

Life on a Rock — Flo Anderson

Flo Anderson was 37 when she left her commodious Vancouver home for Lennard Island light station, a desolate rock near Tofino on Vancouver Island's storm-tossed west coast. Her husband, Trevor, had been appointed Lennard's junior lighthouse keeper — his second career — after serving 20 years as radio operator and radar fighter controller in the Air Force. So the intrepid couple downsized their belongings, packed up their four children and boarded the *Camsell*, the Coast Guard ice breaker assigned to deliver them to their new home. It was December 1961, and the weather was icy, windy and ominous.

“Culture shock” is a term used to describe exposure to different customs, usually in a far away land. Flo moved only about 50 miles, yet the world she entered was as alien as going to the Congo. Travelling north along the coast toward the god-forsaken rock, as Flo wrote later in her autobiography *Lighthouse Chronicles*, “[we saw] a lonely, heavily forested area with deep undergrowth that looked to us to be inhabited only by lightstation personnel and a few rustic hermits.”

The old house awaiting the family epitomized the word, “rustic.” Flo believed she'd entered a time warp, returning to a 19th century pioneer homestead. No furnace. The decrepit wood stove served as both heat source and cooking implement, with wet, uncut flotsam from the beach the only wood available (they'd naively left the chain saw behind). Winds whistled through the bare, creaky floorboards; water was hand-pumped from the rainwater cistern to an attic tank — it then fed faucets and toilet by gravity; electricity was available eight hours a day, at night when the lighthouse required it. Everything, from supervising the schooling of her brood of four (Garry, 16, Stan, 14, Beth, 12 and Adrienne, 4), providing food, to washing clothes in the claw-footed bath tub — challenged her grit. Cooking for six, especially feeding two teenaged boys and with the nearest grocery store a wild, infrequent sea voyage away, was a trial. Because of variable winds, the stove's damper — and thus the temperature — were hard to control. Flo's first bread making efforts spawned little bricks; cakes alchemized into charcoal.

The “hermit” part became equally evident. Trevor met the senior and other junior lighthouse keeper because of his duties. But it was weeks before Flo met the other two Lennard Island families. Even 40 years after the event, Flo still recalls the isolation and desolation confronting her. “Writing about Lennard Island was very painful for me,” she tells me in her

Sidney, British Columbia apartment. “These feelings of exile are indelibly imprinted. Life there was traumatic for me. I was so naïve. Recounting it all was therapy. Lots of people have this romantic view of living at a lighthouse. That’s why I wrote about it. I wanted people to know what it’s really like.”

Trevor adds that lighthouse keeping work was in a state of flux when he entered the profession. “Unlike the keepers then on station, I’d passed qualifying exams and was thus one of the first ‘regular’ lighthouse keepers hired by the government. That was the beginning of a change, a very good change. Maybe the training threatened the old guard.”

For Trev, the isolation wasn’t as painful and he liked the hard work on the light station. For him, it was the people. “The senior lighthouse keeper was an alcoholic misfit with one of the foulest mouths I’d ever heard. He’d run his speedboat into Tofino and return completely inebriated. We’d never experienced that kind of thing before. We’d been in isolated radar stations, but there were groups of people and you could select your friends. On the lightstation you’re forced to live with whoever’s there.”

Slowly the Andersons improved their lives. They cleaned and painted. Flo unravelled sweaters and used the wool to knit warm socks. She learned to manage the balky stove, baking 26 loaves of bread a week. Trevor asked for the midnight shift and the family adopted the same schedule. They’d go to bed just after lunch and rise for breakfast at 11:00 p.m. While Trevor ran the lights, the kids completed their lessons and Flo freely used the electrical appliances powered by the generator feeding the lights. No distractions. The mornings were devoted to exploring the 18-acre island, slashing paths through the dense salal, investigating tidal pools, cutting wood and building a garden to supplement the meagre pay — \$180 a month after deductions.

The family began easing into its rock-bound existence and took pleasure in the warmer summer days with its flowers and birds. Logs were piled up, then cut so Flo would have dry firewood.

Then calamity struck.

The Department of Transport informed Trevor he was fired. The noxious senior keeper had written a batch of letters reporting Trevor performed his duties badly and was wrecking the island. “The bottom fell out of our world,” says Flo. “To have worked so hard, put up with the isolation, the rudeness, the primitive conditions. It was more than I could bear.”

Unwilling to stay on Lennard, Flo took her children and went to visit friends in the Tofino area, while Trevor journeyed to Victoria to protest his dismissal. After a lengthy investigation, with the family returning to Lennard, he was reinstated. Fortunately, in June 1963, he was promoted and appointed senior keeper at Barrett Rock seven miles outside Prince Rupert in Northern British Columbia. The family moved to a more comfortable house this time, although its cistern was empty and the rain, normally plentiful on the raincoast, took a break. Trevor was sometimes sent as relief lighthouse keeper to other stations and, during his absence, Flo ran the lights. “All the wives were part-time lighthouse keepers,” explains Flo. “Unpaid of course. It was just expected. When the man was away, the wife filled the gap.”

Trevor and Flo became rock hoppers and seasoned movers. Just four months after settling at Barrett Rock, they were transferred to McInnes Island in Milbanke Sound, midway between Vancouver Island and Prince Rupert. Their sons moved ashore to complete their high school education. McInnes was just a blip of a mountain jutting out into the sea. Their posting lasted 14 months. Stormy Green Island, the northernmost staffed lighthouse in Canada, was next. Because of fierce winter gales, the valiant family was obliged to wait nearly a week just to go ashore on this isle. Flo, calling her latest home an igloo, remembers writing Christmas cards with a hot-water bottle on her lap. The incessant tempests created rotund — and treacherous — ice pillows on the beaches. The Andersons lived through two ice-sprayed winters, and then, in July 1966, were transferred to Race Rocks, which became a true home. They stayed 16 years.

