

Memories of Montague

By Les Murphy

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Bruce Connolly, one of the last of the lighthouse keepers on Montague Island and at Green Cape, mourns the passing of the manned lights and the removal of their powerful magnifying lenses.

"I had 14 years on the lights, including six-and-a-half on Montague," Bruce, who is 76 this year, told the Narooma News from his home in Tasmania.

"That may seem a long time, but it was only a small part of my life really.

"It was also the best part of our life, the time we spent on Montague. No one wanted to leave there."

His two children, Jane and Jeffrey, were raised at the lighthouses, and Jane, Jeff and their mother Mary still live in Narooma.

"The kids did their lessons by correspondence through primary school on Montague, but that was getting a bit hard," Bruce said.



Bruce Connolly with his daughter Jane (now Narooma's Jane Taylor) pictured in 1981.

They returned to Green Cape, south of Eden, so the children could attend Eden High School a round trip of more than 100km each day from the lighthouse.

Bruce's first posting was to Green Cape as junior head keeper in 1970.

After a six-month transfer to Point Stephens, off Nelson Bay, Bruce applied for a head keepers job and was sent to Montague Island in October, 1972.

Bruce said the island was then a sanctuary under the control of the Department of Shipping and Transport and the National Trust.

"We helped to look after the bird and animal life. It was a great experience for the kids.

"The CSIRO would turn up every Easter to study the mutton birds, drag chicks up from their nests to weight and measure them.

"We also did weather observations every three hours except at midnight.

"We maintained the station and looked after everything on the island, doing all the odd jobs about the place. You always seemed to have a paintbrush in your hand."

"If we ever needed anything, the first boat to pass would drop it off on the wharf.

"You might think the island was remote, but we had a great social life.

"We had a lot of friends in Narooma.

"We were forever having visitors. They would jump on the shark cat at Narooma and be out there in 20 minutes.

"The supply boat also came out every week with vegetables and meat or whatever we ordered."

Bruce said the two island families also made their own fun. "Fishing was the great thing. We always had our own boats," Bruce said.

"It was table fishing at first, for snapper and the like, but we soon had so much stacked in the fridge we didn't know what to do with it all."

They then took to game fishing, tag and release, for marlin, yellowfin tuna and king fish.

"Jeff and I were the champion team at the Bermagui tournament in 1979 and Jane and (fellow lighthouse keeper) Steve Mundy were not far behind. Between us we brought home five of the seven trophies that year."

Bruce now lives on seven acres near St Helens in northeast Tasmania. "Narooma got spoilt in the finish, like a lot of places, by development.

"When I first went to Narooma I knew every soul there. Later on I could walk into the supermarket and not know anybody."

Mary Connolly still lives in Narooma very close to their daughter Jane, who with her husband Bill runs Taylors Seafoods.