

RETURN TO McINNES ISLAND



SO, YOU'RE GOING TO THIS ISLAND IN THE
PACIFIC. IS THAT "SOUTH PACIFIC"?

I WISH!

McInnes Island Project

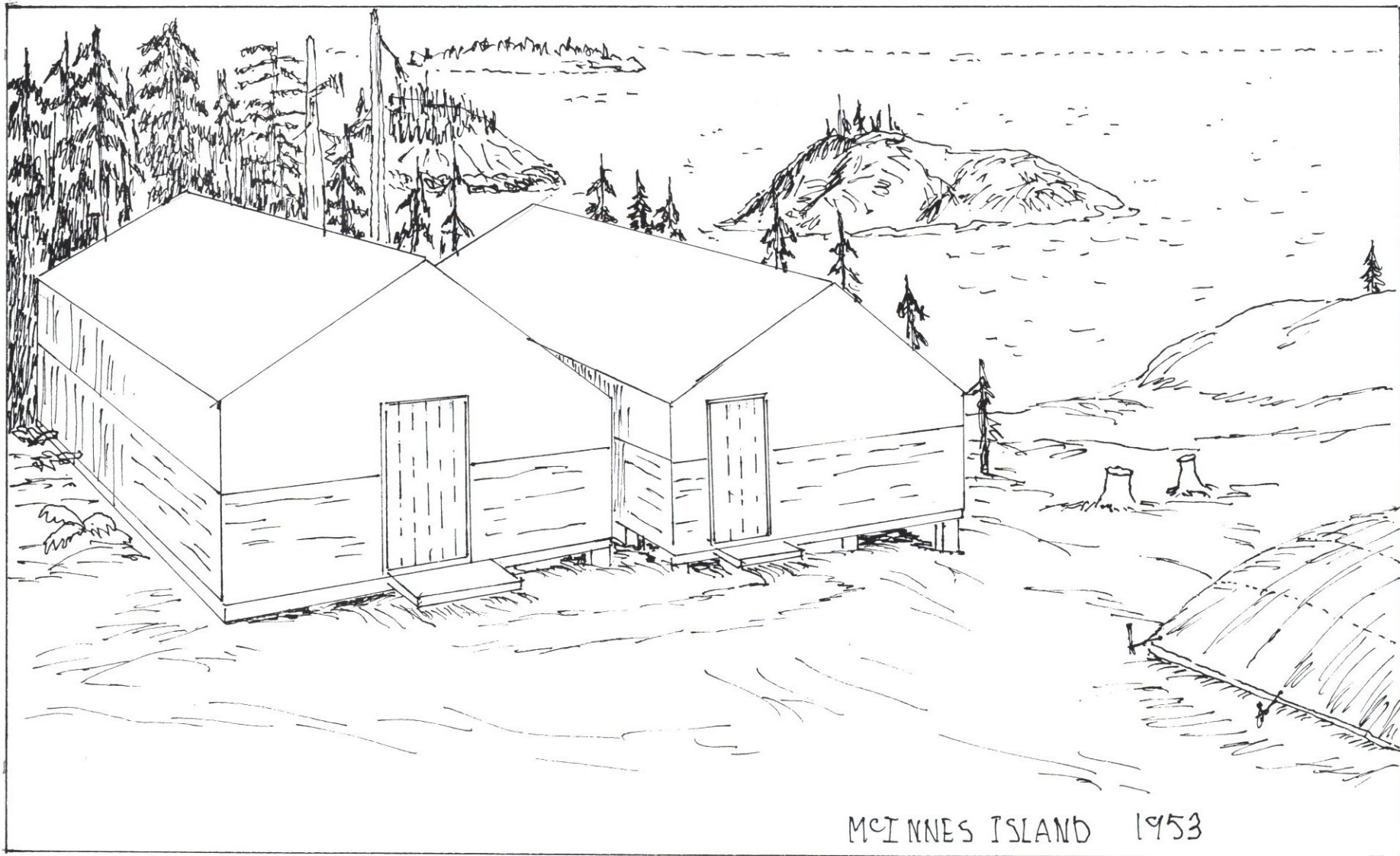
By: Ken Stewart

In 1953, my Father's construction company, Stewart & Slade Construction, was awarded the contract to build the lighthouse and 3 houses on McInnes Island

My story begins in mid August, 1953. A small crew consisting of 5 labourers, of which I was one, 3 carpenters, a cook and my Father. We arrived in Bella Bella by Coast Steamship. From there we were transported across the bay to Shearwater. Shearwater had been an important air/sea base during the Second World War but was now abandoned. A man by the name of Andy Widson had taken over a portion of the site and set up a first class sawmill. Andy had also purchased a war-surplus landing craft from the US and brought it up the Coast alone to Shearwater, later exchanging it's 2 gas engines for 2 GM diesel engines. A comfortable sized cabin was installed above the engines. This unit was referred to as the WL2.

