

# Keeper of the Lights Along the Shore

By Alice K. Rondthaler

There are but a few of the "old-time" lighthouse keepers left: actually, there is no longer need of them in this day of automatic controls. Capt. Joe Burrus is a relic of the old days. For sixteen years he was a keeper of historic Ocracoke Lighthouse; for a total of forty-five years he was a keeper at some Virginia or North Carolina shore or sound lighthouse. Now, nearing the age of 75, he is retired on a government pension. He and his good wife, Eleanor Oden Burrus, live in a comfortable bungalow on Ocracoke Island. They have just celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary with their one son, six daughters, thirteen grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren coming from north, south, and the far west to pay homage to a grand old dad and a wonderful mother.

## Born at Hatteras

Cap'n Joe (Joseph Merritt Burrus) was born at Hatteras. It was natural for him to choose as his life-time job one that savored of the sea. His father had been a sea captain, sailing a freighter between New York City and Wilmington, N. C. He had been lost at sea in 1880 when Joe was but a child, but the boy had heard many times the story of the WILLIAM P. COX.

During a terrific storm off Carolina the ship had tried in vain to make the Bar into Hatteras — it was near enough for those on shore to see the outlines of the men on deck through the wind and rain. But the seas were too rough and the wind too strong and finally the freighter turned southward into the Atlantic, and was never heard of again. Wreckage was found near Southport, and it was thought the ship ran aground on Frying Pan Shoals. Eleanor Burrus, too, is of seafaring ancestry. Her great-grandfather Oden, twice shipwrecked off Diamond Shoals came ashore at Hatteras, the second time afloat a pork barrel. Then he settled down there, the first of the Carolina Odens.

For a while Joe followed in his father's footsteps — fishing and freighting; then he signed up for the U. S. Lighthouse Service. His first pay check, back in 1903, was \$30 per month, and he was proud of it. (Mrs. Burrus says in those days you could get a 24-lb. sack of flour for 85 cents). During his years of service, he was stationed at various lighthouses on the Reefs or in the Sounds of Virginia and Carolina—Tangier Island (Va.), Thimble Shoals (Va.), Diamond Shoals Lightship, Cape Lookout, Croatan, Oliver's Reef (in Pamlico Sound four miles west of Hatteras), Bluff Shoals (in the Sound 30 miles off Ocracoke), and at Ocracoke Island.

Lighthouses out over the water in the Sounds have been replaced with automatic lights, but in the old days a keeper was stationed at each to care for the oil-lamp light, the fog horn equipment, and forty to forty-five buoys or beacons in the Sound. These were lonely assignments, lasting sometimes several weeks until a change of keepers.

The buoys and beacons had oil lamps and had to be checked frequently. Before the days of motor boats, a sailboat was used. Lighthouses in the Sounds were built on steel structures forty feet above the water at depths of about fifteen feet. There was a kitchen, a living room, and two bedrooms, and a porch all-round. No cellar; no attic; no ice box; no electricity; and no wife! A woodstove in the kitchen; a coal heater in the living room; water caught off the eaves in rain barrels. All fuel, food, and other supplies brought out by boat when the keepers exchanged shore and sound stations for a period of time.

## Visits Permitted

With special permission, the keeper's family could make brief visits to the lighthouse during the summer months. Mrs. Burrus and the six little Burrus children and their family pets would get into the sailboat, or the motor launch, at Hatteras, to make the 30-mile trip out to Bluff Shoals. Getting the youngest children and the pets up

into the lighthouse was sometimes a task.

The dog was lassoed and pulled up by rope; the kitten was carried in a basket or bag; and Cap'n Joe tucked the baby under one arm as he swung up the ladder, with the older children and Mrs. Burrus climbing cautious yafter him. Visiting days were happy ones for son Austin, the oldest child, since they gave him the opportunity to fish for big trout off the lighthouse porch, or to sail the skiff, or sometimes accompany his father in the motor launch on his rounds of buoys and beacons.

A near-tragedy occurred on one summer visit. Little Amy, age 3, was suddenly missed and an hour of calling and searching brought no results. The parents decided sorrowfully that she had fallen off the porch into the water below. But happiness was restored when she was found fast asleep squeezed in between the heavy open door and the wall, where they had failed to look in the excitement. "Permission ONLY in the summer months" . . . says Mrs. Burrus with a twinkle in her brown eyes . . . "but once we all went out on Christmas Day and took the tree, the presents, and the Christmas dinner!"

## Ice-Bound

It was out at Bluff Shoals lighthouse, 30 miles west of Hatteras and Ocracoke toward Little Washington, N. C., that Capt. Burrus was once an ice-bound prisoner for thirty days. In the last "big freeze" — that of December 1917-January 1918, Pamlico Sound was frozen over. At the end of twenty days Capt. Joe was down to flour and water. Starving didn't bother him so much; but his tobacco was gone. So he took to chewing boat calking as a substitute. Finally at the end of thirty days the ice began to break up and anxious friends from Ocracoke and Hatteras came out in motor boats with fuel, food, and to his delight, chewing tobacco.

From 1928 to 1946 Capt. Burrus was keeper of the Ocracoke Island light. Today, this historic lighthouse, the oldest and most picturesque on the North Carolina coast, is equipped with automatic controls of all kinds. When the electric bulb burns out, another automatically goes on; when the local electric power goes off, an auxiliary motor goes on. In 1929 oil lamps were used; shortly afterward a vapor lamp replaced the oil.

