

Lighthouse Keeper's Story

COLLECTOR: Ann O'Brien

CONTRIBUTOR: Henry Fowler

Ann O'Brien:

Today is January 25th, my name is Ann O'Brien ah....2010 ah... I'm ah... Henry Fowler is going to share a story with me about ah...when he worked as lighthouse keepers helper, I guess it is. And the places of where he went from time to time. Okay Henry, you can go ahead...

Henry Fowler:

Yeah.

Ann O'Brien:

I asked you, how did you come now, to get your work as a lighthouse keepers helper?

Henry Fowler:

Well, first going off my sister Gladys, she was out on Belle Isle, and they built three new houses and they were looking for family men to go there. So she was telling me about it, I had a letter from her in the spring when she was out there and ah, she was telling me about it. So ah... once Cec Wellman came in that summer on holidays, I went and seen him. I had a talk to him and I asked him was he looking for men and he said 'yes'. So he said "I'll let you know".

In September, he sent a message to me asked me to come out on Belle Isle, with him, but then after that, Gladys and them come in. There had to be some arrangements made then 'cause I was new at it and didn't know too much about it. So when Gladys came in, she made out an order for me to send for my food that they had sent to Charlottetown. The boats use to come from Charlottetown, then.

Ann O'Brien:

That's Charlottetown?

Henry Fowler:

Charlottetown, PEI.

Ann O'Brien:

PEI.

Henry Fowler:

Yeah. And that's like went all down through the Straits, that was on the Charlottetown Agency, then, hey. And so, I made out an order sent for some groceries, enough groceries for the winter. You send them the order and they would have to bring that...when the boat comes in the Fall of the year. November month, I think the boat would come... October or November, anyway, at least. Yup, it was October I think, the last of October or first of November, and when they come they'd bring, all your supplies and that out to 'ya.

And the first year we had to order ah... 'cause they was having, they had ah... the old house they had there use to burn coal.... and they use to have coal and that come out. Then when they put the new houses and that there, they put oil furnaces there. So we had to buy our own fuel. So we had to order twenty five drums of fuel. That's twenty five drums each, so that's what we ordered. And ah... sent it out to us and that Fall, we had it all come and ah.... the 7th of ah... the 7th of October, I went out there on the Northern Ranger.

I got on board the Northern Ranger in West. St. Modeste and ah they had to send a message to St. John's then to get the Ranger to call to Belle Isle. So there was me, Shirley and Patsy, I only had one girl then. And ah... we got out there, boy we must have left before the 7th, that's the day we got out there; on the 7th of October, 1963.

Ann O'Brien:

So ah...

Henry Fowler:

We was out there..... just shortly after we got out there anyway, the Coast Guard boat come and brought supplies and that for the Winter. So you had to stay all the Winter then anyway.

Ann O'Brien:

So what would you do now Henry, like in the Winter time ah...well you didn't see anybody?

Henry Fowler:

No we use to ah...we did see somebody, we use to go back and forth to the west end. You could go from the East end to West end, they had dog team then. And ah...

Ann O'Brien:

Oh.

Henry Fowler:

They had ah....they had ski-doo's out there. They never had a ski-doo there that Winter,

they had a snowmobile, something like a ski-doo anyway. Ah...she was a machine with a motor on the back of it and skis on the front of it and wheels for to steer, something like a ski-doo hey, a snow toboggan it was called I think.

They use to have some of them up around home too or something. Bobby Davis had one just like it. And ah...Cec Davis and Sam Buckle and them and Gilbert and Tom O'Dell and them, they had them afterwards hey. The snow toboggans or something or other.

Ann O'Brien:

Okay.

Henry Fowler:

That was the first. Afterwards, then we got the ski-doo's hey. But ah...that snow toboggan that winter we lost that, poor Cec Wellman owned that hey and they got lost there that Winter so, that was gone.

We had the dog team and Gordon Thomas, he come out...Gordon Thomas come out with me, after they had the accident there. So the next Winter now we got a snow toboggan and ah...then we had ski-doo's after that see. We use to go back and forth the island.

Up on the West end of the island there was three more families of light keepers on the West end, hey. Radio operators they were on the West end too, there was always, six or seven of them up there. So we use to go back and forth with dog team first and ski-doo's after, in the later years. Yeah.

Ann O'Brien:

How long would it take you now Henry, to go from one end of the island to the other?

Henry Fowler:

Oh. The way they use to travel, like going up over the hills and around the ponds and one thing and another. There's about twelve miles, so it would only take you a little over an hour, hey.