I mention these particulars about Andy Widson as he provided all the framing lumber necessary to construct the 3 houses plus the wood portion of the lighthouse, all transported to McInnes via the WL2. The WL2 was also used to transport our crew members to the Island and carried gravel from the huge barge moored a mile or so off of McInnes.

On our second day, the WL2 took us to the Island. We climbed the 100' from the water to the platform beside the garage sized winch house. Several feet away to the southwest were our 2 tents which had been erected by the D.O.T. These were both 16' x 32' with a plywood floor, 4' plywood walls and then 4' canvas walls to the roof. Tent #1 would become the kitchen equipped with an oil fired cook stove and kerosene refrigerator. Our cook, Pat, was an ex-army man who had seen much overseas activity during the Second World War.



MCINNES ISLAND 1953

THE TENT ON THE LEFT WAS THE KITCHEN, COOKS QUARTERS AND MESS HALL. ^{Ken Stewart}
 THE TENT TO THE RIGHT WAS THE BUNKHOUSE. IN THE LOWER RIGHTHAND
 CORNER, UNDER A HUGE TARP, IS A PILE OF TWENTY FIVE HUNDRED BAGS OF CEMENT.

He was a good cook and we ate well. The cook's quarters and crew mess hall were also contained in this tent. Tent #2 was our bunkhouse equipped with upper and lower single bunks and an oil space heater. The tents were lit by both coal oil and gas lamps.

As this was to be the first and only light and radio beacon station on the Coast, there could be no electric motors in the 3 houses.

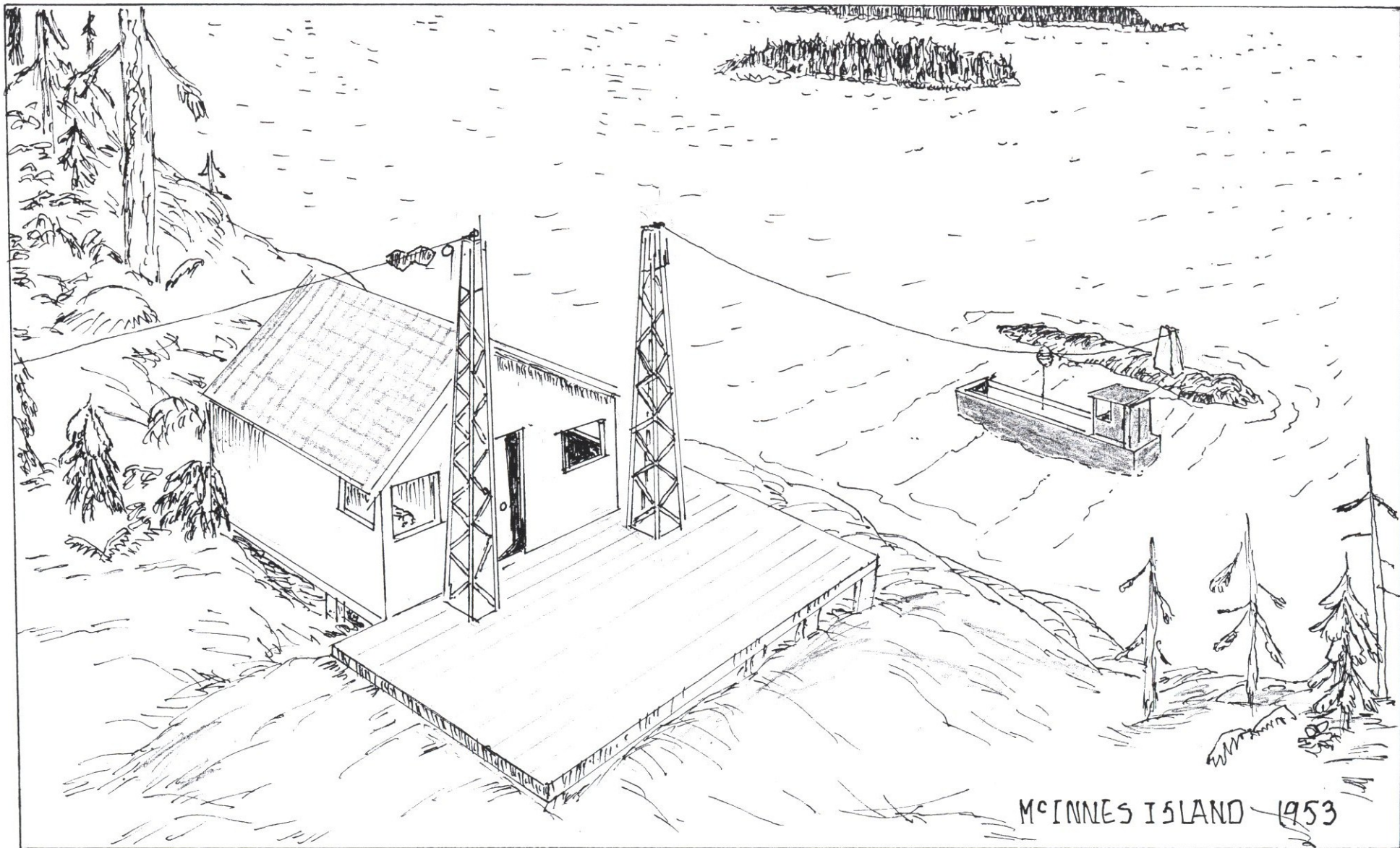
Our entire crew came well equipped with raingear. A good thing too as much of our work was in wet, muddy conditions.

