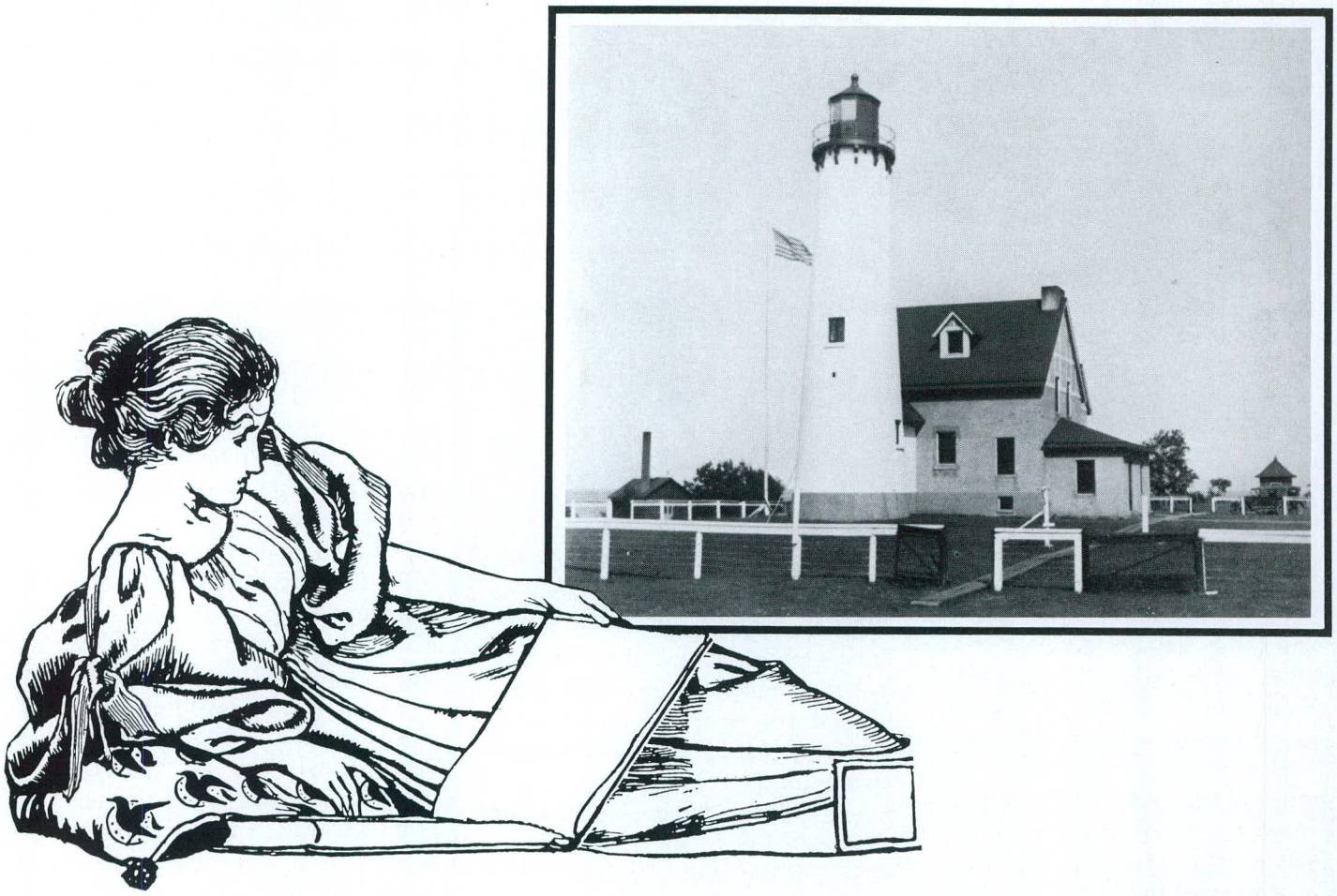


Lighthouse Memories–Summer

by Betty Bacon

Beginning with this issue we will take you on a four season odyssey in the year of a light station. The station is Point Iroquois located at the eastern end of Lake Superior on the Upper Michigan Peninsula. The keeper of the station during our visit (circa 1920) is Elmer Byrnes. Keeper Byrnes entered the USLHE as 1st Assistant at this station and within a few years was appointed Keeper. He served at Point Iroquois from 1915 until 1935 when he was transferred, as keeper, to the Presque Isle lighthouse (Lake Huron) where he completed his 43 year career. Our story teller is his daughter, Betty Byrnes Bacon, who dedicates this delightful story of growing up in a lighthouse to her father.

Above right—Point Iroquois Lighthouse circa 1922. The small building at the left houses the fog signal, the well house is at the right. Betty Bacon photo.

Summer is forever when you are a child. Time seems to stand still as one happy day drifts into the next. It was a dreamy time among the fields of daisies and buttercups and clumps of pink briar roses.

The brook trout and perch hung around the dock and we children, with bamboo poles and green fish lines, spent hours fishing. We would chase grey and tan grasshoppers and, when put on a hook, their yellow wings would spread out so that they floated on the water. We caught many a fish dinner. My father had a saying, "If you can catch them, you can clean them." He showed us how, so the fish we brought to the kitchen were neatly filleted.

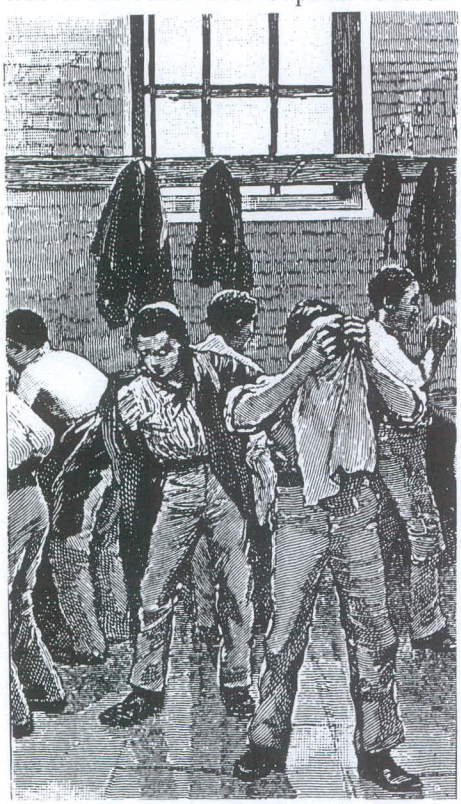
The vessel traffic on Lake Superior was at a peak. The wail of steamers signaling to each other was part of our lives. Father told us that more tonnage passed our lighthouse in the seven month navigation season than the Panama and Suez Canals, combined, handled in a year.

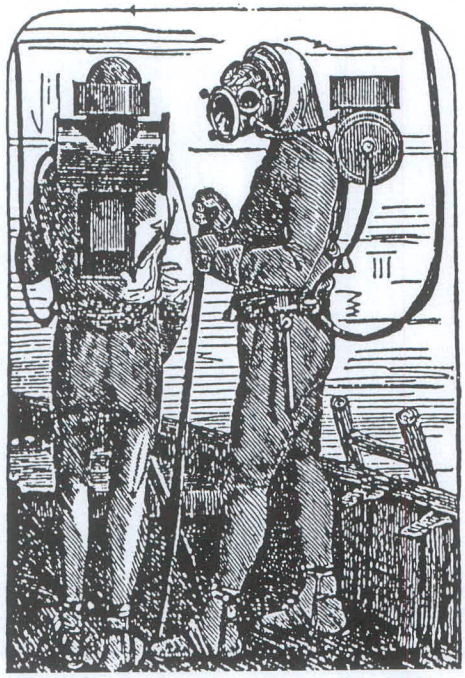
The twenty-four hour day was divided into four hour watches. At night my dad had the eight to twelve watch. His first assistant had the twelve to four, and the second assistant the four to eight. Each man on duty watched the light, and if the fog rolled in, started up the fog signal. During the day whoever had the watch for that day started the fog horn. When company stayed overnight, they would say, "I never slept a wink." He would answer that we never heard it. The fog horn was my first lullaby and a part of lighthouse life.

Across from Iroquois Lighthouse on the Canadian side was a lightship which swung on a ninety-foot cable. It was a British mine sweeper converted after World War I to a lightship. It was a cramped and lonely life for the two or three keepers aboard. Their families lived in the Canadian Soo, and a relief team spelled them every two weeks or so. My father would take us to visit them in our cabin cruiser. They welcomed company, and served us tea and scones and cake. They would tell us about their children and we would be thankful that Iroquois was a shore station where we could be with our parents.

One foggy night around midnight, we children heard many voices downstairs. We rushed down to find our kitchen and dining room packed with men in various stages of undress. My mother was heating big pots of coffee and making sandwiches.

Their ship had sunk, a little west of the lighthouse. It had been rammed by a vessel attempting to make time in the thick fog. All ships were supposed to run at reduced speed and sound whistles to warn others. The sharp bow of the speeding ship had torn a hole in the side of the other. Her Captain ordered





full speed ashore and the helmsman, guided by our fog horn, reached shallow water where the forecastle and engine house were above water when she hit bottom. The Captain was later cited for his quick thinking. The men came ashore in life boats as the Captain feared the ship might capsize.

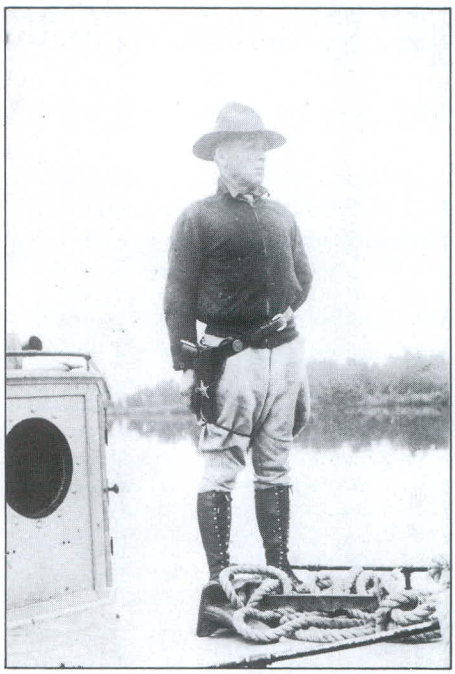
My father called the telephone operator and was connected with the Coast Guard in the Soo. Transportation was furnished and the men were taken by train from the Soo to their homes.

