The Perils of a Lightkeeper

By Bertha M. Best

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Hudson City Lighthouse keeper Frank M. Best. ...

The following true story by Bertha M. Best appeared in the December, 1911 edition of The Lightkeeper, a magazine that was published by Samuel H. Strain for his Lighthouse Literature Mission. The author of the story, Bertha M. Best, was the daughter of Frank M. Best who was the keeper of the Hudson City Lighthouse from 1893 until he died in 1918. Frank Best assumed the position of lighthouse keeper from his father Henry D. Best who was the lighthouse keeper at the Hudson City Lighthouse from 1874 to 1892. Today the Hudson City Lighthouse is known as the Hudson-Athens Lighthouse.

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Vintage image of the Hudson City Lighthouse, also ...

Perhaps in today's world, Frank Best, the lighthouse keeper, would probably be charged with child endangerment, but this was in the early 1900s, when life was much different and the lighthouse keepers and their families were a tough dedicated breed of people. Much of what they often did in those days was simply part of their normal way of life, something that is much different in our modern era.



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Old color post card of the Hudson City ...

Afloat on Ice Drift

By Bertha M. Best

The month of February had gone by and the ice on the Upper Hudson, which had been none too good during that month, threatened to break up at any minute when the March thaw began its softening work.

The rain had poured steadily for a week, and the sun had shown on it for another week, until it had become extremely dangerous to walk on. Few did who could help it, and when they did, it was with the utmost caution, using light scows and grappling irons.

But if the ice broke up, for a time, the crossing would be worse than before, with the heavy jam of floating ice, moving back and forth in the river, acting as a menace to docks and boats alike.

Several miles above the point, known as Percy's Reach, the river was a mile wide between the two villages on either side. At this place, also, it was divided into two channels by a narrow sand-bar, which had raised itself converted from the rock-waste of the Adirondacks that the ice and water scoured off every year.

As this natural barrier grew wider and higher, it formed a deposit for the ice that floated down the river, materially affecting the ice-crop as well as navigation, since the ice, once blown by the northwest winds that prevailed in the fall, was kept there by this sand-bar; consequently the rough ice blown to the one side formed a mass that froze over more quickly than that on the other side, which was eventually smoother. It also resulted in the ice on one side breaking up in patches, while the ice on the other side was firm, perhaps strong.

On the 4th of March, the expected happened, and the ice started to move out at half past four. It was still floating in a mass down river, and Mr. Best and his daughter were left standing on the shore.

Mr. Frank M. Best was the keeper of, and lived with his family in, the light-station, situated 200 feet from and directly in line with the sand-bar. They lived there at all seasons of the year, and had some pretty adventurous times, especially the father and daughter, for they were both obligated to go over oftener than the rest of the family, the father to procure provisions and get the mail, and the daughter to attend school. Both were fearless of anything pertaining to the water, and Bertha could pull as good a stroke as a man, notwithstanding the fact that she was only eleven years old.

On this day, Mr. Best had brought her over early in the morning to school in a scow on runners. They had sat in the boat together, and he pulled the boat over the ice by means of a pike-pole. The sun had not yet struck the ice for the day, so that it stiffened somewhat during the night; it had borne the weight of the boat fairly well. Later in the morning he had succeeded in getting back again, and immediately afterward crossed to the shore again as soon as he had gotten his dinner. He again pulled the boat off the shore preparing to go home, and attempted to break his way through. They had been carried half a mile below where they had started from, and they were only fifty feet across.

Stopping to rest an instant, Mr. Best hastily took in the situation, and, turning his boat, proceeded back to the shore as quickly as possible through the open channel he had made in going out. After he had reached the shore, he looked about. Seemingly now there was no prospect of being able to get home. What to do he could not think; but something must be done, and quickly, for the day was growing darker, and by half-past five it would be so black that they could not see.

The lighthouse he had left in charge of his wife, who, with his son, a lad of six, awaited his return. As no boats were running, there was no need of lighting the lamp, but he knew that his wife was anxiously awaiting his return, and did not wish to leave her in suspense as to whether he had stopped in the village for the night or had been crushed in the crossing. It never occurred to him to leave his daughter in the village at the house of a friend. All he thought of was getting home.

A large field of ice was now floating down the river, about fifty feet from the shore, and, calling his daughter's attention to that fact, told her that he thought the current would carry it past the lighthouse, and if she was willing to undergo the possible risk that was involved, they might go out to it in a big boat, and after getting onto the ice, leave the boat in charge of the man who came out with them. The greatest danger was that they would be separated before reaching home, but that could be avoided by carrying a rope. Calling to one of the river-men, Mr. Best asked him to take them out in their boat to the larger field of ice that was floating down a short distance from shore, and after leaving them on it, row the boat back to the shore.