The D.O.T. had previously constructed a large pyramidal shaped concrete structure on a small rock outcropping some 100 yards off the eastside of the Island. A heavy cable anchored to this solid structure ran up to the winch house 75' above the water line. All materials would eventually be carried up onto the Island via this cable arrangement. A second overhead cable from the platform went across the Island to the location near the lighthouse site.

The carpenters set about staking out the perimeters of the 3 houses. It was our job to excavate each basement by hand. The soil was basically decayed vegetation built up over millennium. It had a pungent odour unlike that of a pig pen.

In each excavation, we had to remove 3 very large tree trunks by hand. In one or two instances, they had to be blasted loose. One of our labourers, John, was a "powder monkey". We had the dynamite and John had the knowhow. Each excavation was 5 – 6' deep at the back or high side.

We had been on the Island for about 2 weeks when my Dad had to go to Vancouver. He put one of the carpenters, Alfie, in charge while he was away. Alfie was a small man with a big attitude. Now as "Commander in Chief", he never left the bunkhouse.



McINNES ISLAND 1953

Ken Stewart

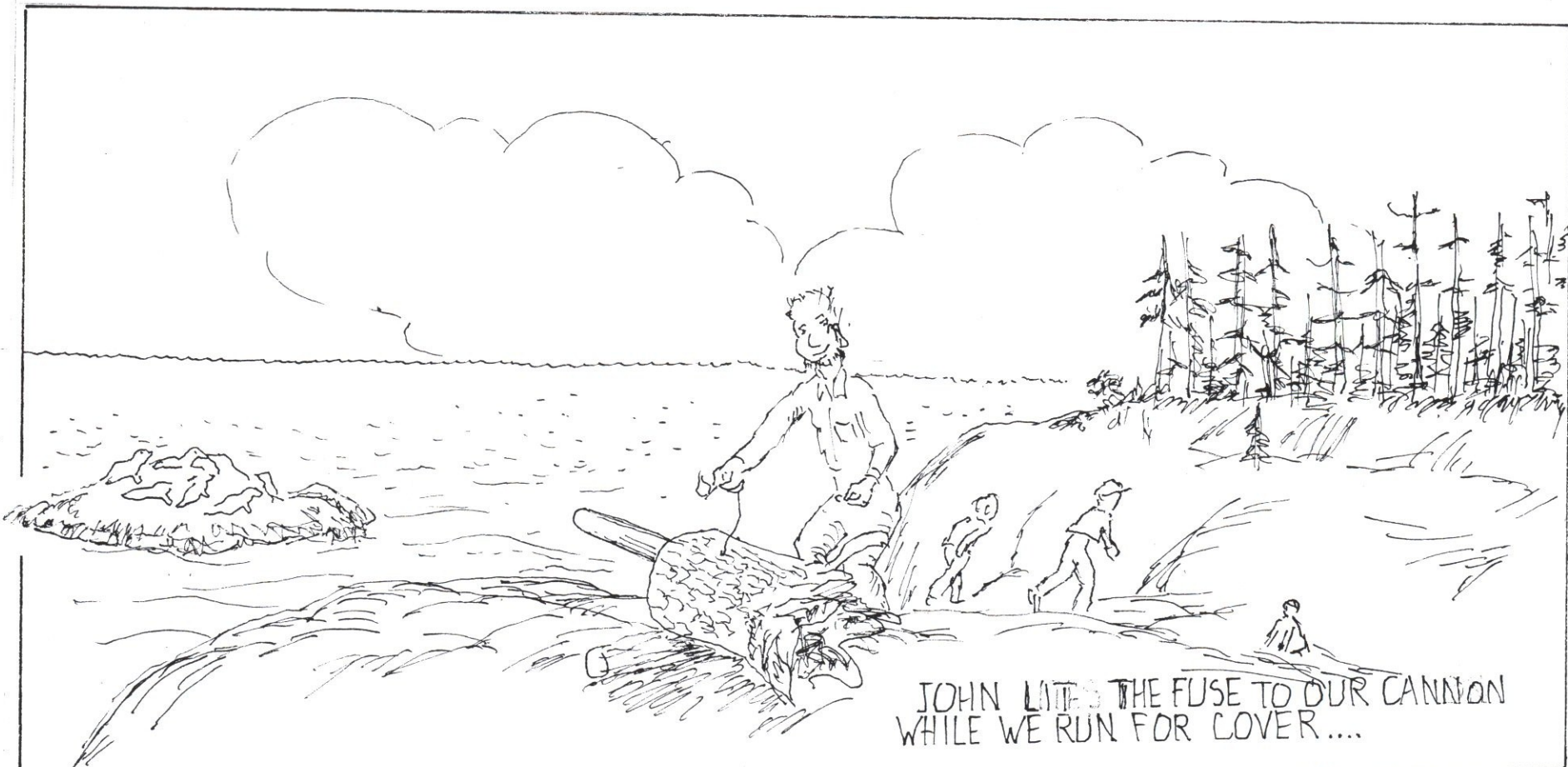
THIS SKETCH MAY NOT BE 100% ACCURATE, BUT IT IS INTENDED TO PROVIDE A
BASIC OUTLINE AS TO THE METHODS WE USED TO BRING ALL MATERIALS ON TO
THE ISLAND.

