

## Pat Churchill Interviews

By M. P. Lorente

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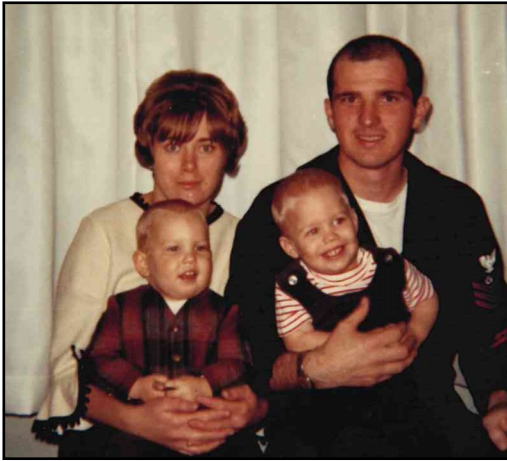
*Photos courtesy of Churchill family*

Pat Churchill lived at the lighthouse on Burrows Island in 1968-1969 with her husband Chuck, a Coast Guard engineer.

“I truly enjoyed our time on the island,” she said, “But you don’t get to choose who you share your rock with!”

In early spring 1968, Chuck had been on the *North Wind* icebreaker for two years. They would be away from home as much as six months at a time, so the couple was looking forward to having time together.

Pat described a memorable start to their life on this island.



OIC Garth Bryant with his wife, Gloria, and sons, Keith and Troy.

“Garth Bryant, OIC, picked us up at Skyline Marina and off we went to start our life as lighthouse keepers. With us we had our two cats.

“As we neared the island, Garth told me, ‘Dogs and cats are natural enemies. I will not have people fighting over them. My dog was here first.’

“I said I totally agreed. I think it was the second or third day – we all gathered in our yard to get acquainted and roast marshmallows. My cat came out and sat on the empty picnic table. Garth’s dog decided to join us.

“My cat didn’t like that idea. She jumped down, walked right up to the dog, slapped his face, then chased him into the woods.

“No one spoke. My cat returned shortly. The dog didn’t show up until the next morning. This wasn’t something new for my cat to do. She hated dogs; I had just not told Garth.”



“Our transportation,” suspended on the boathook. This 26-footer was used for most trips and included an inboard motor, small cabin, steering wheel, radio, and small wood bench. Note snow in the background.

### Lighthouse life

Pat notes that lighthouse duty is not for everyone.

“People are stationed on lighthouse duty with no thought to how they will fit in with the others stationed there. For Burrows, it was three families living together with little outside contact. We were very lucky and there was no trouble between or within the families,” she said.

“Fifty-five years ago, things were different,” she recalled “We had TV, with limited channels (four or five); no cable or Dish. Our only contact with the outside world was radio check-ins to the Coast Guard base in Port Angeles once an hour. We had no phones -- no landline, no cell phones. Things like computers and DVD were not available.”

Time off of the island was limited. Every third weekend, one family got to get off. They left on Friday and returned on Monday.

“This is when mail was picked up and any doctor appointments were made. There was no shopping, lunch out, etc. You were either going off or you didn’t get on the boat,” she said.

“Weather permitting, you went in twice a month for shopping. You were to have a month’s worth of food at all times. Each unit had a large chest freezer and pantry. When you got to the marina, you were told when you had to be back. You were not late.”

“When you returned to the island, the boat was raised up to the boathouse. The groceries were loaded into wheelbarrows and rolled up to your house, and put away. Commissary day was a big, busy, tiring day,” she explained.

Power was a “small problem.” Pat recalled that there were two generators, a big one that ran 24/7, and a smaller one that was

turned on Monday through Friday from 8 to 4. This gave limited power to the big house.

“Every other day you got to use extra power,” she said. “To keep track, you were (assigned) even or odd days. When it was your power day, you could wash clothes, wait an hour and then dry them. Hot water tanks pull power, so you have to wait before pulling more. You also got to use your oven. But remember -- one thing at a time. If too much power was pulled, everything went dead. Black smoke rolled out of the generator room and the guys came running. It wasn’t something you wanted to do! We had a little black box the TV plugged into to save it (during) power surges.”

### **Inspections**

Living in government housing meant inspection. Every two to three months, officers from Base Seattle would come out and inspect everything. Light, boathouse, water tanks, and – yes – living quarters.

“It wasn’t a white glove inspection, but we cleaned like it was. You made sure to dust. Your floors were waxed, dishes washed and put away, beds made, clothes folded, etc. They started with the boat house, lighthouse, quarters, water tanks,” she said.

“On one of those trips as they hiked back to the old water tank, I looked out the window and froze! In the rush of getting everything spic and span, someone hung the American flag upside down! Did I have enough time to run out, lower it, rehang it, and run it back up the pole? They hadn’t seen it yet. I was very pregnant at this time and couldn’t run very fast. So I just prayed.”

They lucked out.

“No one but me saw it until they were back in their boat headed home!”

### **Fire and Ice**

January 1969 was a very cold, white month.

