12 Children On A Rock In Lake Superior

Menagerie Island Has Its Own Story of Life of Those Who Keep the Lonely Lights Burning





Above - The Lighthouse Service Tender *Marigold* under full steam. This 160 foot long tender was constructed in 1890. The boxy device on the roof of the pilot house is a radiobeacon antenna and dates the photo after 1923. Official Coast Guard photo.

Lighthouse Memories

The Detroit News, Sunday,
June 7, 1931
By: Stella M. Champney

We were sitting around on the grass-upholstered rocks of Menagerie Island, sailors from the lighthouse tender *Marigold* and I, talking of this and that, and watching the ship drifting about in Siskiwit Bay.

The sailors were waiting for a bo'sun's chair so that a man could be lowered from the top of the automatic light to make certain repairs. Our call at Menagerie Island was part of the routine of the *Marigold* in its first trip out in the spring, distributing men and supplies to the loneliest lighthouses in the world so that the lights might burn steadily and brightly for the ships that were to pass. My part was that of an observer, to learn the romance of the lighthouse service.

Spring was in the bright sunshine, the sparkling blue of the dancing waves, the soft breezes that blew across our faces.

Menagerie Island! Just a pile of rocks across the harbor from Isle Royale! It could not be true that a woman once lived here, that children had played always under the shadow of death. A slip from a boulder, a leaping wave — little feet would lose their hold, the greedy waters would claim them.

It could not be true. Yet Government records and the sailors told me it was so.

What tales had been uncovered about women in these northern stations! There was the story of Mrs. Davis, of Copper Harbor, across the lake on the Keweenaw Peninsula. Twice, in early spring, while her husband lay ill, she had gone on skis through the snowy wilderness to open the lighthouse 15 miles away, wolves trailing her, howling about the station as night came on. The nearest neighbors were a few settlers living in the woods three miles away. Alone, she started the light and kept it burning until her husband was well enough to take up the work.

It seemed like a story I had read somewhere.

Nothing on this lighthouse tender trip to the lonely outposts of Lake Superior had a touch of reality. It was all like a dream. Devil's Island, with its deep caverns through which angry waters thundered, its red sandstones with the mysterious imprints of moccasined feet; Outer Island, aloof, forbidding, hostle; Raspberry Island, like an open-air stage setting awaiting the players; Passage Island, with its fairyland Greenstone Bay,

where the motorboat had picked me off the rocks, even the *Marigold*, taking messages from the air in its little radio room aft, were just things of which dreams are made. Only Rover, the captain's dog, pushing a cold nose into my hand, was real.

What had the children played with on this pile of boulders? They had left no trace. There were no broken toys in the rubbish piled in the woodshed on Menagerie Island, only a wooden potato masher and a couple of frying pans. A slat-backed chair stood in the spacious living room, another was under the caves, taking the weather.

There was no room for a boy's game of baseball. Rover could run its length in half a minute. One hit, and the ball would sail out in Siskiwit Bay. And the rock wall on the lighthouse side of the house slopes down into green water.

And the little girls! Giving tea parties on the sloping rocks, playing "grown up" in their mother's clothes, with no one but themselves and their brothers to see them. Never a little girl friend to drop in with her dolls. Only the rocks to play on, with sea gulls screaming overhead.

Gray moss covered the steps leading from the boathouse, the planking to the rocky ridge where one looks down upon seas dashing against its base. On a shelf in the rocks, beyond the boathouse with its rusty tramway, lay the remains of a boat, rotting away. Piles of ballast bags, sand dripping through their oilcloth covers, were mute reminders of the sailboat that used to carry the lighthouse keeper to — where? Isle Royale, two miles away? The bleak Canadian shore, far beyond? Duluth?

And the well! Built out over the rocky cliff. A woman stepping out of the kitchen door, a child pulling at her skirts, facing the gales of Lake Superior, the sleet that cut her face, the blizzards that swept across these rocks, drawing water for the family wash. No neighbors, though, to beat her in hanging out her clothes. But setting the clothespins securely to keep them from blowing into the lake.

The machinery of the well is rusting away. The rope is gone. So are the steps that once led down to the water's edge to the dock where the sailboat berthed.

Snatches of conversation came to me now and then as I pondered on what life had been to the woman who had lived on this pile of rocks for 33 years.

"The Malones had 12 children," a voice droned on. "They used to run and hide behind the rocks when the *Marigold*'s men came to the island, they say. There was a new little face behind the rocks every spring."

"And we rode through the hurricane into Panama. But that wasn't as bad as the heat."

