

Floyd Shelton Interviews

By M. P. Lorente

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Photos courtesy of Shelton family

When asked to share memories about his posting as Officer-in-Charge on Burrows Island, Floyd Shelton begins with four words:

“We were so young.”

Shelton was in his early 20s when he was transferred to Burrows in spring 1956, bringing along his wife and their two small children.

“It was quite an adventure,” he added.

Now age 91 and living in Port Ludlow, Shelton still has a quick mind and vivid memories of the years he spent tending lighthouses around the Pacific Northwest.

Shelton was already on his second tour in the U.S. Coast Guard when he arrived at the light station southeast of Anacortes, Washington. (He joined in 1949 and served in Japan and Astoria, Oregon, before being discharged. He tried a variety of jobs before ending up back in the Coast Guard a short time later.)

His transfer to Burrows Island was one piece in a round-robin of movement, which also involved Marrowstone Point and Point Wilson officers. The Coast Guard allowed officers with children reaching school age to request postings on the mainland, and Shelton replaced the previous Officer in Charge (OIC) on Burrows, because the Shelton children were still too young for school.

“His kids needed to go to school,” Shelton recalled. So he left Point Wilson light station (Port Townsend) and headed east with his wife Dora, daughter Carey, 2, infant son Floyd Jr. -- already known as “Shelly” -- and a little dog named Scupper.

Also assigned to the light station as crew were Larry Collison and Dick Chamberlain, along with their wives and children. The crew members and families were assigned to the original duplex quarters.

“We had shipped our belongings up to Anacortes previously and they were in storage. I walked them all down the hill to the boat, across to the island, then carried them all up to the house,” he said.

On Burrows, he found brand new quarters for himself and his young family, as the new OIC.

“The house was only a few months old at the time,” he remembered. “It had a huge bay windows that looked out on Rosario Strait and the boathouse. It was furnished with beautiful new Duncan Phyfe-style furniture.”



Burrows Island Light House, May 1957.



Carey Lee Shelton, age 2, daughter of Floyd Shelton, sitting on the porch of the OIC quarters with the family dog, Scupper.

Shelton estimated that the “beautiful home” was about 3000 sq. ft. and cost about \$35,000 to build. It featured a breakfast nook on the south side, a nice kitchen, three bedrooms, and a spacious living room on the north side.

Electricity from the mainland arrived during Shelton’s time on Burrows, but it was not a successful installation and it couldn’t be relied upon.

“The Coast Guard acquired an underwater cable from the Navy—how? I don’t know, that was above my pay grade. It was installed across Burrows Passage and under the road we had cleared behind the duplex all the way through to the other side of the island.”

“We had cleared it for the right of way using a tractor, and then an electrician came and stayed with us for five days and connected everything up. We had AC power for awhile, but there was something wrong with the cable.

We hardly used it because it kept turning off and on. Eventually we gave up and went back to DC power because we couldn’t rely on it.”

At that time, the kitchen stove was fueled by oil from a 55-gallon drum that sat outside the kitchen window, connected to the stove by a “Rube Goldberg set-up of rinky-dink” copper tubing.

“We had chimney fires all the time!” Shelton said. “There was always soot in the smokestack. The chimney fires would roar and the chimney would turn red hot.”

Everyone quickly settled into a routine on the small island.



Burrows LS, wire-brushed and ready for paint, August 1957.

“We had two responsibilities – stand watches and perform maintenance. The three of us would rotate eight-hour watches: midnight to 8 a.m.; 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and 4 p.m. to midnight,” he said.

“Every three weeks you could get off the island on the weekend – Friday evening to Monday morning. If it was my turn, the other two had to double down on the watches. But sometimes we didn’t go. Usually we had no money and nowhere to go.”

They also had no car for the first 6-8 months, before acquiring a vehicle that was parked at Sunset Beach for a fee of \$5/mo.

The weekly trip to town went like this:

“The family staying on the island would often keep all the kids. We’d take the 26-footer, go into Anacortes



OIC Floyd Shelton sleeping in a chair at Officer’s Quarters. He would often go to sleep in the chair after the family had gone to bed, so as not to wake them when he had a late night shift. All furniture was the property of the USCG, excluding personal family items.



Shelton at the boathouse, with a freshly-caught salmon hanging off the boathook.

and tie up at the foot of Commercial. Then we'd walk up to Safeway, get groceries for everyone, and then do it all again in reverse."