“Chuck’s uncle died and we went off for the funeral. Garth brought the boat in. He was heading off for schooling. The dock was covered with water, snow and ice. We slipped and slid to the boat. I was wearing a dress, nylons and shoes – not what one would wear for boating on a winter day. The boat had a cabin with a small wooden bench; no heater.

“We were about halfway down the channel (on the way back) when the engine quit. There was some water in the gasline and it froze. Chuck went out on the deck, uncovered the engine and used his hands to warm the line and melt the ice. I don’t know when I have ever been so cold!

“He got it running and we were doing fine. But then it stopped again. I remember taking an orange out of my bag. It was frozen. It took three stops before we made it to the island.

“Climbing up the ladder was tricky. The rungs were coated in ice. Chuck told me to go to Gloria’s house until he could turn the heat on and warm our house.

“Gloria said she would make some coffee. I thought it was strange that she took the coffee pot into the bathroom. The reason was that the big water tank behind our house was frozen. Garth was worried, so he had Gloria clean and fill the tub.

“I got home at last. First, I put on warmer clothes. The second thing was to take my biggest pot out to the picnic table and scrape snow into it. I think there was a good six inches. By the time we got water, there was no snow left on either of the tables.

As the islanders pondered ways to conserve water, Chuck took all the tarps and blankets he could find and attached them to the lower end of the water tank.

“The tank was about two feet off the ground. Once he got it well-tented, he went on a light hunt, taking any table (lamp) he could find. He placed them all under the tank and turned them on. It became nice and warm under there.

“When he crawled into bed at midnight, he was pretty proud of himself: ‘We’ll have running water in the morning,’ he said.”

But when the next shift came on duty at midnight, Mike went to check on the tank.

“It was a metal tank filled with frozen water, sitting in a yard of snow. But Mike thought the blankets might catch fire, so he turned all the lights off!



Pat Churchill, shoveling snow outside quarters.

“Need I say, the tank was still frozen (in the morning) and Chuck was a very unhappy fellow. He turned the lights back on, and we had water late that afternoon,” she said.

In March, the brush on the southwest end of the island had grown too high. The crew spent three days cutting and then burning it down.

“They washed the area down good to make sure the fire was out. The next day, they wet it down again, just to be sure.

“The following day, Chuck took Garth and family into town for their weekend off. Mike, Jan and I were having coffee when we heard a boat horn – that got our attention! It kept going off. We ran out to see why. The south end was on fire, and the flames were shooting up rather high!

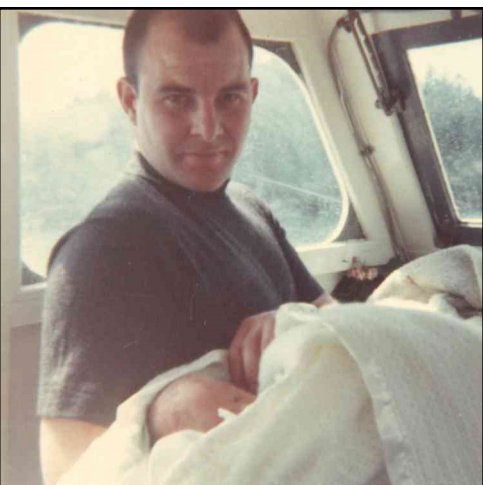
“We headed to the fire box and removed the hose head. Mike and Jan took it, and I helped roll it out. They ran out to face the fire. About then, Chuck returned and took control. He sent me back to the house. Sometimes a pregnant lady needs to stay out of the way!”

### **Pregnancy**

While on the island, the Churchills decided to start a family.

“My Aunt Evelyn was a nurse at the Anacortes hospital. She gave me a book on natural birth. She gave Chuck the type of (emergency) kit ferry boats keep on hand.

“My mom said I had to move off the island. I told her if we couldn’t take the boat, that they would send a helicopter from Port Angeles. That put her mind at rest. What I didn’t tell her was that (if) the winds are crazy during a storm, they wouldn’t send one. Oh well – young and dumb!



Proud papa on the way home from the hospital, with a surprise pair.

“As it turned out, it was a beautiful night in April... clear starry sky and flat water. (45 days early!) When we reached the marina they were just closing for the night. They yelled, laughing: ‘You better hurry. The Coast Guard doesn’t come in at night to see a movie!’ (They knew if I was coming to town that late, it could only be for one reason !)

“Chuck replied, ‘There’s a great double feature tonight.’ We all laughed, not knowing what the end of the story would be.

The end of the story was not one baby – but TWO!

“Charles Robert (Chip) was born at 12:05 the next afternoon (April 16, 1969). At 12:12, Tricia Charlynn was born – we had twins! (Or as the marina crew said, there was a great double feature playing!) Chip was five pounds plus, and Tricia was a just a little under five pounds.

