

# Stories of Triangle Island, Coast's Loneliest Lighthouse

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Of the many isolated lighthouses dotting the coast of B.C., the cluster of buildings which stood for some 11 years on Triangle Island earned a reputation for being undoubtedly the bleakest loneliest and most frequently stormbound of all. Certainly it was viewed as the most undesirable of postings by members of the Federal Government of lighthouse and radio staffs.

Rearing up 690 feet at the seaward end of the Scott Island chain, Triangle stands like a sentinel at the south-western approaches to Queen Charlotte Sound, an appropriate site, it would seem for a lighthouse and weather station. Yet, when the old station was abandoned in 1921, there were few complaints, least of all from those who were or had been stationed there.

Life on the treeless, wind scarred island, its shape and contours attesting to the aptness of its name, was particularly harsh, especially in winter months when howling southeasters besieged it for weeks on end.

Loneliness and lack of amenities were inconveniences shared in common with many isolated stations, but Triangle Island offered its own distinct brand of stress and hazard. The lighthouse and ancillary buildings, though constructed with liberal use of brick, iron and stone, were naked to winds from whatever direction they blew. And blow they did, with predictable regularity.

Wind velocities of 90 miles an hour were recorded not infrequently. One October gale wrecked living quarters and storage sheds, tore down chimneys and masts and sent the wind gauge hurling off into the space after it had registered a force of 120 miles an hour.

Movement outdoors was extremely difficult, often dangerous whenever gales swept across the bare island top, despite life lines which were rigged to link the various buildings.

In the aftermath of storms, the islanders would survey the damage. Sometimes it added up to a few shattered windows, on other occasions a dwelling house was split in two and a section of roof carried away. One storm snapped off part of the 200 foot radio mast and riggers had to be sent to rebuild the mast, in a slightly shortened form. The glass casing around the lighthouse top, threatening to give way under the winds buffeting, had to be watched carefully and often reinforced.

More than one unwilling resident was said to have been at the end of his tether physically and mentally, by the time he made his escape and boarded a supply ship for the homeward trip.

Former residents emphasize, however, that summer days could be pleasant enough. A clear sky over rippled seas with the ubiquitous seabirds wheeling above the salal covered slopes made for an almost idyllic respite, but one which was all too rare.

Women and children shared the rigors of life on the island during much of the decade in which the lighthouse and radio station operated. The wife and three school age daughters of the first lightkeeper, James Davis, spend over two and a half years on Triangle from the fall of 1910 when Davies lit the powerful light for the first time until the spring of 1913.

“As children, we took life on Triangle Island in our stride, through my mother was driven to distraction at times by the difficulties of the place”, says Mrs. Mona Morrison of Victoria, youngest of James Davies daughters.

“Isolation and grim weather were no strangers to our family. As a baby I’d lived at Scarlett Point, where my father was lightkeeper. Then, we moved to Egg Island. After Triangle Island, we went to Pachena Point. My father retired there in 1930.”

“We were a lighthouse family, and when the time came to move to Triangle the prospect of living on a bleak island didn’t worry us at all. But I must admit we found that Triangle was unique in many ways. The difficulties our family had known at other lighthouses were all present there, but they were accentuated.

Hurricane winds for days on end, gales and fog for weeks at time—these things can be hard to bear even with the resiliency of childhood when there’s only very restricted freedom of movement. It was far worse, I suppose, for the radio operators, many of whom were young men in their twenties accustomed to life in less remote surroundings.”

“Our food often had a sameness about it because much of it came out of cans. That couldn’t be helped. It was impossible to grow a garden. What soil cover there was had a very acidic content from the accumulated droppings of the birds, puffins and gulls of many types—which thronged to the island.”

“There were many beautiful days, though, especially in summer and as children we felt no wish to leave the island. But my mother at one point fell very ill and had to be taken away. She was tied on a mattress and lower down the tramway to the beach. From there she was taken on a small boat out to the halibut steamer “New England”, and then to hospital.”

“Our schooling didn’t suffer at all during our stay at Triangle. For tutors, we had members of the wireless station’s staff. In some cases these men had been talked into coming to the island for what was supposed to be a six week period filling in for someone who was on leave. But the six weeks might stretch into much as 18 months. That happened more than once.”

