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# Four Days of Terror

## Winter On Michigan Island






The original Michigan Island Lighthouse in 1989. Photo courtesy of Joel Lauterbach.

# Lighthouse Memories

*The Detroit News*, Sunday, May 17, 1931
By: Stella M. Champney

"I fell to the floor screaming. I screamed at the top of my voice, until I was exhausted. And still my husband did not come. There was another long, terrible night before me."

Mrs. Robert Carlson, 40 years ago bride of a lighthouse keeper in the Apostle Islands group, told how she fought to keep her reason when her husband and his brother were lost for four days on the ice at the head of Lake Superior, during a winter she spent with him on Michigan Island.

"They took the dogs and went fishing," she said, two red spots coming into her cheeks as she recalled the agony of those four days of terror. "I was always afraid to be alone on the island. A city-bred girl, the stark loneliness of it was appalling. As soon as they left the house I ran about and locked all the doors and windows. Yet there was nobody on the island but myself, and the children, a little girl past two, and the twin boys, nine months old."

"We were trying a winter on Michigan Island, where my husband was head lighthouse keeper. His brother was assistant. When we decided to stay, our hired girl promised to remain with us through the winter. But she slipped away and went ashore with some fishermen, and didn't come back.

"For a few hours after they had gone that day I was busy setting the house in order. The tower was closed, but there was lots of work to do in the house, and I was glad for that. I got the children's lunch, prepared things for an early supper, as I knew the men would be very hungry when they came home, and then sat down to wait.

"Women who wait in brightly lighted cities, with people all around within call of the voice, have no conception what it is to sit and wait for your man on a deserted island, with snow and ice everywhere and no light but the stars.

"I watched the sun go down across the water and waited until its sickly, yellowish light had disappeared and the stars came out. I kept stoking the fires, for I knew the men would be cold when they came in.

"I did not even think of such a thing as their not coming back. They had been gone since before daylight, and they would be home before 6, I was sure. The wind was blowing a gale, but in my ignorance of such things I gave it no thought.

"Six o'clock came, and darkness. It was so dark outside I could not bear to look out of the window, but I kept watching for the men and the dogs. It began to snow. Seven o'clock, and still my man had not come. I put the children to bed and waited.

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"All night long I sat by the fire, terror clutching my heart. I could not believe they would not come. Every time the wind rattled the branches of the trees around the lighthouse I would start up, expecting to hear my husband's voice.

"Morning found me on the verge of hysteria. But there was serious work to be done. I had to milk the cow because of the children. And I was afraid of a cow. Raised in Chicago, where one doesn't even think of such things, I had never learned to milk, even after coming with my husband to Michigan Island, where a cow and chickens provided the main food for the children.

"It was bitterly cold, and still snowing. A winter fog shut us in. I went down to the barn, and looked at the cow. She swung her head and made a noise, and I knew I could never milk her as I had seen my husband do.

"Running into the woodshed, I grabbed the ax, and in desperation began chopping at the wall of her manger. Making a hole through which I could put both hands, I started to milk into a little tin cup which I held with one hand milking with the other. The cow kicked, and I jumped away.

"But the children had to have their milk. So back I went and I kept at it until I got enough for them. I fed the cow, and watered her, and looked after the chickens.

"Then I went back to the house and waited. I waited and watched, and somehow kept my reason all through that terrible day and the more terrible night that followed.

"Things began to get a little hazy after that. Two nights of terror and another night faced me. Somehow, I lived through them, looked after the children, got their milk, fed the chickens. That is about all that I remember of those days.

"On the third day I could stand the house no longer. Leaving the little girl with the twins, I put on a hat and coat and went down the shore. You don't know what the Michigan Island shore is in winter. Unbroken trails through the woods, ice hummocks barring the way, deep gulches of snow into which I stumbled, the bitter, cutting wind from the lake lashing my face, and above all the sight of that white expanse which was holding my husband from me.

"It seemed hours afterward that I came back to the house. The twins were asleep in the cradle. Little sister was rocking them. As I closed the door, I fell to the floor, screaming. I screamed at the top of my voice, until I was exhausted. And still my husband did not come. There was another terrible night before me."

