Biloxi Memories

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PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRETNA 2015

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sillery, Barbara.
Biloxi memories / by Barbara Sillery.
pages cm
ISBN 978-1-4556-2067-8 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-4556-2068-5 (e-book)
1. Biloxi (Miss.)--History. I. Title.
F349.B5S56 2015
976.2'13--dc23

2015017176

Printed in Singapore

Published by Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.
1000 Burmaster Street, Gretna, Louisiana 70053

To all the people of Biloxi, past and present,
and to Jane Shambra and Bill Raymond,
who guided me along the way

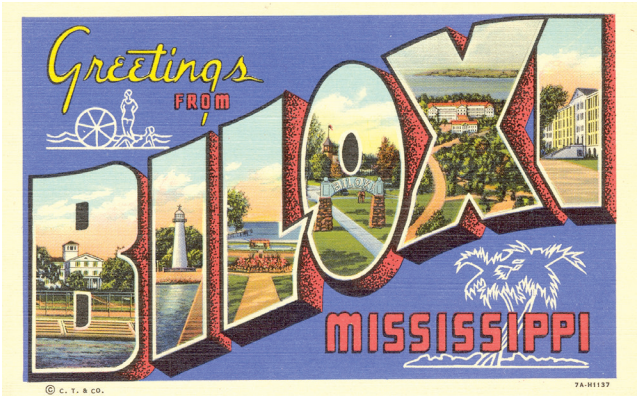
Contents

Prologue

I know a place where you can go
It's on the Gulf of Mexico . . .
A place where life is fun and fancy free
Southern hospitality . . .

—"Down In Biloxi," Ray Fournier, singer/ songwriter

Biloxi is a tale of bathing beauties and beaches, fantasy islands, sailing schooners—the "White Winged Queens"—abundant seafood, pleasure domes, gambling busts and booms, and one legendary lighthouse. Biloxi abounds in characters: Ixolib and Iberville; Ples and Georgia; Elvis and Jayne; Mary Mahoney; Gus Stevens; George Ohr, the "mad potter"; and the hermit of Deer Island.



A vintage postcard welcomes visitors to Biloxi (Courtesy John Stachura Collection)

Surrounded by water—the Mississippi Sound, the Gulf of Mexico, and Back Bay—the people of Biloxi have adapted, endured, and thrived during three centuries of life on the peninsula they call home. Native American tribal groups hunted, fished, and camped along the sandy shorelines. Led by French-Canadian explorer Pierre LeMoyne Sieur d'Iberville in 1699, European entrepreneurs soon arrived. A tiny enclave of Creole settlers blossomed into an antebellum seaside resort. The forging of railroad links in 1870 fueled the rise of a seafood industry, earning Biloxi the title of "Seafood Capital of the World." Despite anti-gaming laws and Prohibition, Biloxi prospered as a destination city in the twentieth century. Booze flowed, and a round of drinks could be ordered at hotel bars and honky tonks along the Biloxi Strip. Dice landed with soft thuds on the green felt of the craps tables. Little white balls rolled in dizzying circles on the roulette wheels, and

the shiny silver handles of the slot machines were irresistible.

Tropical storms and hurricanes churned in the Gulf and two of the fiercest—Camille in 1969 and Katrina in 2005—left Biloxi in tatters. The resilient residents of the city rebounded. Rallying around their landmark lighthouse, the survivors regrouped and rebuilt. In the twenty-first century, Biloxi has regained her reputation as a coastal resort destination, and the now-legal casinos entice eager visitors to place their bets and enjoy headline entertainment in their dazzling venues. While the physical landscape has changed, the cultural traditions of Biloxi live on in her storied past and in the treasured memories of all who have ventured here.

Lagniappe (lan-yap): As with my previous books, each chapter ends with a little lagniappe, something extra to peak your interest. Fitting together the myriad pieces of the colorful puzzle that is Biloxi is like looking through a kaleidoscope; each turn reveals another intriguing layer. This book is a companion to my recent documentary (with the same title) for PBS station WYES-TV in New Orleans.

Chapter 1

Lighting the Way

I have ever faithfully performed the duties of Light Keeper in storm and sunshine . . . I ascended the Tower at and after the last destructive storm when men stood appalled at the danger I encountered.

