

Story #8 Gilbert Gillis shares family stories of the Lighthouse

Story #8 in our heritage interview series. David Weale interviewed Gilbert Gillis at his home Point Prim PEI on Dec 14, 2019.

David Weale: I'm David Weale, I'm still David Weale, and now I'm talking to Gilbert Gillis who is the son of Elinor Murchison-Gillis, who was the daughter of Angus Murchison, who was the lighthouse keeper at Point Prim for 35 years. And Gilbert has some stories about the area generally, but also some about the lighthouse. What should we start with?

Gilbert Gillis: Well, I'm Gilbert Gillis, as you said David. And I'm the eldest grandchild of the longest keeper, Angus Murchison.

David: So you would have grown up, the lighthouse would have been a part of your life from childhood?

Gilbert: From day one. My father gathered Irish moss down there, and I was down around the shore helping him at an early age, as a young boy. And also, I can remember my grandfather Angus carrying the kerosene to the top to refuel the lamps. Me being the oldest grandchild, I remember him so well, and he was so in tuned to the intensity of the light, he just sensed when the intensity of the light got low, the kerosene got low in the lamps, he'd wake up. Didn't need an alarm clock at all

David: Is that right.

Gilbert: No, he'd just jump up, and run up to the lighthouse and refuel, carry the cans of kerosene up to the top. And then when he got up to the top, he had a little handmade four legged footstool that he sat on. So the lamps were taken out and placed down low to the ground where he was sitting, so he wouldn't spill any kerosene in any unwanted area. So he'd sit on the footstool so he could carefully fill the lamps with kerosene. I spent quite a bit of time down there because it's such a beautiful location, scenic spot to have a picnic or just to be down there to walk the shores and all that. When I met my wife Goldie, and was going with her, I also did a little bit of courting down there. Courted my wife Goldie on the grounds, and then of course led up to having the first wedding at the first lighthouse on PEI in 1974. So that made a strong connection to the lighthouse, of course.

David: Well, well, I guess so, yes.

Gilbert: And then a while later, everything was locked up in those years, locked up and boarded up. The old Irish moss shed over there, close by the light, it was boarded up and locked up as well as this lighthouse. So Goldie thought, and I thought too, wouldn't it be nice to have the lighthouse unlocked so tourists could come down and see this beautiful icon, and get in to see, and go to the top and view the area. So she approached the Provincial department of industry, and got funding available to help start the first guided tours of any lighthouse on PEI. I'm not sure what year that was. But a few years later we added to that, by looking at the old Irish moss shed close by and thinking, well now we got the lighthouse open let's see if we can open this old moss shed, turn it in to a little Chowder house, or an art gallery and tea room it was called first. And it became a destination now, complete. People could go to see the lighthouse, tour the top and get some history of it, and then pop by to the Chowder house and

have some refreshment. A nice cup of coffee, and a scallop burger, or seafood chowder, and it just became more popular than ever. Each year our number of visitors would be increasing, increasing all the time. So it is very rewarding to look back now and see this lighthouse and compare it to the days when it was locked up and now see people enjoying as well as the Chowder House.

David: Well, well. And the Chowder House. I was talking to a woman, must have been about a year ago, and she was telling me that every summer she takes different tours of the Island, and one of her destinations is the Chowder House at Point Prim.

Gilbert: Sure, for some it's their highlight. One particular event that's outstanding in my mind is one particular night when we were down there with my dad, and waiting in the trucks for the tide and the wind to take in the Irish moss on the shore, we were parked close by under the light from the lighthouse and it was revolving. Every so often it'd come around and light up the immediate area that we're in right. And all of a sudden, a dance started to take place. A dance? Yes, a dance. And it wasn't by humans, it was by the rabbits. The rabbits loved to come out and jump over one another in the light. Whenever that particular part of the ground would light up, the rabbits were hopping over each other.

David: Wow, that's quite a sight.

Gilbert: Yeah, it was quite a sight.

David: The dance of the hares in the light of the

Gilbert: Yeah, in the beam of the light. So that was quite amazing. They weren't afraid of us, and they just wanted to do that in the beam of the light.

David: One question about the moss. I'm wondering, when you harvested moss here did you use horses?

Gilbert: No, never.

David: Not like up west where they have those moss horses.

Gilbert: No, no, it was always with a little dip net with a wooden handle on it. You went out on the surf with chest waders on and you pulled this dip net through the water and you sieved out the moss and then you walked in and dumped it above the high water mark and made your pile. Then you marked it, every fisherman had a different mark on his pile.