As for us labourers, we had never seen sea lions before. Working six 9 hour days and about 3 hours on Sunday, their loud roars got to be a bit annoying. It was one sunny Sunday afternoon when someone came up with the bright idea to build a cannon. There were many 10' and 12' x 2" lengths of iron pipe which were to be driven into the ground at 2' centres at the base of the foundation footing. We cut off a 3' section of pipe, drilled a hole deep into a portable stump and set up our cannon. John put in a small piece of dynamite and rigged the fuse while the rest of us stuffed small stones down the barrel. We aimed our cannon at the sea lion island, lit the fuse and ran for cover. There was a loud bang and we ran over to our cannon. There was chunks of stump and scraps of metal pipe everywhere. As for the sea lions, they were oblivious to our efforts.

Our labour crew was a real mixture. John, I had known from high school. Harold, who came dressed in a long beige trench coat and hat looked like an underworld character from the twenties and acted the part. His sidekick was very quiet but likeable. Then there was my brother-in-law Bill. He was a good worker and easy going.

There wasn't any drinking water at all so the Company supplied us with gallon cans of apple juice. We tried to collect water in a big tarp but the pine needles gave it a terrible flavour. We tried everything to get rid of the awful taste. I don't remember any of us washing ourselves or our clothing. However, Bill and I discovered a place in the rocks on the high side of the Island where some small tub-like depressions had been formed in the solid rock. These pockets had filled with rainwater and when warmed by the sun, were quite pleasant to bathe in. Bill and I kept this spot our secret.

As much as Andy Widson and the WL2 were very important to us, the D.O.T. ship, Alexander Mackenzie was also a big player. This ship and her crew delivered 2500 bags of cement, roofing shingles framed doors and windows and all the cabinetry for the 3 houses. They also delivered all of the cement pumice blocks for the walls of the lighthouse.



