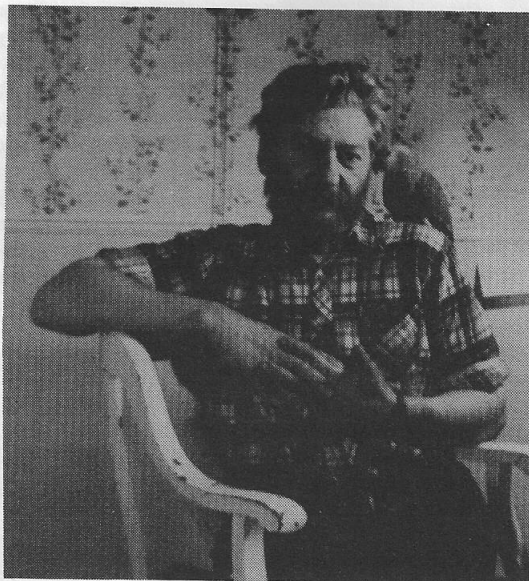


"The Life of a Lighthouse Keeper – Pete Colletti and the Beachstrip Lighthouse", *Brass Tacks*, Vol. 4 No. 2, Spring 1982

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LIFE OF A



Pete Colletti, "an obvious bird lover"!

LIGHTHOUSE

KEEPER

Illustration by Jean Allum

Written and photographed by
Jaye Ramelan and Elaine Bartlett

Special thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Pete Colletti



George Thompson. One of the first lighthouse keepers.

"One of the heaviest white squalls or tornados happened this afternoon between two and four. Waddles house was unroofed. Wells house was blown down with trees blown down".

One of the first lighthouse keeper's diaries.

- George Thompson -

The Colletti home was warm and comfortable. We were greeted by a very nautical looking gentleman, Pete Colletti, and his wife. He carried a green Amazon parrot on his right shoulder. An obvious bird lover, he has three parrots, two Amazon and one Mitred. He also has two budgies and two finches. With his grey beard and moustache, he reminded us of a sea captain. Pete Colletti is the operator of the lighthouse, in Hamilton, on the Beachstrip. Mr. Colletti says, "The Beachstrip was its own community in the past".

Mr. Colletti has lived in Hamilton all of his life and he started his job as the lighthouse keeper fourteen years ago.. Mr. Colletti remembers how he got his job, "There used to be a lighthouse keeper named Jack at one time and I came in to see him. I was kind of friendly with him there for a bit. I'd stop in there once in a while as I went by. One day a friend of mine says, 'Come on, let's go shake old Jack out, he's been on a three day binge already now and I'm tired of looking after the lighthouse for him'. Turned out, he was dead and I started the job the next morning. They carried him out and I started work from July 16, 1968".

Pete Colletti wasn't on the job permanently yet. He

recalls, "I was on casual, but I started again the next March. First I had to go for competition and an exam in Toronto in October of the year 1969. I was on steady from then on but actually my time goes back from 1968. They'll probably have to carry me out the same way for the next lighthouse keeper but I still got seventeen years to go yet".

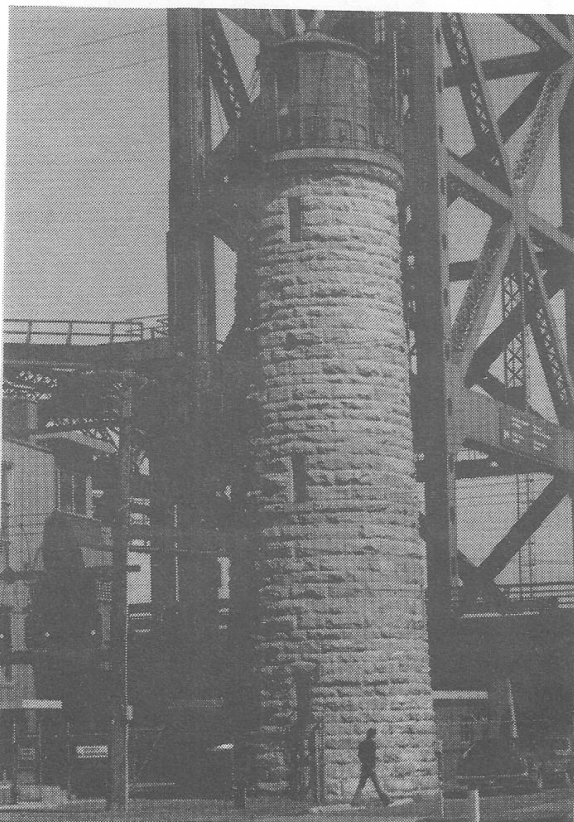
Pete Colletti runs the more modern lighthouse, which is located further out at the end of the pier. That one was built in the late 40's. However, the older lighthouse which is now not in use, is the one which we were interested in. This one was built in June 1858 by two Scotsmen who hauled all the stone in from Queenston Quarry. One of the first lighthouse keepers was a man by the name of George Thompson. He worked the lighthouse in the 1800's. George Thompson kept a diary of his daily experiences as a lighthouse keeper. His diaries can now be found in the Joseph Brant Memorial Museum.