I heard that they never found the hit and run ship. The fog lifted in a few days and divers were sent to repair the damage. We children rowed around watching the divers get into their gear. They looked like men from Mars. After the divers repaired the torn hull and pumped out the water she floated like a cork. Her crew returned and she went on her way.

Lighthouse Keepers had to be self sufficient, so each Spring the three men plowed and disced a large fenced area for vegetable gardens. We were told to bring any lady bugs we found and put them in the garden as my parents didn't believe in insecticides. There were no poisonous snakes in Upper Michigan, so we didn't have to worry. Our parents told us that snakes ate their weight in insects. There were black and white and bright green garter snakes, and every one we found was thrown over the fence into the garden.

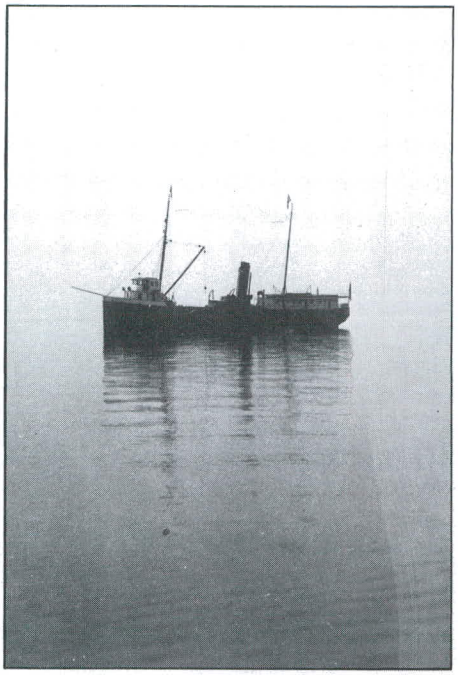
My Irish grandfather visited us one summer and my father and mother found him in the garden hitting a snake with a hoe. My father told him they were harmless. "A snake is the Devil in disguise," said grandfather; adding, "It was the Devil that talked Eve into eating the apple in Eden." My father remarked, "It wasn't the apple in the tree that caused the trouble, it was the pair on the ground." My mother said, "Not in front of the children!" We discussed this and couldn't figure it out. My brother thought it might be because the pear was rotten. It wasn't until years later that we found out what he meant.

During my childhood there was a lot of rum running across the Saint Mary's River into the States, from Canada. Our government launch, painted gray with U.S.L.S. on the bow looked very much like the gray U.S.R.S. (Revenue Service) boats. The Lighthouse Service furnished my father with a revolver to protect himself while on buoy patrol. Some of our local fishermen found hauling Canadian whiskey much more profitable than herring.



Keeper Byrnes on the deck of the USLHE launch about to go on buoy patrol. Note the gun on his hip, insurance in case he runs into bootleggers. The star on the holster is from his days as Deputy Sheriff. Betty Bacon photo.

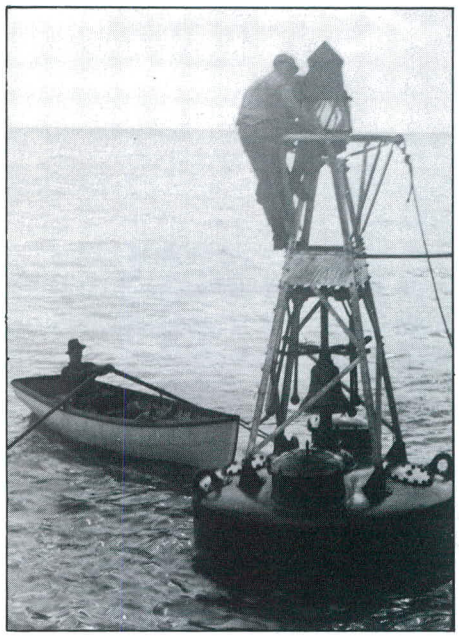




Above—The children of Keeper Byrnes, Betty at the left, aboard the station launch. Right—The USLH tender *Amaranth* lies off Point Iroquois during a quarterly visit. Below—Keeper Elmer Byrnes dressed for inspection, circa 1920. Betty Bacon photos.

We watched many an exciting chase and sometimes, if the revenue boat was gaining, the men would throw the cases overboard. When they were boarded there was no evidence except floating crates. After a heavy Northwest'r, we sometimes found unbroken bottles washed up on the beach.

Our launch was used to service lighted buoys down river from the station. My father would warp the boat up to the buoy and we would help him tie up. He would check them out and fuel them. Being deck hands was fun and we became very good with ropes.



A keeper servicing a buoy. USLHS photo.

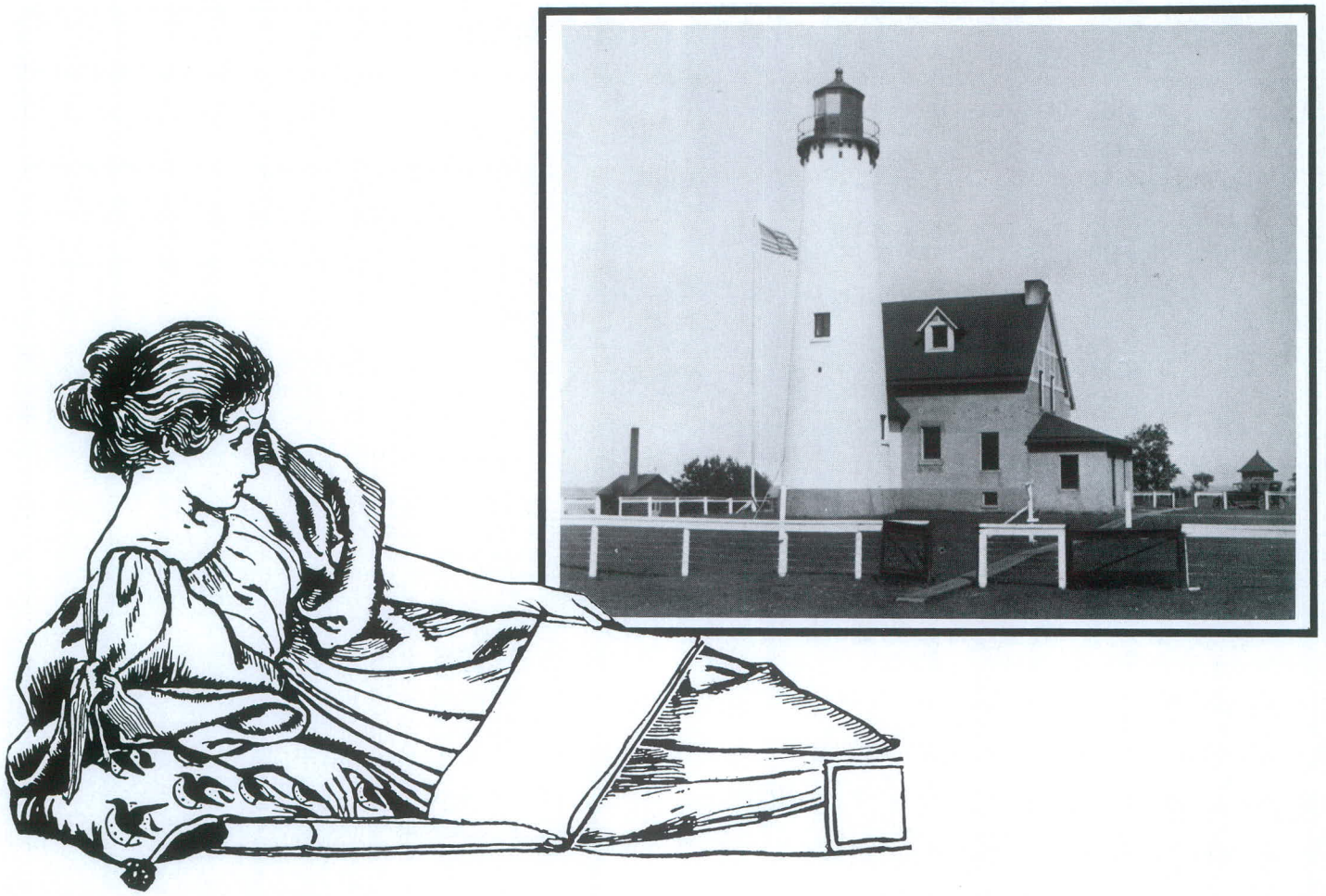


The visits of the Lighthouse Tenders *Amaranth, Marigold, Clover* and *Aspen* bringing supplies were exciting events. We children would row out and be welcomed aboard. We would be invited to dinner around noon and enjoyed the goodies in the officer's mess.

One day a brisk wind was blowing and the *Marigold* was riding at anchor and rolling. I came up on deck very seasick. A deck hand took one look at me and said, "You look green around the gills." When I said I felt sick, he said, "I know how to cure you. Come on down to the galley with me. I'll tie a piece of raw bacon on a string. You swallow it and I'll pull it back up." I rushed for the railing while he laughed hilariously.

The first mate of the *Marigold,* Mr. Snyder, was a good friend of our family. The lighthouse tenders would often put in to Isle Royal (a large island in Lake Superior) in the Fall to kill a deer or two for the ship's mess. Mr. Snyder, raised in a city, became lost in the thick woods. He kept going around in circles, panicked and started running. He became lodged in a couple of leaning trees and had a heart attack. He was only a short distance from the shore when they found him, another victim of the North Country. We children were taught that if we became lost we were to keep calm and stay where we were. Someone would find us if we kept our heads.

So went our golden summer days filled with excitement and dreams and surrounded by love.



