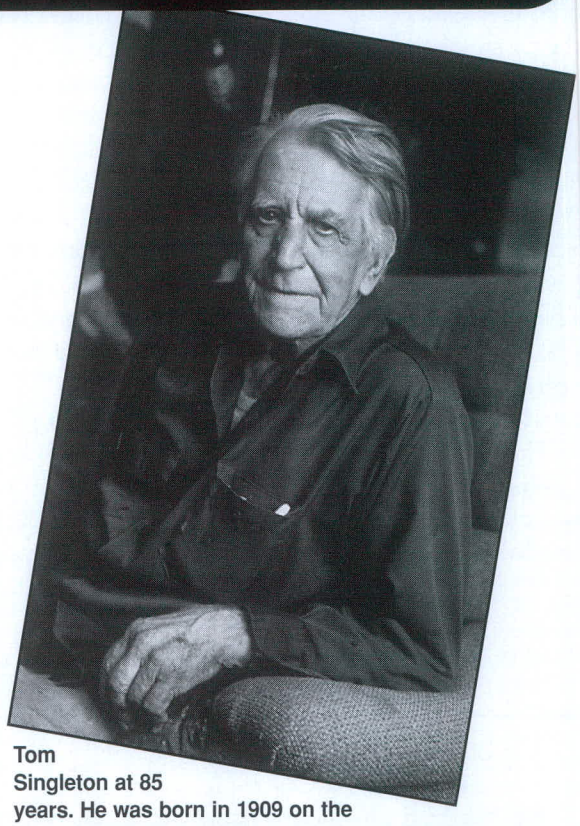
The Lighthouse Kids of Crisp Point



The lighthouse kids. From left – Tom (with slingshot), Roy, Charlie and Jack. Photo taken at the Two Harbor Light Station. The Singletons moved to the Two Harbor Station when Tom was seven. All the brothers, except Jack, are still alive. Roy is the oldest at 87 years.



Tom Singleton at 85 years. He was born in 1909 on the day his father joined the Lighthouse Service. Unless otherwise noted, all photos courtesy of Charles Brill.

An Interview with Tom Singleton
By Charles Brill

"I wish them damn boys of yours would drown and get it over with... we're tired of pullin' them out of the lake."

—Captain Hickey, U.S. Life-Saving Station, Two-Hearted River

Joseph Noah Singleton joined the United States Lighthouse Service October 22, 1909. The same day his wife, Martha Elizabeth, gave birth to his second son, Tom. During 30 years of service, Joseph Singleton would be promoted from First Assistant to Keeper and serve as Keeper at Charity Island, Two Harbors and Crisp Point. His four sons—Roy, Tom, Charlie and Jack—would be tagged the "Lighthouse Kids" by schoolmates.

Tom Singleton is a man who projects the image of a patriarch. His six-foot frame seems to unfold to a greater height when he stands. Large hands, a nose that has been broken three times and hard eyes that suggest a man that could not be bullied. By today's standards, much of what Tom Singleton did as a young man would be considered illegal or reckless. Proud and independent, he walked away from the 10th grade on the first day of school and signed on to the 600-foot ore carrier *Roberts* as a coal-passer.

His exploits as a trapper, hunter, fisherman and guide are well known in the Eastern Upper Peninsula. A 90-year-old resident from Paradise advised, "If a fella can't tell you a story about Tom Singleton, he's not a native."

Singleton began his journey as a "Lighthouse Kid" on Lake Huron's Charity Island. The lighthouse on the northwest side of the small, wooded island marks a dangerous shoal bank at the entrance to Saginaw Bay. The island is 12 miles from Caseville Harbor, and the Singleton family's only contact to the mainland was by sailboat.

Singleton recalled one sail with humorous detail. "I was real young, but I'll never forget the day Dad threw Aunt Johanna overboard. It was a Sunday, and Mother and Aunt Johanna were all dressed-up and sittin' in the stern. It was hot and windless, and Dad at the tiller. He's watchin' the sails. Catch a little wind here, a little there.

"My aunt is splashing water on him with her hands. Dad told her, 'Cut it out or I'll throw you overboard!' Well, she did it again. He jumped, grabbed her and threw her over. I can see it clearly. She went down like a rock and her big hat stayed on the water. She came up laughin' and beggin' Dad to let her back in the boat."