The channel was now clear to this field, and getting into the boat, the three rowed out to it, so that soon the keeper and his daughter were on it, and the man was rowing back to shore. The two crossed over to the side of the float that was nearest the lighthouse, and then Mr. Best fastened one end of the rope to himself, the other end to Bertha, and in that manner they floated together down the channel.

At first the field upon which they were standing had filled the greater part of the channel, but gradually cracks appeared, which caused it to divide and then to sub-divide. These pieces in turn broke up into smaller pieces, and when they had floated halfway to their destination, they stood on a comparatively small piece, and the danger that that piece, too, would go from under their feet grew more imminent. From afield one-half mile in width and a mile long, it had lessened until they stood on a piece scarcely twenty-seven feet in extent, surrounded by gapping cracks. The only thing that mitigated their danger was the fact that there was no wind stirring. If there had been, their ride would have been made impossible, for the ice would have been quickly broken up by the waves created by the winds. Now, the only reason for its going to pieces was the extreme softness of the ice.

Mr. Best realized something of the danger of the journey that they were taking, in fact knew that it was not an ordinary thing for most people to do, but with calm assurance of a man who has passed through many dangers, feared not for the result. As for his daughter, she was unconscious of any particular danger. From a small child she had lived on the water, and it was her home and her playground. She had crossed the river, foaming with white caps, and at other times in sunnier weather had rowed around it to search the shore on either side for flowers, and now their journey seemed but an incident of their every-day life. She felt no responsibility, no danger; her father was with her. Only occasionally she moved with her father to avoid gaping cracks that were settling over the ice. But they were calmer than anybody who saw them. Eager watchers from all sides were following their course. The railroad men crowded to the shore to look, and when the two had floated down so far as to be indistinct in the grey gloom of the fast ending day, many brought field-glasses and continued to look.

On the edge of the shore, about half a mile above where they had started, was a promontory, elevated about three hundred feet above the river, but even with the city, which was built on a hill. To this hill a number had come for the purpose of seeing the ice move out when it had been reported in the town that it was loose, but when they saw what it carried with it and learned that it was a plan of the keeper's for reaching home, they wondered at his foolhardiness, for he might care for himself, but could he save two, if it became necessary, from the ice-cold water and the floating pieces of ice? It was a question, and their hearts grew sick with fear as they watched the ice divide and separate as it forged on its way down the river, the field splitting, and the cracks nearing the two every minute.

Meanwhile, in the lighthouse, as it grew time for them to start, Mrs. Best looked out occasionally to see if she could catch a glimpse of her husband and daughter. Suddenly a noise warned her that something unusual was going on outside. Looking out, she saw the ice was moving. She knew that they had a boat with them, and for that, it would be harder for them to reach home, and would take longer than if the ice were still fastened to the shore. Finally, it was with a feeling of satisfaction that she saw them appear on the sore. She then waited for them to start, but when she saw the way that they had finally adopted for reaching the lighthouse, both she and her little son went out-of-doors. There Mrs. Best stood, shading her eyes, and gazing steadily into the distance so that she might more readily follow their course. When she saw how the danger increased as they neared the lighthouse, her brow contracted, and the look of anxiety deepened, but no sound escaped her; but the child at her side voiced her own thought as well as his when he danced up and down crying: - "My sister will be drowned – my sister will be drowned."

Finally, the floating mass reached the end of the sand-bar, and then, seeing that they would float up to the front of the lighthouse, and the ice would grind itself to pieces on the rocks, as the furthermost pieces were doing, but would never reach the stairs which were on the other side of the lighthouse, he called to his wife and told her to fasten a rope to the railing of the lighthouse and throw it over. In five minutes Mrs. Best had fastened the rope according to her husband's directions, and it was done none too quick, for, in another minute, the ice floated up to the rocks, and, hastily climbing hand-over-hand, they seized the rope, and leaving the perilous float that that they had taken passage on, they climbed up to safety. Before entering the lighthouse, they paused and looked on the soft, snow-like mass that was breaking with a dull splashing sound on the rocks, and raising itself into the air again with so little resistance that they wondered it had not bent long before beneath the weight of the living burden before they had accomplished their journey. Surely they must have been drowned if some unseen power had not protected them.