Lighthouse Memories – Fall

by Betty Bacon

This is the second installment of a four season odyssey in the year of a light station. The station is Point Iroquois located at the eastern end of Lake Superior on the Upper Michigan Peninsula. The keeper of the station during our visit (circa 1920) is Elmer Byrnes. Keeper Byrnes entered the USLHE as 1st Assistant at this station and within a few years was appointed Keeper. He served at Point Iroquois from 1915 until 1935 when he was transferred, as keeper, to the Presque Isle lighthouse (Lake Huron) where he completed his 43 year career. Our story teller is his daughter, Betty Byrnes Bacon, who dedicates this delightful story of growing up in a lighthouse to her father.

Above right—Point Iroquois Lighthouse circa 1922. The small building at the left houses the fog signal, the well house is at the right. Betty Bacon photo.

The glory of the north woods in autumn defies description. The scarlet and orange of maples, maroon oak leaves, and the yellow coin-like birch and aspen leaves blazed in the bright blue October days. Biologists can find no scientific reason for the leaves changing color in the Fall. I like to think that it is their last gallant goodbye to Summer.

The hazel nuts ripened and we collected potato sacks full of this prickly Fall fruit. In the bogs and swamps the cranberries turned bright red, and while gathering them we thought of Thanksgiving.

One of the chief concerns of lighthouse keepers was the education of their children. My father had been writing to headquarters about a school at Iroquois for quite some time. Finally, we learned we would have our own school. It was an existing storehouse which the keepers remodeled. The state furnished blackboards, books, and desks. The government supplied a potbellied stove. The teacher's salary was paid by the state and the Lighthouse Service paid her room and board. Six children of the lighthouse families and three from a nearby fisherman's family attended this one room school house from kindergarten through eighth grade.

Our enthusiastic and dedicated teachers were young women just out of State Normal Schools. We received individual instruction and it was an ideal learning situation. The Marine Library at the Soo sent boxes of children's books. We

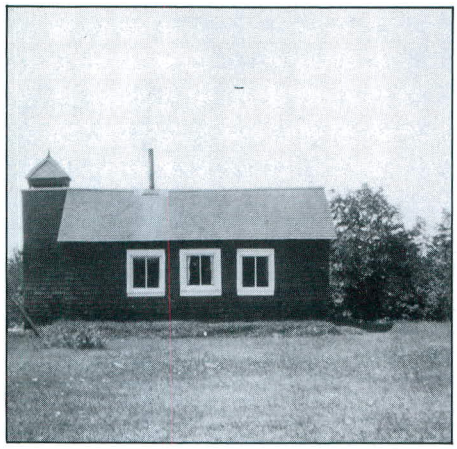
were close to our home and those school days were very happy.

One day, before deer season opened, my father hit a young buck with the car on the way to town. He should have called the Game Warden, but reasoned that this gentleman would impound the deer and eat it himself. So he dressed the deer and hung it by the heels from a rafter in the barn. Afraid I would blab about the illegal deer, he made the mistake of telling me it was a cow. The next day a government agent came to inspect a construction project at the light station and was asked to stay for dinner.

I was always a show-off, so at intervals during the meal I would hang my head down, open my mouth, let my tongue loll out of the corner and in a mournful voice groan, "Poor cow in the barn!" My parents glared at me, but I kept it up. The government man asked if our cow was sick. He was told that it had been feeling poorly.

On a Fall day during hunting season, I was in the chicken yard when a deer, chased by dogs, leaped over the wire fence and fell gasping at my feet. I crouched there next to him, and the wild fear in his large dark eyes touched my heart. I sat for minutes while he rested and when he recovered he sprang to his feet, jumped the back fence, ran down a gully and across the beach, dove into the water and began swimming. A fishing boat was passing and I saw a man jump up on deck with a rifle and shoot the deer. He stopped the boat and hauled the carcass aboard. After that incident, I was never able to shoot deer.

For years lighthouse keepers had commissary privileges at Fort Brady in the Soo. I clearly remember that two pound loaves of baked bread cost three cents. All the supplies at the commissary were less expensive than local stores. In the Summer my father would use the station launch to haul supplies. We would lock through the Soo locks with the long ships, tie up at the lock walls and rent a truck to haul supplies from the fort commissary to our boat. Sometimes on the return trip a northwester would blow up and waves would break so high over the light station dock that we would have to turn back and seek shelter in a bay three miles from the station until the storm subsided. Occasionally, we would call the station from a nearby Indian reservation and one of the assistants would drive the car over.



Top—The storehouse turned school at Point Iroquois Light Station where the children of the three keepers attended school with the children of a local fisherman's family.

Bottom—The author states–"It is of note that three of the group shown here in the doorway of the school house were killed in action in Europe during WWII. They were: The Assistant Keeper's son, Byron Currie (large boy in the foreground), Fisherman's son, Austin Ruthier (looking over Byron's right shoulder) and the Keeper's son, Robert Byrnes (at Byron's left shoulder).

Little did we know when we sang Yankee songs of the Civil War; "Tenting Tonight on the Old Campground," "Just Before the Battle Mother" and "Rally 'Round the Flag" that three of us in that little red school house would die in battle." Betty Bacon Photos.



At one point a keeper on Sugar Island, on the lower Saint Mary's River, started up a grocery store where he sold goods he had purchased from the commissary to civilians. He made good money for several years but was finally caught and fired from the Lighthouse Service. Eventually, because of him and others, all Lighthouse Service employees were banned from using military commissaries.

During the Summer the lighthouse tenders would anchor off our light station and transfer supplies by small boat or a barge. I remember the USLH Tender *Clover* coaling our station. A barge, heaped with coal would tie up at the dock and sailors would shovel the coal into wheelbarrows. The keepers would push the wheelbarrows up the steep sidewalk and fill the bins in the cellar of the quarters, the fog signal building and even our small school house received a supply for Winter. By day's end these coal handlers were black except for the whites of their eyes and their gleaming teeth.

The Head Keeper kept the record of supplies.

The head keeper kept the record of supplies. He was responsible for ordering coal, kerosene for the lighthouse lamp and those of the quarters, lumber, concrete, paint, varnish, sandpaper, etc. Kerosene was delivered in large oil butts and wheeled up the hill from the dock to the round oil house near the tower. Worn out tools were exchanged for new and all transactions duly recorded. Even writing materials (pens, ink and paper) were furnished.

At a remote lighthouse, like Point Iroquois, you couldn't call a plumber, carpenter or painter. Thus the keepers became "jacks of all trades," and masters of many.

In the Summer we used wood in our cooking stoves and in the Winter we burned wood in the fireplaces. Cutting, sawing and hauling wood was another very important part of lighthouse life.

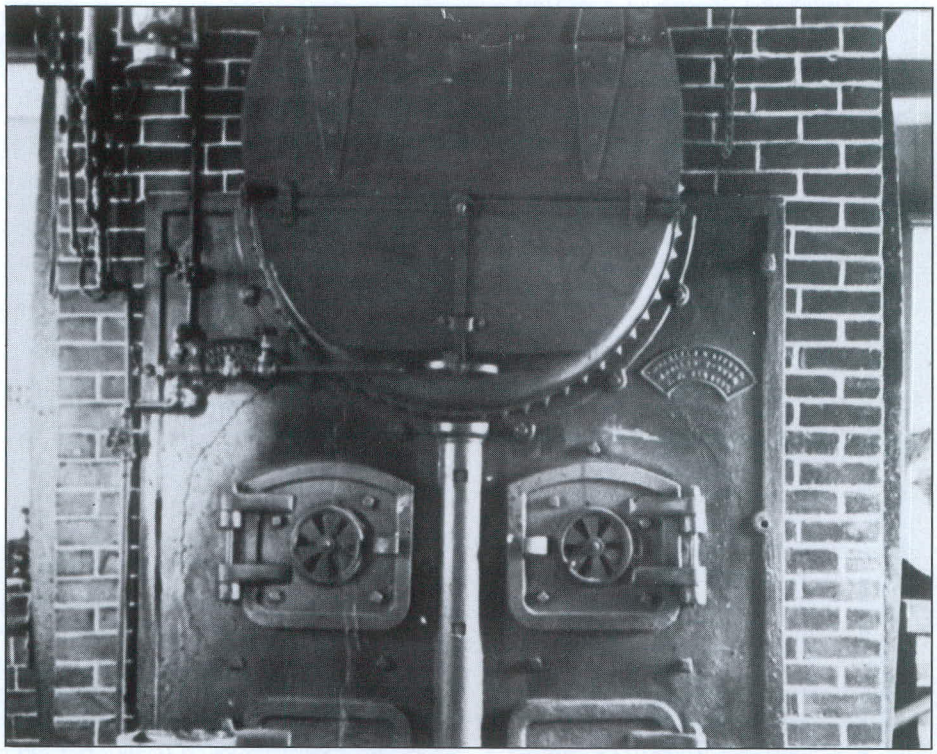
As a child I loved to watch herring gulls swooping and soaring in flocks along the shore, and I decided that I had to have one for a pet. I baited a large hook with a chunk of herring and tied the cord to a stake. Sure enough, I caught a gull. My family was sitting down to breakfast when I walked in to show them my prize. The angry gull reached up and tore a gash in my cheek. My father was furious and released the bird and I got a lecture and a bonus. For the rest of my life, I had a dimple where none had been before.

In late Fall, terrible storms boiled down from Canada. The ore boats were at risk, but the last runs of the season were profitable. The Great Lakes skippers were outstanding seamen. Many were Norwegians, Swedes and Danes. They often said that ocean sailors could always ride a storm out because they had room. On the Great Lakes there was nowhere to run and over the years storms took their toll on Great Lakes shipping. Lake Superior never warms up and old timers had a saying that the lake never gives up its dead, although sometimes bodies would wash ashore. My father had an agreement with the coroner at the Soo to bring any bodies to the nearby town of Brimley. This duty paid a small fee, but it was a disagreeable job as some of the corpses were badly decomposed.