"The days ran through one to the next. There wasn't much to do when we weren't on duty. We did a lot of fishing."

Shelton remembers catching plenty of ling cod for dinners, and once broke his pole on a 28-lb. salmon.

He also recalls a memorable hunting trip.

"Larry and I took the 16-footer all the way to San Juan Island (maybe 10-15 miles) and went rabbit hunting. We were 22 years old and not very smart. No one liked the rabbits – that was not a success!"

"I used to hike on the south side, as well," he recalled. "One time I got to the bluff and sat down to smoke a cigarette. I saw a big herd of orca by the kelp bed. As I watched, a mature whale came up out of the water vertically. Its tail cleared the water by five feet. He hesitated, then fell back. It was one of the most incredible sights of nature I've ever seen!"

One of the most frightening experiences Shelton experienced was when his wife, Dora, had a medical emergency.

"We had fixed up a room downstairs for cards and beer. One evening we were playing cards down there, and Dora said she was going upstairs. A little while later around 10 p.m., I found her unconscious on the bathroom floor."

"I'm a 22-year-old kid – what do I know?! I radioed Pt. Angeles and asked them to send down the helicopter, but they wouldn't do it. It was nighttime, the tide was out and it was stormy. Instead they sent an 83-footer from Bellingham that had been in Charlie status*; it didn't get there until 3-3:30 a.m. She was unconscious the whole time."



View from the boat dock, with a visiting friend's boat suspended by the crane in the foreground. The Coast Guard 26-footer in the distance was the boat used to get on and off the island.



Carey, sitting on the grass beside their home. Partial view of boat house in the background.

"Larry and I carried her to the boathouse on a Stokes litter and lashed her up with life jackets. Then we paddled out to the boat, lifted her up, and put her on the deck. I couldn't leave the island."

She regained consciousness that morning at the hospital, and spent four or five days in the hospital.

"During her recent pregnancy, she had a vein problem in her leg that caused some blood clots. But a few months later on the island, it broke loose and lodged in her lungs, creating a lung embolism."

"She made it, and had no more problems from then on."

Another family member also had a close encounter while the Sheltons were stationed on

* A Charlie status is assigned to allow for more in-depth maintenance on the mechanical plant of the cutter and indicates the vessel will not be called upon to respond to anything but the gravest emergencies.

Burrows Island. The backyard was fenced behind the OIC quarters, and “we had a rule that the kids could not be let loose out front.”

But one day “our dog Scupper got out somehow, and I think Carey must have followed him. There was a concrete path that ran down to the light building office. I looked down towards the boathouse, and saw Carey had walked down to the bluffs. She was standing with her toes on the edge of the bluff, looking down at the kelp. (There were cement steps down to a paint locker, about halfway down the bluff.)”

“I was afraid to holler,” for fear of startling the toddler, “so I started slowly moving towards her. Finally, I got close and quietly said, “ ‘Carey, give me your hand!’ Took two steps and grabbed her!”



Shelton shows the lighthouse lens to a visiting relative, August 1957.

Carey Shelton Taylor, now retired and living in Portland, Oregon, lived at three light stations growing up, and remembers it was “magical.”

“It was a great way to grow up,” Taylor recalls. “There wasn’t a lot to do, but my dad tried! Did he tell you about the TV?”

Another great story ...

“We had a 17-inch blond Hoffman TV that we bought in Coos Bay,” Shelton said. “It was ‘portable’ but really heavy. The house didn’t have AC power; instead we had DC batteries. I made a big deal, telling my family officiously about how we had to be really careful now and plug it into the DC converter first. But then I plugged it directly into the AC wall outlet, and there was a big POOF! A cloud of smoke came out the back.”

“The next day I carried it way up Commercial to the TV shop in Anacortes, but it was gone – nothing he could do. He sold me a standing TV for \$75. That was a lot of money for me back then, and I carried THAT back down to the dock! It was so heavy I had to stop about every half a block for a rest!”

“It came with a box of replacement tubes. From then on, I often had to take the back off and change the tubes around. None of them were marked, so if they’d fit the socket, I’d swap it out until we got a clear picture. I did that for two years!”

Overall, Shelton said his years in light stations were some of the best experiences of his life.



Dora Shelton, age 19. holding a dogfish caught off the dock below the boathouse, with little Carey nearby. Summer 1956

“But it was difficult for us as young people – we were all so young. None of us had lived together like this. My wife was only 20, and it was so isolated. Sometimes the other wives would get mad at her because of some decision I made involving their husbands.”