—Mary Reynolds, 1861

Built in 1848, the Biloxi Lighthouse stands close to shore (Courtesy John Stachura Collection)

"One of the most interesting things about the Biloxi Lighthouse is that during its ninety-some years of manned service, most of those years it was manned by women, starting with Mary Reynolds," states Bill Raymond, the city of Biloxi's historical administrator. In searing heat, blinding rain, hurricane-force winds, and damp, bone-chilling cold, Mary never wavered. Each day at sunset, she left her residence at the base of the sixty-five-foot Biloxi Lighthouse, unlocked the wooden door, and climbed all fifty-seven steps of the spiral staircase. Clutching the heavy material of her voluminous skirt in one hand, she hoisted an oil bucket in the other. On reaching the top step, she paused to catch her breath, opened the trap door, and then pulled herself up the eight rungs of a wooden ladder leading to the lamp room. Here she lit all nine cast-brass lamps. The lamps' reflectors bounced the light out to sea, where oyster schooners and shrimp boat captains caught the shining beacon at a distance of some thirteen nautical miles.

Mary's chores included multiple trips up the brick-lined interior of the tower to clean the black soot off the windows, lights, and reflectors, replace the oil in the light, and note the amount consumed. On the way back down, she would check the stash of valuable oil stored in the base of the tower and order new supplies. This conscientious keeper also made meticulous reports to the United

States Light-House Board, which administrated all lighthouses from 1852-1910. For maintaining an unblemished record, Mary received an annual salary of $400. At the same time, this tireless woman took in and cared for "the many orphaned children of my deceased relatives."

Only with the outbreak of the Civil War did Mary question how she would manage. Her salary came from the Federal government, but her loyalties were to the Confederacy. In a public meeting on June 18, 1861, the citizens of Biloxi voted to extinguish the light, making it difficult for Yankee ships to navigate through the Mississippi Sound. Mary did not have a problem with the lighthouse going dark for the first time since its installation in 1848; but she was indignant over what she considered a usurpation of her appointed duties.

On November 26, 1861, Mary wrote to then Mississippi governor John Jones Pettus and pleaded her case. "I am a woman entirely unprotected." Mary explained that shortly after the light was extinguished ". . . others came and demanded the key of the Light Tower which ever since has remained in the hands of a Company calling themselves 'Home Guards.'" Mary questioned the right of the "disreputable characters taking out the oil in bottles and jugs . . . in the night." She also implied that Biloxi mayor James Fewell might be acting inappropriately as he served as the captain of the same Home Guards, who were "making away with the valuable oil." Mary reiterated that she alone was accountable to the Federal government for the oil and wanted it returned and "placed under my charge at the Light House."

To alleviate any suspicion that she was being disloyal to "our great and holy cause of freedom," she informed the governor that she volunteered to make clothing for Confederate soldiers and that she had already been sewing heavy winter coats "during the hottest season of the year working day and night."

Mayor Fewell justified his actions in a letter to the collector of customs in February of 1862, stating that he merely carried out the wishes of the citizens of Biloxi in extinguishing the light, and that the confiscated oil ". . . was sold for the amount of Thirty Dollars which fund was distributed by me to poor destitute families. Any property taken from the premises of the Light House is safely secured and is subject to the order of the authorities of the Confederate States Government."

In addition to her concerns over the pilfering of oil, Mary's larger issue was money. With the lighthouse dark, there was no need for a keeper on salary, and with the war raging there would be no way to receive money from the trust fund set up in Baltimore for the orphaned children under her care. However, Mary

continued to be listed as official keeper of the Biloxi Lighthouse until 1866. Her name appears in the Light-House Board records as keeper of the Pass Christian Light on the Mississippi Sound from 1873 to 1874. There are no further official accounts of this remarkable woman.

Mary's tenure (1854-1866) as the second keeper of the Biloxi lighthouse was bookended briefly by two men. Her predecessor, Marcellus J. Howard, served as the first keeper (1848-1854), and Perry Younghans succeeded her. Younghans arrived on November 14, 1866, with his wife, Maria, and daughter, Miranda. The next day, November 15, Perry had the privilege of officially turning the Biloxi light back on after five years of darkness during the Civil War. But Perry was in poor health; just one year into his service he died at the age of fifty-three. His twenty-five-year-old widow, Maria, assumed her deceased husband's duties.

By 1877, the keeper's house where Maria lived with her daughter was declared "so far decayed as to render it difficult to make any repairs." Finally, in 1880, the original house was torn down and a new one built. Postcards from the early 1900s depict a lighthouse with additional structures: a stable, chicken house, an enlarged oil house, and a nine-hundred-foot wooden wharf with a gated landing platform.

Like Mary Reynolds, Maria Younghans never chose personal safety over duty. In 1893, the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* reported that during the hurricane "Mrs. Younghans, the plucky woman who was in charge of the Biloxi light kept a light going all through the storm, notwithstanding that there were several feet of water in the room where she lived."