One day my father tied up at the dock in Brimley with a corpse he had found. He placed the body in a row boat and towed it to town with the station launch. While he was in town getting the coroner a woman came down to the dock to get a pail of water. She bent over, saw the body in the boat, threw the pail over her head and ran screaming into town yelling "Murder, murder!"

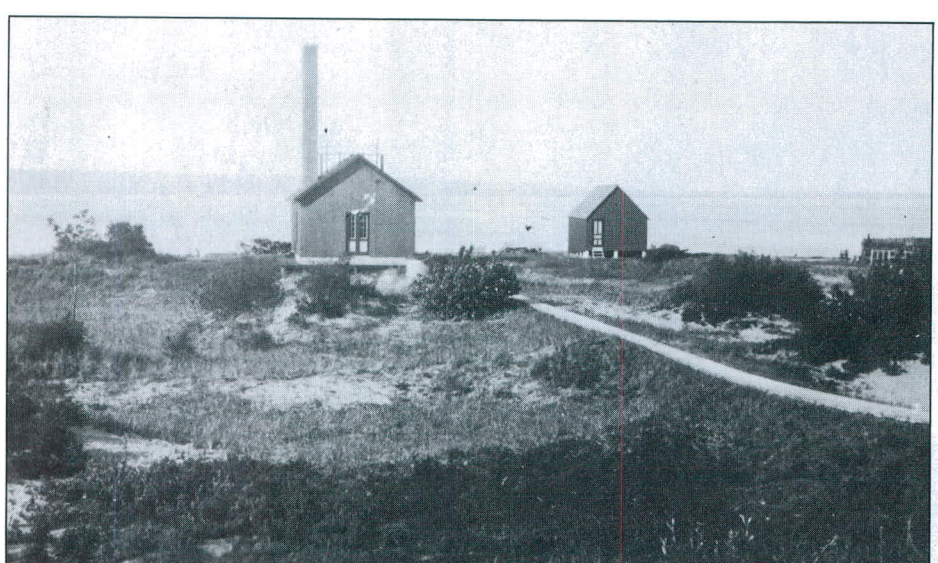
One of my earliest memories is of my father wading into the waves wearing hip boots and dragging a chair to shore before it crashed on the rocks. It





Top—A keeper polishes a 10″ steam whistle similar to the one that was installed at Point Iroquois when Elmer Byrnes was the Keeper. The Point Iroquois characteristic that lulled Betty, Robert, Nan & Junior Byrnes to sleep was a five second blast every 30 seconds.

Bottom—A standard coal fired boiler, in duplicate, for a steam powered fog signal. This apparatus had a voracious appetite. Typically keepers shoveled a ton of coal for each ten hour period of fog signal operation. U.S. Lighthouse Society Photos.



Above—The fog signal building at Point Iroquois with the boat house at the right and the "fish house," barely discernible, at the far right.

Below—At Point Iroquois Lighthouse, like all stations of the Lighthouse Service, rank had its privileges. One half of the living quarters were the head keeper's. The other half was divided between the 1st and 2nd assistants. In the foreground are the two privies. The larger was for the Head Keeper's family and the smaller for the families of the two assistants. Betty Bacon states, "Our privy had three holes—Papa, Mama and Baby Bear sizes. It was a hangout for wasps and hornets. They kept building nests in the corners and buzzed under the seats. It was not a place to linger! In that era the Sears Roebuck catalog did not have glossy paper nor colored pictures and we were usually into the harness section by Spring." Betty Bacon Photos.

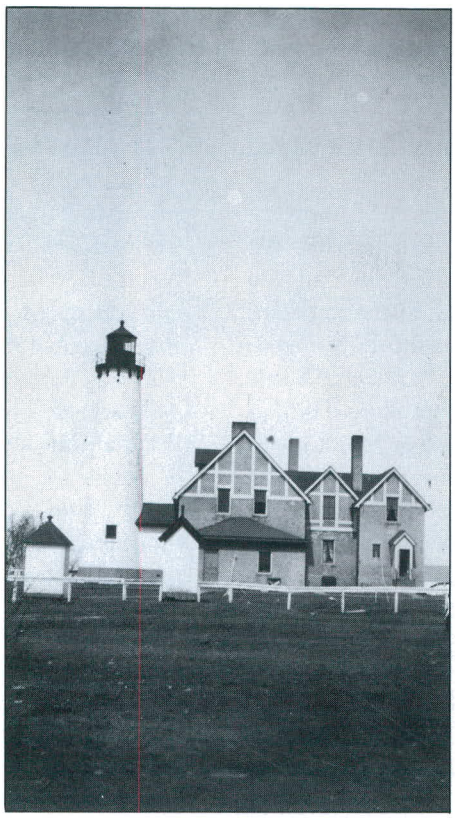


Above—Our "heroine" Betty Byrnes (circa 1928) wearing dad's gun and badge from his days as a Deputy Sheriff. She's all set to capture some "Rum Runners" bringing in illegal 'hooch' from Canada with her smaller siblings and, just maybe, reap a big reward . . . or a dressing down by dad. (Story over leaf). Betty Bacon Photo.

was a beautiful captain's chair with the name "Myron" burned into the back, no doubt from some lake "boat" that failed to make port.

The Canadian Pacific had three cruise ships that regularly passed our lighthouse. They were large white ships with orange superstructures. Once, when one was passing our point, a toddler fell over the railing. Her body was never found, but her father walked our beach for days. It left an indelible impression of sadness on me.

In my childhood our fog signal went from two coal furnaces to two huge diesel engines. Technology was rapidly changing and in my teens the station became electrified. No longer did keepers have to haul kerosene cans up winding tower stairs. No more trimming wicks or washing smoke-stained lenses and storm panes. We even got indoor plumbing. The families welcomed all these changes not knowing that the end of life as we knew it was approaching.



My father was a lover of nature. We would be hauled out of bed to see a full moon or a beautiful sunrise. Our family watched sunsets and that queer phenomenon called a mirage. Whitefish Point beyond the horizon would loom up clearly with the lighthouse and other structures outlined against the sky. Boats not in sight would rise boxlike in the sky. We watched moon dogs and sun dogs and always the changing weather. Northwest storms, offshore south winds and east winds bringing rain. The upper Michigan peninsula was a very turbulent region and Lake Superior unforgiving to those who ventured in "harm's way."

As children, when the days grew shorter we began looking forward to Winter. We enjoyed the changing seasons.





Drawing—Dennis Ellefson

LIGHTHOUSE KIDS & THE RUM RUNNERS

by Betty Bacon

We four children walked single file down the narrow rutted road. There was no moon, but the stars were bright in the cloudless sky. The circling beams from Point Iroquois lighthouse, our home, lit our path at regular intervals. The summer night was quiet except for the occasional lunatic yodeling of loons across the still water and the questioning calls of whip-poor-wills in the woods. We startled flocks of night hawks, whose red eyes flared as they swooped down for insects.

The year was 1927 and we children were out for adventure. I was twelve so I appointed myself as the leader. We had watched large black cars park facing the Canadian side of the river. Their lights would blink on and off and be answered by blinking lights on the opposite shore. Soon we would hear a motor launch, then when it anchored offshore, the sound of a row boat's oar locks creaking. Hidden in the bushes on the bank we would see wooden cases hauled ashore by dark figures and hear muffled voices as they carried the loot up the bank and loaded it into the waiting car. One time we saw men changing license plates.

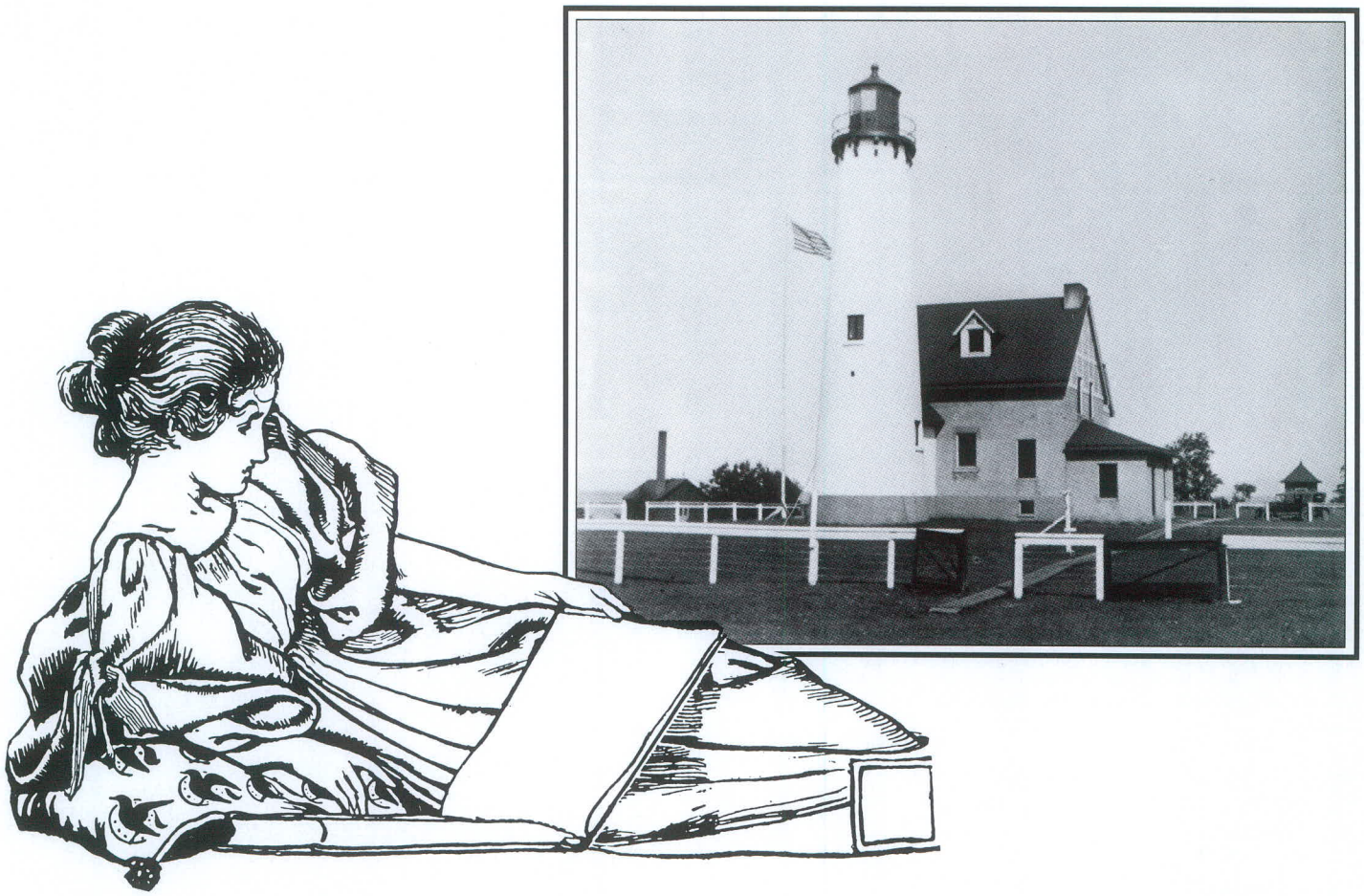
We had listened to parents and friends telling stories about revenue officers and their exciting chases. Someone said that people had received awards for catching rum runners. We dreamed of having enough money to order anything we wanted from the Sears Roebuck Catalog. Sheer bliss!

