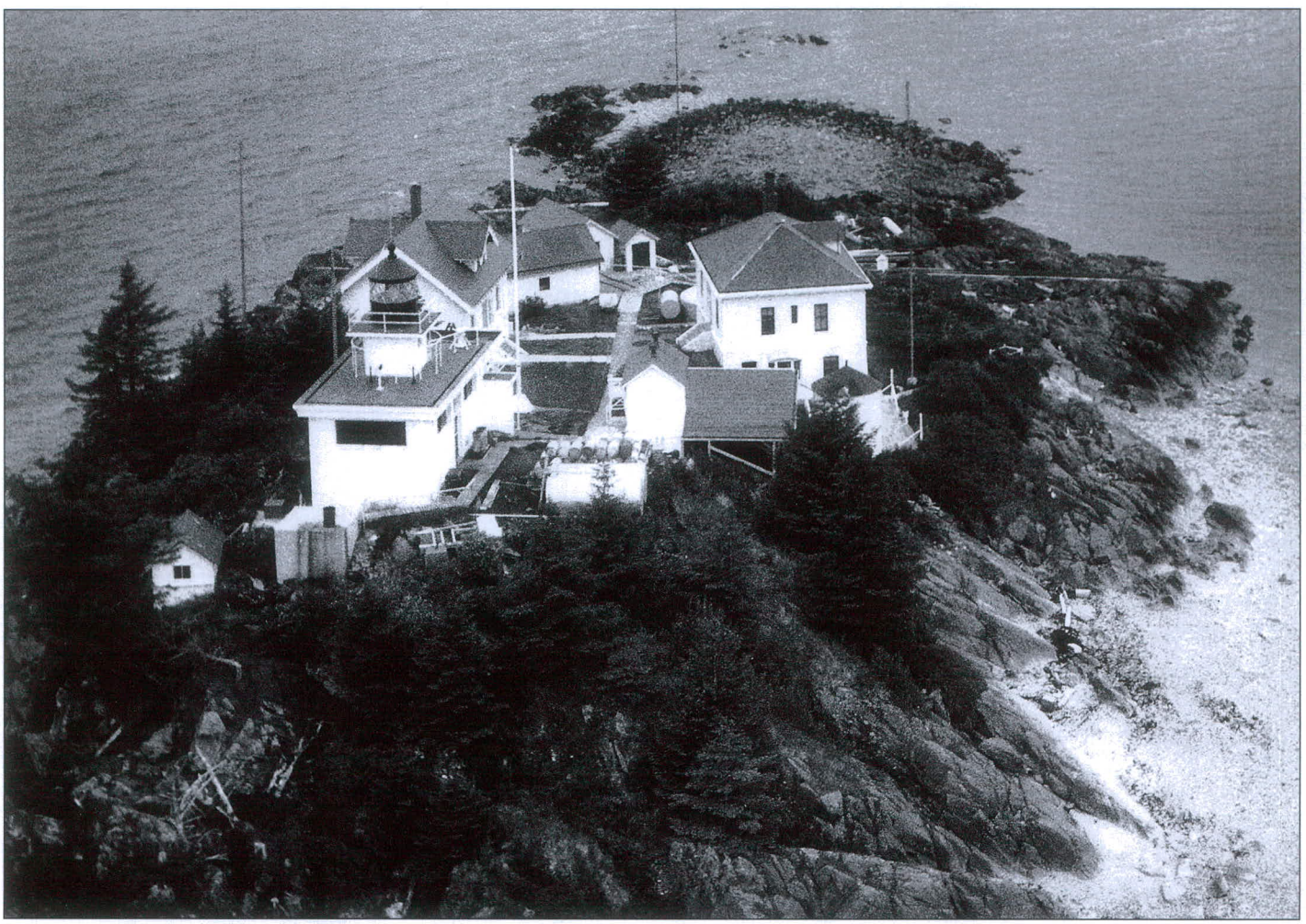



**The Guard Island Station launch. Photo courtesy of U. S. Coast Guard.**

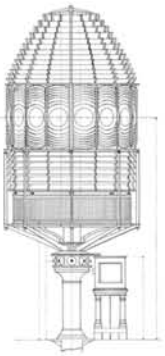
The site was left to the harsh north winds, incessant rain and fog, and the crying seabirds. The buildings, all nearing a half century old, began a slow deterioration, occasionally hastened by squatters and partiers who broke into the structures, set campfires on the bare floors, and left behind piles of trash. Concerned about the liability of the ramshackle buildings, the Coast Guard opted to burn down all structures except for the light tower and adjacent fog signal building. Parts of the boat landing remained, as well as the cisterns.

In 1997, local Boy Scouts expressed interest in the station as a camping retreat but soon realized it was too much to maintain. A few years later, local residents of Ketchikan formed Guard Island Heritage, Inc. with the aim of gaining the property under the National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act of 2000. If successful, their goal is to preserve the remains of the station and build a boardwalk around it for a self-guided interpretive trail. The site will be used for educational purposes. To date, the property remains in Coast Guard hands.

**A birds-eye view of the station in its last staffed years shows the compact layout of the half-acre site and significantly more forestation than in its early years. Photo courtesy of Coast Guard Archives.**



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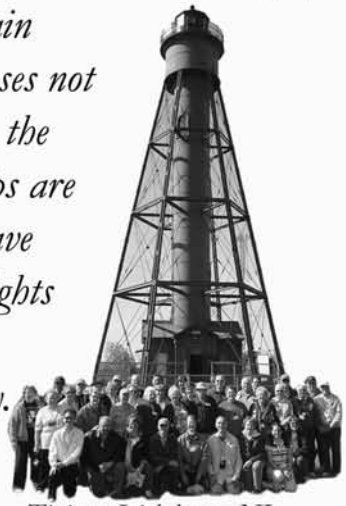
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