Ann O'Brien:

Okay.

Henry Fowler:

It wouldn't take you an hour on ski-doo, thirty five or forty minutes like that, on ski-doo.

Ann O'Brien:

Now when you wasn't working like at night. Would you get together and play cards or?

Henry Fowler:

Oh, yes. Yes we use to be playing cards, one thing and another. There was a...yeah, I use to go from house to house there. There was three houses there see, on the East end.

We use to have ah...Winter time after we closed down, the station use to close down around January, first part of January, hey. And ah...then it wouldn't open then until March so they had a couple of months with it closed down.

We use to always be doing something or other and then Spring of the year...first year we was out there, no, second year I was out there, that was, when Gordon and George was out there with me then, we had material come out in the Fall of the year and then in the Spring we built a boat...built a speed boat...and ah, the next Spring, we built another one. Three years running, we built three speed boats out there. So that was past time for us, hey.

Ann O'Brien:

Oh yes. And go bird huntin' and seal huntin'?

Henry Fowler:

We always use to get a few birds and that in the Fall of the year, first when the birds, ducks and that started to come around. That's about the only thing we use to trouble about out there was ducks. They'd get plenty of ducks only just two or three days when they come around then, then you'd have plenty of birds, for the Winter.

Seals, we use to get some seals in the Spring of the year, a few times we got some seals.

Ann O'Brien:

And like in the Summer time would you go out fishing, like to get your fish for the Winter, that is?

Henry Fowler:

Oh, yes. We use to get fish enough for the Winter maid, and you'd get a salmon. Have a salmon net and get a few salmon after the summer, enough to keep us going. Yeah. We never had to go nowhere, just off the point there and there use to be a lot of fishermen out around there too, hey.

Yeah, we had ah...one summer we had forty fishermen out there.

Ann O'Brien:

Oh.

Henry Fowler:

Different crews, hey. Yeah.

There was one year, we had them out there from in home too. Hayward Normore and them was out there one year, there was four of them; Hayward Normore, Cec Davis, and Clifford Buckle and Bill Barney. Yeah. And another...next year then, my brothers out to Harvey and Hollis and Joe and Walter. That same year, Al Davis and ah, and Ray Flynn, they was out there too. Then there was a lot of fishermen there besides that. Summer time they use to be real...real busy. (laughs)

Ann O'Brien:

You never got lonesome for sure.

Henry Fowler:

No, we never got lonesome summer time, because it's always something going on, hey. Back and forth to the fishermen there and you were back and forth to the fishermen there, and you were back and forth down to Black Joe, they had houses down there too, hey.

Ann O'Brien:

Okay.

Henry Fowler:

A lot of people use to be staying ashore there, hey.

Ann O'Brien:

Yes.

Henry Fowler:

Yeah, that was mostly for them, all them stayed ashore. Yup. One crowd had a schooner, a small size schooner there but they use to just put their fish aboard, salt their fish and that aboard of her but they stayed ashore hey.

Ann O'Brien:

What did they stay in? Tents?

Henry Fowler:

No, they had cabins built there maid.

Ann O'Brien:

Oh.

Henry Fowler:

They all had little houses and that built.

Ann O'Brien:

Now how many years did you work on Belle Isle?

Henry Fowler:

I was out there, ah...'63....7 years, 8 months something or other. Ah...wait now, I went out there in '63, come in '70.

Ann O'Brien:

Where did you go to work then, when you came from Belle Isle?

Henry Fowler:

When I came from Belle Isle, I come to Point Amour. I was to Point Amour for a year and a half. I come there in July '70, and left again in May '72. Moved to Red Bay then, went to Red Bay in '72.

Ann O'Brien:

Where in Red Bay?

Henry Fowler:

On the light station on Saddle Island. I went principal lightkeeper on Saddle Island then.

I was ah....after Gordon Thomas and them left on Belle Isle, they was out there for three years. They left and then I went Principal lightkeeper on Belle Isle. When I came to Point Amour, I went assistant keeper. I was there for a year and a halfa little over that. And then I went to Red Bay as principal keeper when Enos Yetman retired, hey, and Al Yetman. So me and Jim Yetman went there then. I was there then 'til ah...'83.

In '83 I went to Fogo Island and I was up there 'til, I went up there in August '83 and I come back in ah..November '84. I come back to Red Bay again then.

Ann O'Brien:

So did you get better pay like by leaving and going to places where they asked you to go?