December 19, 1856

"Ice banks made from eight to ten feet high. The bay froze over and the lamps froze out between ten and twelve last night. I put a hand lantern in. No coming vessels in or out I closed the light out".

That was a quote from one of George Thompson's diaries showing us an example of a day as a lighthouse keeper in the nineteenth century.

Now the worn down rock of the old lighthouse shows its



The old lighthouse shows it's age.

age. When we first walked in we got a scent of decay and mould. The stairs leading up the five floors were not very wide and we found it quite a frightening experience to climb. The first four floors were the same with two windows which gave us an idea how thick the walls were. Most of the windows were broken and glass was lying about on the floor along with some old pieces of wood, dust and a couple of mice. The view from the top was spectacular. We got a wonderful view of the Skyway Bridge and the lake.

There was a prism in the middle of the room which contained a small yellow light and reflectors. You would think that this one thousand watt bulb for the lighthouse would be quite large but we were surprised to see it was the size of a normal bulb. This light can be seen as far away as 20 miles by lost boats and ships in the dark or fog.



Elaine and Pete Colletti at the top of the lighthouse, beside the prism.

Across from the lighthouse there used to be a large boat club called Lakeside. Mr. Colletti laughs, "There was one lighthouse keeper here that was the fastest drinker in the county. His old lady would chase him all the time he would run in the back door of the club and out the front and that was good for two beers!"

The Colletti's house dates back to 1850. It is directly beside the old lighthouse and is well built. According to Pete Colletti, it has two and a half foot foundations which are solid



An early postcard of the Lakeside Yacht Club.

as a rock. We took a look out of one of the windows and realized that place was well made because the walls were about a foot thick. A few years ago they had the exterior orange-red brick sand blasted and some pointing was done in between the bricks. Now, the house has quite a new look to it.

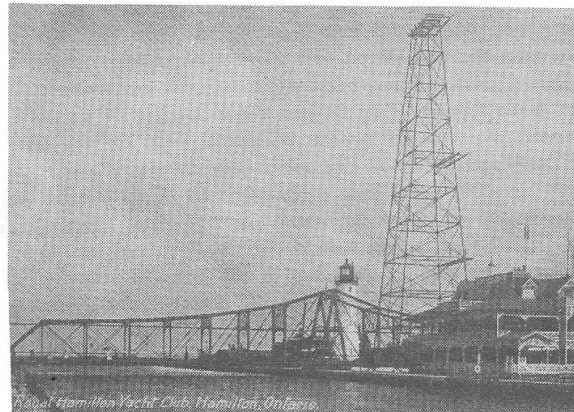
The lighthouse keeper's job was always to keep the lighthouse functioning. This is an example from George Thomson's diary.

December 9, 1858

"I had much work and trouble in warming the coal oil in the pier and lighthouse. I wrapped the lamps all round with flannel and rope yarn. I was wearing mittens with the ear flaps of the cap down. I kept large lighthouse light burning but the coal oil partially froze!"