Then approaching her sixties, Maria's joints and bones ached after years of harsh weather and physical challenges, and daughter Miranda stepped in to assist her mother. During the 1916 storm, the local *Daily Herald* newspaper described the winds as so strong and fierce that "the heavy glass in the lighthouse tower was broken by a large pelican being blown against it." The same article praised the bravery of Maria and Miranda Younghans, both of whom were "mindful of the especial need of the light on such a night, replaced the glass temporarily and made the light to shine as before, unimpaired." In 1919, Miranda replaced Maria as the full-time keeper of the Biloxi Lighthouse.

Miranda's daily chores became less arduous in 1926 when the oil-fueled lights were converted to electricity. Miranda Younghans is remembered in her obituary for the "unfailing courtesy and dignity" that she showed to the hundreds of visitors who came to view the lighthouse.

Three keepers—Mary Reynolds, Maria Younghans, and Miranda Younghans—provided a total of seventy-four years of dedicated service. These women set the record for more years of service at a single lighthouse than at any other in the United States.

The history of the lighthouse tower itself is as remarkable as the faithful female keepers who devoted their lives to lighting the way home for sailors at sea. On March 3, 1847, with the assistance of United States representative Jefferson Davis (later the president of the Confederacy), Congress allocated $12,000 to build a lighthouse and an attendant residence in Biloxi. Murray and Hazelhurst Vulcan Works of Baltimore fabricated the cast-iron tower. The cast-metal sheets were shipped in sections on the brig *General North*, assembled, and bolted together in Biloxi. The interior of the tower was strengthened with a brick lining. The Biloxi lighthouse would be only the third cast-iron lighthouse in the United States and the first in the South. The work was completed in 1848.

Records indicate and physical flaws confirmed that the lighthouse, erected on a low, sandy outcropping overlooking the Mississippi Sound, had been placed too close to the shoreline; the second of three hurricanes in 1860 washed out part of the sand bluff under the brick foundation, causing it to list two feet off center. Fortunately, in 1867 a local engineer offered a simple but brilliant solution. According to Raymond, the engineer arrived on site and said, "I know how to fix this; let's just dig out dirt from the north side and let gravity right it."

Simple won out. After prodigious amounts of digging, the Biloxi Lighthouse once again pointed skyward—although falling short of perfect vertical alignment. Standing on the balcony of the Biloxi Visitor Center, a keenly-observant Raymond stares at the lighthouse before him. "It's not right today. . . . If you look at it, you'll see it leans about five degrees to the east and about two degrees to the north."

With nearly fifteen hundred lighthouses in the United States, mariners at sea needed to be able to distinguish one lighthouse from another. During daylight hours, the shape and color were the standard method of identification. From its inception, the Biloxi Lighthouse's tapered tower was painted white with a black-railed balcony surrounding the lamp room at the top. The color scheme is noted in navigational charts and records and cannot be altered. However, in 1867 the Biloxi lighthouse was cloaked in black from base to tip. For years, a legend lingered that the citizens of Biloxi painted the tower black to mourn the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. It seemed an unlikely scenario for the residents of a Confederate-aligned Southern state to want to honor the man who as president fought to keep them in the Union.

In reality, maintenance, not mourning, was the culprit. As early as 1860, orange-

red blotches began to blossom on the snow-white exterior. Rust was quickly eating away at the cast-iron plates. In 1867, to prevent further damage, the Coast Guard ordered that the lighthouse be coated with black tar. Seafarers complained that the lighthouse was difficult to spot. In 1868, the Coast Guard rescinded its order, and the Biloxi Lighthouse once again sported a coat of fresh white paint. Raymond agrees that white is the better choice, both for visibility and for the lighthouse's status as a historic landmark, but the Coast Guard's decision to use black tar was a valid one. "We're in a saltwater environment. Trust me—it's an ongoing battle to keep our lighthouse from rusting away."

The lighthouse's tilt to the east is still visible today (Author's collection)

In addition to color and shape, at night each light has specific characteristics to differentiate it from others close-by along the jagged coastline. The lamp or lens (a Fresnel lens was the standard by the 1920s) flashes at designated intervals. The Biloxi light is on for three seconds, then off for three seconds.

The Biloxi Lighthouse has endured the pounding of the unnamed storms of 1893, 1906, and 1947 and barely escaped the ferocious ladies of Camille in 1969 and Katrina in 2005. Camille's storm surge brought the water level inside the tower to seventeen feet, five inches and reduced the keeper's residence to a pile of rubble. The water level during the height of Katrina's wrath peaked at a record twenty-one feet, five inches and weakened the brick lining. Today blue bands inside the tower mark the height of the water during these two fierce hurricanes.