Mrs. Carlson paused, her hands gripped together, her chest heaving.

"You know," she said, apologetically, "how it is with us women. Sometimes, when we think we can't endure any longer, it does us good to let go like that. I think if I had not screamed I would have lost my mind.

"That night I slept a little. On the fourth day the weather had cleared, but it was still bitterly cold. I went about the house in a daze. The same chores had to be done, the children had to be cared for. How I hated Lake Superior!

"I was doing some task about the kitchen that afternoon when I heard my husband's voice:

"I'm all right, Anna," he called to me. 'Don't be afraid.'

"The next moment I was in his arms, sobbing and laughing in real hysterics.

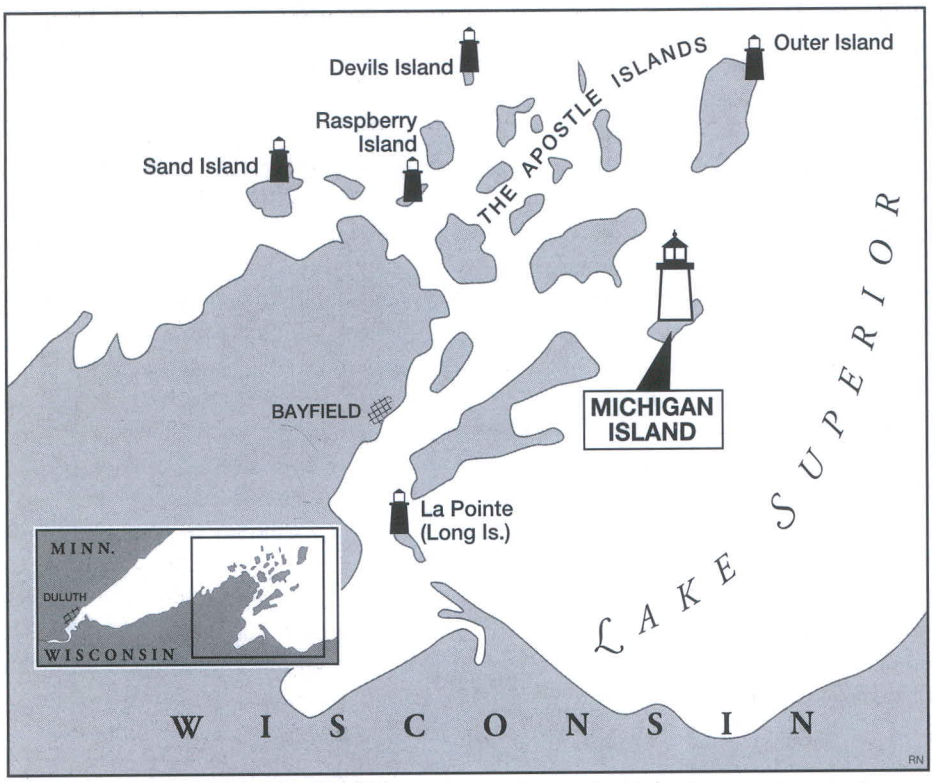
"My husband told me that he had been afraid to come in without first calling to me. He said he was afraid – afraid. He thought I might have killed the children and myself.

"The two men had drifted to Madeline Island when the ice broke up. My brother in-law said: 'You have suffered greatly. But he suffered more. He just walked the beach all night, worrying about you and the children.'

"Their sufferings from the intense cold, hunger and weariness were terrible. When the gale came up, it started the ice out into the lake with them on it. By night the floe upon which they were riding with the dogs pushed up against Madeline Island. They had walked and jumped from floe to floe until their shoes were almost off their feet and the feet of the dogs were bleeding.

"On the island they found some flour in a fisherman's shanty, some dry wood and kindling, and after building a hot fire, they boiled the flour into a sort of gruel. That was all they and the dogs had to eat during the time they were held on the island.