Henry Fowler:

No, well...I ah...reduced my pay when I came to Point Amour because they didn't ask me to go there, I just put in for it 'cause we had children going to school and that then see. So I wanted to get in off Belle Isle, so I didn't get so much pay then, 'cause I went assistant keeper.

When I ...when Red Bay come out then, they was looking for people for Red Bay. I put in for that, so I got more pay then, it wasn't very much pay we got there anyway. That was a low paying job, that was.

Ann O'Brien:

Yes. But it was a steady income year round.

Henry Fowler:

It was a stead income, yes maid, enough to keep you going and that anyway, hey. Because you got paid the year round even though we got ah...it use to be closed down winter time, hey. 'Cause after it got automatic, the light stations became automatic, the light station come to be automatic and that's what we use to close down winter time then see.

'Cause when we was in Red Bay now, he use to close down sometime in December and didn't go back 'til April one year and then they gradually went on longer every year. In May, June...so it use to be later when you go to work, hey.

Ann O'Brien:

Did you stay in Red Bay, like where your children was going to school?

Henry Fowler:

No, we stayed on the island. We stayed out on Saddle Island but we use to bring them back and forth to school in the fall of the year. But then when it closed down, we'd move up to West Ste. Modeste and they went to school in West Ste Modeste. I stayed to Capstan Island because I had a house in Capstan Island see.

Ann O'Brien:

Yes.

Henry Fowler:

Yeah.

Ann O'Brien:

I remember that. And then you moved to ah...you didn't move anywhere else from...after you were in Red Bay?

Henry Fowler:

No. I moved from Red Bay up to Fogo Island. I was up there from '83 to '84. And then I come back to Red Bay again. I finished up in Red Bay then. I worked with them for 31 years, with the Coast Guard.

Ann O'Brien:

When did you finish work then ah...?

Henry Fowler:

'94. I come to Goose Bay then.

Ann O'Brien:

All your children are growed up and gone away?

Henry Fowler:

Yeah.

Ann O'Brien:

And finished school?

Henry Fowler;

No, they weren't finished school then because we still had four of them going to school...or three of them going to school, then, when I come to Goose Bay. They were still going to school when I retired, hey.

'Cause Cory come down here first, first when Cory come down here, he was ah...that was ah...'91, he was in grade 7 then. So there was Cory, Kim, and Kerry going to school, see. Three of them went to school down here. But Kerry was...Kerry's last year though, I think, she took grade twelve, I think. Then a couple of years after that then the two boys was finished.

Ann O'Brien:

Now your later years of working as a lighthouse keeper, was your pay better then???

Henry Fowler:

Oh, yes. Yeah.

Ann O'Brien:

As....

Henry Fowler:

It was much better then when I started first. I can remember the first cheque I got for a months wages...the first one I got when I went on Belle Isle, he was \$213.00.

Ann O'Brien:

Wouldn't very much to live on?

Henry Fowler;

For a month.

Ann O'Brien:

...for a family man.

Henry Fowler:

No sir, it wasn't very much. But after that now, the next year in June, we went under the civil service, and the pay did rise a bit more then. But ah...for a couple of years, maid, the first two or three years, you wouldn't gettin all that much. Somewhere around eight or nine thousand a year.

Ann O'Brien:

And your food now, when you made your order for your food, did you have to buy that yourselves?

Henry Fowler:

Yes. Yeah. We had to buy it ourselves, it had to be send it to Charlottetown, everything you sent for, you got it. The brand and everything, if they never had it themselves....we use to have it come Blige brothers in Charlottetown...and if they never had it themselves, they'd go somewhere else and get it.

They'd send it to 'ya and ah...well they use to, the Coast Guard, use to have the same kind of an order. You had to make out two orders, send one to the head of the Coast

Guard hey, and one to the Blige Brothers. I suppose they done that more or less, if you didn't pay for it, they'd take it...they'd pay for it, hey.

Ann O'Brien:

Hmmm..

Henry Fowler:

So they use to...they sent out this stuff, son out all the things they ordered for the Winter and then pay them so much a month.

Ann O'Brien:

Oh, that's how you paid.

Henry Fowler:

That's how we paid.

Ann O'Brien:

Yeah.

Henry Fowler:

You couldn't do much different back then when you was only getting' two hundred and thirteen dollars a month.

The first Winter, I can mind about the first Winter I went there now, I had five hundred dollars worth. Five hundred dollars worth of food and I had five hundred dollars worth of oil.