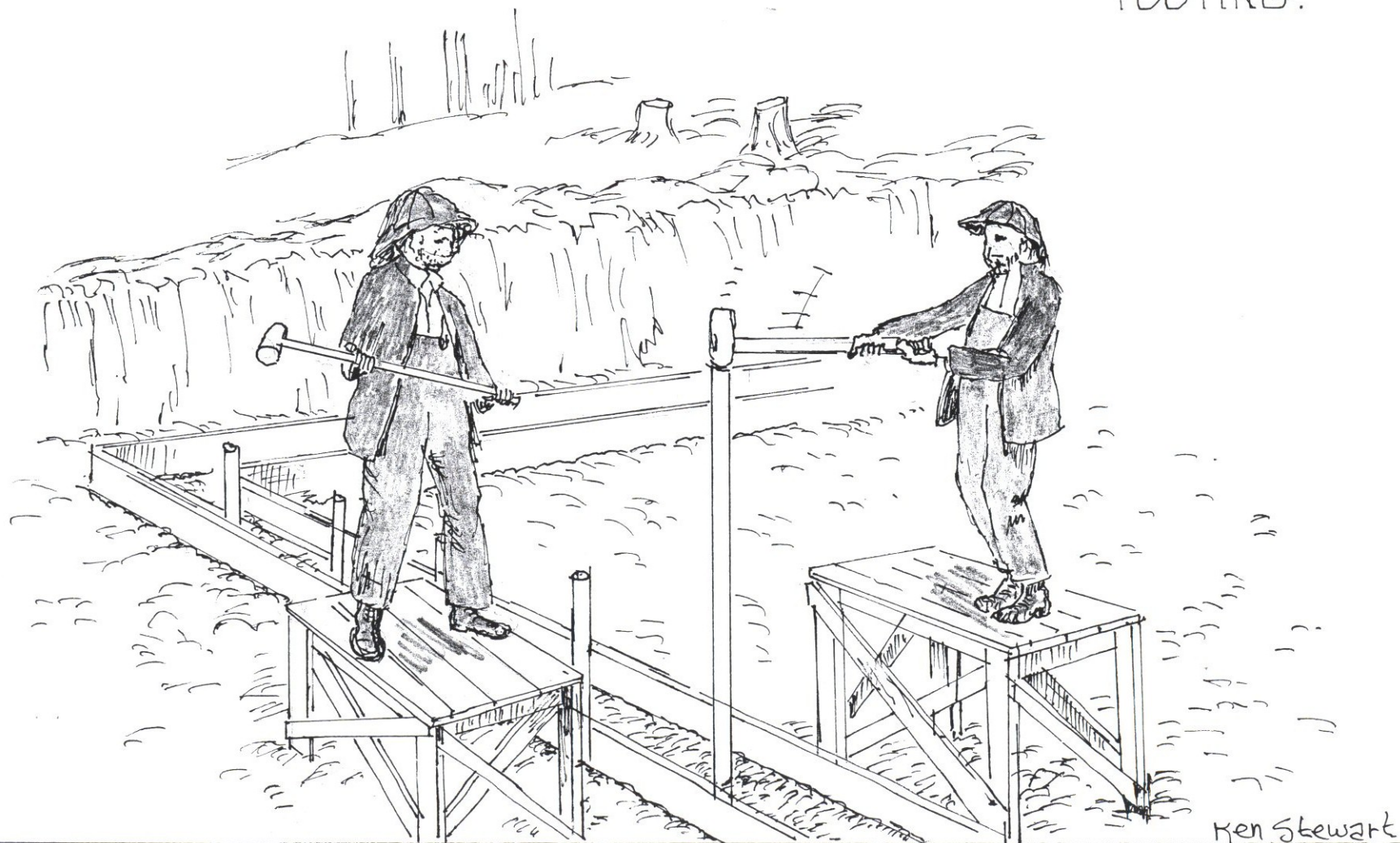
JOHN LITES THE FUSE TO OUR CANNON
WHILE WE RUN FOR COVER....

NOT ONLY WAS MCINNES ISLAND THE ONLY LIGHT & RADIO
BEACON STATION ON THE WEST COAST, BUT THE ONLY ONE
WITH A CANNON! (IF ONLY FOR A FEW MINUTES')

Ken Stewart

MCINNES ISLAND 1953

THIS PARTIAL SKETCH SHOWS TWO MEN DRIVING THE TWO INCH STEEL PIPES INTO THE GROUND AT THE BASE OF THE FOUNDATION FOOTING. THE PIPES WHICH WERE INTENDED TO BE DRIVEN DOWN TO BEDROCK, NEVER REACHED THAT FAR. THE DENSE SOIL CREATED SO MUCH SKIN FRICTION ON THE PIPES THAT ANY FURTHER HAMMERING SIMPLY MUSHROOMED THE TOP OF THE PIPE. THE EXCESS PIPE WAS THEN CUT OFF A COUPLE OF INCHES ABOVE THE BASE OF THE FOOTING.