“They made a big hit in the little town of Anacortes. We were ten days in the hospital. People we didn’t know kept coming by to see them. I know it sounds crazy, but at

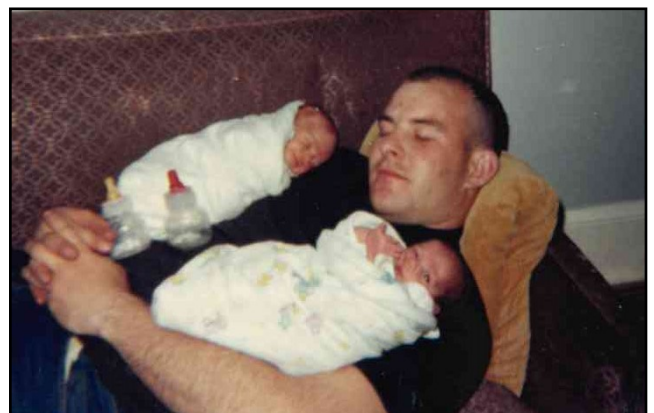
that time, Anacortes was a small, dying town.

“We walked down to the nursery one afternoon to see them. As Chuck went to leave, I told him to get six more bottles and another crib. Everyone laughed.

“Yes, in 1969, you could go in to have a baby and come home with two. When calling grandparents and friends, they didn’t believe us!

“I wondered if I was going to be able to handle them (on my own). Of course, family said: ‘No, you can’t take them to the island.’ A nurse stopped by and we talked... yes, I could do it. No one would be stopping by. I would find a routine. I didn’t have to worry about meals, house work – we could have a can of soup.

“The kids did well, as did Chuck and I,” she summed up.



Chuck Churchill rests with the newborns.

## **Food and fun times**

“Chuck was a very outgoing, friendly guy. When he saw a fishing boat go by, he always waved. Often they would come close and chat. The results were that now and then, they would give us a salmon. Since there were three families, we rotated with adding a salad, rice, potatoes, vegetable, drinks, and enjoyed a salmon barbecue about every other week (during fishing season),” she recalled.

Thanksgiving was also a cooperative effort.

“For Thanksgiving we would take one cart at the commissary just for the holiday dinner. Turkey, butter, stuffing, everything we needed, splitting the bill three ways. Back on the island, we would split up the food. I did the turkey, dressing, potatoes and gravy. Gloria did the pie, and between her and Jan, the rest of the dinner. A good time was had by all,” she remembered.

“I can’t remember borrowing food in a pinch. I either had it or did without. I think this helped everything going smoothly. Of the four couples we shared the island with, only one did we develop a real friendship with. We usually just all did our thing and it worked.

“We often all met at the dock, where we fished for sea bass. Fishing was always good. We always gave Mike a bad time. He was a young guy out of Los Angeles inner city. He loved the idea of fishing, but he did not like to touch them or eat them. Jan would bring a chair, book, garden gloves and pliers. When Mike got a fish, she would put on the gloves, grab the pliers and remove the hook, then toss the fish back into the water.

“Janice didn’t like going to or from the marina when the tide was out. We always went from one dock to the other. She said at low tide, we had further to go – I never understood that!”

Pat recalls another memorable boat ride.

In February 1969, OIC Garth and his wife Gloria were transferred off the island. A new OIC, Dave, with his wife Janice and two small children, replaced them.

“Dave took us in for a commissary day. My babies were about two months old. I had taken one with me, leaving the other for Chuck to watch. About halfway back, the boat quit. We drifted close to shore, so I got out. They handed me my child, and I headed off for home.

“By radio, Dave had gotten ahold of Chuck. He said he would come get us in the skiff. That ended radio contact. Where was my other baby? Did he leave him alone while he came to get us? At last I got to the house – no baby. I placed the one I had with me in the playpen and took off to the boathouse. They were just pulling in. In the bow of the boat, laying on a dozen blankets, was a very happy baby!” (The skiff was a 16-footer aluminum boat with outboard motor).

All’s well that ends well, but commissary day presented its own unique challenges.

“Chuck brought us in for a commissary day in the skiff. The plan was we would come back early, take our stuff out to the island, and he would go back for the others. Well, it didn’t work.

“Once out in the channel, we found two boats – I think a 32-footer and a bigger one, maybe 50+. The big one had run out of gas. The smaller was towing him in and ran out of gas as well! We got the small one, and a bigger boat came by and got the big one. Back to the marina we went. By now the others were there, ready to go home. So we loaded them and their food into the skiff and went home. Because we were doing a speed trip, I had bought ice cream. When I got in the house and started putting stuff away, the ice cream ran out the four corners of the box. When they tried to pick up the sacks with meat, the sides of the bags came up, but the blood-soaked bottoms stayed on the deck. I guess that’s what you call ‘the Coast Guard to the Rescue.’”

## **My Flowers**

Even in a beautiful place like Burrows, there was room for improvement.

“When we moved out to the island, I found daffodils blooming all about. I ended up digging them up and planting them in an old rockery garden. The next spring they were lovely!” she said.

“Even with limited outside contact, restrictions on when you could come and go, power sharing, and weather being in charge, I found life on Burrows an experience I’ll never forget and truly enjoyed. It had its drawbacks, but the beauty and quiet overruled them.”