Tom was seven years old when his father was transferred to Two Harbors, MN. Two Harbors was an important shipping point for the Messabe and Iron Range railway. This was not a shipping season duty-station, but a 12-month residence for the family and their home for seven years. For the Singleton brothers, it was the time of their youth. It was here they were given the tag "Lighthouse Kids" by their schoolmates. It was here the four German-Irish boys often fought their way home from the schoolyard to the safety of fenced coal docks.

"They'd be waiting for us when we left the schoolyard. The Norwegians and Swedes didn't bother us much. But those Finlanders, they had a gang, and would hang around like a pack of wolves waiting for us. They'd chase us, and we'd run to beat heck. We'd get tired and stop. And Roy, he was the biggest, would knock the hell out of the first two, then we'd run again. When we got to the coal yard gate, the watchman would be waiting for us."

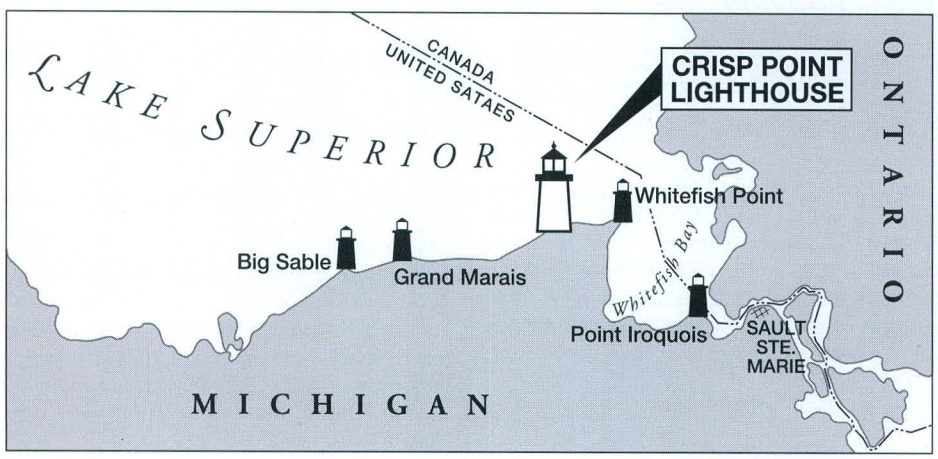
When the Singleton family moved from Two Harbors to Crisp Point, Joseph had the rank of Keeper, and the government gave them passage across [Lake] Superior in a freighter. "Captain" Singleton would remain at the station until his retirement to become the last light keeper.

Crisp Point was a remote lighthouse between the life-saving station at Vermilion Point and the Two Hearted River. The station was active during the shipping season: April to mid-December. The family spent the winters in Newberry. The 35-mile trip to town in a Model T took seven hours.

As Tom recalled, "You could barely make the trip. In the spring there was two or three feet of water in the road. We used to take rope, cross-cut saws and block and tackle." From December until May it was impossible to use any mode of transportation other than a dog team or snowshoes. It was "no winter wonderland," wrote a reporter for the *Newberry News*. "There, six months of the year, driving nor'easters from across the lake spend their full force against the unprotected shore and pile it with mountainous banks of ice and snow."



This gaff-rigged open ketch was the vessel used by the family to travel from Charity Island to Caseville Harbor, MI. Tom's dad threw aunt Johanna overboard from this vessel.



For 14-year-old Tom Singleton, it was a time of discovery and adventure. The family lived in a large brick duplex. Tom remembered, "Everything was slick and polished oak with big, sliding doors. Our folks wouldn't let us take a dog in house." The home had two big fireplaces, one on each side. The Singleton family lived on one side and there were two apartments on the other. The First Assistant lived downstairs and the Second, upstairs.

Electric service has never reached Crisp Point, and the residents continue to rely on oil lamps or generators. A Coast Guard phone line was eventually connected to the stations of Grand Marais, Crisp Point, Vermilion and Whitefish Point to Newberry and the SOO.

Canned milk was used for drinking and cooking. Meat other than venison was a rarity. "After the 4th of July, we'd eat venison," said Tom. "We'd shoot a small buck or a red doe..." As Tom recalled, "Everyone helped each other. When the Coast Guard at Vermilion went into town, they'd get our groceries." In the warm days of summer, Tom's mother would get together with the women of Vermilion and arrange family picnics on the beach.