Jack Bowerman of Sidney, retired from the federal service these past 20 years, chuckles as he recalls his dual role as wireless operator and school teacher. “Mona Davies (Mrs. Morrison), it seems to me, was only nine or ten and her sisters weren’t much older,” he says. “There’re all grandmothers and the last time I saw them I teased them about the days on Triangle Island when they were my pupils.”

Mrs. Morrison, her two sisters, Mrs. Ella Harris and Violet Allan, and Jack Bowerman are among the few remaining survivors of the Triangle Island stations.

To this day, one of their clearest memories is of the halibut fisherman who, no strangers to hardship themselves, would make a special effort to visit the island once in awhile. To the delight of the station staff, they would always bring fresh fish and sometimes meat and precious fruit and vegetables, as well as copies of the Vancouver newspapers.

“It was always a red letter day in our lives when a fishing vessel called,” Mrs. Morrison relates, “apart from the welcome fresh food they gave to my mother they were the only contact we had with the outside world except for government supply ships. Names of the fishing boats escape me, but quite a few of them, I remember, were New England Fishing vessels.”

At Triangle, visits by fishing boats were all the more welcome because the five or six annual calls by the government lighthouse tenders and supply ships—the Quadra, Estevan and Galiano, among others—often had to be postponed because bad weather made landing on the beach impossible.

Once, Mrs. Morrison recalls, a superintendent of the lighthouses visited the island intending to spend the day there. The supply ship was to have picked him up in 24 hours but his arrival coincided with an outbreak of a bout of savage weather. The senior official’s one day visit stretched into a sojourn of six weeks.

Several months before James Davies placed the light into operation for the first time in 1910, the supply ship Leebro had anchored off Triangle to begin the task of unloading building materials for the new light and radio station.

Near the beach, a work party found a skeleton clad in the tattered remains of a lifebelt, seaboots and other clothing that a fisherman or seaman might wear.

It was hardly an auspicious beginning to settlement of the island, although it was no secret that the nearby waters, including the treacherous current swept reefs and passages of the Scott Island Group had claimed many lives and ships over the years. Some were recorded, others forgotten.

One tragedy remains fresh in the memory of Newfoundland born Martin Dyke, now 83 years of age and retired from fishing since the mid-fifties. He recalls with clarity a day 53 years ago when a shipmate and his boat, the 44 foot Madeline Dyke, were lost to the grim shore of Triangle Island.

“It was in May, 1919, and there were three of us fishing halibut on the boat, Jimmy Parsons, Al Crane and myself. One day we ran for the shelter of the bight on the North side of Triangle Island. There’s a fair anchorage there in certain winds. But during that night the wind shifted and the seas began rolling into the bay. There was no way we could get out and we were driven toward the shore of the island.”

“We tried to hold her with everything we had, including a dozen or so anchors from the halibut gear. But it was no good. Lines parted and anchors dragged like there was no hold at all.”

“About four o’clock in the morning we were slammed onto a small reef some distance offshore and there was nothing to do but try and make it to the beach. We expected her to break up or capsize

in short order. All this time, the loom of the light was sweeping overhead from the lighthouse 700 feet above us on top of the island, but no one there knew a boat was in trouble down below.”

“It was all confusion for a while, but I remember being in the water with Jim Parsons nearby. We were both wearing those bulky old cork type lifebelts we used to have. But I don’t believe Al Crane ever got to put his on.”

“Anyway, Jim Parsons and me were swept in by the seas and thrown up on the shore at a spot we found out later to be 15 feet above high water mark. We looked, but there was no sign of our shipmate.”

On arriving at Triangle in 1910, the builders had been faced with the initial task of creating the means of hauling materials up the steep slope to the topmost plateau where the lighthouse and radio station were to be situated.

Up the Island’s sheer flank they built a timbered railway track six feet wide. On this ran an eight foot long freight trolley, hauled by a steel cable connected to a gas powered hoisting engine at the top of the island.

The tramway, traversing the sometimes giddy contours of the northern slope, hauled from the beach to island top all the building materials for the station, and in later years all its food, fuel and other supplies.