So we planned our expedition. My father had a Colt revolver from his days as a sheriff before he entered the Lighthouse Service. I borrowed the gun, but we would have to do without ammunition as the bullets were kept locked up. Maybe the men we were going to capture would think the gun was loaded. We planned to tie a rope to trees and block the road.

The night we set out we had seen flashing car lights on the Canadian shore. The rum runners never landed on the government-owned lighthouse reservation, so we walked along the road down river. We went back to the main road and strung our rope across the road between two trees. The waiting was long but finally we heard a car being cranked and the roar of its engine. The big car was coming fast. It hit the rope, snapped it like store cord, and nearly pulled the two small trees out of the sandy soil.

We started walking sadly home, but worse was in store. We met our dad who had come looking for us. He saw my brother carrying the gun, his sheriff's badge on my chest and my youngest brother and sister each dragging a piece of rope. He demanded an explanation. We started crying and the whole story came out. He was furious! He told us that these men were armed and dangerous. We could have been killed and that grown men had gotten shot in such situations. We were in the doghouse for days and had many privileges taken away.

I often wonder what would have happened if the rope had been stronger and we had actually stopped the car.



Lighthouse Memories—Winter

by Betty Bacon

This is the third installment of a four season odyssey in the year of a light station. The station is Point Iroquois located at the eastern end of Lake Superior on the Upper Michigan Peninsula. The keeper of the station during our visit (circa 1920) is Elmer Byrnes. Keeper Byrnes entered the USLHE as 1st Assistant at this station and within a few years was appointed Keeper. He served at Point Iroquois from 1915 until 1935 when he was transferred, as keeper, to the Presque Isle lighthouse (Lake Huron) where he completed his 43 year career. Our story teller is his daughter, Betty Byrnes Bacon, who dedicates this delightful story of growing up in a lighthouse to her father.

Above right—Point Iroquois Lighthouse circa 1922. The small building at the left houses the fog signals, the well house is at the right. Betty Bacon photo.

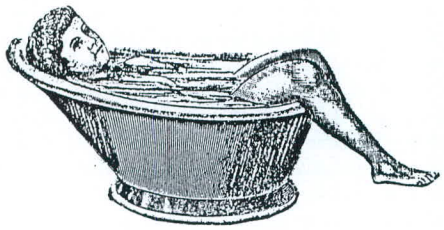
After the rivers connecting the Great Lakes froze, all lake traffic came to a halt. The keepers and their families settled in for the long cold winter. All painting and repairs to lighthouses was confined to interior areas. In the mornings, an hour before school started, my father would build a coal fire in the pot-bellied stove in our little school house. Weekends, the teacher would be driven across the ice to Brimley by car where she would take the train to the Soo.

Every month of my childhood a magazine with an eagle on the cover arrived called *The Federal Employee*. Dad would read it and pass it on to his assistants. I tried reading it but it seemed fact-filled and rather boring.

We children enjoyed "helping" dad in his station chores. A large grinding wheel with a treadle and a container of water at the base was used to sharpen scythes, axes, hatchets, knives, and other tools. We loved sitting at the machine and working the treadle and even learned how to sharpen tools with the grindstone. No dull edges were tolerated and each tool was hung in its proper place when not in use.

It is hard to imagine a Federal Civil Service position with so many responsibilities and major decision powers that wouldn't call for the addition of at least a clerk-typist. Such was the case in the Lighthouse Service. The head keeper kept record books, made out requisitions and answered all correspondence from various offices of the district headquarters himself. My father bought a typewriter and taught himself to type. He also ordered file cabinets and during his night watches became manager, secretary and file clerk all rolled into one.

My father devised an ingenious alternative to the Saturday night tub bath in front of the kitchen range. The fog signal building had overhead hot and cold water pipes and a concrete floor. At one end of the building, over a floor drain, he installed a shower head and valves to regulate water temperature. There was one catch, we could only use the shower during foggy weather when the furnace was fired for the fog signal. But when it was foggy and bath day, we four children would troop down the sidewalk, armed with soap and towels and our clean clothes.



In the winter we reverted to kitchen galvanized tub baths.

There was a pump at our kitchen sink and water for dishwashing or bathing was pumped from large concrete cisterns in front of the quarters. Drinking and cooking water was carried in from the well house. In the Winter when the cisterns were drained all water was carried into the house from the well building. In cold weather the pump had to be primed with hot water. A dry Summer meant empty cisterns, but our well was deep, removed from the outdoor toilets and the water pure and plentiful.

Many winter days were spent painting walls and ceilings in the living quarters. My father's pride and joy were the beautiful hardwood floors upstairs and downstairs. He varnished the wood floors until they gleamed. His father and mother often spent the winter at the lighthouse. My grandmother believed that a very stiff scrub brush and a bar of strong soap were the only tools for cleaning floors. And the job could only be accomplished on one's hands and knees. She literally scrubbed the varnish down to bare wood.

When my dad told her that a mop was all that was necessary and she replied, "No son of mine is going to tell me how to wash a floor. I want a floor you can eat off of!" He remarked that not even the cat or dog ate off the floor, and she retorted, "Men don't know about such chores, and had best stay out of women's work." When she left, dad had to varnish the floors again. It seemed to me that he lost every battle with his strong-willed mother.

One might expect that the isolation imposed by Winter might cause tempers to flare for three families living in such close quarters. Surprisingly, the three families became an extended family, and got along very well. They helped each other out, visited back and forth, and, like early pioneers, circled the wagons against the harshness and isolation of the northern winters.

My mother sang and played the piano and the two assistant families had phonographs. The records were the size of a can of Campbell's soup, with the needle going around the girth. We sang along to tunes "The Prisoner's Song," "It was Sad When that Great Ship Went Down" (The Titanic), "The Wreck of the Old 97" and other tear-jerkers. This was before radio and the Victrolas were cranked by hand.

Many winter nights our family would gather around the fireplace in the library with a large Coleman lamp furnishing light. We children would go down to the cold cellar where barrels of apples were stored. There were Mac Intoshes, Jonathans, Northern Spies and Russets. I can still taste the crisp tart or sweet fruit which is far different tasting than the apples found in supermarkets today. We popped corn in the fireplace and often my mother read to us. Some of our favorites were "The Legend of Hiawatha," "The Lady of The Lake," and of course, "Snowbound." Looking back I can see the flickering fire, and hear the storm raging outside and my mother's voice.

My mother loved poetry and as a young girl had studied elocution. We were her audience. One of our favorites was a Victorian tear-jerker about a storm at sea:

We were crowded in the cabin
not a soul there dared to speak.
It was midnight on the water
and a storm was on the deep.

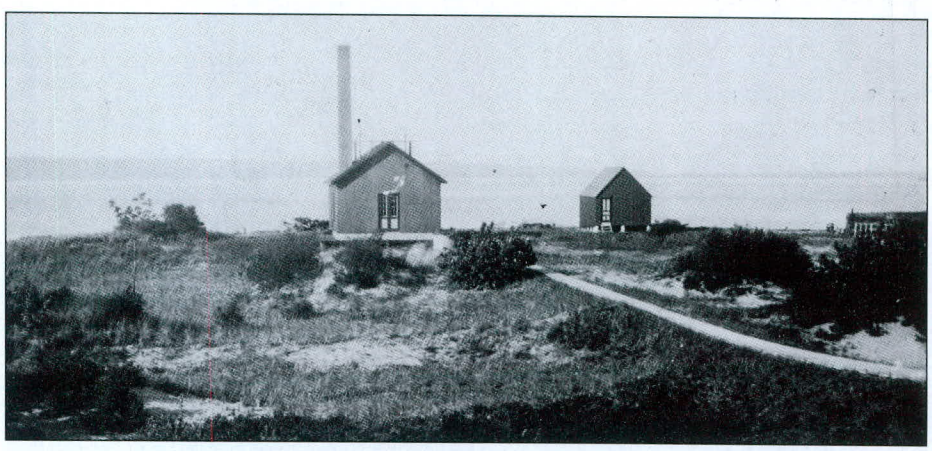
We were crowded in the cabin,
each one busy saying prayers.
"We are lost!" the captain shouted
as he staggered down the stairs.

But his little daugher whispered
as she took his icy hand:
"Isn't God upon the water
just the same as on the land?"

Then we thanked the little maiden
and we spoke in better cheer.
And we anchored safe in harbor
when the dawn was shining clear.

I tried to get my father to stumble onto the scene so that I could take his hand. He would mumble, "The skipper was probably drunk." My mother didn't think this was the least bit funny.

All our Christmases were white and it seemed to me that the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas was forever.



The fog signal building with the large smoke stack was the scene of Saturday night showers, but only when the fog signal was in operation. Betty Bacon photo.

