

[From Spring 1993]

## **A Blast from the Past: Bridges, Boats, and Backsides**

The years 1953-1963 marked a time of dramatic change for the refuge, culminating in the construction of the bridge between Chincoteague and Assateague. In 1953 Enos Mellinger was still refuge manager and work was continuing on dikes and roads on the refuge. Also in 1953, the first sighting of cattle egrets in Virginia was made by John Buckalew on Chincoteague Island.

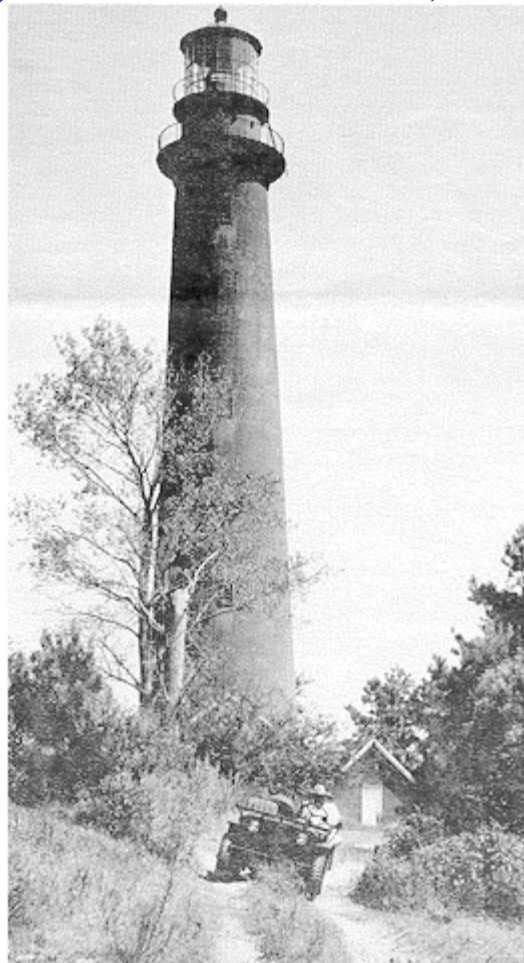
In 1955, Mr. Mellinger transferred and Jacob Valentine became refuge manager. Mr. Valentine was actively involved in the community as a Scoutmaster and a member of the local Kiwanis Club. As refuge manager he often spoke to community organizations and granted interviews.

Manager Valentine was the first to discover that the strange deer on the refuge were not white-tailed and correctly identified them as sika. Some of the first sightings during his tenure included indigo buntings and snapping turtles. He also observed 2,000 canvasbacks on the refuge.

In 1958, Thomas W. Martin became refuge manager when Mr. Valentine transferred. Developments during his tenure were the planting of the farm fields north of D dike, census of the sika, and the constant repair of sand fence, dikes, and water control structures.

Reading the annual reports during this era, one gets a rare glimpse into the many difficulties of creating a refuge in the late 1950's. Maintenance of equipment seemed to be a recurring problem. Sand, salt, and the fact that everything was still brought over by boat meant that docks constantly needed repair, boats needed painting, bearings had to be greased and re-packed and so on. Mr. Martin described a particular incident with repairing trucks: "We have a 4X4 pickup running again. Our 1948 and 1953 Willys pickups both coughed and quit. By the dint of much sweat, lurid language, and absolute frothing fits, pieces and parts of each have been combined into a thing that runs. Sometimes."

Of course, some things have not changed as Manager Martin described the flying insects



*FWS photo of Manager Valentine - 1950's*

around the middle of May: "Our buzzard sized mosquitoes pack a foot long, three-quarter inch drill for tapping sap or saps."

Although there were difficulties, there seems to have been some humorous events involving the refuge manager, as in this annual report description of how he solved the "abrasive problem" of wet sand in his clothing after a day of installing fencing: "At the close of the day's work he (Mr. Martin) calmly draped his shirt over a piling, then his pants, discarded his shoes. The part of the anatomy referred to as one's backside was all that could be seen of Manager Martin as he disappeared into the top of this wave. Compensation had been gained for all the toil that day."

During Martin's stay at Chincoteague, the Chincoteague Naval Air Station, which was at that time the largest employer in the area, was closed. Henceforth, the town looked forward to the construction of a bridge between Chincoteague and Assateague to bring tourists into the area and help the economy. The bridge and road were eventually completed in 1962, soon after that, Manager Martin transferred to Santee Refuge and Charles Noble was to become the next refuge manager.

Next Issue: 1963-1973

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