The first summer at Crisp Point, Tom Singleton had his first offshore adventure. The Pearly Nolan family lived about a quarter-mile west of the lighthouse on the site of the Crisp Point Life-Saving Station. (Named after its first captain, Christopher Crisp, it began operation in 1876 and was inactive when the Singletons arrived in 1923). Nolan was assigned as the caretaker of the Coast Guard buildings and maintained the telephone lines.

Tom said, "He got blew out" with the Nolan kids when he took them fishing. He took the rowboat out to pull his hook-line. The line was 200 feet long and [we] had a hook every 20 feet. Reaching for the flag-buoy that marked the end, he dropped the oar.

Continued Tom, "He figured he could skull back and retrieve it, but a sudden summer storm blew the boat out." Several hours later they were picked up by the vessel *Clover* en route to Isle Royale to pick up "pinch-gas buoys." What did his Dad say? "Nothing. No matter how stormy it was, he'd say, 'Well, you goin' to get out there? Ain't going to catch any fish on shore.'"

Tom had one yearly chore. In the spring he had to paint the white picket fence around a small cemetery. He pointed to a photograph. "It was up by that big pine tree, just past the barn. Most of the graves were there when we arrived." He remembered one burial. A local man by the name of Pete Babbitt was carrying the mail up to Crisp Point from the Vermilion station.

"He was on his way back and had just passed the fog signal when he saw an overshoe sticking out of the sand. He kicked it and the foot came off. He returned to the house, walked into the kitchen and said, 'There's a dead man down there."' They laid the remains on a canvas and buried it in the cemetery. Tom figured, "He probably fell overboard in the fall, froze in the ice and floated in." Who was he? Tom shook his head. "They never found out."

The isolation of the lighthouse, described by a visitor as "a wild looking place with tall, somber fir and pine trees in gloomy ranks," provided an ideal setting for story telling on a stormy night. Tom recalled, "The old man used to tell visitors, 'Watch it when you're on the beach. Old Reilly's runnin' up and down the beach looking for his fingers.'"

According to Singleton, William Reilly was buried behind the white picket fence of the Crisp Point Cemetery. Reilly was lost when the *John Owen* sank in the November storm of 1919. His body was found on the beach by a mail carrier west of Crisp Point in the spring of 1920. In his dad's story, "They cut Reilly's fingers off when they chopped him out of ice."

Tom would often stand watch with his father. "The old man was 'Skipper,' so he always took the first watch. Every night he'd go up to the tower and light the lamp. We'd stand watch in the house and look out of the window. If it got foggy we'd stay in the fog signal and blow air horns. The old man would shovel coal to keep the steam up."

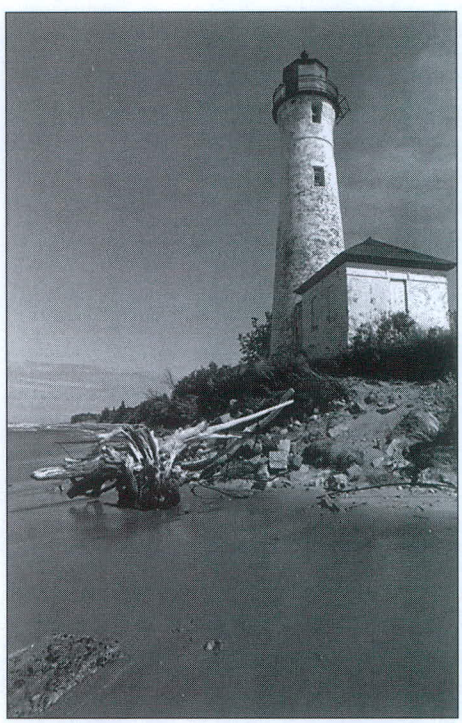
Tom was standing watch with his father on November 5, 1925 when a gale sank the wooden barge *Crane*. Tom had returned to the station for the deer season and to help lay-up the house for the winter. The barge was being towed by the steamer *Herman H. Hettler*.



