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An island, a lighthouse and one man's determination to save them both

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JAMES ISLAND — The Morris Island lighthouse looks like it's attached to Johnny Ohlandt's island, looming out there across the sweep of marsh grasses.

Ohlandt played on the caissons of the old lighthouse station as a child. As a teenager, he'd slip out in a rowboat from the Ashley River and pull the oars back into the tides of shallow Clark Sound, sneaking over to fish the island and sleep in the then-closed-up lighthouse, out of sight of U.S. Coast Guardsmen who patrolled on horses and would kick you off.



Photo by Brad Nettles

John Ohlandt has been going to his island, Black's Island, from his Clark Sound home for years by john boat. The island has been placed under the strictest conservation easement.

The 80-year-old has hunted all his life on the nearby Black's Island, and eventually bought it. He lives across the sound, within sight of his island and the iconic lighthouse behind.

He watched for years as the lighthouse fell apart from neglect. And then he saved it.

"He was the heart and soul of the whole effort," said Robert New, founding member of Save the Light, the group that rescued the decrepit old tower. "He's the guardian."

Ohlandt is earthy and earnest, laughing easily. He's a little uncomfortable as he concedes, "I'm one of those tree huggers." Strolling out to a tidal run of Clark Sound where his johnboat is docked, he smiles as he cautions a visitor that they're walking an illegal causeway -- a dirt and stone levee through the marsh that wouldn't be permitted today.

The view is spectacular: wide open skies, hammock islands and the sea. A white ibis rises out of the marsh. To one side of the channel, fishermen are casting; to the other, oystermen are working their poled-off bed.

Ohlandt talks about how in the old days you could go out to the beds and collect your fill of prize "selects," single oysters the size of a small shoe. Now the commercial guys pick the beds clean, he said. He gauges the tide deepening the tidal run and laughs as he says his "yacht" will be floating in a few minutes.

Off in the distance stretches Black's Island. It's so commonly called Block Island that even Ohlandt calls it by that name. He spends every minute on that island that the tide will let him before it drains from the muddy channel leading in. A day earlier, he spent every daylight hour out there.

"That's his paradise," said Pam Ohlandt, his wife.

'What am I going to do?'

Johnny Ohlandt is the son of a Charleston wholesale grocer who loved to surf fish on Morris Island. Billy Ohlandt would carry his son with him when Johnny was as young as he can remember.

Billy Ohlandt and the others would walk what was then a quarter mile of sand beach to the ocean. Johnny would stay to play at the lighthouse station at the inlet's edge, already eroding into an island spit of its own.

As a young teen, Johnny Ohlandt was one of the students of math teacher Ephie Seabrook, and Ohlandt accompanied the teacher while launching from his home near Fort Johnson to hunt raccoon on Black's Island.

The island, so near the lighthouse Ohlandt loved as a child, enthralled him. The sound was way out there back then, and mostly too shallow to get much use. So, the islands were roamed like wilderness. Everybody knew that somebody owned Black's Island, but nobody seemed to know who.

"I just got a feeling for this one," he said. "I always said, 'I want that island.'"

Then one day, while Ohlandt slung rice bags in his father's grocery warehouse, a loud-voiced rice broker could be heard cussing outside -- "What am I going to do with this?" The broker had been told by a big customer in the Northeast to sell some land the customer owned, including the island, or forget about keeping the customer's business.

The broker told the customer he had gotten an offer for the island, naming a price so cheap he thought the owner would refuse. The owner said sell. The broker bought the island to save face. Ohlandt kept in touch in order to keep hunting the island, and years later, the broker sold the 60 acres of high ground and vast spread of marsh to him.

Ohlandt also bought and built his home on a piece of the James Island point where his math teacher had lived, in view of "his" island and the lighthouse. He became the habitue of both.

Like others islands among the innumerable hammocks of the Lowcountry, Black's Island is a little Eden, haunted by sweetgrass, painted buntings, occasional deer and bobcats. Ohlandt has put the island under the strictest conservation easement -- no construction more complex than a shack, no electricity, no pier, no roads. There's only a lone path.

Over the years, he watched ruefully as the tides took and tore away the caisson of the old lighthouse. "People started breaking in, tearing it up," he said. By the 1960s, the lighthouse had become so swamped and hazardous that the Coast Guard proposed to tear it down.

Billy Ohlandt was among the small horde of anglers and preservationists who raised hell. He kept the letter sent to him by U.S. senator Strom Thurmond. The Coast Guard budget for the year was on Thurmond's desk, the senator wrote, and he was sure the service would find some way to protect the lighthouse. The service later sold it to land speculators who let it idle.

Thirty years later, Johnny Ohlandt would own it, briefly.

'Like heaven'

In the mid-1990s, with the lighthouse maybe just one hurricane from toppling into the sea, it went up for foreclosure sale. Johnny Ohlandt, New and a few others formed Save the Light, ponied up enough money and bought it to preserve.

They turned the island over to the state, and Save the Light managed a fundraising campaign that led to new caissons and other supports being put in place to keep it standing. A decade later, the state bought Morris Island itself, creating a heritage preserve.

The islands and the lighthouse, the treasured memories of Ohlandt's childhood, were saved.

The Christmas tree in his living room sits by a cabinet full of huge conch shells, a photo on the wall of the old Morris Island Lighthouse with the caissons he scrambled as a kid, and a vintage map of inlet and sound environs.

That recent day on Black's Island, he told his wife, was his happiest day in the last six years. Each time he boats out to the island now, he carries 30 black walnuts, 30 pecans and three ears of corn for the squirrels, who gather in the trees near his landing site when they hear him coming.

He also takes along a load of dirt, partly to shore up erosion, partly because an old American Indian friend once told him, when you go to an island, bring a gift.

One by one, the once-remote hammock islands behind Folly Beach are becoming subdivisions. Looking toward Ohlandt's island from the causeway road to the beach, Peas Island is now rows of waterfront houses. A developer's plan to run a bridge from Peas to Long Island was stymied only by a South Carolina Supreme Court decision.

Ohlandt has watched it coming for years, and he doesn't like it.

"You know, you hear about 'smart growth.' I want somebody to tell me when 'smart' is 'enough' growth," he said. It reminds him of the studies that show when rats get crowded too close, they start to eat each other.

"All I know, one thing for sure, that one island is never going to get developed," he said. He looks out from his dock at Black's Island, the lighthouse with its turret framed against the clouds. "To me it's like heaven."