"On the beach they found an old boat. In the shanty were oakum and pitch. They patched and caulked the boat and rowed across the eight miles of stormy waters to Michigan Island and home. They were badly frosted and it was two weeks before they recovered from the terrible experience. The feet of one poor old dog, the most faithful of the team, were so badly



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torn and frosted, he had to be put out of his suffering. We never tried living on any of our island homes through the winter after that experience."

Mrs. Carlson spent her honeymoon on Outer Island, where her husband took her 40 years ago from Chicago, a happy, light-hearted girl accustomed only to city life.

"I had three persons to talk to," she said, "my husband, who was assistant keeper, the head keeper, an old man with but one eye, and a fisherman who came that summer and lived in a shack down the shore.

"Oh! The loneliness of those days on Outer Island! There was nothing to see but water with the dim outline of other islands of the Apostles group behind the haze, and an occasional steamer way out on the lake. When my housework was done, my husband used to take me down the shore to the fisherman's shack, where we would visit for a while. Or we would walk out into the woods.

"That was my life, day in and day out. Going ashore to the mainland, 40 miles away, meant riding in a sailboat, which always frightened me. Nights I would look out of the window and see nothing but the dark water, no lights anywhere, not even in the fisherman's shanty, which was too far away.

"The old lighthouse keeper, dead these many years, was always very kind. He showed me how to cook, for I had never been used to much work. I have learned to do all kinds of housework since my marriage. A woman can learn to do anything if she sets her mind to it.

"My husband has said many times, since those lonely years, 'How did you ever endure it!'

"There is just one answer to it all. I loved him."

Mrs. Carlson's love for her husband is like a garden of roses behind a cold stone fence, a glorious stage setting hidden by a drab curtain. The stone fence is the desolation of those far-flung islands. The drab curtain, the memory of what they brought her.

But look behind the stone fence, lift the drab curtain, and there stands revealed a happy woman, a woman who, after 40 years has found her heart's desire.

"We have always wanted to live in a city," said Mrs. Carlson, "both my husband and me. The only thing that kept him in the lighthouse work was his love of service, keeping the lights going for the mariners along these dangerous coasts. And I hated it, the loneliness, the isolation, the fear. We've lived in lighthouses all our married life, the last 12 years at Whitefish Point; lonely stations, all of them. But I have much to be thankful for. My husband never got 'queer', as some do from the solitude.

"He retired from the service at Whitefish Point April 1. And now we are free — free to live where we will. We bought a nice little home in Sault Ste. Marie; paid cash for it. He made some money at Whitefish Point with a fishing fleet, and we made some good investments. With his pension we can live without worry from financial matters the rest of our lives.

"We are going places now. To the movies, to parties, to church, to see friends, to other cities, where we will. After 40 years of loneliness we have a home where we have always wanted it — where we can see life."

A new lighthouse has been built on Michigan Island since the Carlsons lived there. Edward J. Lane, father of Lawrence Lane, first assistant on Passage Island, is the head keeper. He has been in the service more than 30 years. His first assistant is Leslie Parker, his second, Joe LaBelle. Things haven't changed much around the island since Mrs. Carlson lived there, and Mrs. Lane spends much time away. But the radio, undreamed of when Mrs. Carlson locked her doors against loneliness, now gives them touch with the world across the 40 miles of treacherous waters.

The Apostle Island lighthouse stations do something to the wives of the lighthouse keepers.

"I hate lighthouses" said Mrs. Alexander McLean, whose husband kept the light on Raspberry Island for several years. He is now retired, and lives in Duluth. "They are so lonely. Going from one island to another, out in the Apostles group, isn't much fun especially when you have to go in a small boat and maybe get caught in a storm. We left Raspberry Island in 1916, and I was glad enough to see the last of it.



**The old (front) and new Michigan Island lighthouses, both without lenses in the lantern rooms in this 1989 photo by Joel Lauterbach.**

"When a woman marries a lighthouse keeper, she gives up everything else in the world. If I had my life to live over again, it would not be in lighthouse stations.