Race Rocks, a group of jagged islets lying eight miles from Victoria is the southernmost point in Pacific Canada — a conspicuous contrast with McInnes Island. The Rocks are named after the passage separating it from Vancouver Island which has a tidal race reaching 10 knots. When strong tides and winds oppose each other, standing waves can reach 15 feet. Trevor and Flo, now hardened lighthouse keepers, lived on the largest of the islets, and enjoyed the abundant seals, sea lions, whales and birds that colonize the other rocks. They also worked in tandem with nearby Pearson College of the Pacific, whose international students actively study the unique ecology of the isles. Flo, captured by the kaleidoscopic colours and ocean turbulence, began painting seascapes.

In 1974, the couple embarked on a new construction project — the building of their future home, a 44-foot wooden ketch (57 feet overall), *WaWa the Wayward Goose* (Wawa is the word for Canada goose in Ojibway). Flo still laughs about getting a copy of *Chapelle's*

Boatbuilding and having to study a new language — marine terminology. Trevor lofted the boat, and over the next eight years, working a bit each day, the sailboat slowly took shape. Getting wood, spruce spars and parts to the lighthouse was a challenge, but with characteristic stick-to-it-ness, the pair persevered. In 1982, when they retired, *WaWa* skidded down greased rails into the ever-turbulent Race Passage.

“After circumnavigating Vancouver Island in 1983, we realized that life on the lights had thoroughly prepared us for living on a boat,” says Flo. “There are so many similarities. At the lighthouse, we did hard physical labour every day and we were in good shape. Because everything has to be delivered by boat, we’d learned to do without. Then there’s the provisioning. Conserving water. The need to prepare. Counting on each other as a couple.” They called Pearson College their “home port,” then spent time exploring Puget Sound, learning to use a sextant and cooking on a boat’s stove — diesel this time.

Flo was adamant that living on a boat should not include being tied to a dock. So they anchored out. They avoided moorage fees. No alcohol. No smoking. No fancy dinners out. They made do so they could afford to immerse themselves in the vastness of the west coast. Then, in 1985, they set sail for Hawaii, thinking they might sail around the world.

Much later, after arriving in New Zealand, they decided against circling the globe. “We thought Europe too crowded and everywhere we considered going seemed to have pots of political problems,” says Flo. So slowly, they wended home, stopping in Fiji, Pango Pango, Western Samoa and then Fanning Island, with its “magic lagoon and flocks of rays,” arriving in Hawaii in late fall. Flo remembered how her celestial navigation teacher instructor stated emphatically, “any fool crosses the North Pacific in the wintertime deserves what he gets,” so they awaited summer in Honolulu.

But sailing north in summer doesn’t guarantee an easy passage. When they left in July 1987, an initial calm forced them to motor. Then the Pacific turned unpacific, and a five-day gale drove them within 500 miles of the Oregon coast. The gale ripped the seams on their sails sewn with thread containing cotton, a perishable commodity in the hot tropical sun. Next the engine stopped — they’d run out of fuel. They feared another big wind would drive them onto Oregon’s rocky coast.

Flo wryly recalls her depression while standing watch at 5:00 a.m. “Suddenly,” she chuckles, “this cheery voice came over the VHF radio and said, ‘Hello there, sailboat. Where are

you going?’ I answered the Alaskan fishing boat en route to Eugene, Oregon, and then got up the courage to ask them for fuel. They were pleased to help and we floated jerry cans with some greenbacks attached over to the vessel. Forty gallons of diesel! The ship was called *Dawn*, but I renamed it, *Angel of Dawn*. Their kindness allowed us to power all the way into Victoria.”

After returning to their home port in 1987, the Andersons continued to live on *WaWa* for the next eight years — indulging in a cell phone the last year aboard — when they sold the vessel and moved ashore. At age 70, Flo started her lighthouse memoirs, writing first on a typewriter, later — at the urgings of her son — on a computer. Initially, she intended her musings to serve only as a record for her children. “But,” she says, eyes twinkling, “each person reading the manuscript told me to publish it.” So she phoned Howard White at Harbour Publishing. “Many people think living on an isolated rock is such fun. It’s hard, ceaseless work. A routine that doesn’t bend. It’s been my passion to let others know what life on the lights was really like. Since the book came out, many lighthouse keepers have contacted me to say it was their story too.”

Flo and Trevor remain awfully busy. They’re new great-grandparents. They continue the lifelong conversation they’ve had during 60 years of marriage. “We have so many projects,” says Flo, “our lives are full. Trevor is writing his own memoirs, pecking away two fingers at the time. Not for publication, mind you. He’s just telling his children about the 55 World War II missions he flew out of North Africa.”

What advice does this duo have for other intrepid couples? “Our lives taught us to expect the unexpected,” concludes Flo. “On the lights and during our Pacific voyage, we were, of course, always surrounded by the sea. We appreciate the sea but know it’s totally unforgiving. We don’t control it. It’s powerful. I remember on Green Island the huge logs flying over the rocks. All this teaches you to be prepared for anything. So when our genoa’s clew shackle flogged off, the main blew out and we ran out of fuel, we had to be inventive. Learn to adapt.”

“Yep,” adds Trevor. “Flo’s right. Murphy’s law has complete control.”