"None of your tropics for mine, I'll take Lake Superior."

"Look out for wind with that sky. There's a nor'wester hiding behind that haze."

"Mackerel scales and mares' tales make lofty ships carry low sails."

"We whitewashed the tower two years ago. Looks good yet."

"We found the two boys who were lost in the fog on Siskiwit Bay. They had the good sense to land on an island. My, their folks were scared. Fishermen across the harbor."

"If they don't hurry with that bo'sun's chair we'll have to run out of here. That landing goes right out of sight in a gale."

The *Marigold* swung slowly about as she drifted in the breeze. Her bow pointed toward the open lake.

"What," I asked the tall, blond sailor, sitting in the slat-backed chair under the eaves, "will we eat if the tender drifts out into Lake Superior, and away?"

"The dog!"

"Not Rover!"

"Well, that's the way it goes in story books," said the muscular, brown-eyed sailor, sheepishly. "Whenever a shipwrecked party lands on a desert island they always eat the dog, first."

We cast uneasy glances around the circle. What did he mean, "First!"

Rover, panting beside me, gave a sharp bark, then settled down at my feet. As prospective rations he had not gone over. But he was on his guard.

"Lighthouse keepers eat sea gulls' eggs," a sailor said. "They scramble them with onions."

"But we've no onions."

"Then we'll have to eat them plain."

"Plain, nothing! Onions kill the sea gull taste," the slim one protested. There's onions on the *Marigold*."

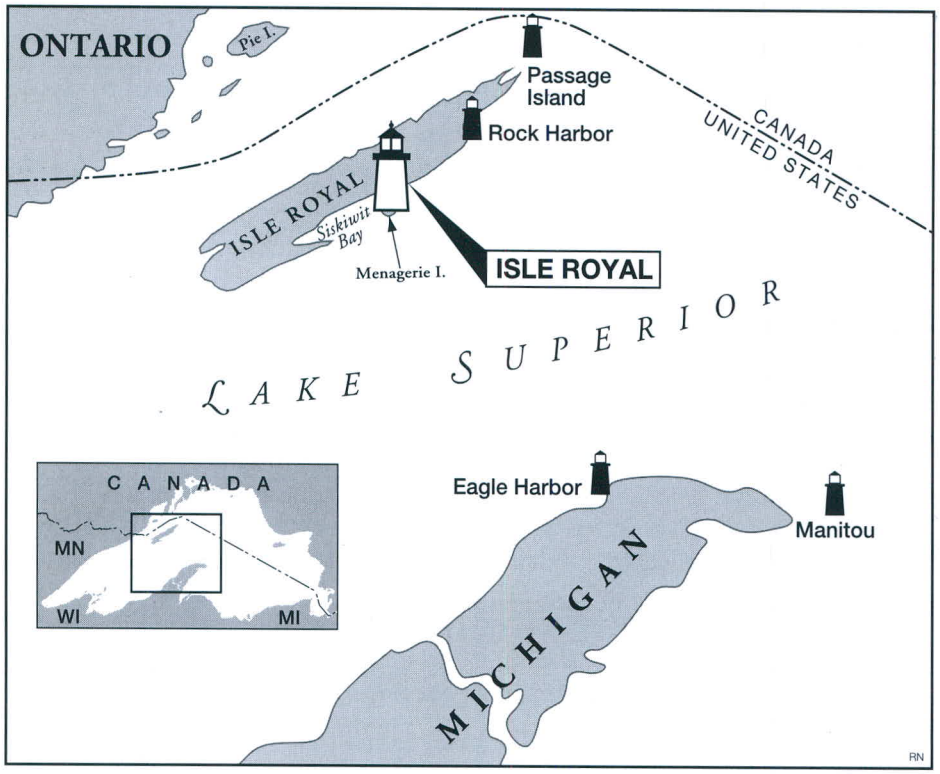
"But the *Marigold* is drifting away."

He looked out at the tender a scowl between the eyes. We knew he wouldn't like sea gulls' eggs without onions.

"Fish for mine!" he said.

"How are you going to catch fish from Menagerie Island? You can't get near the water for the waves."

"Use a net. We had Lake Superior whitefish and trout every day, one time, when we were held up in Rock Harbor by a storm. We caught them in an old net."



The net, he was reminded was on the *Marigold*.

The silence was broken by the tall blond sailor in the slat-backed chair.

"The motor boat!" he exclaimed.

They all jumped up and ran. For them the play had ended. The curtain was down. The stage scene had shifted to the woraday world. Officer Pat O'Donnell, swinging in the bo'sun's chair, high above the rocks and the restless seas, was fixing the wire of the automatic light. Men were running up and down the lighthouse stairs, doing this and that. They worked feverishly. The wind had freshened. The spray was already dashing over the landing.