"My husband was 35 years in the lighthouse service. Thirty of those I was his wife, living on the isolated stations in the Apostle Islands and part of the time at

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Two Harbors, Minn., where one might as well be on an island for all the social life one is able to have. Winters I was shut in by unbroken snowdrifts down in the railroad yards which abut off the lighthouse from the town, and while the men folks got the children out of school and back by the time I was ready to go anywhere, the roads were drifted full again. And ma could stay home. There was always too much to do around home, anyway, to spend any time getting to town.

"On islands, we always had to keep up two homes, as women and children have to be off the islands Oct. 15, and when you have two homes to maintain, something has to be slighted. We slighted necessities. Luxuries — we had none of them. We gave up the things we needed."

Mrs. McLean spent her honeymoon on Devil's Island, a lonely outpost in those days. Her husband began his lighthouse work on Isle Royale, and for a time was assistant keeper on Menagerie Island, a rock pile in Siskiwit Bay. The first head keeper's job was on Michigan Island, following the Carlsons, and he said, "Where I was the only human being for whole months, monarch of all I surveyed."

Four years later, while keeper on Devil's Island, he married.

"On Devil's Island," his wife continued, "in storms the spray used to dash against my living room windows, 600 feet from the cliffs, and ooze through the windows and flood the floor so that I would have to take rags and sop it up. Such a mess it always made.

"I spent six years on that island. Tourists used to come from Bayfield, and that was all the social contact I had. We always seemed to be on lonely outposts. There were three years on Huron Island, three miles off shore from the Keweenaw Peninsula, and when my husband was on Stannard Rock I had to live alone on the mainland. We're through with lighthouses now, and I am glad."

"I liked them," said McLean, "or I would not have spent 35 years keeping the lights going."

Sand Island, 21 miles from Bayfield, now an automatic light, was the home of Mrs. Emmanuel Luick, whose husband is now head keeper at Grand Marais, Minn. for 10 years.

"My only neighbors were the wives of fishermen," said Mrs. Luick. "But we stuck together. We organized a sewing circle and we sewed for the Red Cross and other things. We met twice a month at each other's houses, and got up nice little parties, besides. We made much of our birthdays, and baked birthday cakes, and made most of everything we had. There were Mrs. Bert Hill, Mrs. Herman Johnson, Mrs. Fred Hanson, Mrs. Harold Dahl, Mrs. Louis Moe, Mrs. Bert Noring, Mrs. Loftfield and Mrs. Swain Berdstrom. When you live for years with just a handful of neighbors, you remember them all your life.

"We had an 18-foot flat boat with a three-horse power motor, and when it was too wet to cross the swampy places, my husband would sometimes run me to a neighbor's in this boat. The soil is not deep on these islands, which are mostly sandstone and rocks, but some of the fishermen' s wives raised garden stuff, and a little fruit. We went three and a half miles for our milk, every other day. Our nearest neighbor was a mile away. The first year we were there Charles Haven was the assistant, and he had a wife and two children. Then came Ole Christensen, and his wife. At the last there was an unmarried assistant, and the three of us kept the light. We were six miles from the mainland.

"It was dreary enough when the ice hung over the caves. Sometimes it lasted until early summer. I remember in 1912 on June 5 I stood on the ice under an overhanging shelf of ice and had my picture taken. In November, after I had left the island, my husband used to have to climb down a ladder set against the ice hummocks to get a pail of water. You could scarcely see the lighthouse for the ice around it."

The Luicks are living comfortably in the Grand Marais lighthouse residence. The lighthouse is out on the pier, where the wife need not go.

"We have had our isolation," she said. "Now we are back to civilization.

Happy women live at the Split Rock lighthouse station, women far removed from the stress and turmoil of metropolitan life, women who stand with contented eyes that watch for the flash of the Devil's Island light, 50 miles away.

Large, comfortable dwellings house these women. Their children play all day in the shadow of the lighthouse, or out in the fragrant woods.

"I'm happy here," said Mrs. Franklin J. Covell, wife of the head keeper. "I've got a good husband. We have everything we need. It's nice up here. We like it."