Ann O'Brien:

Boy.

Henry Fowler:

But now you had to pay for your drums but when send your oil drums back, you'd get your money back for 'em, hey.

Ann O'Brien:

And then plus you had your birds and...

Henry Fowler:

Oh yes, yeah.

Ann O'Brien:

And could you get trout out there, too?

Henry Fowler:

Ah, no...the way ..there was a few small ponds there but we never troubled much about the troutin' just the same. No. There's a few ponds there, you'd get a few trout and that

in but they was only small, never troubled with it. Mostly what we went for was salmon and fish and stuff like that.

Ann O'Brien:

So all those things was a good help to you, you know.

Henry Fowler:

Oh yes. Yeah.

Ann O'Brien:

And did you have a garden, like a small garden.

Henry Fowler:

Oh yes, we use to grow vegetables. Not too many, we had cabbage and turnip and turnip greens, carrots and stuff like that. Shirley, oh one year she had a nice garden of cabbage, great big heads. But then after that we never troubled much about it. We had it for two or three years.

Ann O'Brien:

That was all a help.

Henry Fowler:

Oh all a help, for sure. Then in the fall of the year, you'd get a few berries and stuff like that, hey. Everything....

Ann O'Brien:

Was there lots of berries to pick out there?

Henry Fowler:

Yeah. Bakeapples and Partridgeberries, and blackberries, stuff like that. You wouldn't get no squashberries or nothing 'cause there was no trees there. (laughs)

Ann O'Brien:

Were you bothered with flies very much, Henry?

Henry Fowler:

No, not very much. Very seldom would be flies you might find a scatter one sometime but there was always a little draft of wind because you were up so high.

On the island, you're up high from the water right there where our houses was to on the East end of Belle Isle now was ah...ninety feet. You're up ninety feet above the water and then as you go up across the island the island got higher, hey. Up on the West of the Island now that was eight hundred feet up there, so ah...you never had too much bother with flies.

Ann O'Brien:

Now, before you left here you had more...you had a couple of children, I suppose?

Henry Fowler:

Nope. One. Patsy.

Ann O'Brien:

Only Patsy.

Henry Fowler:

Yeah, it was only Patsy. Yeah. June was born after we went out there, hey. Four or five years later Four years later.

Ann O'Brien:

Because...

Henry Fowler:

Patsy was a little over a year old when we went out there.

Ann O'Brien:

It must have been a...scary to be... you know you always had to be watching the children.

Henry Fowler:

Oh, yes. Yeah. We had one scary time, my dear....with Patsy.

Ann O'Brien:

Yes?

Henry Fowler:

Yes, I guarantee you. There was about forty people down there at Black Joe, down under the hill, where they use to stay to down there, we use to call that Black Joe, hey.

Ann O'Brien:

Yes.

Henry Fowler:

And ah... up on top of the hill now..... Hayward Normore and them was out there. We had a little ah...store there just outside the fence, we had a fence put right around, in between the houses, hey. From one house up to the other one, and then from the other end of the house to the light and back up around to the other house again, 'twas a yard for them, we had gates and that around it, to go back and forth through, hey.

Ann O'Brien:

Hmmm.

Henry Fowler:

And ah... Hayward Normore and them, they was out there ... they stayed in the little store and he was on the outside of the fence, out towards the cliff. And ah... he was always fooling around with Patsy and them.

Hayward left and come up for to....they came in out of boat and Hayward came up for to get the lunch or their breakfast, whatever they was getting anyway. When he was going along he said to Patsy he said..... Patsy was out again the door see like she was always chasing him around and that... and he said “come on, you can come on over me”. And he left and went on.

He went over in the house and ah...bun-by he was there getting his....boiling the kettle and getting his lunch and that ready and ah he missed her. He said, My God she went out against the door and looked around and sung out to her and there was no sign of her and he sung out to her and there was no sign of her. He sung out to Shirley, “Is Patsy over there?” She said “no”. He said “she was just here with me, now” he said, “I don’t see her”. And then the uproar was made, then.

Looking for her, sung out to her, and no answer. We were right alongside the cliff see maid, there was nowhere from the cliff and you’d drop down ninety feet there. There was only about twenty five feet from where the store was to I suppose.

And ah all hands, then when they sung out and made the roar, all hands came up over the hill everywhere. Bun-by I sung out to her, I was part of the ways up the hill, I was going up the hill, there was fellows all over the place, everywhere.

