THE BELLE: LAST SAILING LIGHTHOUSE TENDER ON THE LAKES

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In today's age of multi-purpose Coast Guard cutters, such as the *Mesquite*, homeported at Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, and nominally a buoy tender, but with equipment and capabilities for ice breaking, search or rescue, fire fighting, logistics, etc., it is somewhat difficult to perceive that until 1873 Federal lighthouse tenders worked aids to navigation under sail on the Great Lakes. The distinction of being the last one on these inland waters belongs to the schooner *Belle*. Her predecessors were the *Challenge* (May 1856-1862), subsequently renamed *Lamplighter*, and the *Skylark* (December 1856-October 1867), later renamed *Watchful*. In many respects, the *Belle's* career is typical of those of the earlier two sailing tenders.

Built in 1861 at St. Joseph, Michigan, as the *Belle Stevens*, the vessel measured 88 feet in length, 21 feet-3 inches in the beam, and drew only 6 feet when her 6 foot-10 inch hold was empty. Her hull was constructed of oak and iron fastened.

The Lighthouse Board, predecessor of the U.S. Lighthouse Service, purchased her and renamed her *Belle* in 1863 and placed her in service as a lighthouse tender in the 11th District. During the career of this sailing tender, this district encompassed all aids to navigation above Detroit, and included Lakes St. Clair, Huron, Michigan and Superior, and the straits connecting them.

After being "properly fitted," the *Belle* sailed forth on her assigned duties. One of her tasks the first year was the marking of a rock reef off Racine, Wisconsin. Apparently her work that first year was satisfactory, for the Lighthouse Board reported on October 31, 1863, that "the buoyage of the district has been well attended."

During 1864, the *Belle* was probably hard pressed to keep the District's aids to navigation, which consisted of 48 lights and 37 buoys, "carefully attended," as was reported. No doubt keeping...as she did... the buoyage "in satisfactory condition," posed a particularly troublesome problem, for "many of the buoys have been dragged from their stations by passing tow-boats."

The following year, the buoys the *Belle* worked were described as "well attended," and the other aids to navigation "in an efficient condition." Since several "extensive works of renovation" were in progress that year, the sailing tender more likely than not was utilized transporting men, supplies, and

equipment about the 11th Lighthouse District.

In 1866, the same situation prevailed, for "several important works of renovation and repair" were still in progress. The Lighthouse Board paid the *Belle* the compliment of describing the buoyage of the District as having "been well cared for, and few, if any complaints have been made in this respect."

Beginning in 1867, the Lighthouse Board appeared to drastically change its view of the effectiveness of the schooner *Belle*. No doubt the appearance of the first steam-powered lighthouse tender, the *Haze*, on the Great Lakes that year played a significant part in this change of opinion. In any event, the Lighthouse Board now claimed that, prior to 1867, the *Belle* only "indifferently" performed all the supply and inspection needs of the 11th Lighthouse District, since the sailing tender "could not possibly make more than one tour during the same season, and could spare but little time to devote to the buoyage of the district."

By this time, the aids to navigation in the 11th District had increased to 63 lighthouses and lighted beacons and 80 buoys.

Since the erection of a lighthouse at Spectacle Reef actually justified the full services of a tender, the District Engineer assigned the *Belle* on a full-time basis to this construction work. The following year the sailing tender was still there, "transporting material (except stone) and supplies as well as serving as quarters for a portion of the force connected with that work"" and was described as "a fine vessel of her size...in good condition."

In 1869, the *Belle* was provided moorings "within hailing distance of the work." Here she remained except when otherwise employed. The sailing tender hauled a load of machinery from the construction site to Detroit during 1869, returning with a load of cement, lumber, and other materials, as well as illuminating apparatus for the Sturgeon Point Lighthouse and a third order lens for the Cana Island Lighthouse, which she subsequently delivered to the respective light stations. The schooner spent the following year:

> ...in attendance upon Spectacle Reef working party at Scammon's Harbor; in transporting tools, rigging, etc., from completed works to those needing them. When not required for other service, she is employed as at present, collecting ballast stone for the pier of protection at Spectacle Reef. This vessel also serves occasionally for quarters for working parties, when required at places where other economical means are not available for that purpose.

The *Belle* spent the 1871 season "as quarters for the workmen at Spectacle Reef." Although she was "getting old" in the opinion of the Lighthouse Board, her light draft permitted her to be "moored directly on the reef, and she thus answers a purpose which very few vessels would and is indeed of the greatest value.

During the winter layup, enough repairs were made to the *Belle* "to enable her to perform good services for at least four years." With the opening of the season of 1872, she sailed forth and spent most of that year in carrying coal and other heavy supplies to Spectacle Reef and the several steam fog signals. The completion of the barracks on the pier of protection at Spectacle Reef had freed her for these other normal duties.

For the most part, the District Engineer utilized the *Belle* on construction and repair duties during 1873. As late as September, she was still tending to the needs of the District's aids to navigation, which now totaled 100 lighthouses and lighted beacons, 7 fog signals, and 145 buoys.

On November 10, 1873, the District Engineer notified the Lighthouse Board that the *Belle* had run ashore and was badly damaged. After determining that the condition of the schooner was very bad, the Lighthouse Board ordered her, on July 10, 1874, to be "sold at auction." Accordingly, in May, 1875, the last sailing lighthouse tender on the Great Lakes was sold for $470.