Like the Coast Guard Stations, the lighthouses served, and still serve as places of refuge in time of storm. The Burrus family lived through three hurricanes at Ocracoke Lighthouse—1933, 1938, and 1944, and of these the last was by far the worst. The water flooded the entire island, rising in many homes as high as 25 to 30 inches. At the keeper's house—located on one of the island's highest spots—it was seven inches deep; and for the first remembered time it lapped against the doorstep of the lighthouse proper.

Early in the morning, just before the storm had reached its greatest fury, about thirty-five people gathered at the Burrus home. Some waded through the swirling tides; others were brought in skiffs by coast guardsmen. Many came without breakfast and by noon Mrs. Burrus had baked a peck of biscuits and opened up a gallon or more of lima beans and corned beef to feed her hungry visitors.

## Captain Burrus Retires

After his retirement from the Lighthouse Service, Capt. Burrus, like many old-time keepers, settled down on the Carolina Reefs. The Burrus family chose Ocracoke where several of the girls had married and settled. Now the Cap'n has time to walk the sandy lanes to the village store porches to discuss politics and the events of the

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## Carteret Waters Yield Tremendous Bonita Catch

Runs of bonita were so tremendous last week and a few days prior, that fish dealers were having the bonita put in quick-freeze.

Bonita, also called king mackerel, and in some waters, tuna, were being taken in such numbers that even non-committal experienced fishermen were amazed.

Beaufort Quick-Freeze handled the surplus catches. Unusually large catches of blues have been made this fall also.

## Lab Pools Used For Experiments

Four of the concrete pools at the United States Fisheries Biological laboratory, Piver's Island, are now being used for experimental purposes.

The large central pool, around which the driveway circles, contains menhaden, another contains shrimp, a third shad, and the fourth oysters.

Both the menhaden and shrimp have been "tagged." Studies are being made to see what effect the tag has on the fish, from migration standpoints and growth. Scientists are trying to find the best method of tagging.

The shad were taken from the Neuse river and have been marked by having their fins clipped. Tests will also be conducted with them to determine how much oxygen they require. This is being done in connection with pollution problems. Oxidation of excessive foreign matter in the streams takes oxygen required by the fish, scientists believe, and for that reason many of them die.

Oysters have been placed in one pool merely as a source of supply for oyster experiments in the laboratory.

One of the few Republicans on the Island, he says, "And I'm no wishy-washy Republican either."

No, Capt. Burrus isn't wishy-washy about anything; he is as staunch as the lighthouse which he manned for many years. "Life today is more eventful in the world abroad, but less eventful at home. The great event of each day used to be climbing the spiral stairs at sundown to trim the wick, fill the reservoir, polish the reflectors, and light the lamp. Today, my days are more like the trip back down the spiral stairway."

In the fiscal year 1949-50 North Carolina planted oyster shells at a cost of \$6,089.44.

## Boat Undergoes Overhaul On Piver's Island Ways

Undergoing repair and overhaul on the ways at Piver's Island is a boat that has just been turned over to the Fish and Wildlife Service by the Army.

When work on this boat is complete, investigators at the lab will have three boats at their disposal, a "contact" boat which contacts fishermen while they're at work, a boat which is equipped with a laboratory, sleeps five, and has all the latest scientific devices for fishery investigation, and the boat now on the ways.

The Fish and Wildlife Service names all its boats after fish, but no names have been found yet for the three based at the Piver's Island lab.

## Rumor on Sale of Oyster Farm False, Owner Says

Contrary to rumor, the North River oyster farm operated by Dr. Herbert F. Prytherch, Beaufort, has not been sold to Harvey Smith of Beaufort. Dr. Prytherch stated today. Both have an interest in the farm, he said.

Don Martin is resident care-taker of the farm where experiments on oysters are continuing. Dr. Prytherch says that he has found that Belgrade rock will "fertilize" oyster beds and cause growth of fatter shellfish.

# Sanitation Rating On Shellfish Is 93.6 Per Cent

In his latest report N. McKeithen Caldwell, state shellfish sanitarian, revealed that the United States Public Health service appraised North Carolina's shellfish sanitation program and gave it a rating of 93.6 per cent for the 1949-50 oyster season.

During the 1948-49 season this state ranked No. 1 in the nation with a rating from the federal health service of 94 per cent.

In the 1948-50 biennium 27 plants were furnished for new shellfish plants. Caldwell said, "Certificates of inspection were issued to a yearly average of 19 crab meat plants, 59 shucking plants, and to 144 shellstock dealers . . . 1,336 sanitary inspections were made of these plants."

## Improvement Noted

Caldwell noted "a gradual improvement in plant operation" and reported that during the biennium sanitation in most crab meat plants reached a new high. He added, ". . . yet the inflexible regulations of the United States Food and Drug administration harassed maximum production. The industry is in need of new methods of processing, production, and marketing. Old methods hold little promise in the future."

The sanitarian's report continues: "Sanitary bacteriological surveys of six polluted shellfish growing areas were completed during the biennium. A total of 543 water samples were collected and examined."

## Services Expanded

"Through the cooperation of the state board of health and the Carteret County Health department laboratory facilities and services have been expanded. A long existing need for laboratory control over the sanitary quality of oysters, clams, and crab meat produced within and shipped into this state has now been met. Present services are on a temporary status; funds should be made available to make them permanent."

In conclusion, Caldwell remarked, "North Carolina has long been recognized as a state with a great shellfish potential but has never been able to approach that potential. North Carolina is now producing shellfish of highest physical and sanitary quality, yet the future is not bright unless antiquated methods of marketing are drastically improved. Consumer demand must be developed and new markets created if North Carolina's shellfish industry is to go forward."

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