“We did have some nice times, though, when relatives or friends would come to visit,” he said. “And one time we took a week off and drove to Portland.”

Those visits from friends and relatives didn’t come easy, though.

“They’d go to Sunset Beach and head south from there about a quarter mile on a little road, then park and flash their headlights across Burrows Passage until we noticed them. Then we’d flash back, launch a boat, and go pick them up.”

The most memorable visit was two days before Christmas 1957. His parents and sister drove up from Portland, Oregon, and reached the beach, commencing the agreed-upon flashes.

“They flashed for half an hour before we noticed. I loaded the 16-footer on a skid and hauled it over the island, with help from Dick. It was blowing from the south, and rougher than the dickens. I got over there and told them it was too rough – I couldn’t take them back across. We talked for a little while, then we exchanged our Christmas presents and I fought my way back. Everyone was so disappointed.”

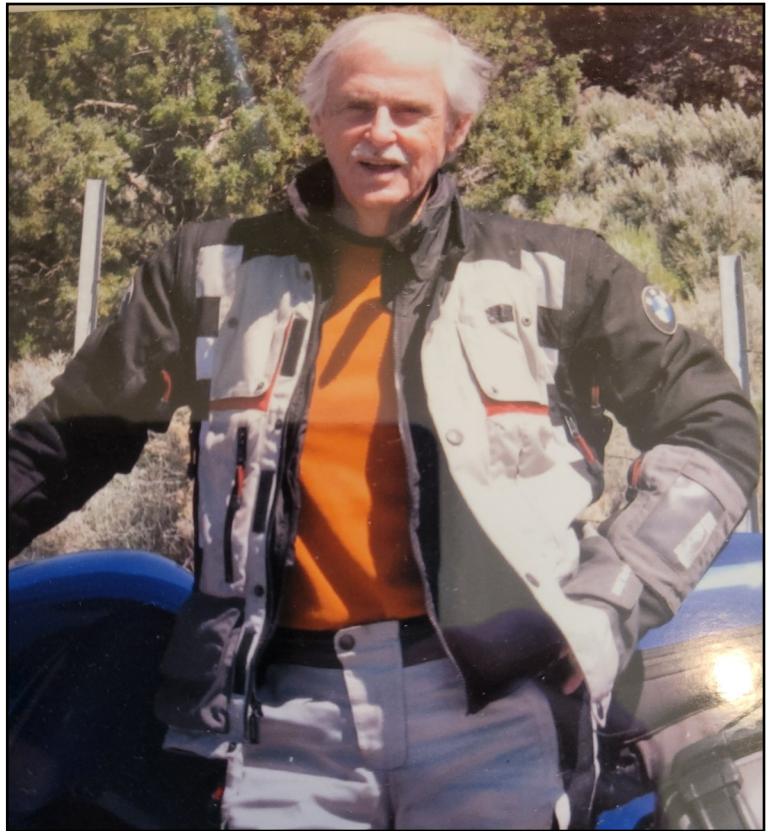
Carey remembers her Christmas gift that year – a blanket handmade by her grandmother, picturing the sights of Burrows Island and featuring her favorite exclamation in those days, which she would repeat again and again as only small children can: “HOLY COW!”

Shelton recalls another stormy crossing...

“One time I had written up a change suggestion, and I got an award for it. I was invited to Seattle to receive it, so I put on my dress uniform because we were going to get our picture taken with the Admiral. I took the 10-footer with a 5.5hp motor. When I got back, it was blowing like the dickens from the south. I flashed my lights so they’d know I was coming, then took off in the 10-footer. I got up in the bow to keep it flat, and used a steering stick. The boat was starting to pound, big waves, tide rip. The crew and my wife were watching me. I drove the boat with my foot – never did that again!”

Shelton was transferred back to Coos Bay in fall, 1958, and later was OIC at Tillamook Bay LBS. His last assignment was OIC of the Coast Guard Cutter *Point Richmond* out of Anacortes. He retired in 1970 as a Master Chief, after participating in more than 2,000 search and rescue missions over the course of his Coast Guard career.

After retirement, he graduated from Portland State University and later obtained a law degree from Cardiff University in Wales.



Floyd Shelton in 2023. After he retired, he and a friend put a lot of miles on their motorcycles, traveling around the U.S. and Canada.