Ken Stewart

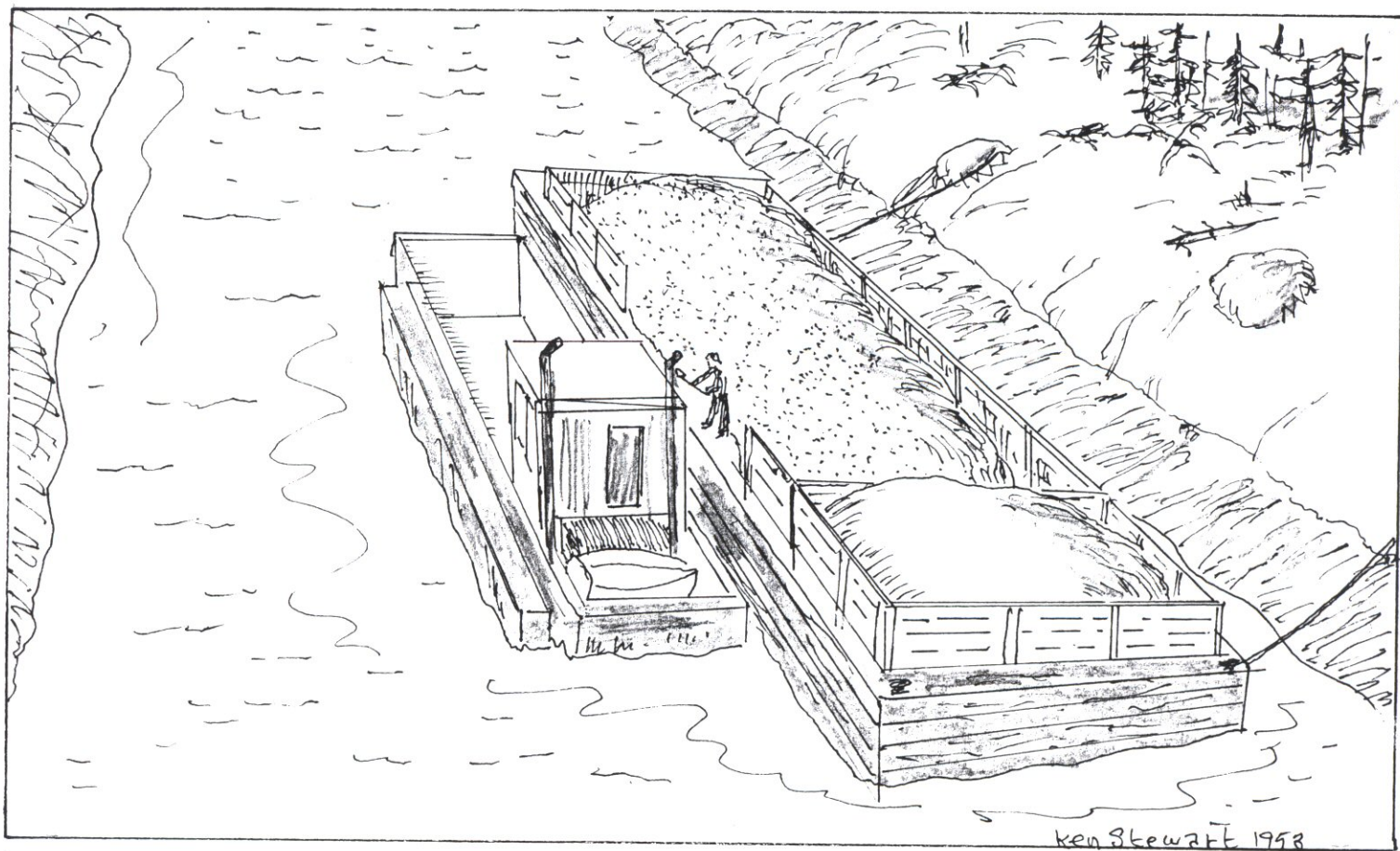
The McKenzie also delivered all of the drywall. Today, regular gyproc sheets are 1/2" thick. In 1953, sheets were 3/8", thank goodness! because all of the gyproc for the 3 houses came in crates: 6 – 4' x 8' sheets in a wooden frame. We had to carry these heavy crates from the platform to each house. At least by this time, the carpenters had built a raised boardwalk from the platform all the way to the third house.

Excavating the 3 basements was tough enough but for the lighthouse foundation, we were required to dig the foundation trench 3 feet wide clear down to bedrock. This ditch must have been a nightmare to form for the carpenters as it dipped from 3 feet down to 6 feet and continued like this for its entire perimeter.

It was another sunny Sunday afternoon and we were sitting around the bunkhouse. Harold decided we should do something so he told us that one time, he and a number of his Friends had levitated a large heavy table. It had been made even heavier by having a women lie on it. They would place their hands on the edge of the table so that their hands would all touch each other. Then by concentrating together, they would levitate the table and walk around the room. He suggested we could do this with our small table. I didn't believe this but I was not about to contradict the "God Father". On the other hand, Bill broke into hysterical laughter. Harold ordered him out of the tent. Bill was laughing so hard he nearly rolled out. That was the end of Harold's theatrical performance.

Probably the toughest job was transferring the 300 yards of 3/4 crushed navijack gravel and 30 yards of masonry sand from the huge barge which was moored a mile or so from McInnes Island in a sheltered bay. We had to hand off-load this material 20 yards at a time into the WL2.

Off loading the gravel from the barge was done by two labourers at a time. We would take turns and on one of these days it was Bill and myself. One of the peculiar things about the West Coast weather seemed to be it would blow a gale then settle down and a day later



THE HUGE BARGE CONTAINING THE 300 HUNDRED YARDS OF GRAVEL PLUS 30 YARDS OF MASONRY SAND, TOGETHER WITH ALL THE RELATED CHIMNEY MATERIALS, WAS ANCHORED IN A SHELTERED COVE, ABOUT A MILE EAST OF MCINNES. HERE THE BARGE WAS PROTECTED FROM STORMS COMING IN FROM THE OPEN SEA.