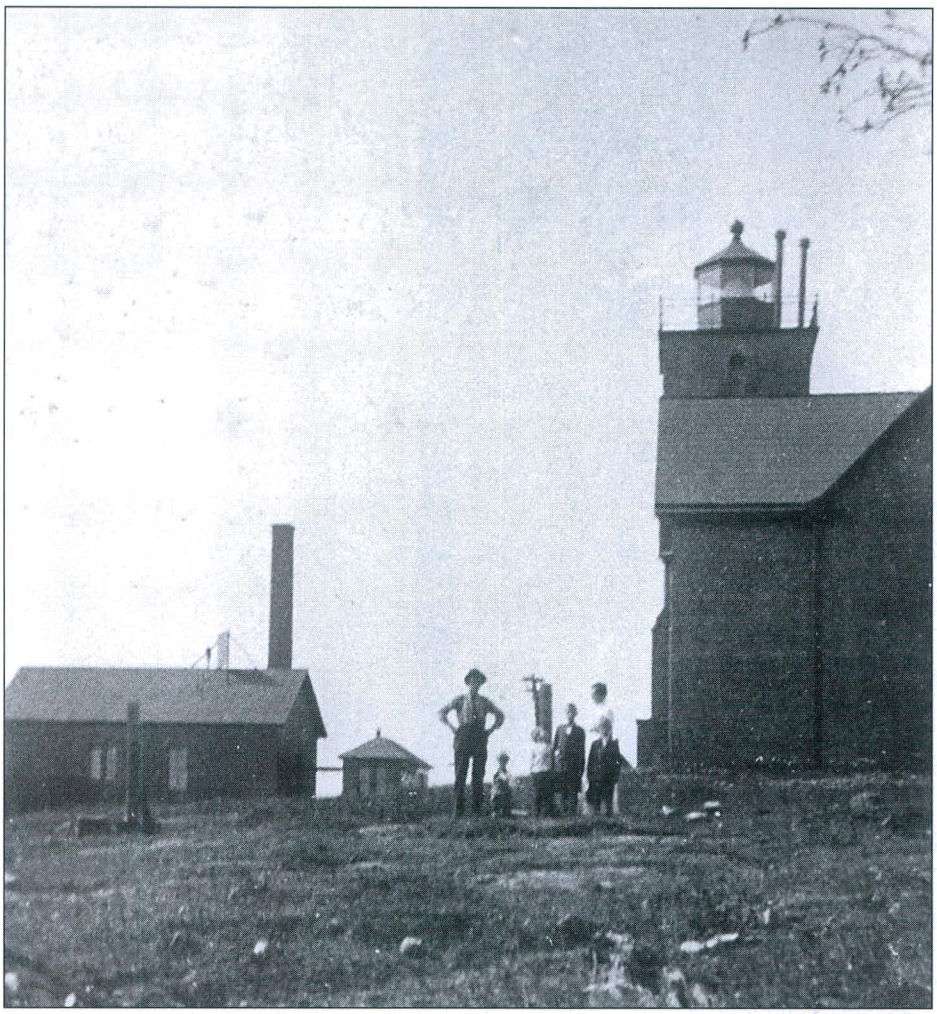
Overview of the Crisp Point station. Tom's sled-dogs, duplex in back of shed, two outhouses and a big pine near the cemetery where William J. Reilly, "Old Reilly," in the story is buried.



