

LOCAL LIFEGUARDS

Wise to the ways of the ocean, these guardians scan the surf and keep safety first

Coastal Life

Story by MARILYN GILBAUGH

A big draw for locals and tourists during the warm months in Cannon Beach, Seaside and Gearhart are the miles and miles of pristine sand and, depending on the day or the hour, the moody Pacific Ocean's gently lapping or churning white-capped waves. In Cannon Beach and Seaside (and not too many years ago in Gearhart), lifeguards scan the horizon, making beaches safer places to recreate. Mostly men but a smattering of women, athletically able and safety savvy, these lifeguards make summer beach visits feel like, well, more like summer.

On the job from Memorial Day through Labor Day, a lifeguard's employment requirements are impressive. To qualify for the job, first and foremost, guards must be able to swim well and swim far. In Cannon Beach, lifeguards operate under the auspices of the district's police department. Applicants must swim through the surf, out and around Haystack Rock and thread through "The Needles," a nearby outcropping of tall, spiraling rocks. Then using surfboards, they must maneuver north to Chapman Point. For those who make the cut, training takes place the first two weekends in June.

Meeting the minimum age to lifeguard, 18-year-old Seaside High School graduate Calvin Pollard is spending most of his summer working as a first-year Cannon Beach lifeguard. His name may sound familiar; he's one of the area's 2015 Oregon East-West Shri-

ner All-Star football standouts. Pollard lifeguards 10 hours a day, four days a week, rotating with five other guards: four men and one woman, who, this season, range in age from 18 to almost 50. There are also two guards on call.

A lifeguard tower rises on the beach in front of Haystack Rock. In addition to the perch, the team has an SUV equipped with a rescue board and a kayak, and there are two ATVs.

"It can get pretty windy up in the tower. Being on duty is kind of like being a firefighter on call. You're up there, scanning the beach with binoculars and a scope, best for cutting through fog," Pollard says. "The ocean's water temperature usually varies between 51 and 55 degrees — though one day it reached 62. We wade out each day to a knee-deep depth and drop a thermometer into the ocean to take the reading. It's chilly. If we're in the ocean, we wear wet suits."

Lifeguarding in Cannon Beach isn't new. Gail McCormick was a full-time Cannon Beach lifeguard for five seasons in the 1970s. It ran in the family; her brother, Mark, was a Seaside lifeguard. McCormick was the first woman hired as a guard on Cannon Beach's five miles of sandy beach.

"Early in the season we would swim and train at Fort Steven's Coffinberry Lake — the ocean was too cold," she recalls. "To stay in shape, as the weather grew warmer, we would swim around Haystack Rock and

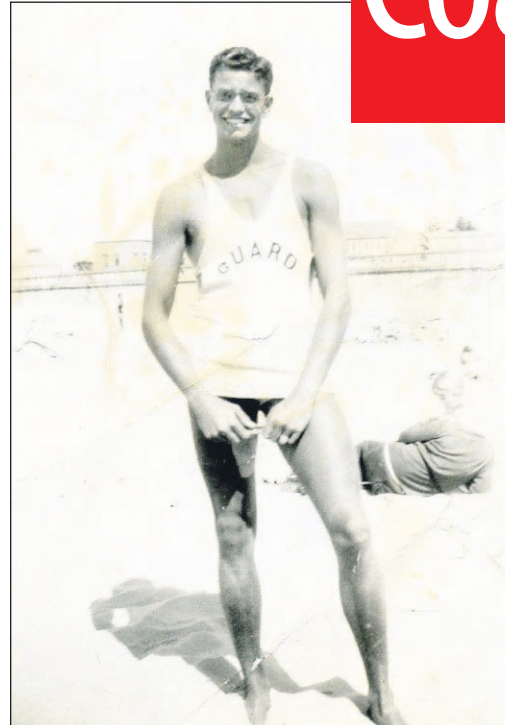
Surf's Up: Wisdom from lifeguards

- Go into the surf with a pal — never alone
- Beware of sneaker waves and tidal changes
- Stay off of logs
- Find a vantage point on the shore, it provides a bearing when you drift
 - If caught in a crab hole, exit laterally.
 - If you see someone in distress, first call for professional help
 - If you are knocked under by waves and become disoriented, follow your air bubbles to the surface.

do long runs from Haystack Rock north to Chapman Point Creek. We hung out together because we worked six days a week. Getting two days off in a row was a big deal." A strong swimmer, after her lifeguarding years McCormick went on to swim the English Channel.

For over 100 years, Seaside lifeguards have scanned the beaches using binoculars and telescopes. They sit high in the tall white lifeguard stand located just down from Seaside's landmark Turnaround, and they drive two vehicles up and down the beach.

In the 1930s, one such lifeguard was Bill Palmer, a 21-year-old Baker City resident who took a break from attending the University of Oregon law school to be a summer lifeguard in Seaside. His daughter, current Gearhart



Submitted photo
Left: 21-year-old Bill Palmer spent a summer lifeguarding on Seaside's beach in 1932. His daughter, Pat McDonald, now lives in Gearhart.



Photo by Joshua Bessex

A lifeguard tower stands tall on the beach at Seaside.



Photo by Joshua Bessex

Ralph Davis, 94, worked as a lifeguard in Seaside in the 1950s with his wife, Betty Davis, before moving to Gearhart and lifeguarding there for 10 years.

resident Pat McDonald, and her four siblings continued to summer in Seaside, and their father passed along his knowledge of the ocean.

"We were raised with a very, very strong respect for the ocean," recalls McDonald.

The Seaside lifeguards are employed by the Seaside Fire

Department.

"Our lifeguards respond to everything from the ocean up to the Prom," says David Rankin, who was a lifeguard in Seaside for two years before becoming division chief of operations and training of the lifeguarding program in 2012. "Shifts vary; some are 10

hours, and some are six hours. We overlap to bring in more coverage in the afternoon.

"We try as best we can to have two guards always on and three on weekends," he says. "We'll also cover Gearhart if we get a call that we're needed."

Gearhart used to have lifeguards of its own: the legendary Ralph and Betty Davis. Lifeguards in the Seaside for five years in the 1950s, the couple moved on to guard the Gearhart beaches for 10 years.

"Our whole family — Betty, me, along with our assistants who just happened to be our two sons — scanned the beaches in Gearhart," Ralph Davis recalls. "From the time they were 10 and 11 the boys were out there with us.

"Gearhart didn't have a lifeguard tower," he says. "We sat high up on the dunes where we could also keep warm in the tall grass when a cold wind was blowing."

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