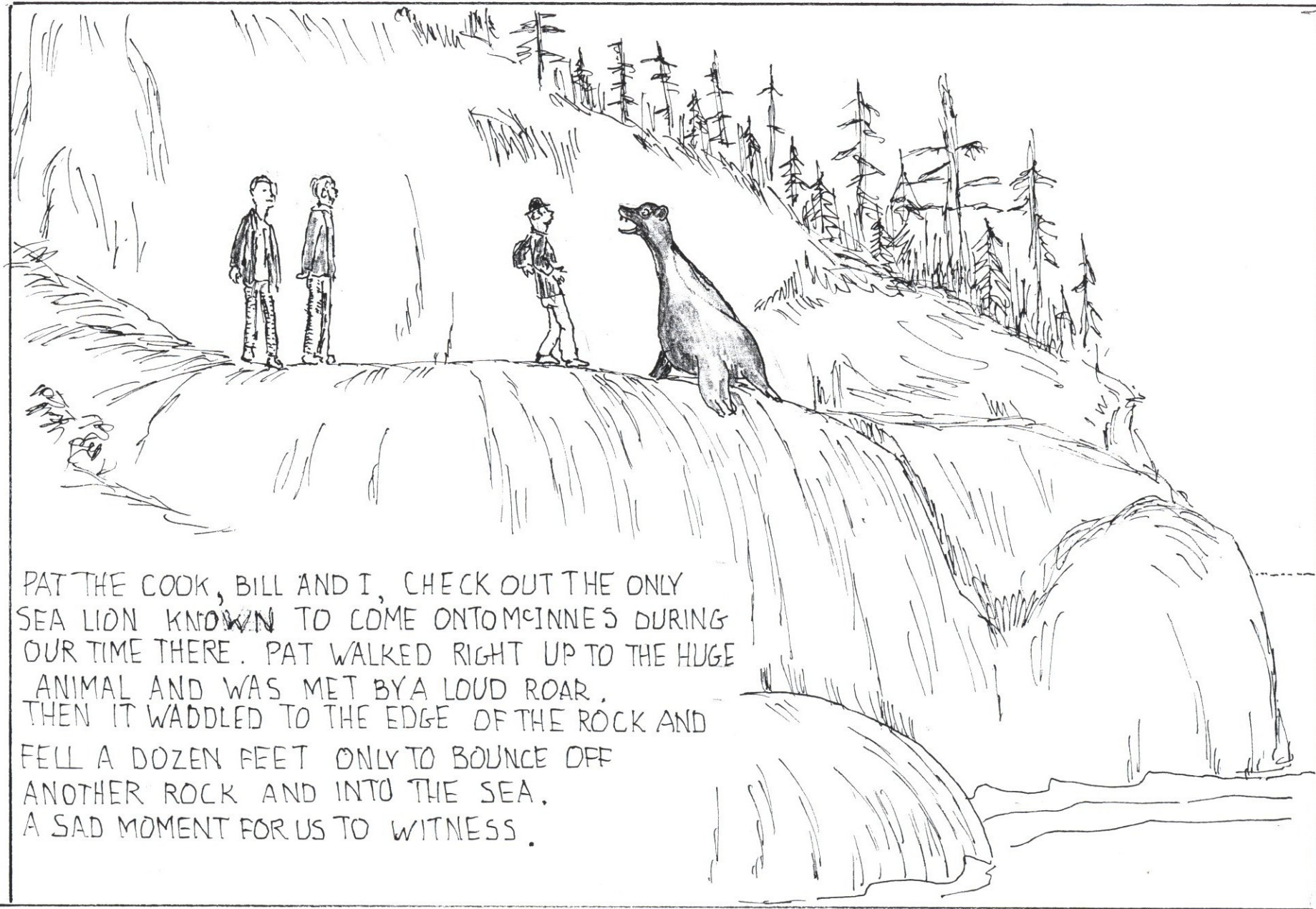
THIS SKETCH SHOWS THE WL2 TIED ALONGSIDE THE BIG BARGE. ABOUT 20 YARDS OF GRAVEL WOULD BE OFFLOADED BY HAND INTO THE WL2, WHICH WOULD TRANSPORT THE LOAD TO MCINNES.

the sun would be shining. Then the big waves would come rolling in. One day we had finished loading the WL2 and were heading back to the Island. Neither of us were happy the way the boat was rolling up and down when suddenly the big flat bottomed barge crashed down off a large wave with such a bang that everything hanging on the cabin walls came crashing down. Sensing our concern, Don, one of the Skippers, informed us that when these old barges get rusty, they will sometimes break in half. By the time Bill and I had finished that load, it was supertime. It took several hours before the Island, table and everything around us would stop swaying.

From the WL2, this transported material would be taken to the cable line at the Island and shovelled into slings, 1/3 yard each. These sling loads would be carried up to the platform where they were hooked up to the cross island cable and dumped on a platform close to the lighthouse site. From there the gravel was shovelled into wheelbarrows and wheeled to a central pile. Eventually, this material would be shovelled into a cement mixer.

During this time, 3 more men arrived. Two of them were carpenters, one being the brother of Alfie but a real nice guy. The third, Larry, was a 19 year old from Manitoba and a carpenter's apprentice. Larry felt that he was much better than any of our lowly labour crew and made no bones about it. Living 24/7 with the Crew on such a small Island must have been like an inmate in San Quentin, hard labour included.