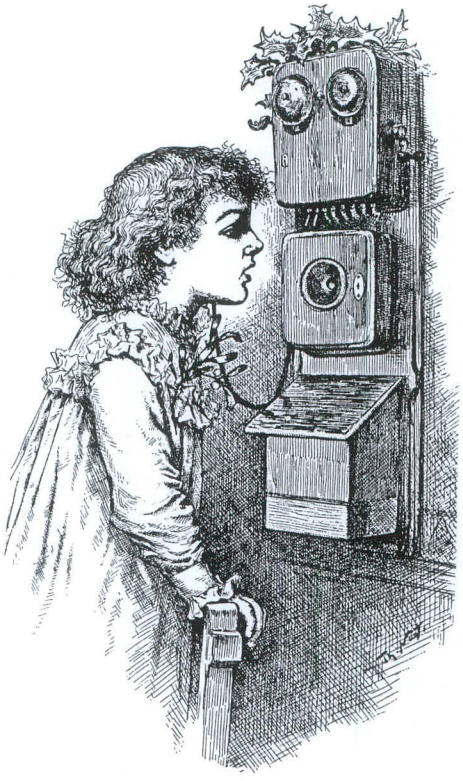


Christmas Eve, my father, pulling a toboggan, went into the woods to find the perfect Christmas tree. He was trailed by four children, all wearing snow shoes. Every year our tree was a blue spruce with thick needles, and sometimes it had the added charm of a bird nest lodged in the branches. It smelled like heaven when my father chopped it down. The tree was placed in a galvanized pail, filled with coal and water in the corner of the library opposite the fireplace. My mother covered the base with a white sheet. A box of ornaments from Germany and Austria was opened and we all took part in placing them on the tree. The bright balls were covered in gold and silver mesh. Strings of popcorn and cranberries were draped over the branches and candles were clipped on the end of each bough. With the candles lit and the fire flickering, it looked like a children's wonderland, portending a visit from Santa.

Too early we were sent to bed and it was impossible to get to sleep. I was a sneaky child and after everyone was asleep I crept downstairs and looked over my loot. I really felt that it was too much to ask that I wait until morning! When my parents opened the folding doors in the morning and we rushed in, I put on my surprise act. I did it for years and was never caught.

Communication with the outside world is a primarily concern at all isolated light stations. At Iroquois we had a single telephone line from the Chipppawa Indian Reservation three miles to the east. Poles supported the line except in the woods where the line was fastened to trees. It was my father's job to climb the poles or trees any time heavy snow damaged this vital link with the outside world. With climbing spikes on his shoes he scaled the tree or pole and repaired or rehung the damaged telephone wire.

"Central" was in the town of Brimley, Michigan, some eight miles away. The telephone operator was a widow raising four children. Her switchboard, with all

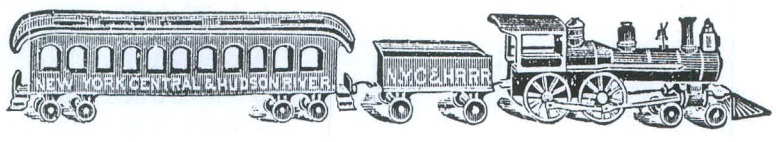


the plugs and wires, was in her dining room. There were twelve families on our line. Each had wooden wall hung telephones with a speaker and a hand held ear piece. To operate the phone one turned a crank to contact "central." Each station on the line had its own signal. Ours was one long and one short ring. More often than not when using the phone clicks could be heard signaling curious neighbors listening in. Sometimes so many people were listening in that you could barely hear the party you were calling or even central. My mother would shout, "If you'll hang up I'll call you back and tell you the news." Then the clickings would be heard as shamed eavesdroppers hung up and central came in clear again.

One January day, my father's first assistant received a telephone call from his brother who was stationed at Fort Brady, above the Soo Locks. He said he was coming by train and would walk across the ice from Brimley to the lighthouse. Shortly before he was scheduled to arrive a sudden snow storm blew up. Knowing that a person could get lost in the "white out", the keepers started up the fog signal. The soldier followed the sound and arrived safely. He said that he had become completely disoriented and had no idea in which direction he was headed. The sound of the horn, he insisted, had saved him from freezing to death.

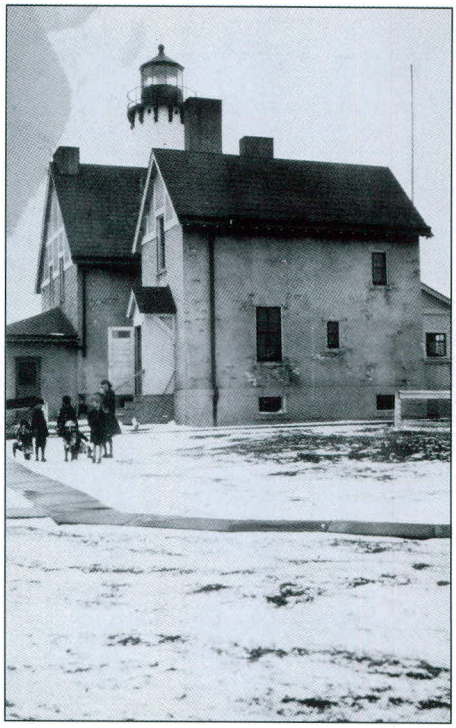
Transportation was another important aspect of lighthouse life. When I was a small child we had a team of Malamute dogs and a dog sled for some Winter transportation. The dogs loved being hitched up to the sled. My mother and I were warm and comfortable wrapped in buffalo and bear skin robes. Dad, stationed in back of the sled, would steer. The dog sled was only used after heavy snows when our horse drawn sleigh was unable to plow through the drifts. And even then we only went as far as the Indian reservation to get our mail as we had no deliveries at the station. When the snow drifts were removed between the station and the reservation we could go all the way to Brimley by sleigh.

My dad bought his first car when I was six or seven. It was a Maxwell touring car with isinglass side curtains, carbide head lamps, a tool chest mounted on the running board and a brass horn that operated by squeezing a bulb. This replaced our buggy rides to town, but we still used the horse drawn sleigh during the Winter.









Above left—Brother Elmer Byrnes holding the lake trout that didn't get away...and he looks a bit fishy himself.

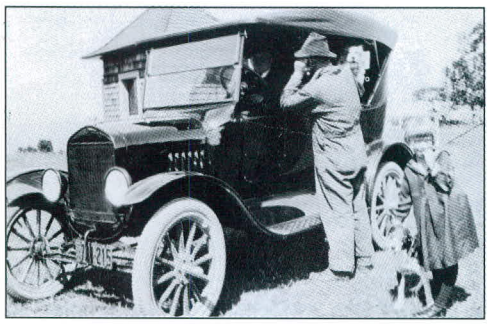
Above center—making snow men in front of the old school house.

Far right— Point Iroquois with a first dusting of snow.

Below—Keeper Byrnes and his new Maxwell circa 1920. Young Betty Byrnes (Bacon) poses at right. Betty Bacon family photographs.

My father and his first assistant used the horse team and sleigh to fish under the ice for herring. Gill nets, woven to catch only the mature fish, were strung between holes in the ice. Herring, a schooling fish, were abundant. Sometimes when the nets were raised you could hardly see the mesh for the shining fish. The blanketed horses waited patiently while the fish were loaded in the sleigh. The load was transported to our fish house on shore. The men then unloaded the herring, stabled the horses and spent the rest of the day cleaning and packing the fish in boxes between layers of ice. These boxes were hauled to the Brimley railroad station and shipped to Chicago. Three cents a pound was considered a good price in those days, although they did get 5 cents during Lent.

Another job performed with the horses was the transportation of large blocks of ice. The keepers would go out onto the lake and cut foot thick slabs of ice. The blocks were transported to our ice house by sleigh and stored under saw dust until needed during the Summer.



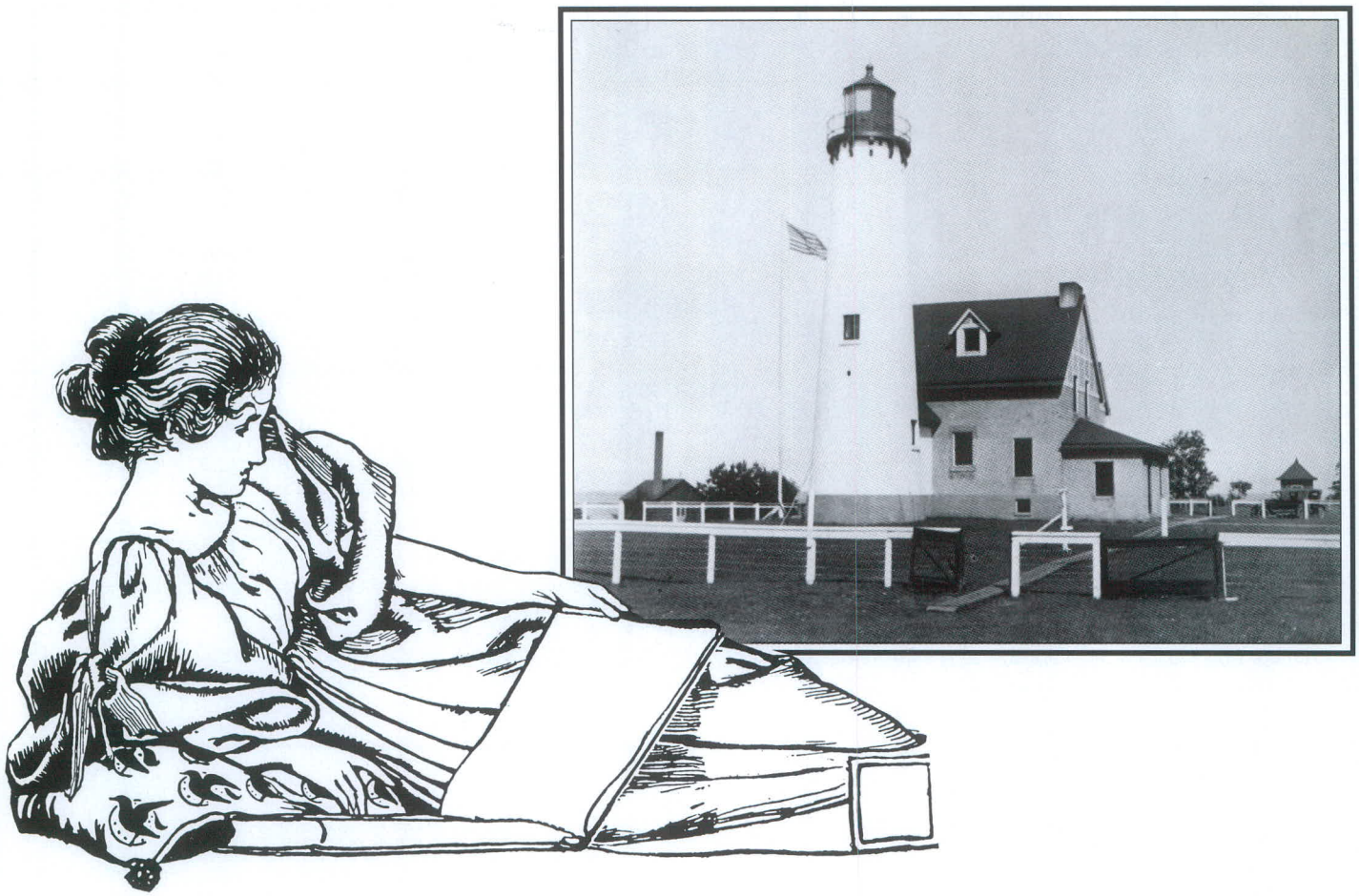
Underground "warm" springs caused softs spots in the ice. The horses were sharp shod, so they wouldn't slip and twice in my memory teams broke through the ice. The men cut them loose from the sleigh and tried to get them out but the horses cut each other thrashing around and the icy water soon put an end to their misery. In the spring the animals washed ashore and after the harnesses were removed they were buried.