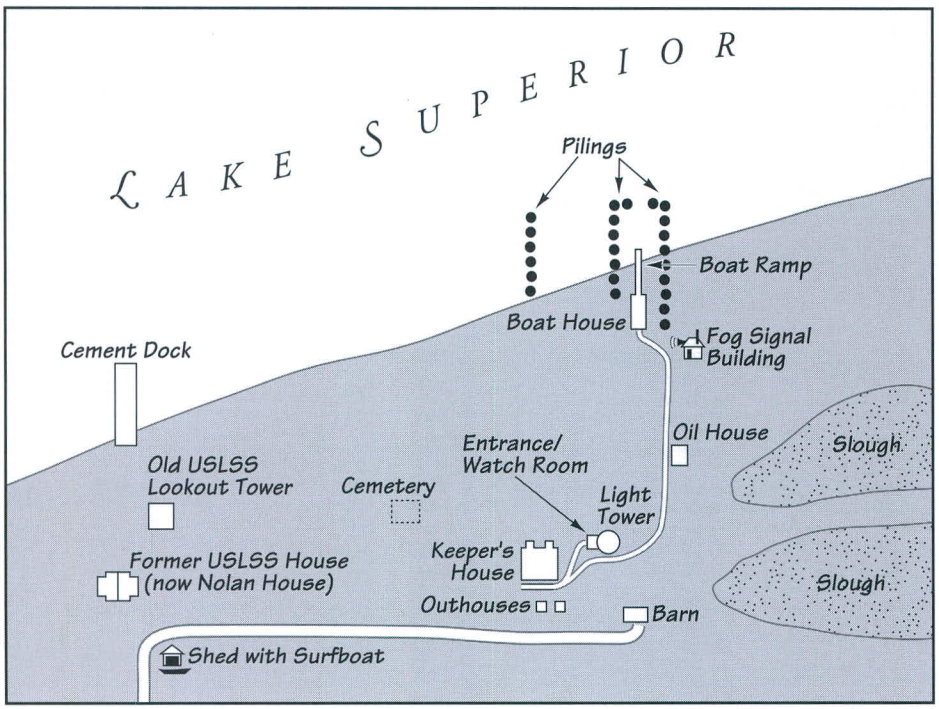
John Noah Singleton, right, born October 15, 1879. He joined the U. S. Lighthouse Service in 1909. He retired fromm the U. S. Coast Guard in 1939 as the last keeper at the Crisp Point Station and died on September 8, 1964. Shown here with assistant keeper, Al Brown, in front of the oil house.



The Crisp Point tower and work room in recent years, note the proximity of the beach to the tower. After Singleton retired this light continued as an automated aid until November 8, 1992.



The Singleton family at the Two Harbor Light Station. Note the whistle fog signal, left of the chimney of the building at left. Small building is the oil house.



"All we saw was the lights," recalled Tom. "We never saw the boats. We could see the lights of the tug come up on the waves, then the barge would come up. But she wasn't making any headway. I went out—it was all gravel from the house to the water—and stuck two sticks in the line that we could see from the window, so we could see if she was making any headway. And she wasn't gaining. Pretty soon the tug lights came up and the barge lights were gone."

The crew of the *Crane,* five men, one woman, went down with vessel in 25 feet of water. Tom estimated the vessel was less than a quarter-mile offshore. After the storm, Tom's father went out with the two assistants in a rowboat. "All they found," says Tom, "was a big pine spar with some cable hanging on it."

With the help of a government construction crew working at Crisp Point, 17-year-old Singleton built a 24-foot fish tug. Built from local lumber, he named it *Laugh's Dream* after the government engineer who designed it. "They laid the keel out on the curved root of a spruce tree. The keel was made of four-by-eight-inch hardwood with a four-inch-wide steel keel plate. It was built to run over rocks and charge through 30-foot waves. "It was," said Singleton, "built to sail on Superior. God! We took some awful storms with her.

"Three times," he laughed, "we had to get off the lake and run her on the beach."

The last time he was fishing with his 6' 7" brother, Jack. "We was trollin' 12 miles out on a sand shoal when it really started to blow a gale from the northwest. We knew we'd have trouble ridin' it out, so we tried to go to Grand Marais. I was watchin' the stumps on the shore. [Most of the merchantable timber had been cut in the area; the forest was denuded.] The seas were getting heavy and we wasn't making any headway. I said to Jack, 'The hell with this, we'll beach her,' so we got on top of a wave and headed right for the Two Heart Station. Made sure the guy in the watchtower saw us. He came out and waved so we knew he saw us.

"When she hit bottom we dove overboard. With the next wave I grabbed an oar, put it under my arm cause you can swim good with an oar. Jack, he just dove in. Had to get away from the boat cause she'd swing sideways. The crew came down and

put a sea anchor in the ground, then with four guys on the winch pulled her up on the beach. Then the skipper called my Dad and said, 'I wish them damn boys of yours would drown and get it over with. We're tired of pullin' them out of the lake.' It was about the third time we come in at the Two Heart and old Cap Hickey was getting a little mad."

Tom fished offshore with his brothers for six years and "took some wild rides. Sometimes we couldn't get ashore for two or three days. We'd just tie up and ride."