First, of course, supplies had to be landed on the beach from the supply ship offshore, a time consuming and often hazardous process. Martin Dyke insists the original building plan had called for a small breakwater and landing dock in the north bay. Money for that purpose was actually allocated, he says, but construction never took place.

Viewed from seaward, the route taken up the slope by the old rail track is still distinguishable. At close quarters, the track complete with some rotted timbers, can be followed for part of the way up the island’s side, though only with considerable difficulty because of thick overgrowth.

“After we’d made it ashore from the wreck of my boat,” says Martin Dyke, summoning his memories of a night more than half a century ago, “we found our way to a small shed at the foot of the rail track. There was a phone line there to the hoisting room at the light station and we rang for help. There was no answer.”

“We knew about the footpath which ran alongside the track; in fact I’d climbed it to the lighthouse when I’d been ashore at the island earlier. But we were not in shape to try it then. We were soaking wet, cold and exhausted. We were barefoot and wore only underclothes. Jim had swallowed a lot of water. So we kept trying the phone.”

“At last, at about 8 o’clock, someone answered. We told him what had happened and he said they’d send down the trolley. When it came, we climbed aboard and waited for them to hoist us up the track. Nothing happened so I went back to the phone to tell them to haul away. As I did so, the trolley

started moving. Tired or not, I ran after it and jumped on the side. We both hung on with a leg swung over each side, instead of getting right into the trolley. That proved to be a good idea.”

“In the terrible wind then blowing, the slack in the downhaul part of the cable flapped around like it was a piece of string. About 200 feet up from the beach, as near as I can remember, the track runs up at about a 45 degree angle. At that point, the slack in the cable snagged something and caused the trolley to derail, overturning and falling off the side several feet before coming to a stop.”

“If we’d been sitting inside, we’d have gone with it, though instead of stopping we’d probably have kept on going. As it was, we were able to jump off in time. We decided then to stay where we were and wait for help. After a while 3 young fellows from the radio station came down the footpath, crouched low against the wind, looking to see what had happened to us and the trolley.”

“Jim was very weak by this time and they helped him up the steep path back to the lighthouse. The keeper soon had us into warm clothes and before too long we felt fairly good once again.”

Less than a year before the events described by Martin Dyke, Triangle Island had been starting point for a rapid sequence of events culminating in one of the British Columbia’s worst marine disasters.

About 3 o’clock on the morning of October 30, 1918, a Triangle Island radio operator named Michael Neary picked up a faint distress call tapped out on the Morse key by his brother Jack, operator on the fisheries patrol ship Galiano.

The message said only, “Hold full of water....send help.” It was the last word heard from the ill fated vessel and within hours it was known that she had taken some 30 persons to their death. One of them was a Miss Brunton, the cook housekeeper at Triangle Island, who had boarded the Galiano the previous day after completing a lengthy period of duty at the station.

Serving temporarily as a lighthouse tender, the 162 foot Galiano, a steel hulled vessel built in Dublin only 5 years previously, had made a routine call at the island with supplies. While fuel and foodstuffs were being ferried ashore at the north bay, the weather began deteriorating and the last load was delivered to the beach none too soon. With her passenger safely onboard, the Galiano, skippered by Capt. R.M Pope, picked up steam and headed north toward the Queen Charlotte Islands.

What happened subsequently has been a matter of much conjecture. Some have suggested the ship was holed by one of the ragged clumps of rock off Cape St. James but there is stronger evidence that she went down east of Moresby Island after clearing the Cape.

The only bodies recovered were picked up shortly afterward in the vicinity of Lyman Point (East Point), one of them by the halibut steamer George E. Foster. Units of whaling fleet then based at Rose Harbour also participated in the search.

Some years later an American longliner fishing about 12 miles east of Lyman Point reportedly brought up on her gear a ship’s log—the type usually attached to the rail on a ship’s quarter towing a line astern to measure distance travelled. The log is said to have been from the Galiano.

On November 8, 1918, the Vancouver World reported that 3 bodies recovered following the Galiano's loss had arrived at Vancouver on board the Union steam ship Cheloshin.