We children unfortunately witnessed one of the teams break through the ice and drown. To us they were pets and when they sank from sight we huddled with our arms around each other and cried.

One of our favorite Winter sports were cutting hard packed snow into blocks and building igloos. We would sit inside around a kerosene lantern, wrapped in fur robes and pretend we were Eskimos. We had sleighs, toboggans, and ice skates. Sometimes our mother would call us in saying it was thirty below. We played too hard to feel the low temperatures and were warmly dressed. It was a happy childhood.

A large grove of maple trees grew a quarter mile from the light station. Sap began to rise while the snow was still on the ground, a sure sign that Spring was not far away. The men would load the sleigh with buckets, a huge iron kettle and firewood. After arriving, they cut vees in the bark of the trees, handing pails and pounding 'lead outs' into the grooves to catch the sap, a wooden tripod was constructed and the kettle hung above a fire. The fire was kept going continually while the sap was boiled down. We would dip out spoonfuls of the thick syrup and pour it on the snow where it hardened into candy. The smell of wood smoke, the fire flickering through the trees and the star speckled night sky were part of the fun of "sugaring off."

The lighthouse personnel eagerly awaited the end of winter and the coming of spring. Their dedication to the lamps they tended and their shorebased support of shipping stretched back generations in the history of our country, helping to make the United States a great maritime nation. They felt a part of all keepers from the Atlantic to the Pacific. They were family.



Lighthouse Memories—Spring

by Betty Bacon

This is the last installment of a four season odyssey in the year of a light station. The station is Point Iroquois located at the eastern end of Lake Superior on the Upper Michigan Peninsula. The keeper of the station during our visit (circa 1920) is Elmer Byrnes. Keeper Byrnes entered the USLHE as 1st Assistant at this station and within a few years was appointed Keeper. He served at Point Iroquois from 1915 until 1935 when he was transferred, as keeper, to the Presque Isle lighthouse (Lake Huron) where he completed his 43 year career. Our story teller is his daughter, Betty Byrnes Bacon, who dedicates this delightful story of growing up in a lighthouse to her father.

Above right—Point Iroquois Lighthouse circa 1922. The small building at the left houses the fog signals, the well house is at the right. Betty Bacon photo.

The first sign of Spring at the lighthouse was flocks of large, black, ragged-winged birds: squalling, squawking and squabbling against the blue March sky and white patches of snow. The crows had come back.

Each day the sun shone warmer and longer. The ice on the river and bay became honeycombed and began breaking up and shifting with the changing winds. Then a Northwester would roar down from Canada and the dawn revealed huge ice cakes piled against the shore. Some of the chunks would be broken into long needles, shining like rainbows in the sun. We children would climb up and down the shimmering piles, delighting in the tinkling sounds of breaking ice needles. To us they were like fairy chimes.

About the last of March or first part of April, the first boats would start pushing through the ice floes and emerging channels, heading for Lake Superior. For some inexplicable reason Great Lakes sailors call a five or six-hundred foot long vessel a boat. The iron and copper ore boats were racing to be the first to arrive in the Lake Superior ports, and bring back the first cargoes to the eastern industrial cities. Bonuses were given to the boats that broke through first. Sometimes the wind would change, and moving fields of ice would trap the vessels for days until the wind veered. Once they got through the St. Mary River and into Lake Superior, the going was easier.

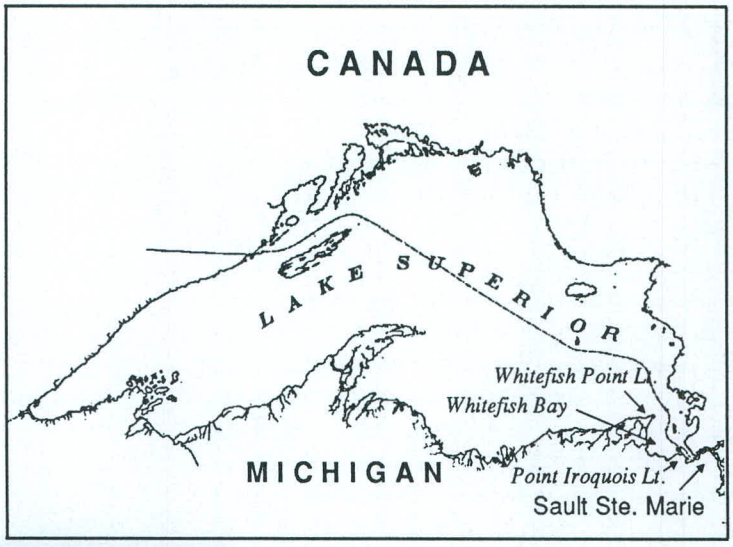


Weeks before the opening of navigation, the keepers were busy polishing the lens, hauling oil and readying the light and fog signal. Our lighthouse had a 4th order Fresnel lens that produced a flash every 30 seconds. The lamp was a kerosene Incandescent Oil Vapor lamp (IOV) which had a mantle much like a Coleman lantern. At the end of each 4 hour watch the keeper on watch would climb the tower and wind the clockworks which rotated the lens. He would also trim the wicks as needed. Once each day the lantern room windows (storm panes) were cleaned inside and out. The lens was polished at the beginning of the season and cleaned weekly.

Once a year, usually before the Spring inspection, the exterior of the tower was whitewashed. The three keepers all cooperated to rig the bos'ns chair and hoist the painting keeper up and down the tower exterior. On clear nights the rays of light emanating from the lens revolved around and around against the star-studded night sky, like spokes of a giant golden cartwheel. There is nothing sadder to me than driving past a lighthouse tower at night and not seeing a light.

The fog signal at Iroquois was a steam whistle powered by a coal fueled boilers. The characteristic of our fog signal was one 5 second blast every 30 seconds (5s. blast, 25s. silence). However, during heavy snow storms the ships caught in the ice would sound their horn "requesting" a response from any fog signal in the area: dad would sound one long and one short blast, and this told the ships that they were near the Iroquois Light Station.

To the people of the North, the coming of Spring after the long cold winter was a welcome occurrence and something of a miracle. Although some lighthouses were abandoned during the Great Lakes Winters, all three families at Iroquois spent the Winter months at the light station. With Spring the reason for being there was reaffirmed. Once again the long ships needed the guiding light and fog and signal during periods of thick weather.





The keeper painting the tower by means of a bos'n chair. Photo courtesy of Betty Bacon.

Spring came to the North in fits and starts. A week of warm sunny weather would be followed by a blinding sleet and snow storm, but the storms grew fewer and the trees began leafing out and the grass greening. Along the shores of Lake Superior children had few choices with which to fill a May Basket. We did find arbutus between patches of snow and no perfume could compare with their fragrance. The clumps of waxy white and pink flowers were nestled in fuzzy round-shaped green leaves. When we found them, we knew Spring had finally arrived. The only other decorations for our baskets were pussy willows. Their pearly grey buds were indeed like miniature kittens.

By late May and June, the woods were carpeted with white, blue and lavender violets, Dutchman's breeches, Jack-in-the-Pulpit, and dog-tooth violets. In the marshes we picked cowslips, which my mother called marsh marigolds. But the most exotic flowers were lady slippers or moccasin plants, as the Indians called them. These wild orchids were pink, white, and yellow.

The birds returned in mass migrations. Some flew at night and dashed themselves against the lantern room windows. Some mornings the lawn would be littered with bright colored song birds. The vees of Canadian Geese honked their way north and several times those heavy birds would crash through the storm panes (windows) of the lantern room and we would have roast goose.