When Tom and Roy get together for their yearly visit, it was time to "Remember when?"

"I'll tell ya one thing that I remember," said Roy. "We were way out on the Canadian side, to hell and gone. It was a rough day and we were settin' flag-buoys. Of course, that flag was awavin'. And way off in the distance you could this sea tug comin' to beat hell. Belchin' smoke and a-rollin', her stack almost hittin' the water. She was named *Search* and when she came alongside the captain said, 'I thought you guys was wavin' that flag for help. I'll tell ya one thing, it will be a cold day in Hell before I'll be way out here in a little piss-pot boat like you got."

In dense fog, the brothers had to run by compass and there was always the danger of collision. "Oh, God, yes," said Roy, "we used to sit out there in the fog. You know sailboats have the right-of-way. You know what he used to do out there? I'm surprised he isn't in jail. We had this big schooner bell and whenever we'd hear a freighter comin' that darn sneak got up and rang the bell. Oh boy! They'd back up driving water and go way out and around."

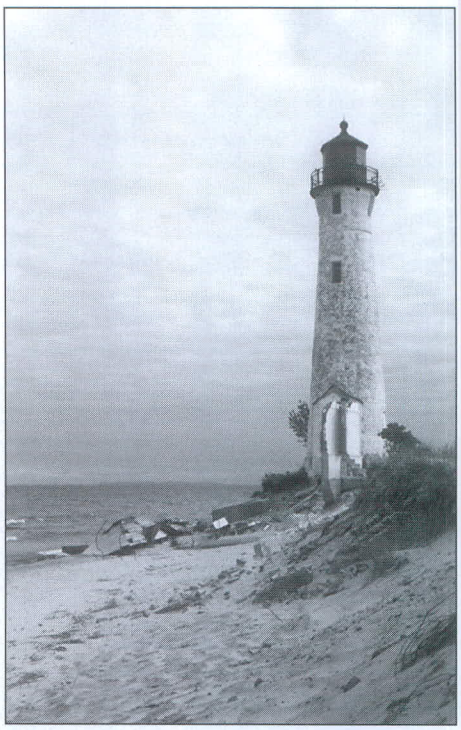
They recalled walking the isolated beaches and looking for treasures as young boys. Roy remembered when the Nolan children found a coffin. "The sea washed part of the hill away and they found a birch bark coffin sticking out of the sand. Inside they found a skeleton, two hand-hammered bracelets and a big silver cross." The young beachcombers agreed they had found an Indian princess.

Tom married Neva in 1937 and moved into Newberry. The first fall and winter of their marriage he made enough money trapping, bounty hunting and selling live animals to begin building a house. "I got $50 for bears up to 100 pounds [$560 in today's dollars], but when you think you're breaking the law you gotta hide everything." Later, he discovered he could legally sell live animals.

During the winter he used the Keeper's house as a base for his trapping. He trapped beaver and otter from Crisp Point to Paradise. "Ya," he laughed, "some were bootleg hides, but these were hard times." If he extended the trapping season and the limit, he justified his actions, "I didn't have to borrow money or beg anybody. Never took a pound of butter from welfare."

"Then," said Tom, "you could go all day and never see anybody from the highway [M-123] to the lake. I'd take my sled dogs, a seven-by-seven tent and a stove and head out toward Paradise. If I got caught in one area, I'd branch out. No one could catch me. When I got hungry I'd head for the lighthouse." There was always plenty of coal for the stove and a well-stocked fruit-cellar.

"Those were good days," he continued. "No private property, no Keep Out signs, plenty of game, wolves howling almost every night. Sure, I broke a few rules, but dammit, I was raised out in that country when there were no rules."



A 1997 photo showing the destroyed watch room of the Crisp Point tower. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

The Crisp Point Light Station in 1965 when the shoreline was still some distance from the tower. Photo courtesy of the author.





Tom Singleton's mother, Martha Elizabeth Singleton, with a Mackinaw trout caught from the lighthouse dock with a rod and reel. Herring was used for bait. The "Mackinaw," according to Tom, was less greasy than today's fish. He said, "It just disappeared from the lake."



The last picture of the Crisp Point keeper's dwelling, taken in 1965 before it burned down. The house was constructed as a duplex, but used to house three families. Photo courtesy of the author.