7 months later, in early June 1919, the body of Al Crane, drowned at Triangle Island in the wreck of the Madeline Dyke, also arrived home in Vancouver on a Union steam freighter. His former shipmates and staff of the radio station had found Crane's body in a thick kelp bed at Triangle Island's north bay.

Martin Dyke remembers how it happened. "About noon on the day of the wreck we went down to the beach. The boat had been driven right ashore by that time and was lying well up on the beach near the base of the rail track. We salvaged a bit of gear and then combed the beach for a body but found nothing."

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"The next day we looked again. I was sure he'd come ashore sooner or later because with the kind of sea that was running there was little chance of him being carried out."

"The kelp on the beach was several feet deep in places. After a while, I noticed the bottom of a seaboot sticking out of the kelp. I'd found what we were looking for."

"We built a casket out of some big shelves the lightkeeper gave us. There was plenty of time; we were on the island 6 days before the Estevan took us off. As it happened, the Estevan's chief mate, who came out in a small boat to take us all back on board, turned out to be Lew Shepard. Like Al Crane and myself, he was a native of Harbour Grace, Newfoundland. Years before, he and Al had left home together, travelling across the continent to Vancouver."

Lighthouses and other navigational aids were seldom established with the safety and convenience of fishermen in mind, and Triangle Island's were no exception.

The West Coast's tallest lighthouse and radio masts were intended primarily to benefit Canadian Pacific "Empress Liners" and other ships inbound from the Orient, liners on the B.C.-Australian route, and the large fleet of passenger vessels and freighters then plying the coast for CPR, Union Steam and other big companies.

From its lofty pedestal, Triangle's beam in clear weather could be seen afar and from all directions. But clear weather, it was soon discovered, is a scarce commodity on the island's peak. In 1 year, the station recorded 240 days of fog, mist or low cloud cover. Shrouded for days, even weeks on end, the light was obscured as often as it was visible.

Old-timers recall fishing the area on days when visibility as sea level was good but the top half of Triangle's sheer slopes remained blanketed in mist or fog and the light stayed hidden.

A foghorn, which might have served a useful purpose, was never installed. Mrs. Morrison says one reason for this was the belief that the island, cut off by bad weather for prolonged periods, could never have been supplied with enough oil to guarantee the horn's operation whenever it was needed. And a foghorn operating intermittently would have been worse than none at all.

Sometime in the later part of 1919 the light was discontinued although the radio station continued to function for another year or two. Despite an inhospitable location, the understandable reluctance of personnel to serve there, and the winds which periodically damaged or destroyed masts and other equipment, the radio station had served reasonably well as a communications link with trans-Pacific marine traffic.

Former Triangle Island operator Jack Bowerman points out that the station transmitting from a mast almost 900 feet above sea level was able to keep in touch with ships up to 2000 miles off shore. It also served as a bridge between stations on the north coast and those at Estevan Point and Alert Bay. Weather reports from Triangle Island appeared regularly in the Vancouver evening newspaper.

But technological advances soon overshadowed the advantages gained by maintaining the radio station and in 1921 it followed the already defunct lighthouse into the pages of B.C. marine history.

The glassed top of the lighthouse sits today in the federal transport ministry's marine depot in Victoria. Some of the other lighthouse equipment is said to have been installed later at Triple Island and Egg Island. The radio equipment was moved to Bull Harbour.

Apart from an occasional visitor, Triangle Island since 1921 has been the preserve of birds, sea lions and fluctuating rabbit population. The island is a familiar sight to halibut fishermen, salmon trollers and some Fisheries Service Patrol Boats.

The north bay still finds use as a temporary anchorage and many fisherman have stepped ashore on the island at one time or another. But the only people to spend any amount of time there in recent years are believed to be David and Lynn Hancock of Saanich, the well known producers of wildlife documentaries.

On different occasions the Hancocks have set up camp on the beach at the north bay and in another indentation on the island's southern shore. They say the island has favoured them with generally fair weather—except for the fog.

Cement foundations of the stations are still there, Hancock says, but that, apart from the overgrown tramway track up the north slope, is about the only reminder left of the island's brief period of settlement.

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