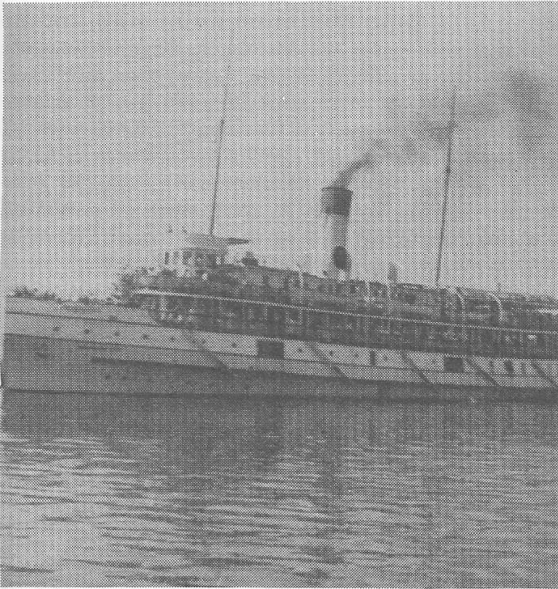
Mr. Colletti is responsible for the general maintenance of the lighthouse. All the equipment must be checked out every day. He must change the light bulbs and things like that.

If it is a foggy day, Pete Colletti sends out a Morse code, "Now providing the captain of the boat knows what the sequence is for, Toronto and Burlington, he can tell what direction is which. If he wants to go to Burlington, he will

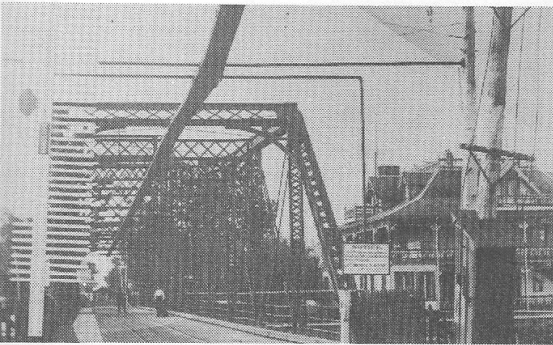


Another view of the Lakeside Yacht Club.

know which one to follow". Pete Colletti told us that deep noise of the fog horn we hear on a dull night can also direct lost boats or ships to safety. This horn can be heard about three miles away. When we asked Pete Colletti if he enjoyed his job he replied, "Oh, yes! Nobody bothers you too much. You don't have to punch in every morning. You live right on the job. This, like most jobs, has its drawbacks because you can't go on holidays till the winter and there really is no place to go except for down to the warm climate".



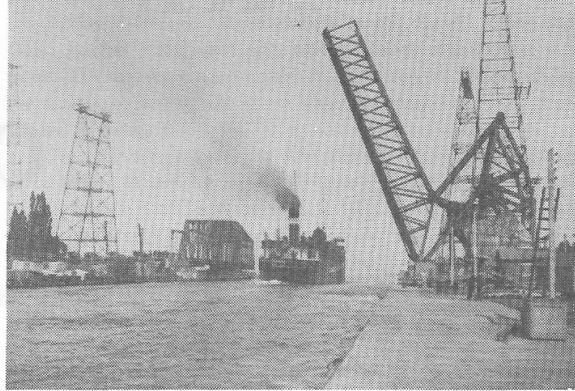
A boat going through the canal in the early 1900's.



The old canal and bridge in Hamilton.

Pete Colletti laughs, "This one guy came here one night last January. He sat out in his car out there for maybe an hour or so. Next thing you know, the guys in the lift bridge phoned the police and said that somebody jumped off the bridge. Well they got him out alright and put him in an ambulance and took him over to Joseph Brant Hospital and somehow or another he escaped out of there and all he had on was a bed

sheet! Next, he steals an ambulance then he went over to the bridge and parks it and then he takes his car and he ran out of gas at King and James. In the end it took his parents one and a half hours or something like that to get him out.



The old bridge in action, taken in the early 1900's.



Aerial view of the Beach Strip in the old days.

Mr. Colletti went to a conference last year with many other lighthouse keepers to talk about new equipment for the lighthouse. At this conference the importance of a lighthouse keeper was stressed. It is very obvious to us, how important his unusual job is.