For me, the play went on. The tender *Marigold*, out there in the harbor, was a phantom ship that never touched port, her skipper a figure in blue who never slept, blowing the whistle when the wind changed — blowing the whistle to call us back.

Menagerie Island — a leaf from a story book! I thumbed the pages.

An island of boulders off Siskiwit Bay was a menance to shipping.

"We'll build a lighthouse," said Washington.

They opened the lighthouse in '75. Will Stevens came to live in the spacious dwelling built to withstand the seas that would batter at its foundation in certain gales that would sweep the island.

It was a lonely life on Siskiwit Bay. The copper fleet, which had run in and out of Rock Harbor, Isle Royale, had gone seeking other cargoes, and few ships came into these waters. The steamer lane to Duluth was far to the south.

The pay was small. Stevens meant to make a home on Menagerie Island. The spacious home was rent free. He laid in a stock of provisions. There were plenty of fish to be had, and the government brought in coal.

"A regular tornado is blowing," he wrote in his log that first January, "and a blizzard."

A blizzard sweeping this pile of rocks on a January day. A man hugging a stove in a high-walled spacious living room, with ice hummocks piling higher and higher all around him. Measuring his vegetables, his flour, his bacon—and the ice sealing the harbor. His stay on Menagerie Island was brief.



Isle Royale Lighthouse on Menagerie Island. Photo by Griswald Boxley.

John H. Malone came to the pile of rocks Aug. 27, 1877. He left in 1910, when a son succeeded him. In 1914 the residence was closed. It has since been an unattended light, operated automatically.

In the early years the government allowed rations. It still allows coal. Malone tried the island a few winters. He began in the spring to store in the food. He had to bring it from Houghton or Duluth in his sailboat in the early years. No fresh meat, except on occasion. But always fish, Lake Superior whitefish and trout, salted and fresh. And when the snows came, with the winter gales, and the world "outside" headed into a season of gaieties, the Malone family huddled about their coal fires and waited for spring.

"I close the light for this season," Malone wrote in his log Nov. 22, 1897, "and am waiting to catch the steamer Dixon on her last trip in the vicinity of this light for this season. The island is covered with snow."

It opened May 1, the following spring, "with rain and a gale."

Back from a winter in Superior, Wis., to Menagerie Island, keeping the children indoors lest they blow off the rocks, getting the light ready, setting the house in order, making a run out to set the nets, watching for a plume of smoke that meant coal, and men swarming up the grade from the lighthouse tender.

"Each year a new little face behind the rocks."

Twelve little faces watching the harbor. Twelve little faces hiding from the sailors who came with the lighthouse tender. They rose before me as I thumbed the page of the story book.

The *Marigold* — phantom ship upon make-believe waters — shrilled a warning. Sailors grabbed things and ran down to the dock, awash with the rising seas. Hands reached out and helped me into the motor boat. She chugged away from an island that never was to a ship that cannot be.

A man in blue looked down over the companionway.

"Dinner is ready," he said, gravely, "and the wind is rising."

The wind again. Always the wind, rising.

A shipwrecked crew — and 12 little faces behind the rocks, How much is true? How much in the story book? I asked myself, as I ran to my stateroom to prepare for dinner.

"You were lucky," my friends said, "that the *Marigold* did not have to leave you on that desert island until the seas died down."

They do not understand how much must be cut out of the storybook. If the skipper had slept, and had failed to blow the warning whistle, and seas had shut us off from the dock —

Twelve little faces behind the rocks! Sailors scrambling sea gull eggs!

It might have been. But the man in blue who never sleeps brought us back from Menagerie Island.

Menagerie Island, a dark agate in a silver sea, fading into the setting sun! It cannot be true that a woman once made her home on your barren rocks, that children played along your cliffs with angry seas reaching upward for their little feet.

Yet government records and the sailors on the *Marigold* told me it was true.

"We make Houghton tomorrow," said Capt. Gundersen, as the ship pushed into the darkening seas.

Rover, lying on the pilot house floor, came over and dropped down at my feet.

My trip to the loveliest lighthouses in the world was nearly ended.



Above - Menagerie Island is just a slip of rock and earth off Isle Royale. Photo by Griswald Boxley in 1991.

Below - A close up view of the Isle Royale Lighthouse sometime after the Coast Guard took over in 1939. A Coast Guard man in a sailor hat can be seen by the wood box at the left of the house. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