After the forms were built and concrete poured, the buildings started to take shape. Some of the rooms were finished with ¾" tongue & groove fir flooring delivered by the Alexander Mackenzie. Dad gave the job of sanding the floors to Larry. Like the rest of us, Larry was growing a beard. After being given the basic instructions on how to sand the floors with the big generator powered electric sander, he disregarded the warning about throwing the fine sawdust into the airtight heater. Larry tossed a large amount of the sawdust into the roaring flames and the material virtually exploded.



PAT THE COOK, BILL AND I, CHECK OUT THE ONLY
SEA LION KNOWN TO COME ON TOMMIES DURING
OUR TIME THERE. PAT WALKED RIGHT UP TO THE HUGE
ANIMAL AND WAS MET BY A LOUD ROAR.
THEN IT WADDLED TO THE EDGE OF THE ROCK AND
FELL A DOZEN FEET ONLY TO BOUNCE OFF
ANOTHER ROCK AND INTO THE SEA.
A SAD MOMENT FOR US TO WITNESS.

Ken Stewart 1953

It blew the stove pipe off the stove but most of all, it burnt Larry's beard, eyebrows and the front of his hair, plus it left his facial skin very red. Suddenly, Larry was no better than us.

Around the beginning of November, Pat the cook gave up and left for Vancouver. Fortunately for us, Harold and Friend had been replaced by 2 Norwegians, Andy and Lar. Andy had been a cook in the Norwegian Merchant Navy so he went from labourer to cook. It was also about this time that provisions in the kitchen were getting very low. A food order had been sent and was to be delivered by the WL2. Unfortunately, a big storm came up causing the WL2 to seek refuge in the bay where the big barge moored. This left Andy to make the best of all the cases of food items that were always put aside: canned pork, spam, boxes of cereal, etc in the preference of the more favourable food items. Even though this wasn't the best energy food, Andy performed miracles.

The lighthouse keeper had arrived earlier followed by the radio operator. The lighthouse keeper was a great guy and became our good friend. The time finally came when we would go home for Christmas. It was December 15, 1953 and another big storm was brewing. Several crew members were sent in slings down to the 25' longboat from the Mackenzie. The waves were getting much bigger. We would never know if this next "deed" by our Friend was intentional or by accident. Either way, we could have kissed him for lowering the sling with Larry and Alfie enough to catch a wave. After that, the Captain decided to move the longboat to the south side of the Island. One crewman threw out a sea anchor and when the boat rose up near the top of the vertical rock face, a second crewman jumped up onto the rocks. This way they were able to guide the longboat close to the rock face as it rose and dropped some 10' – 12' with each wave. The captain instructed each of us to jump when he yelled, "JUMP". This was no worse than jumping off a kitchen counter. Dad and at least one other person jumped into the boat without incident, however Bill had become homesick and worried about his wife (my sister). Bill's wife was expecting their first child in January. He was so nervous that he hesitated when told to jump. Bill followed the boat clear to the bottom straddling the gunnel.



MCINNES ISLAND

Ken Stewart Dec. 15, 1953

AS THE STORM INCREASED, THE WAVES GOT HIGHER SO WE WERE 'GUIDED TO A POINT ON THE EAST OR SOUTH POINT OF THE ISLAND. THE ROCK WE WERE STANDING ON HAD A NEAR VERTICAL FACE. AS THE BOAT ROSE SOME TEN OR TWELVE FEET WITH EACH WAVE, THE CAPTAIN WOULD TELL THE NEXT PERSON TO 'JUMP'!

The Captain grabbed him by the seat of his pants and the scruff of the neck and pulled him into the boat. Poor Bill! He was out of it for quite awhile.

Once on the Alexander Mackenzie, several of us poor seamen sat in deckchairs on the open deck. Meanwhile, our 2 character Friends who usually ran the WL2 were going about finding ways to make life miserable for "poor Larry". First, they told him he could avoid getting sea sick if he sat and looked up at the ship's mast. Boy, did that get him sick bay! The last thing I remember them doing was looking for some raw bacon for Larry to lick.

I would be returning along with Dad and a few crew members, plus a new cook, to the Island to spend March and part of April in order to finish things up.

I have only touched on the basic events which took place on the construction work on McInnes along with some funny stories; the cook shooting an eagle. John falling off the raised boardwalk onto his back in the mud. What a mess! The sea lion perched on a small rock off the northwest side of the Island - a couple of large waves converged on the rock from different directions popping the animal into the air like a ping pong ball. Huge thunderous breakers crashing into the Island with such a force that you could feel the vibration through the solid rock.

These experiences and many more too numerous to mention are ingrained into my memory.

I shall never forget McInnes Island.

Ken Stewart