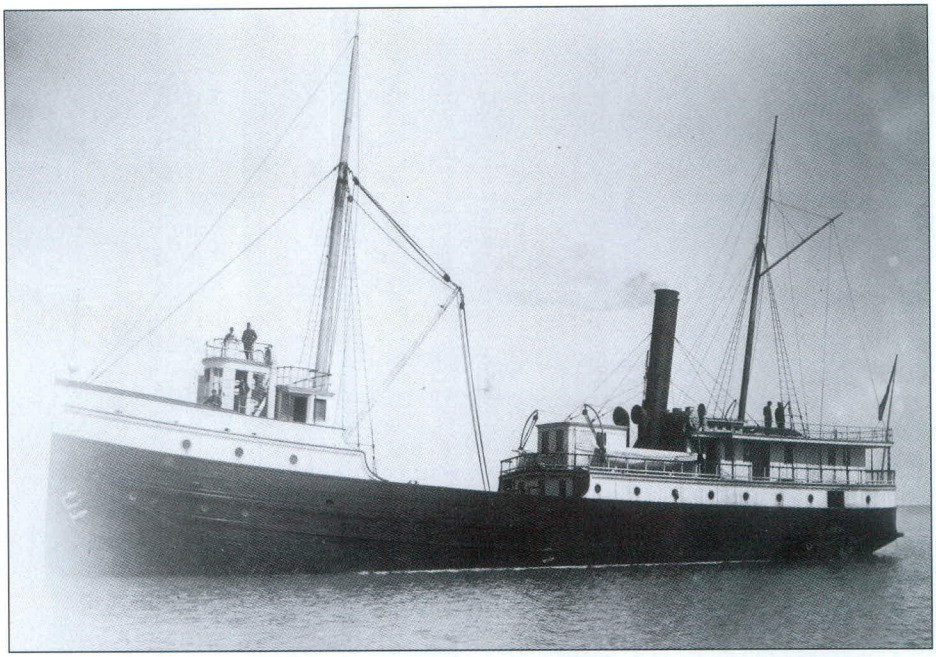
Nesting birds and their chicks fascinated me. I was a great tree climber and knew where most nests were within a mile radius of home. My father told a friend, Dr. Christopherson (an ornithologist in the Soo), about my knowledge of nesting sites. He came out to the lighthouse with a box of bird bands of all sizes and showed me how to band nestlings. He explained that many things could be learned about bird migrations from the information on the bands and for years he called me his favorite assistant.

In June the spring Lighthouse Service Inspection took place. The inspector went from station to station on the Lighthouse Tender *Amaranth*. The tower, fog signal, quarters, and outlying buildings were inspected. For weeks my father and his assistants varnished, painted, polished and shined everything that didn't move. The inspector's visit was supposed to be a surprise, but stations down river would call us on the telephone to say that the *Amaranth* was on its way.

When the tender hove into view my father and his first and second assistants would get into their newly cleaned and pressed uniforms which were only worn on special occasions. Insignia on hats were polished and buttons (each with a miniature lighthouse) shined. The rest of the family also dressed in our best outfits. There was much running around picking things up and seemingly never enough time. One time the sink was full of dishes, so my mother tossed them in a big bread pan, threw a clean cloth over them and put them in the oven. If by chance the oven door was opened by the inspector they were "rising bread."



Keeper Elmer Byrnes looking snappy in his inspection uniform. Betty Bacon photo.



The 166 foot long Lighthouse Tender *Amaranth*, one of the Lakes vessels used to carry the District Inspector on his periodic inspection trips. These ungainly vessels were called barges and they were reported to have rolled like a beast. Photo courtesy of the Van Hoey Collection.

Although we were never supposed to know when the inspector was to arrive, most keepers had a fairly good idea. Those stations with phones could alert the next station down the line that the ship had left and was heading their way. When the Lighthouse Tender dropped anchor the keepers hurried down to the dock and stood at attention as the launch drew near. The keepers saluted the Inspector and he returned their salutes. They would then escort him to the various buildings and up to the lantern room. The keeper of each quarters would take the Inspector to his door, where his wife and children greeted him. He was then escorted through every room in the house, including the attic and cellar. At the end of the inspection the District Inspector would go over the numerous Logs with dad and listen to complaints or hear the need for repairs beyond the capability of station personnel.

A head keeper's reputation depended on that one day of inspection, usually each quarter. However, in the Lakes the Inspector only held 2 or 3 inspections a year; Spring and Fall and sometimes a mid Summer inspection. The keeper who received the best marks of all the stations for all the inspections during one calendar year received the Efficiency Pin and was authorized to fly the "E Flag" during the year. My father was a perfectionist and his men liked and respected him. For years he flew the "E Flag," a symbol of excellence. He never received a letter of reprimand for a light not burning or a fog signal not sounding. He retired with 43 years of service (all but his first few as head keeper.)

We children would roam the woods of second growth oak, birch, maple and poplar. The big pines were gone and we could see signs of old logging roads. One lightning-blasted pine that escaped the lumberjacks was a landmark, so we never got lost. This survivor was called the Eagle Nest Tree, and in a three-branched center near the top was a huge nest about four feet in diameter. Year after year, throughout my childhood, when Spring came, a pair of bald eagles would return and add to the nest. They caught fish in the shallows and squirrels and mice in the woods. Each year we would watch them feeding their two or three eaglets, and finally the young would learn to fly. In the Fall, they left for the South.

One Spring, the male eagle returned alone. For days he would sit on a limb above the nest, only hunting when hunger drove him to it. We wondered what had happened to his mate , and if he was grieving. For two years he came back and then we never saw him again.



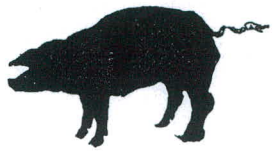
Above—the four Byrnes kids at the 'Eagle Nest Tree' circa 1924. Below—the author at an early age. Betty Bacon photos.



One day my father and his assistant hitched up the horses with a cross cut saw in the wagon, and drove out to the Eagle Nest Tree and sawed it down for wood. We four children sat in the old nest and had our picture taken.

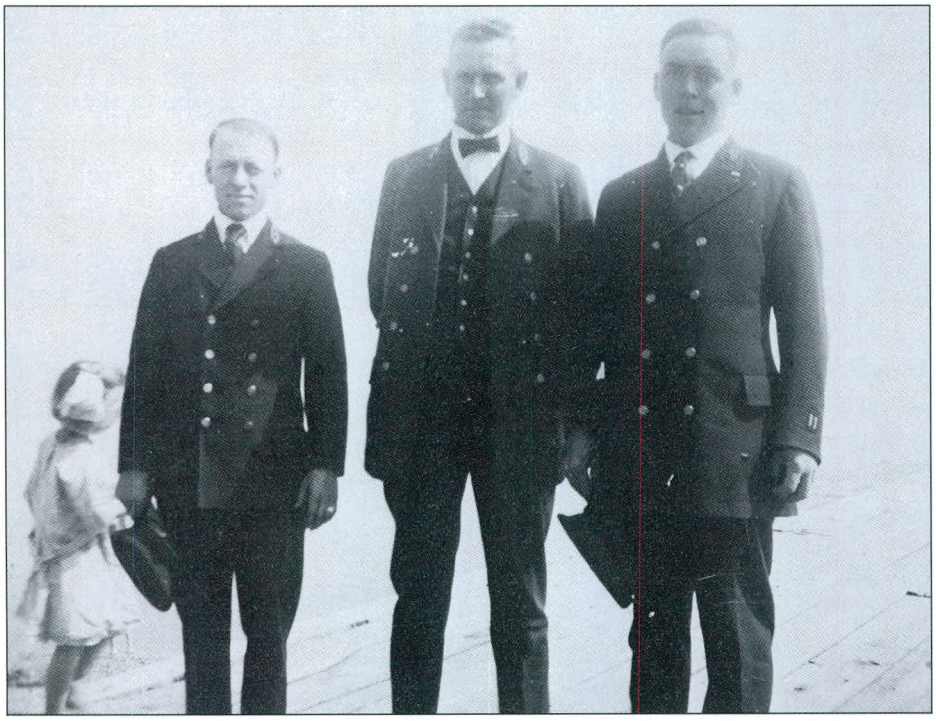
Like many rural families we had chickens for food and eggs. I kept pestering my dad to let me raise some baby chicks. I hovered over a broody hen sitting on ten eggs. I decided I'd be a midwife and help the chicks when they began to break out of the eggs. I injured two so badly that they died. I put the remaining eight in a pen and filled a lard-pail with water and I leaned a shingle against the pail so that they could walk up and drink; two chicks fell in and drowned. The weather turned cold, so I took the remaining six chicks home, wrapped them in a flannel cloth and laid them on the radiator. My dad stoked up the coal furnace and five roasted. The remaining baby chick looked sick, so I took it to be with me. I rolled on it during the night, and in the morning it was a quarter inch thick and very dead! I confessed the series of events to my father when he asked how my chickens were coming along. I was given a lecture, and never allowed to raise baby chicks again.

We also raised one or two pigs a year. One young black and white pig (which I thought quite intelligent) became very attached to me. I used to ride on his back and one day I tied a rope around his neck and kept pulling on it to stop him. He fell over and I got off his back and kept pulling harder to make him get up. My father was up in the tower and happened to look down and see the pig lying there. He ran down the winding steel stairway, tore the rope off the pig's neck and kneaded its ribs until it started to breathe. I was six years old and started crying. My father said that I had tied a slip knot and that the pig could have died of suffocation. He showed me how to tie a knot that wouldn't slip and comforted me. But I never rode the pig again.



Children of the lighthouse keepers had a wonderful life. Our father was always there for us, and we could follow him around on his various tasks. We felt sorry for children who only saw their fathers at breakfast and in the evenings, when they came home from work. We had boats to row, woods to roam, and our parents always at hand. I would not change my childhood as it was exciting, happy and full of wonder.





Inspection day in the Spring of 1919 or 1920. Left to right; 1st Ass't James Collins, 2nd Ass't Peter Day and Keeper Elmer Byrnes. Note 2nd Ass't Day has an extra button on his vest and is wearing a bow tie, maybe that's why he is the 2nd assistant. Betty Bacon photo.

This is the final episode of our four season odyssey at Point Iroquois light station on Lake Superior. We'll revisit a teen age Betty Byrnes at her father's next station, Presque Isle on Lake Huron, in a future edition of the Log.