THE HUMAN CONDITION

Lamplighters once served vital function along Louisiana coast

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A lamplighter was a person hired by the U.S. Coast Guard to light kerosene wick lanterns at unmanned lighthouses. There were also lanterns attached to an arm on a pole or upon an unmanned tower. The lights were used as a navigational aid for seafaring ships along America's coastline, bays and waterways. These lights act as guideposts, warning sailors of their position so they wouldn't hit land at night, in storms, or during fog. These lamplighters are not to be confused with the lamplighters that once lit kerosene lamps along city streets before the arrival of electricity. However, their jobs were basically the same, except one was on water while the other on land.

For decades lamplighters maintained the kerosene lamps in the Gulf waters of Vermilion Parish. I thank Allen LeBlanc and EZ Studios of Abbeville for sharing the following information. According to a 1981 article by Bryce Mooreland, "Lamplighters of Vermilion Parish," the first lamplighter in southwest Louisiana was Numa Veazez. Veazez began his career as a lamplighter in 1915, maintaining three lights. They were all unmanned lanterns made of brass, fueled by kerosene and suspended 12 feet above the surface of the water. The lights were visible five miles away and could burn day and night for five or six days on one fueling.

Long ago, the light beam would be visible only short distances. In 1822, the first modern lighthouse lens was invented by French physicist Augustin Jean Fresnel. He learned how to use prisms to increase the distance a beam could be seen. In 1841, a Fresnel lens was installed for the first time in a lighthouse.

Lighthouses have been around since ancient time. Early mariners were guided by fires built on hilltops. And since raising the fire increased visibility, placing the fire onto a platform became a practice, which eventually led to the development of today's lighthouses. According to thinkquest, an online educational foundation, the Egyptians, the builders of the ancient pyramids were the first to build lighthouses. Among the best preserved and best examples of lighthouses from ancient history is the Tower of Hercules in Coruna, Spain. The oldest lighthouse in North America is in Tulum, Mexico, and the first lighthouse in the United States arrived in Boston in 1716. And the state of Michigan has the most lighthouses in the United States followed closely by Maine.

Though not as dramatic nor as glamorous as manned lighthouses, which you've probably read about in books or seen in movies, unmanned lanterns were just as important in their day. There have been countless romance and mystery novels written about lighthouses. Probably the most famous novel is titled The Lamplighter, written by Maria Susanna Cummins during the 19th century. It outsold The Scarlet Letter 10 to 1 in 1850, and second in sales only to Uncle Tom's Cabin. Despite its popularity years ago, the novel is almost completely unknown today.

Ferdinand and Roland Dupuy of Abbeville were lamplighters. Ferdinand, Roland's father, was hired by the Coast Guard in 1925. He received $25 a month to maintain the lantern at Red Fish Point, which was too far in Vermilion Bay for Numa Veazez's small boat. Ferdinand didn't think it was worth the money, but he continued to maintain the lanterns between Avery and Pecan islands. Ferdinand inherited Veazez's lanterns in 1935 when electric lights powered by chemical reaction between caustic soda and water in Pyrex jars replaced kerosene lanterns. At times it was dangerous; the mixture sometimes exploded and caused injury. The caustic soda mixture was eventually replaced by 40-pound Edison batteries, which later became standard. At the time of Mooreland's 1981 article, the Edison battery was replaced by a modern, solid-state battery powered light, equipped with dependable sun switches. It's unfortunate that the once popular business of lamplighting is now a vanished trade. In 1978, chafing at the customs of change, technology had eventually caught up with the lamplighters; their positions were terminated leaving only memories. Ferdinand was 75 years old with 30 years service, and Roland was 53 with 15 years service. However, the entire time the Dupuys were lamplighters, they had been moonlighting — they were oystermen from the start; that was their calling. Never prone to shirk their duties, they were headed in the direction of the unmanned lanterns anyway. And, after the terminations, they devoted their time exclusively to an oyster shop — Dupuy's of Abbeville.

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