(Off camera: Now the story about the Britannia, don't forget it)

Gilbert: No, we got sidetracked a little David. So I'd like to tell a couple stories on Manson Murchison. And I hope you don't mind, or his family, telling these stories, because Manson was a very conscientious lighthouse keeper as well as my grandfather Angus. But these two stories are concerning how Manson did his job so well. And the first one involves the Royal Yacht Britannia in 1959. The Queen was coming here to the Island, to Charlottetown, on the Royal Yacht and word was sent out from the Department of Transport to Manson Murchison to make sure you have that light shining very brightly Manson, because

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the Queen is coming. And she'll be rounding the Point at one or two o'clock whatever the set time was, they had it right down, or maybe it was in the evening because the light wasn't shining during the day during those times, it is now, but back then it wasn't. It must have been towards, close to sunset or after that the Royal Yacht was rounding Point Prim to Charlottetown. So Manson sent back word to the Department of Transport, yes I'll have it, I'll make sure it's shining brightly. So the system was kerosene vapour, and it was a pressurized system, the light then, and there was a hand pump needed to get the air pressure pumped up enough to make the kerosene vapourize, to make a brighter light. Okay? So the more pressure you had, the brighter the light came but it also had a bladder in there, an air bladder and if you pumped up the pressure too much you could rupture the bladder. So Manson made sure he was going to do his job good, so he pumped up maybe a little too much pressure in the system, and when the Royal Yacht Britannia came around the four miles off, out at the navigational lane where the shipping buoy was, the people on the bridge on the Britannia looked in at Point Prim and saw blackness. No light, no light at all. The bladder had ruptured. That was it.

David: He did his job too well. And he must have caught hell over that.

Gilbert: Well, yeah, yeah. But not as much as the next story. The next story caught a lot more of that. The next one is this. Back then there was a gate on the road way between the Chowder House and the lighthouse, there was a gate there and Manson had to keep that locked. No one was allowed on the immediate area of the lighthouse. Tourism was in its beginning stages back then, and there would be visitors come down and want to go over to the lighthouse and see it but they couldn't get over because of the gate. But Manson was very friendly and cooperative, and he liked to talk to people because lighthouse duties were lonely down there, and he liked to have people to talk to. So he took upon himself to invite this couple in, they were tourists, and they were well-to-do, this couple. He really wasn't supposed to do that, but he did it from time to time, and he took them to the top this day. I don't know, they were probably from the States, back then we had a lot of American tourists back here. Probably New York or Boston. Anyway, they get to the top and Manson is explaining all the different features about the lighting system, and at this time the lamps were bathed in mercury. The mercury was very lubricating, and easy for the lamps to rotate. Whether the lamps rotated, or the lens. I should say, the outside, the lens I guess you would call it.

(Off camera: Yeah they had the fourth order Fresnel at that time)

Gilbert: The fourth order Fresnel lens at that time, and it is revolving, and it revolved in this mercury because it's very friction free material for it to work in. But there was like a trough around the outside edge of it for that to move around in. Manson says, it's very interesting stuff, just dip your hands in there and lift it and see how it runs out and let it bead out. It doesn't run like water, in kind of goes like beads down and back in to the trough. So this lady thought she'd try it. So whether she put her left hand in, or her right hand in, it'd have to be her left hand that she put in, she scooped in to the mercury and did as he said to try it, let it bead out like this. And she was fascinated by it, the properties of mercury. And after a while, she let out this horrible scream, my ring! My gold ring, it's disappearing! And then she started to come on to Manson. You didn't tell me that mercury loves gold, my ring is gone. So they had an awful kerfuffle for a while, and then they went to the Department of Transport, this couple. Told the

story to them in Charlottetown, so the word got back to Manson, don't you ever let anybody in that lighthouse again and play around with that mercury.

David: Well, well. He didn't know that mercury would do that to gold either.

Gilbert: Exactly, no.

David: I didn't know that either. I'd have had this hand in there likely, cause it is fascinating to have mercury in your hand, but it just corrodes the gold?

Gilbert: It eats it up, just gobbles it fast. It loves it. So that's the two stories on Manson. I hope he's not offended by them. It was good to take time out to explain the history of the lighthouse and how things worked.

David: They weren't very appreciative those tourists, I mean he had taken time out of his schedule to entertain them. I guess it's pretty sentimental though when it's your wedding ring that's disappeared in front of your eyes.