

Kincardine's legendary Phantom Piper marks 20 years

By Barb McKay

Twenty years and 1,100 performances later, the legend of the Phantom Piper lives on.

It was in 1996 that Kincardine Scottish Pipe Band members began piping at the top of the Kincardine lighthouse at sunset to honour the legend of Donald Sinclair. The legend was documented by former *Kincardine Independent* publisher Eric Howald, who was inspired by an event following his daughter Sarah's (a descendant of Sinclair) graduation. The family was visiting at the cottage of Sarah's coach. Sarah had her bagpipes with her and was piping on the shore when a bagpiper across the lake responded back. The two began playing back and forth.

The legend, as written by Howald, is this:

Back in 1856, on a cold October day, a small vessel left the Port of Goderich carrying a family from the Isle of Skye, Scotland. It was the final leg of a journey for the immigrant family, which intended to farm at Penetangore (now Kincardine).

The weather was cloudy with a light breeze out of the southwest when the vessel left Goderich, goes the story. But as the boat approached Point Clark, the sky turned black and a cold wind started to blow out of the west, making for heavier and heavier seas. As the vessel slowly beat its way north, late afternoon turned to dusk and the captain feared he would not find Penetangore in the dark.

Donald Sinclair, fearing for his family, went down into the hold and fetched his pipes. He prayed for safe passage and then played a lament. The sound of the pipes carried across the water to Penetangore where another piper heard the rich sound. The settler on shore retrieved his pipes and played another lament in return, just as the sky suddenly cleared in the west and the sun set beneath



Two decades of piping from the top

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Kincardine Scottish Pipe Band member Leslie Ray plays at the top of the Kincardine lighthouse as the Phantom Piper for the 100th time. (Barb McKay photo)

the cold waters.

The captain, knowing he had to be near Penetangore, headed for the drone of the bagpipes and eventually made his way into the harbour.

For many years after the narrow escape, Donald Sinclair often went down to the harbour to play the pipes at dusk. They say it was a way to remember his good fortune and to remind others of the power of the pipes.

And it's in the memory of Donald Sinclair that the Kincardine Scottish have decided to play at dusk atop the lighthouse on sunny summer evenings throughout July and August (with the exception of

Saturday evenings when the Band is parading).

(The legend of the phantom piper cannot be reproduced without the written permission of Eric Howald.)

In the time since the legend of the Phantom Piper was written, a total of 83 bagpipers have played at the top of the lighthouse, including Leslie Ray, who last Tuesday gave her 100th performance. She was joined by Phantom Piper co-ordinator David Hamilton at the lighthouse to commemorate the moment.

"I can't believe it. I didn't realize it until David told me last week," she said. "I

knew I was getting close, but I haven't kept track, myself. I'm amazed really. I'm looking forward to cracking 200 in a few years."

Ray performed as the Phantom Piper for the first time in 1998 and takes her turn at the top of the tower roughly five times each summer.

"I was very freaked out the first couple of years because I'm afraid of heights, but now it doesn't bother me," she said. "I have played at the top of the steps when there is a very high wind."

Pipers perform at dusk every night, with the exception of Saturday night when

the band marches down Queen Street. Some pipers prefer to pipe from the top of steps at the rear of the lighthouse. They perform for approximately 15 minutes with favourite Scottish songs and hymns, including *Scotland the Brave*, *March of the Champions Supreme*, *Amazing Grace*, and *Highland Cathedral*.

"When we started this it was supposed to be sunny summer evenings, but it became so popular with people who came to watch, and with the pipers, that we did it as the weather permitted

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