A black railing surrounds the lamp room of the all-white tapered tower (Author's collection)

Scaffolding surrounds the tower as repairs begin following Hurricane Katrina (Courtesy City of Biloxi)

The only lighthouse to stand in the middle of a four-lane highway (Author's collection)

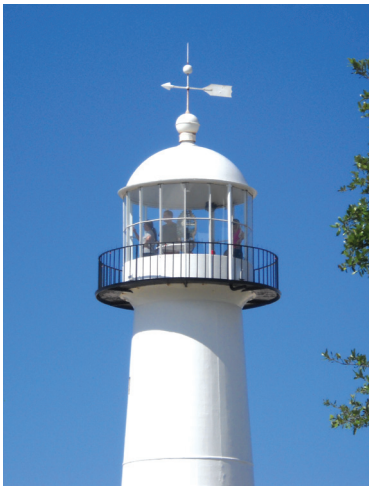
Within hours of Hurricane Katrina's passing, the Biloxi Lighthouse took on iconic status. An American flag, draped over the balcony railing, became a symbol of hope to those who had lost everything. Realizing the importance of the lighthouse to the community, city officials quickly assessed the damage. Scaffolding rose from the bottom up, and the tedious work began on the $421,000 restoration.

On February 19, 2010, a relighting ceremony marked the reopening of the Biloxi Lighthouse. While every effort had been made to restore the lighthouse to the era of Mary Reynolds and her female counterparts Maria and Miranda Younghans, there were some aspects that had to conform to a changing world.

The lighthouse was electrified in 1926. By 1938, the keeper's job had become obsolete. The last keeper, W. B. Thompson, retired in 1939. In 1941, the Coast Guard took over operation of all lighthouses in the United States. With advances in the automation of navigational tools and GPS (Global Positioning Systems), the Coast Guard decommissioned the Biloxi Lighthouse in 1967. A year later, they transferred ownership of the property to the city of Biloxi. In 1973, the tower was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The state of Mississippi designated the Biloxi Lighthouse as a state landmark in 1987. Then, on July 23, 2009, the Biloxi Lighthouse made its debut on a United States postal stamp.

Mary, Maria, and Miranda would surely approve of the accolades but would have some difficulty with the lighthouse's location; the tower itself has remained stationary, but the land around it has not. By the 1920s, the original breakwaters of brick, heavy timbers, and ballast rock in front of the lighthouse were failing to hold back the sea. A concrete stepped seawall

completed in 1928 slowed the erosion and protected Highway 90 running parallel to the coastline. In 1951, the Army Corps of Engineers determined that the seawall needed protection from storm surge and built a twenty-six-mile man-made beach in front of the seawall. With the completion of the sand beach, the Biloxi Lighthouse became landlocked for the first time. As traffic increased along the Gulf Coast, Highway 90 was expanded into four lanes—two lanes headed east and two lanes headed west. The lighthouse now found itself isolated on a small, grassy island in the median or neutral ground as cars and trucks whizzed by. Today it is the only lighthouse to stand in the middle of a major thoroughfare.



The Biloxi Lighthouse is open for guided tours (Author's collection)

Although far-removed from the water's edge, its beacon remains a welcoming sight. "We get tourists here every day," states Raymond, "and the number one question is: 'Do you still use it?' I tell them, 'Yes, the city operates it as a private aid to navigation.'" Raymond adds, "You know, boaters today have all of these other things to help them navigate, but they still use the Biloxi Lighthouse."

Lagniappe: The Biloxi Lighthouse is open for guided tours every day at 9:00, 9:15 and 9:30 a.m. Bill Raymond explains the limited tour hours. "For those who wonder why only three tours are scheduled so early in the day, it's because you have to remember that this is a cast-iron structure in the middle of a heavily-traveled highway. The heat in the lighthouse can climb quickly to well over one hundred degrees during the day."

Fair warning: The climb up fifty-seven steps, capped by a jaunt up the ladder to reach the lamp room, is daunting even in the relatively "cooler" morning hours. During the filming of the documentary *Biloxi Memories and the Broadwater Beach Hotel*, the television crew found breathing a challenge. Hauling up the camera and tripod added to an already difficult assignment. After the shoot in the searing July heat, thoroughly sweat-drenched cameraman Paul Combel pronounced, "We aren't going to do that again anytime soon." Nevertheless, for the best view of the coast, there is no better way to gaze out across the waters than to follow in the footsteps of Biloxi's famous keepers Mary Reynolds, Maria Younghans, and Miranda Younghans.