I sung out to her and Hayward said, “she answered you.” I said, “she answered me?” “Yes, sing out to her again”. I sung out to her again, “yes”; he said, “she’s answering you”. “Where’s she to then? he said, “ She’s down here”. Went in and couldn’t find her. She was after crawling in the sleeping bag to hide away from Hayward and went to sleep. (laughs)

Yeah, she hiding away from Hayward and went in the sleeping bag and went sound to sleep.

Ann O’Brien:

My. It was scary, I know.

Henry Fowler:

Yes, it was scary for a while, I guarantee you. It ended up pretty happy after that.

Ann O’Brien:

How old was she Henry?

Henry Fowler:

She was...she was about three then I suppose.

Yeah. that was the year after we went out there, yeah she was about three then.

Ann O'Brien:

Yeah. It was scary, for sure.

Henry Fowler:

Scary for sure. Yeah.

Ann O'Brien:

Yeah, well is there anything else now that you'd like to share with me?

Henry Fowler;

I don't know, maid. There's a lot of old tales I can tell ya, I guess. No maid, that's about it on the station side, I suppose.

Ann O'Brien:

That's about one of your scariest stories.

Henry Fowler:

Yes.

Well when we started first, there's a lot of difference in...there's an awful lot of change in the years that I worked there, hey. Because when I went to work on Belle Isle now you had the old stationary engine and you use to have to start them up and pump up air in the air tanks. And then time it all, to get it all on the go, and that ...the old horn that was going by compressed air see. You use to have all air compressors and that then.

Then afterwards now, its ...in the later years now after you come to Point Amour there, well the year I come to Point Amour, that's when they changed it over to ah....the automatic ones then, so that made a lot of difference.

Because when you was ah...when you had to keep twenty four hour watch see, before that. Had to watch for the fog and when the fog come in, you had to go and start the horn and then when it'd clear off, you had to go and stop it and they had to, it was always on the move hey. The same thing with the light, you use to have to go and light the light.

But ah, the year that I went out there just the same, I never usedI use to use the laden lamps or something another, mantle lamps hey. But the year I went out there now, they got the bulbs there then. We had four hundred watt bulbs for East end of Belle Isle and ah...the same thing happened to all the lights then, they changed them to bulbs, hey, electric. That made a lot of difference. It cut down on the work a lot and then it gradually cut down on the work right on through hey.

Ann O'Brien:

Yes, and then they didn't.

Henry Fowler:

Right on the last of it, it was hard to do anything.

Ann O'Brien:

And they didn't need the workers then.

Henry Fowler:

No. No when it come automatic then, they made it all automatic hey. The first few years it come automatic now, you had to more or less stay and watch it a bit because they never had it operating like the...well it takes you so long to get use to, to let you know what you had to do anyway, see.

First two or three years, three or four years now you use to have to watch it pretty good, but after that then it went automatic, and then they got to the point that if she blows, she blows and if the fog comes in and she blows is okay. And if she don't, well, just report it. And then there'd be lots of time when she'd be blowing with no fog in. So it makes a lot of difference anyway.

Ann O'Brien:

Who went to work now when you finished in Red Bay, in your place?

Henry Fowler:

No. There was no one that went in my place then. Jim Yetman, he was still there, they only kept one man on then, when I retired.

Ann O'Brien:

And did he work year round?

Henry Fowler:

He.....yes, yeah. Oh yes, he worked year 'round too.

Ann O'Brien:

Is he still working?

Henry Fowler:

I think he is. Not much now just the same, I think he's still working though. Yeah. Summer time. I believe last summer, I don't know, a couple of years ago he said he had another couple of years, something or other, before he retired. So I guess he's still there maid. And the other station now, both ends of Belle Isle got closed down and the fellows that was out there, they took them and put them in ...there's three of them in St. Anthony and there's two in Cape Norman. But they are only put there now until it's time for them to retire, I suppose.

It's not for to keep the lights and that going now because if anything happens, they're there and they comes from St. John's or Stephenville or something or other by helicopter or truck, something or other and does it, hey.

Ann O'Brien:

Well it's all automatic.

Henry Fowler:

Yes, it's all automatic now, yeah.

Ann O'Brien:

Well thank you very much Henry for that ...

Henry Fowler:

Yeah, very good my dear.

Ann O'Brien:

...for sharing that story. Okay thank you.

Henry Fowler:

Yeah and thank you too.

Ann O'Brien:

Good night now.

Henry Fowler:

Very good, Good night.