The Split Rock lighthouse is set on the dizzy heights of a rocky promontory seemingly inaccessible from the shore. As the lighthouse tender *Marigold* drew nearer one could discern a snubby little concrete



**Tender *Amaranth* hove to off the Split Rock Light Station in 1929. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.**

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dock against the rocks, and leading from it, steps! Steps that followed the tramway over which they carried the freight, a tramway that uses 600 feet of cable. Up, up to the top of the bluff we went, Rover and I, with Mr. Covell panting along. Then up to the top of the tower, where the lens, 178 feet above the lashing seas, flashes its warning across the lake.

It was sunset, the hour for lighting the lamp. Justus C. Luick, first assistant, was filling the Bunson burner as we climbed the steps where the great glass hangs. In a few minutes that glorious light was flashing out across the waters, faintly at first, gaining in brilliance as the burner warmed, until the majesty became awe-inspiring.

"They see the light at Devil's Island," said Mr. Covell. "And we see their's."

Down below Adam B. Sayles was watching the power room of the fog signal, cleaning and polishing. In the three residences, back from the bluff, the women were putting away the supper dishes. The *Marigold*, lying at anchor, nodded and swung gently about as the waves rocked her.

"The wrecks were awful along this shore before the lighthouse was built," said Covell. "The magnetic force of the minerals plays with the compass, and pulls ships upon these rocks, unless the mariner can see where he is. It pulled the steamer *Lafayette* ashore and broke her in two, back in 1905. Five years later they built the lighthouse."



**Keeper Franklin Covell, Mrs. Covell, and their daughters Ileana & Beulah, circa 1930. Minnesota Historical Society Photo.**

One who has not seen a lighthouse glass can form a conception of its beauty. Only in France can be found the rare quality of sand that gives the prisms their clarity and smoothness and softness of effect. All are imported from Paris. An alcohol torch heats the vaporizer, for there is no electricity here, and a 120,000 candle power light flashes every 10 seconds, while the great glass set in a frame work of polished brass swings smoothly about, clock works run with weights of iron timing it.

"The mercury," said Mr. Covell, "in which the ball bearings rests, costs Uncle Sam $3 a pound. There are 300 pounds in the case here, replenished a few dozen pounds at a time, as it deteriorates."

Split Rock - Devil's Island, crossing lights on the steamer lane. I saw them both, last October, on my way to Superior Entry on the freighter *John J. Barlum*, flashing their warnings against the rocky, dangerous coasts over which they stand guard.

"It's a pretty light," said Mrs. Covell.

As I turned to go back down the tram, down the long, long flight of steps to the dock, where the *Marigold's* boat was waiting for me, she grabbed her hat and coat.

"I'll go with you," she said, supreme eagerness in her voice.

Hands reached out to help me into the boat as soon as we reached the dock. There was no time to visit longer.

"You've got to climb all those steps," I said in parting. "I'm sorry."

The flicker of a smile flashed across her face.

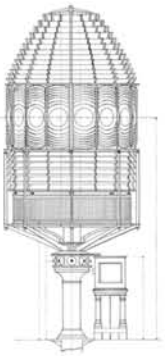
"I climb them, once in a while," she said, "I don't mind."

That night, as the ship swung softly at her anchor, and the Split Rock light flashed into my stateroom, the thoughts of those women up there on the bluff went into my mind. There was something about them that was sweet and wholesome and brave, and a little wistful, it seemed to me.

Split Rock and Devil's Island are more than lights that flash their warnings to mariners of dangerous, rocky coasts.

They are the greetings, one to another of isolated women, sent across the dangerous water of Lake Superior.

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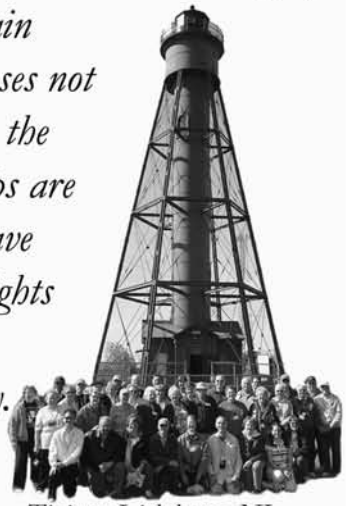
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